

## Weaving Multiple Dialects in the Classroom Discourse: Poetry and Spoken Word as a Critical Teaching Tool

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### Introduction

Shiv: All I can remember as I sat in Professor Miguel Algarin's undergraduate class "Ethnic Poetry in the United States" was, "I should have been exposed to this sooner. Why wasn't this part of my schooling experience?" In his class, we read and scrutinized spoken word poetry as well as listened to spoken word artists perform their poetry for our class. For the first time in my schooling experience, we were reading texts written by people of color and discussing topics that I could relate to such as racism, oppression, poverty, immigrant identity, and a number of other important issues that a kid from urban Jersey City understood only too well. The spoken word texts articulated a style that demonstrated how intellectual, aesthetically beautiful and socially conscious inner-city youth were. Spoken word poetry, performance poetry, spoke to me and touched my soul like no other type of literacy before. It was like looking in a mirror and seeing my faults, my resiliency, my scars, and my hopes.

Tyson: Grandmother sang to me "Bye-O, Bye-O Baby, Bye-O, Bye-O, Baby." She held my head in her lap as I cried, but as she sang, my tears disappeared and I knew that as long as I lay there, I was safe, that I would be okay. As I reflect on the pains of growing up black in a majority white and violently racist city in Eastern Washington State, this paper is too short to allow for a summary of the hurtful and oppressive circumstances I endured both within and outside of school. However, for the sake of succinctness, I can say that my grandmother's poetry...although I did not consider it poetry back then...resonates within me as I press on in academia. Growing up, my family interacted through song and poetry...yet none of us called it that. Poetry runs through my veins, it has been passed on by my people for centuries.

Spoken word is a form of poetry that utilizes the strengths of our communities: oral tradition, call-and-response, home languages, storytelling and resistance. Spoken word poetry is usually performed for an audience and must be heard. Herndon

& Weiss (2001) state that spoken word expresses a shared language with the audience and demands that we see our community and ourselves in a new light. In addition, spoken word is a type of poetry that bonds the poet with the audience to an end, whatever that may be. Anglesey (1999) states that spoken word affirms passionate, even shocking, expression and offers ethical insights for solving the most severe problems plaguing society. Lastly, Sparks & Grochowski (2002), in their work with young youth, argue that spoken word serves as a method for young people in reinventing language, defining themselves, and mapping their social communities. Moreover, this particular form of poetry provides politically charged testimonies of their own realities and/or experiences through spoken word.

As a result of our shared experiences, we feel it is important to study spoken word because, as an art form, it allows us to connect with students like ourselves to broader critical theories and provides an avenue for self-discovery and expression. Furthermore, spoken word sheds light on how students and adults engage in literacy—reading, writing, speaking and hearing—outside the classroom, workplace and home. It helps students realize that they are literate and are able/do engage in critical dialogue and action. This factor becomes extremely vital, when so many students of color in urban schools struggle with what has been termed “academic literacy.”

In building upon the Fisher, Jocson, and Kinloch (2005) conceptualization of *literocracy*, or, “the intersection of literacy and democracy,” we explore the meshing of oral, auditory, and written forms of literacy “while emphasizing that language processes exist in partnership with action” (p. 92). After a proper and safe space is created, youth engagement in spoken word allows them to face oppression while empowering them to use their voices to inform and to protest against sociopolitical and historical injustices. When that space is provided, youth are willing to share and enlighten their elders with their respective concerns, thoughts, and aspirations. This is critical for teachers because too many times youth voices get dismissed due to academic priorities (e.g., tests, standards, homework). Spoken word provides the teachers and students the opportunity to create meaningful relationships that leads to academic achievement (Fisher, Jocson, & Kinloch, 2005).

Finally, we are interested in investigating how spoken word can be utilized as a critical teaching tool that can be employed to foster critical consciousness, dialogue, and action. In other words, how students can reflect and articulate their lived experiences while envisioning new possibilities. In addition, we forward the idea that this art form can be exploited to build literacy for economically disadvantaged students of color. We believe that in writing, reading, and sharing spoken word poetry, students and teachers are able to “name” their world in terms of their individual lived experiences and the histories of their respective communities. Lastly, we contend that the act of writing and reading spoken word poetry can serve as praxis for social transformation.

In this paper, we will provide an overview of some of the key ideas and concepts of Critical Pedagogy, Critical Race Theory and Critical Literacy studies. Through an examination of the major components of Critical Pedagogy, we evidence the liberatory

potential of spoken word. In offering an overview of Critical Race Theory, we highlight the practice of counter-storytelling as a central theme of spoken word. An analysis of Critical Literacy studies present insights into the reading of the word and the world and the multiple discourses employed and elicited in spoken word. Following this analysis, we will draw upon our work at LAX High School,<sup>1</sup> where we have employed poetry and spoken word poetry to connect with our students.

