"Supreme Efforts of Care and Honest Utterance": Grasping the Singular Power of the Spoken Word in School Spaces

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I knew Joe Cytrynbaum as a fellow graduate student, a friend, an organizer, and a neighbor. I knew him as the student asking penetrating questions of the educational anthropologies we read in our doctoral courses. I knew him as a neighbor within our West Philadelphia surroundings, waving hello on beautiful autumn mornings and appearing at weekend get-togethers, instantly transforming them by his energy, laughter, and warmth. I knew him as the voice at the other end of my apartment building's intercom system wanting to talk about graduate student organizing, knowing intuitively and clearly that electronic organizing is only enhanced by face-to-face interactions. I think he must have known, too, that the sincerity and humanity in which he approached this work profoundly shaped the emerging movement and perhaps, too, that his own enthusiasm was both infectious and irresistible. I shared with Joe only a small number of those charged and beautiful moments. In the context of his passing, I am deeply grateful for those moments, for Joe, and for the opportunity to spend time in the presence of such light.

I also shared with Joe an interest in pursuing scholarship that explored youth work, poetry, and activism, while also sharing a continued and sober consideration of research relationships, responsibilities, and subjectivities (Gustavson & Cytrynbaum, 2003) within work that crossed differences and that was situated in struggles for educational equity and social justice. At the time I was coming to know Joe, I was beginning to teach and research a poetry and photography course with a group of adolescent girls. My research explored how the young women in the course drew upon the literacy and artistic traditions of African American women to pursue self-definition (Wissman, 2009) and social critique (Wissman, 2007) within an in-school context. Across the many hours I spent with the young women reading, writing, and sharing poetry, I was continually moved by the electric force in the quiet moments of writing and the hushed silence that overcame us as we listened to words carefully chosen and dynamically read. As the spoken words continued to flow, eventually the quiet would become punctuated by sighs of recognition, laughter, applause, and sometimes tears. Joe, who coached a spoken word team, "Louder than a Bomb," in Chicago's Manley High School, also knew the power of engaging students with poetry. One of Joe's students, Vasawa Thekingofvrworld Robinson, posted a note to Joe on Joe's Facebook page, writing of his time participating in the "Louder than a Bomb":

> sitting in a room that fit about seventy people. where our pads became skin, our pens became needles. injecting ink. it became an addiction. it became a habit. the word of the day you'll say. then we'll proceed to write about a topic. you'll grab your journal, freestyle your writings. while you took a bite of some snack that was organic. seeds, you planted. life, you didn't take for granted.

In my experience, poetry and spoken word are the generative and contagious forces for illumination, inspiration, transformation, and reflection that Joe's student suggests. It is this singular and simple power of words written, words spoken, and words heard that I reflect on when I think of the students Joe and I have been privileged to work with and come to know. June Jordan (1998), another poet and teacher who left us too soon, wrote that the U.C. Berkeley student poets with whom she worked approached the creative and social practice of poetry as an act of faith, a compact, a trust between poets and listeners, writing:

> They believe that someone will
> come along
> and listen to what they have tried to
> say.
>
> They believe that when someone
> comes along
> and hears what they, the poets,
> think
> desire, or despise, a trustworthy
> conversation will become possible
>
> They believe that important, truthful conversation
> between people fosters and defends
> the values of democratic equality
>
> They believe that other people deserve
> supreme efforts of care and honest
> utterance (p. 208)

In light of Joe's spirit and life's work, I would like to explore here some emerging insights related to poetry within public school spaces. These insights are drawn from work I am pursuing with an inquiry group of middle and secondary teachers who are exploring the complexities and possibilities of incorporating multimodalities into their English and Reading support classes. I have been drawn to consideration of the poetry and experiences of two boys who conveyed to me and others in the inquiry group compelling insights about the synergy between "old" and "new" literacies, between spoken words and written words, between individual creative processes and public performances. Like the student poets Jordan writes of, their work suggests this faith in the power of poetry and this yearning toward the kinds of communities that can be created by, for, and in support of words spoken and words heard.