## Theoretical Frameworks

### *Critical Pedagogy*

As demonstrated by McLaren (2003), “a critical and affirming pedagogy has to be constructed around the stories that people tell, the ways in which students and teachers author meaning, and the possibilities that underlie the experiences that shape their voices” (p. 245). From the perspective of critical pedagogues, the development of student voice is central to the struggle against oppression and plays a vital role in the naming of oppressive structures that reproduce social inequality. Critical Pedagogy emphasizes the need for the oppressed to engage in dialogue so as to call the repressive ideologies that reinforce and reproduce wealthy, white, heterosexual and masculine social norms into question while reflecting on their own subjectivities towards the end of imagining and enacting a world rife with empowering possibilities and freedom (McLaren, 2003; Giroux, 2001; hooks, 1994; Freire, 1970). In relation to compulsory schooling, we contend that spoken word poetry can serve as a powerful tool in initiating the first stage of what Freire terms *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which the oppressed confront their oppressive reality and resolve to change it. According to Lorde (1984), “Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom” (p. 38).

The nature of spoken word poetry centers on the illumination of the world in the words of poets whose views are shaped by their respective subjectivities and interaction with the world. In addition, through the performance and sharing of the written word, poets can further incorporate their emotions through energetic movement to enact their perception of truth and reality. Through call-and-response, or poet-audience interaction, poets can tap into and draw upon the experiences of their audience whose response might indicate connection, concurrence, disagreement, reflection or inspiration. Utilizing spoken word poetry, teachers and students are able to engage in a discussion that draws from the lived realities of all participants while facilitating collective dialogue and local/global meaning making. In the classroom, spoken word poetry can serve to illuminate generative themes, or points of connection and movement between oppressive realities for the oppressed and the oppressor alike (Freire, 1970). These themes can be built upon through dialogue and plans of action can be drafted in poetic form in order to provide for the expression of individual perceptions of revolutionary and transformative possibilities. These perceptions can in turn be incorporated and crafted into a collective action to serve

the purpose of teaching, learning and in the words of spoken word/rap artist Geologic “rewriting the script with [our] voice inside of the page” (Blue Scholars, 2003). However, in order to facilitate such possibilities it is imperative that we acknowledge our own individual affinities and prejudices and how they have been shaped in terms of our lived experiences.

As noted by Freire (1970), within an educational context, teachers must be willing to sacrifice their power in order to make possible the surfacing of student knowledge and voice. Furthermore, the discourse of Critical Pedagogy must subject itself to its own structural themes in order to enable those on the margins to develop the thought-language of spoken word poetry to be realized (Grande, 2004; hooks, 1998; Ellsworth, 1996). Because teachers possess the power to engage in socially reproductive and reductive forms of teaching (and learning), they must become aware of and be willing to sacrifice their position of power to the possibilities of those on the margins. In essence, teachers must be willing to step outside of their traditional and historical roles and acknowledge that they can learn from their students, thus becoming teacher-students (Freire, 1970). Furthermore, although critical pedagogues have engaged in the development of a theoretical model that embraces the development of a language that delineates the experience of the oppressed, much of the discourse in Critical Pedagogy has served to pre-formulate the medium of discussion. If we are to hold true to the tenets of Critical Pedagogy, the development of the language of the oppressed must come from the oppressed and should result from their respective subjectivities, whether it is centered on race, class, gender or sexuality, or a combination of these. We must, therefore, engage in the creation of space for both the spoken and written word, because both possess value and facilitate praxis. As students and educators, we acknowledge this and now turn to Critical Race Theory to further articulate the power of poetry in creating possibilities.

### *Critical Race Theory*

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theory and movement created by activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism and power—particularly during the post Civil Rights period. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) describe several hallmarks of CRT such as racism, intersectionality and storytelling. There are other elements of CRT, but for the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the aforementioned.

Tony Medina’s (1994) *New York City Rundown (European on me)* is an example of how spoken word embodies the facets of CRT. The poem describes the struggle, oppression and racism people of color endure not only in New York City but also in the United States. Medina writes passionately employing a clever pun:

America! America, Aesthetically/ European on me/ psychologically/ European on me/ mentally/ European on me/ socially/ European on me/ economically/ European on me/

First, Medina describes how racism is part of our reality and endemic in our society. Racism manifests itself through social norms via societal, political, and economic structures. Therefore, we must recognize that there is a “whitestream”<sup>2</sup> that privileges the property of whiteness. In addition, whiteness contains a sense of entitlement, which does not acknowledge or takes for granted the labor to overcome and persevere through racism (see McIntosh, 1988). Moreover, there is a pigment-hierarchy—the lighter your skin the more access you obtain—and there is a value placed on people of color who resemble “whitestream” features. Medina writes in the poem, “/is your hair/ straight enough/ are your lips/ thin enough/ is your skin/ light enough.” Hence, Medina sheds light to the struggle some people of color confront with their body image and self-esteem. Therefore, spoken word artists are able to articulate the pains and struggles of overcoming racism and divulge information on racism is “endemic” throughout society.

Another key ingredient of CRT is intersectionality, which means the examination of race, sex, class, age, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Crenshaw states that the intersectional framework addresses multiple systems of subordination and pertains particularly to women of color who have to battle not only against racism but sexism as well (cited in Tate, 1997). This idea is particular to spoken word texts because in discussing this genre we cannot ignore how race, class and gender intersect in each written or performed piece. As a result, one can say that each poet carries his or her socio-cultural identity, political history and multiple subjectivities in each text and/or performance. Medina’s poem reflects the experiences he encountered as a young, Boricua male who grew up in the South Bronx during the 1970s and 1980s, where he witnessed economic, political and social marginalization. In fact, one could argue that each poem is an autographical work because the spoken word artist exposes his/her emotions and reveals a little of him/herself in each text. As one poet expressed at a venue, each poet “gets naked” when they are on stage.

The last chief tenant of CRT is “voice.” One of the ways voices of the oppressed are heard is through storytelling and counter-storytelling. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state that engaging stories help us understand what life is like for others and invites the reader into an unfamiliar world. In this case, Medina invites the reader to the chaotic world of capitalistic, racist and oppressive New York City. Spoken word allows teachers and students to tell their stories about their lived experiences and invites the outer group to visit their world. In another important element, stories, narratives, poems, etc. are a powerful means for challenging cultural hegemony—presuppositions, received wisdom, shared understanding and common sense. Stories by people of color can counter the stories of the oppressor (Tate, 1997; Delgado, 2000). Medina employs the words in the poem to challenge the cultural hegemony of the “whitestream.” As a matter of fact, Medina explicitly revolts against the “European” image of beauty, value and culture and provides a space for people of color to be revered.

Such storytelling strongly resonates with critical pedagogy because both

theories desire to change and challenge the status quo. Spoken word is a form of storytelling that allows for this process to occur. As poems are heard and read, students and teachers begin to question the status quo through thought provoking discussions, critical response and consciences dialogue. As Dyson (1993) points out rap allows the rest of America to “consume and eavesdrop” as rappers verbalize their perspective on a range of issues, social, cultural, political and economical to tell their stories. The same could be true about spoken word artists. We now turn to Critical Literacy studies to demonstrate how literacy is embedded in social practice and to discuss how multiple discourses are represented in classrooms.

### *Critical Literacy*

Anthropologists and sociolinguists concentrate on literacies as a set of social practices. Brian Street, a prominent figure in the new literacy studies field, discusses two models of literacy: “autonomous” and “ideological.” Street states that the autonomous model of literacy conceptualizes literacy in technical terms, treating it as independent of social context. This model focuses on the mechanics of literacy: reading, writing, and speaking. Street asserts the problem with this model is that literacy treated as a neutral act that negates the social and political nature of literacy. However, the ideological model, according to Street, “view literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society and recognize the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts” (pp. 433-4). Therefore, researchers who take the ideological model of literacy pay greater attention to the role of literacy practices in reproducing or challenging structures of power and domination. This contrasts greatly with the autonomous model which studies literacy-in-itself and isolates aspects of social life.

Street also discusses how the ideological model challenges dominant discourse while redefining “proper literacy.” We believe our work with spoken word follows the ideological model. In our work, we seek to explore how we can alter what constitutes as being proper literacy. In addition, we seek to demonstrate how spoken word can challenge dominant discourses and is a site of struggle for power and position.

In reflecting on what Meacham (2001) has termed “literacy at the crossroads,” we can begin to see how spoken word poetry can be employed to facilitate a dialogue between students, teachers and the multiple literacies that we possess. According to Meacham, “The crossroads is that space where differences intersect and communicate” (p. 188). We believe that the spoken word club serves as a “crossroad” where students’ home and local literacies merge with schools to create a space where students can manipulate language and where students are encouraged expressive forms not often found in more conventional venues such as educational classrooms,” (Sparks & Grochowski, 2002; Kinloch, 2005; Fisher; 2005; Jocson, 2005). We have found this to be true in our weekly poetry meetings. This has been a space where students have found they can manipulate language in a manner that reflects their emotions and feelings.

We state this thesis because spoken word was developed and still develops in local communities. It is an art form that combines traditional notions of literacy—reading, writing and speaking—with bodily performance. The students we work with participate in this form of literacy naturally because it is a part of their literacy practices. Many of our students kept journals that housed their poetry prior to coming to the club. Others were more familiar with rap and wrote rap rhymes in their notebooks.

James Gee (1989) describes *Discourses* as “ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes” (p. 526). More importantly, categories such as race, class, and gender also affect the types of discourses we are exposed to and employ. Gee (1996) describes three different types of discourses: written, body and oral discourses. To be succinct, written discourse is any written text; body discourse is using the as performance, clothes, kinesthetics; and oral discourse is spoken word, dialects. Fisher’s (2003) study of African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities (ADPLC) settings. She employed this term to describe spoken word venues. Fisher contended in her study that three key literacy developments occur in ADPLCs: participatory nature where everyone has an equally important role, written word is shared orally, where the poet provides a message, and the audience must have an open mind.