Exploring Multimodal Literacies in an Inquiry Community

The study involves five teach-

ers from a range of rural, urban, and suburban districts. Over the course of the 2007-2008 academic year and summer, the teachers, three graduate student research assistants, and I met monthly in an inquiry community to explore adolescent literacies and to develop teacher research projects. These teachers, all of whom were members of my graduate level adolescent literacies course the previous year, developed data collection tools to learn from their students about their literacies; analyzed this data; developed curricula and projects to build on their students out-of-school literacies and lives; and utilized digital cameras, digital video, and movie-making software purchased with money from a research grant to engage their students in multimodal learning. Three teachers worked with their students to create digital poetry. One ELA teacher worked with students after school to put on a spoken word and music event that they called Java Jive; this teacher also worked with her students to create a literary art magazine. The fifth teacher, a social studies teacher, worked after school with a group of boys to create a digital video exploring the Roman empire. Here, I would like to explore the experiences of just one member of the inquiry group, Mira. (All student and teacher names are pseudonyms.)

Mira and Her Classroom

After a lengthy career teaching English in India, Mira Singh is currently in her third year teaching in a rural district in upstate New York. Mira teaches Academic Intervention Services (AIS) classes for students who have scored below expectations on the state's English Language Arts exam. She is also enrolled in a local doctoral program in literacy. She has described her previous teaching philosophy as reflecting a "New Critical" stance wherein authority and knowledge rested within the text and the teacher. As a result of her doctoral work, participation in this inquiry group, and her own professional development pursuits, she now describes herself as "moving with the times" and her pedagogy as being informed by inquiry-based learning, multimodalities, and out-of-school literacies. In interviews and through writing she has described her goals to provide students choice, agency, and ownership and to respond to her students' facility and comfort with music, images, and nonprint media.

While a participant in the inquiry group, Mira was also serendipitously working with another faculty member interested in exploring poetry and new media. To begin, Mira and her university-based co-teacher worked together to create a poetry workshop in her classroom. The students were invited to read poems by Emily Dickinson, William Carlos Williams, and others to explore imagery, tone, and word choice. Students then wrote original poems that were workshopped in the classroom. In order to create a "poem movie," or a digital poem, the students were invited to choose images and music to accompany their selected poem and to record their voices narrating their poem. Using Windows Moviemaker, the students then stitched together images, music, and spoken word, working both individually and collaboratively to orchestrate these multimodalities (Kress & Jewitt, 2003) toward the completion of their digital poems. These poems were shared with the entire class at the end of the project. After the first implementation of this project, Mira also incorporated digital poetry into her Academic Intervention Support classes on her own the following academic year.

Michael and Jared

The digital poems of two boys, Michael and Jared, provided compelling windows into their literacies and lives for both Mira and other members of our inquiry community. Both boys were 8th graders at the time of the study. Michael, who is White, was part of the first class where digital poetry was introduced. Jared, who is African American, participated in this project the following academic year. Conversations with both students, classroom observations, and interviews with Mira provide further insight into the ways in which the students took up invitations to do this kind of work and how their engagement re-shaped the social interactions within Mira's classroom. In a finding that initially surprised us, both boys embraced the opportunity within this work for reasons that were not tied only to the novelty of using new technologies and new literacies in school spaces.

In presenting these mini-cases, I am interested in how the boys embraced opportunities to pursue poetry in the service of furthering their own self-understanding; of combining words and images to reach their audience; and in shaping an in-school space as one embracing of social interactions typically not found in school spaces.

Here, first, is a link to Michael's digital poem:

http://www.urbanedjournal.org/videos/digitalpoemMichael.wmv

In interviews, Michael recounted that he "loves writing poems and song and stuff" and that he frequently writes outside of school. This project was his first opportunity to conceptualize and pursue this kind of digital poetry in school. He said, "It was awesome just to make something like that! I always wanted to do something like that, so it awesome." Asked about the inspiration for the poem, Michael told us, "My house burned down and my poem was about homeless people…'cause not a lot of people realize the aspect of people and not having homes and stuff." Michael discussed not only the process of writing and sharing his own poem, but also what he learned about other students, saying,

> It really showed off peoples' creative abilities and like their personalities in what they did in their work…Just that like you never really know how people think or feel on the inside. Just the way they look and act on the outside is totally different from the person inside them, basically.