Through spoken word, we concur with Fisher that these three different types of discourses are clearly represented. Written and oral discourses are perhaps the most apparent. When students recite their poems or read their poems out loud, they engage in oral discourse. Students utilize written discourse as they write their poems in their journals, notebooks, etc. As students perform their poetry, in front of an audience, they incorporate bodily discourse by using their voice, gestures and/or props to accentuate key aspects in a poem. We posit that spoken word employs these three forms of discourses and can be a valuable tool in facilitating a crossroads between students’ home, local and academic literacies.

## Methodology

As graduate students, spoken word has served as a bridge enabling us to translate the complex theoretical frameworks we study into the everyday lived experiences we endure both within and outside of the classroom. Spoken word has enabled us to connect our individual realities with the abstract and philosophical. We have created and relied upon spoken word to affirm and justify our presence within a predominantly white, upper class, heterosexual male dominated institution of higher education. Spoken word poetry continues to serve as a language that allows us to express our struggles and ourselves in creative and culturally relevant ways. As educators, we acknowledge the need for such spaces and, in reflecting on our own educational experiences, we strive to create such spaces for our students. Specifically, in our work at LAX High School, we recognize the importance of preparing our

students for college, but understand that, in preparing our students for academic success, it is imperative that we do not silence them in the process. As a result, we have created a space for our students to speak to their cultural knowledge, lived realities and personal struggles. For them, spoken word serves as a common language that all of our students engage in, with comfort and ease.

### *Site*

Upon stepping outside of the classroom, one would see a courtyard, surrounded by four buildings which seem to isolate the youth, who, after school are practicing their dance steps, talking, laughing and catching up with one another after a long day of classes. If your eyes wander across the courtyard, you cannot ignore the smiling black and brown faces that seem illuminated and liberated by the end of the school day, yet they do not go home. They seem to have found a place where they can be safe, be young and simultaneously free. However, it is important to note that during the day, the energy and demeanor of the students is much less liberated as they are hurried to class by armed security guards and police officers. Those that manage to escape wander aimlessly in search of piece of mind, and in hopes of not being caught and sucked into a classroom or the principal's office. Wandering through the courtyard, their thoughts might be distracted by the roar of planes making their final descent into the concrete abyss of Los Angeles International Airport.

### *The PEACE Class*

The PEACE Class (Political Education, Art, and Critical Expression) was made possible by a federal GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) grant in partnership with LAX Unified School District and the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. This class was designed to draw from the cultural capital of students while reinforcing their cultural ways of knowing. Through key readings and music that speak to the realities of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism and other forms of oppression, the PEACE class seeks to engage GEAR UP students in developing a critical consciousness and commitment to social justice. Through reading, writing and, sharing poetry as well as other forms of critical expression, the class was developed to assist students in reflecting on what they have learned and how it relates to their own lived experiences both in and outside of school.

In addition, students were encouraged to use their knowledge and experience to educate one another on critical issues of their choice. The goal of this course was to EMPOWER students to take on the dual role of student and teacher. Over the course of the summer and academic year, the course was open to all students as well as their guests. A total of 10 students attended on a regular basis while at least 10 students attended on a part time basis, as determined by their schedules.



### *Method*

In the following pages, we will incorporate the conversation as well as student spoken and written word that surfaced in the PEACE Class. Drawing from these sources we hope to illuminate how the open and poetic space we have created with our students has served as a location for the development of student voice, experience and collective literacy. In incorporating student works, we intend to demonstrate how—when we open ourselves to the knowledge of students as teacher-students—we can familiarize ourselves to the realities, hopes and dreams of the students we serve, while creating possibilities. Throughout our analysis, we demonstrate that if we offer our ears, student poetry, story and narrative embody the complex theoretical frameworks we have outlined above while expanding upon them and creating hope. In acknowledging, hearing, feeling, seeing and valuing student voice, we articulate the power of spoken word poetry as a tool that builds upon students' home and local literacies.

### *The Space*

Our energy illuminates the dark room, which serves by day, as a science lab. Indeed, this room serves its purpose as a lab each Thursday after school. As we rush to rearrange the desks into a circle to facilitate face-to-face interaction, Devon enters the room, softly, quietly, with a smile on her face. Devon embraces us as she speaks briefly about her week and the challenges she has endured "I might have to leave early next week because I have an assignment due in my History class." We frown, but understand and reply, "Can you stop by for just a minute?" Devon professes that she will try her "hardest." At that moment, our attention shifts to Andre, who freestyles just outside of the door with a fellow student, his tone is mellow and to a newcomer, his 6 ft. frame would be unexpected. As he extends his hand for a quick handshake, we respond but only half way because his grip is crushing. We laugh about his handshake and he continues with his lyrical flow. Kyle enters the room, dressed in his ROTC uniform, shakes our hand, and listens in to Andre's freestyle. We step outside, it is 3:10 and class was supposed to start at 3:00 PM and folks are slowly trickling in. We yell out "Poetry is my people, my people need poetry" and a few heads turn in response and walk towards our classroom.

Britney rushes in and informs us that she has to go in 20 minutes for track practice and we give her a tough time, but she prevails... "I will come next week for the full hour and a half!" The circle of desks is completed but we know that we will have to make it larger because the students always seem to bring their friends. Lou enters the classroom and whispers his dark statements for a moment or two and takes his seat. He has had a rough day, but despite his demeanor he always offers his powerful insight. Finally, we manage to collect everyone in the classroom and slowly folks begin to take their seats. Slowly Denise, a fellow facilitator, gets everyone to quiet down and we conduct our routine "check in." In our check-ins, we ask all our students

to tell us how they have been doing since we saw them last. Some day's our check-ins takes 30 minutes but it is critical that we know the mood and emotion that we all bring to the classroom. As we check-in, not all folks have good things to say, but some do not, regardless, we are all here for the purpose of engaging one another. Once the circle is complete, we announce our intentions for the day, but offer the students the opportunity to do what they wish whether it be free-write, prompt writing or dialogue. This is their space.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Poetry/Writing*

Each quarter during our first class meeting, we pose the question: "Why do we write?" The responses students shared vary and are quite revealing. Through this dialogue, we discovered that at least half of the students wrote outside of school by keeping a journal or notebook for their poetry. Through their poetry, they were able to articulate their deepest thoughts, ideas, views and personal struggles. One student, Andre said, "I love poetry . . . poetry is just a way of expressing your feelings." Andre further explained that writing is a way of understanding people and that it is a way to connect with people who share different cultures and views. Lastly, he stated how poetry could serve as tool in "schooling" people with ghetto, street talk. Andre opines how we feel about spoken word, as it is an avenue where youth can express themselves and is a powerful way for youth to utilize a discourse they are more familiar with to connect with and educate their peers, families, communities and teachers.

Joe, a student who is normally quiet and often in a solemn mood, states, "I write mostly to express myself." Joe elaborates in an untitled poem about writing, "We write to express ourselves/ to be free, to free our problems from our mind/ to reach people's heart/ and lettin' them know who we are/ Words is power/ When we write we find ourselves." In his lines, Joe articulates how we feel about writing. Writing and performing spoken word poetry frees students' souls of the problems that may weigh them down. Joe often shares deep, personal poems about his home life, in particular, his relationship with his father. Through his poetry he is able to empower himself while sharing his daily struggles with his peers and teachers. The words he uses in his poetry demonstrate agency in a situation that is at times bleak. Joe wrote and read a poem in class, *Dad and Son*, about a conversation he hopes to have one day with his dad, who has been away for nine years.

*Son says:*  
 Dad where are you  
 Dad I miss you  
 I miss you  
 I miss the Dad who brought me to  
 This world  
 I want him to see me how much

I've grown  
If it wasn't for you I wouldn't be here  
Everywhere I was you were always near  
I remember the first two faces I saw  
When I was born, was you and mom  
I am proud of being your son.  
You were the first who hugged me  
You were the one who hugged when I cry  
I pray to God to give us a second try.  
You took me to the doctor when I was ill  
You were wondering and asking how I feel  
You feed me and took me to school  
That was really pretty cool  
I woke up one morning and you were  
gone.  
I ask myself if it was something I've  
done  
I ask mom and everybody where's dad  
I was around the house crying saying  
I want my dad...

*Dad says:*  
My son, I'm sorry that I left  
Hope you'll understand  
I love you still and miss you with all  
My heart  
Hope I could have been with you since the start  
Every night I pray to God to  
Protect you wherever you go  
I also wish to see you and hug you  
And see how you've grown.  
My beloved son  
You will always be the number one  
I ask for your forgiveness  
I'm sorry for everything  
I know it's been nine years  
For those nine years I've been  
Loosing my tears  
But I pray to God to hope one day  
To see you and your brother...

Through the poem, we are able to witness the heartache and agony of a student wanting and yearning to see his father. Joe's poem provides a space for him to release his desires and express his wishes. As Joe shared his poem with other students, he cried, demonstrating his vulnerability. Fortunately, other students showed compassion and were able to identify with the poem. After this poem was read, we all had a moment of silence. The deep message of the poem was especially

hitting to several other students in the room who grew up without their fathers. Imagine if teachers in his regular classes are able to hear this poem. These teachers could begin to connect with Joe in ways that deal with his emotional needs and then assist him in his academic needs. Joe is willing to open up, but only, if someone is there to listen.