In discussing the rhythm and intonations of the poem, Michael talked about the influence of hip hop and rap. Later in the interview, he provided even more insight into his writing process, a process Mira explores with great curiosity:

Mira: And when you write, do you

see images, visuals?

Michael: Yeah. Yeah.

Mira: You do? That's part of it?

Michael: Yeah. Like you see it in your head and you keep going.

Mira: Okay. And does rhythm come in, too? Or does it come later? How does it flow when you are writing?

Michael: The flow is there. It starts off with a flow and then it stops and then at the end you bring it all into one flow. Like from the different flows, because I don't write all at one time. I write a little bit and when I get more I keep on writing. Whatever comes out, I don't try to rush it. I just write whatever comes to my head and if I don't have nothing else I'll just stop and try again. But whatever I write, I write to like rhythms and beats.

Through this project, Michael was able to craft a place for his writing in school, a practice he pursued outside of school, but had never brought into school. In doing so, many additional opportunities for movements across boundaries arose. His exchange with Mira is striking in that they shift traditional roles of teacher and student; Mira takes a stance as a learner from Michael and he teaches his teacher about his writing process. There is also movement here in terms of knowledge production: a life-changing experience was able to travel into school through this poem and Michael's use of poetry, images, and spoken word communicated to his fellow students how poetry can make social commentary. Significantly, Michael's out-of-school literacy practice was enriched by the multimodal component that Mira introduced and that he had never pursued before. In fact, after the project ended, Michael put this poem and others up on Youtube. Digital poetry here becomes an essential part of Michael's rich palette of literacy practices, one both welcomed and enriched by school.

Here is Jared's digital poem:

http://www.urbanedjournal.org/videos/digitalpoemJared.wmv

Unlike Michael, Jared did not consider himself a writer before this project. In his predominantly white rural school, and as a talented basketball player, Jared told us that most people saw him only as a "jock," an identity that he also seemed to embrace. After the project he remarked, "I didn't think I had it in me to write the poem, so after I wrote I was like, 'did I really write that'?" He noted that he had written poems before, but only "if [teachers] made me, but not in my free time." He said that he came to the realization that "poetry is actually kind of fun. That writing poems is, I don't know, I guess it could be a hobby or something like that. Something I could do in my free time."

To Jared, the opportunity to write a poem and receive feedback was the most appealing aspects of the project, not the movie-making component. He said, "I didn't know I could write poems that good, but I guess I can a little. I don't know. It was just fun to write a poem and to get feedback on it." Jared noted that in other English classes students rarely hear poems read out loud. For Jared, reading his poem and hearing others was significant to him and we noted in classroom observations that he played a very active role in commenting on other student's drafts, discussing the choice of images, and working with other students to construct their poems. Jared noted, "I always read my poems out loud. I'm not a stage fright type of person. I'll read other people's poems out loud if they want me to. I just do that because I like getting feedback on what people think about the poem." Asked why he did so, he commented, "'cause then you'll know what they're thinking and you can make a poem that would suit what they're thinking."

In this sense, Jared's experience in the class is valuable to him in terms of how it opened up a social experience centered around writing and discussion in the classroom he had not experienced before. Jared mentioned the importance of hearing poetry read out loud and of receiving response to his work five times in our interview. For Jared, much like Michael, poetry opened up opportunities for social interaction, for the enrichment of knowledge about other people and their experiences, and for the exploration of his own identity within a broader classroom community. While neither boy spoke specifically about his racial and gender identity, the kind of identity work that their poems reflect is compelling. Jared provides an image of himself where being a poet and a basketball player are not in conflict and the intonations in Michael's poem reveal how his work is profoundly influenced by the rhythms and social consciousness of hip hop, a tradition that might not be noticeable without this project as a shaping influence for a young man in this rural school.