In another poem, Jay, a soft spoken but confident young Latino male declared, “My environment is what makes me speak because it’s what I live in everyday.” Through his response, Jay demonstrates how his environment plays a powerful role in shaping his view of the world. In poetic form Jay writes, “My voice is power/ My voice is me/ Poetry is what doesn’t/ Silence me.” Jay’s poetic statement articulates the power of his voice and how, through spoken word, his world-view can be articulated. The PEACE class is one of the few spaces in the school where student voice is encouraged and is centered. Here, the lives of the students take hold and are a means of communicating differences and similarities.

Stacy, a young and initially soft-spoken Latina uses poetry to build up her self-esteem. In a poem titled *Myself to Blame*, Stacy writes:

*Myself to blame—*

Is it always my fault for putting  
myself down? I mean the love that  
I need that I don’t have is making  
me feel this way...

Is it just me to blame  
When I say that my thoughts and feelings  
Are lame? Would it be fair to claim  
That love that I need from my  
Surroundings and up above or just have  
In mind that I don’t have it for a  
Reason? Is it I who’s got to realize  
That I have to love myself and show  
my pride before others can love  
me and appreciate me also.

I feel lovely, but how can I escape  
From it while the world spins  
And I think that is just myself to blame.

Stacy discusses how she needs to have self-love and self-respect before others will give it to her. This is an extremely important concept for young teens and people in general to have because without self-love there cannot be self-respect. In her poem, she divulges how she “puts herself down” but leaves the reader guessing as to why. We can speculate it may be due to peer pressure or wanting to please a boy. Whatever the reason, Stacy has figured out that she has only herself to blame. Thus, if she is able to love herself, then she will be able to rise up. Throughout the course of the PEACE class, we gradually witnessed Stacy’s poetry develop along with her voice.

In addition to her newly developed comfort in reading and sharing her poetry also seemed to parallel her rise in self-esteem.

Andre, an eighteen-year-old Black male, has written many poems since coming to the PEACE class. However, Andre had written a collection of poems prior to the formation of the class. Andre has experienced many things in a life so young and his poetry alludes to both his struggles and his personal development. A former gang-member, at the end of his sophomore year in high school, Andre nearly lost his life as he stared down the barrel of rival gang member's gun. As a result of this incident, Andre and his mother both felt that it would be best for him to move to Minnesota and stay with his extended family. Spending his junior year in Minnesota, Andre was exposed to and began writing poetry, documenting his previous life, his transformation and his new love for writing. Since his return to LAX High School, Andre has continued writing and he explains why in this excerpt from one of his poems:

My soul burns to write.  
 And my pen yearns to hold my paper tight.  
 In reality may be to escape from life  
 So I think.  
 My thoughts turn into my pen.  
 Releasing my ink.  
 My pen touching.  
 Bursting free for my paper  
 To write on her beautiful lines.

There is a sense of urgency in this poem. It is as if he needs to release an energy that is harboring inside of him. In another piece, *Poetry*, Andre further reveals what poetry has meant to him and why he writes (the poem is centered in the manner in which Andre wrote it):

Words that can express your feeling  
 Poetry.  
 Is words of healing.  
 Passion.  
 In every word  
 And every letter  
 From A to Z.  
 Poetry  
 Can speak.  
 Speaks all languages  
 and all types of slang.  
 It could be sunny—or—  
 It could be rain.  
 It could be Joy.  
 Or it could be pain.  
 Poetry  
 Can be anything.

Words that dig deep into your soul  
 Can tell a story—or—even—  
 Play a roll.  
 Poetry is somewhere you could go  
 And be free as a bird  
 Passion  
 In every word  
 So when I speak you know it's Me.  
 Deep AKA Poetry.

For Andre, and for many of our students, “poetry is words of healing.” Poetry is a way to free your soul and mind in a language that speaks to you intimately. Andre elucidates so beautifully that poetry is spoken and understood in many languages. Our students engage in spoken word because it incorporates a style of language that is their own and clearly expresses who they are or “who they be.” Andre writes in his poem, *deep sleep*:

At first total blindness.  
 Being blind.  
 Cant see with my own eyes.  
 Having no one in my life...  
 Frustrated feeling hated  
 Im in pain I Cant feel my hands to my feet.  
 I guess love don't love me...  
 I used to have a heart  
 But now Im heartless  
 And in total darkness.  
 Where's my mommy.  
 Does my sister love me.  
 She probably with her friends.  
 Mommas in the hospital.  
 Daddy doesn't come  
 But im use to it.  
 Having so much hate.  
 And nothing to loose.  
 Makes me a dangerous man...

The last line in this poem is quite chilling. It is a line that many youth in urban areas can relate to because they experience economic, social and political marginalization. Through Andre's poetry, he is able to express this sense of isolation and this rage that consumes him. The poetry he writes calms his rage and allows him to have a conversation with himself to articulate his struggles. In another revealing poem, *a mothers story*, Andre writes:

...no more parties  
 no more fun  
 she's a baby herself

and she has to raise a child.  
Now she gotta be grown  
If it wasn't for her dad  
She'd be all on her own.  
Young girl becomes a woman  
Becomes a young lady  
Just as beautiful as she was when she was a child.  
But she doesn't realize...

Andre pays homage to his mother. He realizes the sacrifices she has made without stating it explicitly. His mom's story is the story of many single mothers in urban areas. In his poem, he illuminates the beauty of her spirit and the strength of her resolve to raise a child with the support of her dad. More importantly, this piece demonstrates that Andre is making sense and connecting his own reality with that of his mothers. Andre's father is not regularly present in his life and in many conversations and poems, Andre has expressed how this has been a source of his own personal struggles. Although his poetry initially served as an avenue for Andre to grapple with his thoughts and emotions, he has transformed his poetry into spoken word for the sake of communicating his reality with those around him. For Andre, this allows him to connect with others while reaching out to those who may have similar struggles. When these connections are made, self-dialogue can be transformed into group dialogue, allowing those engaged to relate to one another and share their own personal stories.

For educators, this proves to be an opportunity to understand the context in which our students are coming from. Once we can familiarize ourselves with the struggles our students grapple with internally, both in and outside of school, we can connect with them on a more human, personal level. More importantly, by simply listening to our students and creating a space where they can begin to articulate their thoughts and ideas in written and spoken form, we can further assist them in developing a love for written and spoken word. We conclude this section by offering the words of Michael, a seventeen year old Black male who has served as an inspiration to both his peers and the PEACE Class facilitators. This excerpt was taken from a deep analytical response to the initial question "Why do you write?" Michael responds:

I know when I write it's to kinda avoid getting locked in myself...I end up looking through my eyes and so I'm isolated in my own body, it's not really me, I'm just looking through a looking glass or looking through a window or a mirror and that feeling is interesting, makes me feel real small, but it makes me feel real good...if you really think about it you can get so lost in the thought that maybe there's maybe something more than that, that you're not just that body sitting on your bed but there's more inside yourself too, and you feel so isolated and you feel so off and you feel so separated, but then you can think of it in the same way that everybody else is just that big, just that small.

As demonstrated in this excerpt, Michael writes (poetry) so that can purge himself of the thoughts and ideas that are locked inside of him. He writes to keep from

being locked in himself, to keep from being lost and, to connect with others. When he states “you’re not just that body sitting on your bed, but there’s more inside your self too,” he speaks to the power of poetry as a tool for searching oneself, one’s place in the world, to keep from losing one’s self. Michael continues:

No matter how much space we have we’re still connected to each other cause we’re all that small so I get lost in myself and it perplexes me and it makes me feel like oh my God where am I cause I don’t feel like I’m where I should be. So I write, and I lose myself in the paper so I don’t focus so much on myself cause when I do I get to feel claustrophobia, and I’m not scared of feeling claustrophobia, but when I do it takes long hours to remember I’m still a person and I’m still sitting here in real life I don’t have to be lost in myself and I wonder if it’s more fun to be lost in yourself or be in real life.

As demonstrated here, Michael writes because he feels connected and wants to maintain that connection with others around him. In engaging in writing poetry, Michael is able to put himself on paper, he writes himself into reality and offers up his poetry for others to see who he is. When Michael states, “I don’t have to be lost in myself and I wonder if it’s more fun to be lost in yourself or be in real life.” Through his poetry, makes his reality part of what he terms as “real life,” or the life of others around him. Through this excerpt, we see that Michael’s writing represents hope, possibility and connection between his inner-self and the world, in action, around him. He writes to be part of that world. Michael further elaborates on this point as he concludes stating:

you can learn so much by realizing how small you are in your own right and you can learn so much from the interaction with other people. So I write to express myself to free myself from myself so I can see who I am.

In concluding, Michael articulates that he writes but expresses his writing through spoken word to “free myself from myself so I can see who I am.” Through the act of expressing his poetry, Michael is able to see who he is and where he fits in to the world around him.

***The Teacher-Student-Preacher-Listener:  
Towards an Interactive-Auditory Discourse***

As the reader may recall, we discussed how Gee articulated three types of discourses: oral, written, and body. We feel a fourth type of discourse should be considered. Specifically, we make the case for an Interactive-Auditory discourse because, in working with our students in the PEACE Class, we have come to realize that without listening with our ears, minds and hearts, meaningful and powerful other forms of discourse cannot take place. At the center of Interactive-Auditory discourse is the African concept of Nommo (Keyes, 2002). Keyes explains that Nommo is the power of the word and how the word invokes feelings, expression and reactions. Also,



Keyes discusses *nyama*, or “the energy of action.” Spoken word moves its audience at times to take action on a particular issue. An example of this has been the numerous poems that have been written about 9/11 and the War on Terror. Moreover, spoken word stresses and “fosters a culture of listening” (Fisher, 2005). When each student reads their poetry, other students must listen attentively in order to better comprehend the message of the poem, and to respond to that poem. Spoken word relies on active listening similar to a preacher relying on the congregation to provide response to his/her sermon. Spoken word demands the active listening of the audience and an interaction with the spoken word. Spoken word provokes and incites thought.