"New" Literacies and "Old" Purposes: Reclaiming the Spoken

In discussing new literacies, Knobel and Lankshear (2007) note that they involve a different kind of "ethos stuff" in that they invite more participatory, collaborative, and collective ways of working and more distribution of expertise and authority. Within Mira's class, digital poetry set the stage for a classroom where participation norms and traditional ways of knowledge production were upset. Here, students' in and out-of-school literacies were a bit less dichotomized, multimodalities were encouraged, and collaborative and public sharing were encouraged in marked contrast to the individual and private writing that characterized much of the students' previous experiences of in-school learning. It could also be argued that there was space here not only for a more generative recognition of adolescents' literacies in school, but also an *enrichment* of those literacies, from Michael's newfound ability to incorporate multimodalities into his composing process to Jared's embrace of an identity as a poet and public commentator and supporter of other people's poems. Given the context of this class – given its purpose to work with students who did not do well on the state's standardized test – these attributes seem all the more strik-

ing. Rather than crafting the class in the image of a traditional "remedial" course focused on skill-building, Mira instead invited engagement with poetry, images, and spoken word. This decision correspondingly shifted focus away from deficits to strengths, from isolated skills to embodied knowledge.

In many ways, though, what occurred here was not only due to "new" or multimodal literacies, but also due to the invitation to engage with the most traditional mode of communication: orality. Both Michael and Jared spent little time with us talking about the technology or the software or the process of choosing images for their digital poems; rather, both were much more expansive when talking about the composing process of their own poems and about coming to know others in the class through listening to their poetry. As reflective young men, both Michael and Jared expressed desires for socially significant work and spoke frequently to how the project enabled a different kind of knowledge about themselves and other students. It seems significant that by bringing in "new" literacies to one of the oldest art forms, the students were not taken in by the new tools or technology for their own sake, but by how those tools could be used in the service of meaning making and community building.

To me, Mira, Jared, and Michael suggest that to study adolescent literacies requires an openness, a collaborative commitment, a dedication to learning with and from students and other teachers. In discussing her experience, Mira noted, "I was a student, teacher, researcher, all in one. That really, really helps and we should be open to this as teachers." The insights we learned from Jared and Michael emerged not only from Mira's classroom, but also from a community of other teachers supporting Mira in her work, and from Michael and Jared themselves. Michael, for example, responded to our question about what he would suggest to other English teachers based on his experience with the digital poetry project in this way:

> The typical English class is taking a few notes, reading the book, and then a reflection essay about the book. The thing we did in Ms. Singh's class was more open discussions and more creative, instead of like pen to the paper work, more philosophical, if I can use that word?

Michael's work and the responses to it remind me that at the heart of English education should be the drive to communicate and to wrestle with large ideas. Along with Michael, I continue to think we could be a bit more "philosophical" in our teaching and research of adolescent literacies as well as a bit more participatory, if I could use that word.

"Yeah, Yeah, I Hear That"

My time in this inquiry community has reinforced my sense of the importance of contexts for both students and for teachers to be a part of participatory communities, to write, to speak, and to be heard. Within words written, words spoken, and words heard possibilities can emerge for understanding, for change, for compassion. In considering Joe's life and legacy, I continually return to June Jordan's (1998) description of her student poets, her proclamation that they believed everyone deserved "supreme efforts of care and honest utterance" (p. 208). Joe's sister, Pamela Cytrynbaum, recounts her brother's own fierce belief and compassionate listening to her, saying:

> I would bring him the most toxic feelings, my most unproud moments, my ugliest pain, and he would be just like with his students: "Yeah, yeah, I hear that." Somehow with this incredible alchemy of empathy and sympathy and fiery brain sharpness he would just turn me all around. (Schmich, 2009)

From students seeking out poetry slams in urban centers to rural students pursuing work of depth and complexity in their marginalized and sometimes stigmatized "remedial" courses, Joe is an inspiration to work with deep integrity to create contexts for young people where their words are nurtured, brought forth, and heard. However ephemeral and however fragile those moments and spaces are, I believe they are of singular importance to our students and to our democracy. They require the commitment that inspires the best community organizers and the boldness that is at the heart of all poets. Carole Maso (2000), an eloquent and poetic voice on writing, love, and loss writes:

> As we dare to utter something, to commit ourselves, to make a mark on a page or a field of light.
>
> To incorporate this dangerous and fragile world. All its beauty. All its pain. (p. 179)

To Joe, in humble recognition of all this beauty of your life, of all this pain at your loss.

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