Interactive-Auditory discourse is an expansion on the notion of “listening” but also accounts for the resulting literate reaction. It is very similar to call and response but is not necessarily prompted nor expressed immediately but can be expressed overtime repetitively through oral, body or written discourse. One of our students, JB-Real defines, call-and-response as “when you ask yourself a question and then come up with a answer for it.” This definition articulates what we mean when we say that a spoken word text may take its affect over time. In a sense, spoken word is a conversation not only among the audience but also of the self. It is the internalization of the word, its piecing together and sense making within the mind and spirit of the people. Spoken word also influences the manner and position in which people situate themselves in their world.

One striking example of Interactive-Auditory discourse is when Diana opened her poem, *The Thermometer*, with the following lines:

Sometimes I can feel my temperature risin’  
 From my feet to my thighs from my thighs to my fist  
*From my fist to my mouth*  
 And wouldn’t cha know it, every word came out...

Students in the classroom were so floored they asked Diana to repeat the line. A student asking another student to repeat lines was not an uncommon occurrence in the PEACE class. She did this three or four times until the students allowed her to finish the rest of poem. The students, for obvious reasons, found her lines moving. They felt the power in her words and it invoked an emotion for them. Diana continues the poem:

Although the feeling u felt from my fist and my lips  
 Hurt just the same.  
 You still would have felt that same pain  
 That made you want to stand still and lie there  
 Like every part of your body ached  
 While I took the blame and carried the shame  
 That felt when I let my temperature get to high  
 To control the things that I felt in my soul...  
 Have you ever felt this pain or said somthin’ that  
 You should not have out loud.  
 Loud as the sound of 10 cars, in a car crash

Where everyone was hurt but no one was dead  
*Have you kept in too much, that it drove you crazy* (emphasis added)  
 Like words are stuck in a box  
 I could see it moving, but it is just comin' out.  
 Every word you spit, that comes out ur mouth either  
 Makes my temperature rise or lets it stay where its  
 At. After all, I am the thermometer, ain't I suppose  
 To do that?

Students in the class responded to the imagery Diana created in the poem. When Diana spoke her line about a car crash, students jeered. As she finished her poem, students answered the question she posed with a “right on” and an “ohhhhh!” Diana’s poem represents Nommo as she evoked a passion for her fellow students and incited responses through Interactive-Auditory discourse.

In another poem, *Reach out*, Diana evokes the ideas of nyama. In this poem, Interactive-Auditory discourse takes place in Diana’s call to aid people and give a helping hand to those who need it the most. As the reader may recall, we discuss how this process of Interactive-Auditory discourse can take place over time. She writes:

Reach out and touch somebody  
 With your voice, your heart, your soul,  
 Reach out to the hand  
 That needs another.  
 Reach out and give back to those that have less than  
 You, and do it with all you have.  
 Don't do it as a publicity stunt, do it 'cause  
 You really want too  
 Reach out and pick those who fall  
 Because you don't want to see them hurt

Diana urges listeners to be active and help people sincerely, not for “a publicity stunt.” This is a crucial statement in the poem because Diana privileges genuine sincerity. She calls upon the humanity to help humanity for the sake of humanity.

## Conclusion

Educators must learn to become literate in Interactive-Auditory discourse in order to facilitate critical engagement with their students. Unless teachers are able to employ Interactive-Auditory discourse, they will fail to connect with and acknowledge their students realities. A failure to acknowledge the realities and lived experiences of students is a failure to acknowledge the possibility of connection and movement within and outside the multiple discourses that come into the classroom. Furthermore, this failure renders the students lived experience and perception of the world as illegitimate. It is imperative that students begin to enhance their Interactive-Auditory discourse so that they too can learn from the perceptions of their peers as well as the tools that their peers may employ in making sense of the world.

We illustrate via the PEACE class how spoken word poetry is a form of literocracy that connects students' lives with the classroom and classroom teachers. Through the use of spoken word, we are better able to understand what issues students are facing, what subjectivities students identify with and how students persevere. If we are willing to create a space where students are able express and discover their deepest and most intense feelings, then, perhaps, we as critical educators may find a more effective means of interacting with their students. If we don't listen to our students and fail to create a space where they can articulate their realities, how can we expect that they will do the same, both in and outside of the classroom?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> We use pseudonyms to describe the school and students.

<sup>2</sup> Claude Denis (1997) defines "whitestream" as the idea that while American society is not "white" in sociodemographic terms, it remains principally and fundamentally structured on the basis of the Anglo-European, "white" experience.

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