ABSTRACT

Title of Document: SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER: SPOKEN WORD POETRY AS POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN THE MILLENNIAL AGE

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Civic and political disengagement is an often-cited distinguishing feature of young Americans today, collectively known as the millennial generation—i.e., those born between 1980 and 2000. Yet, measures of engagement often fail to consider how young people themselves define acting political. This dissertation investigates youth politics through the prism of spoken word performance poetry, an art form assigned social change attributes by its principal practitioners: young urban adults. This study asks: how do contemporary young adults use spoken word poetry to civically and politically engage?

Using ethnographic research methods, I followed discourses and practices deployed in the Washington, D.C. spoken word poetry community that centered on social change. I identify three social change processes carried out by these young poets. First, through a process I call speaking truths, poets used spoken word to draw upon their lived

experiences—their truths—as a political and moral source of knowledge that guided and legitimated their social change messages. Second, poets healed themselves and others by writing and performing their truths in the form of spoken word therapy narratives, thereby placing their community in a position to do sustainable social justice work. Third, using new school activist approaches, poets leveraged spoken word to advocate for social justice causes, build political networks, and mobilize others into political action.

To frame this analysis, I integrate social change scholarship on (1) public sphere civic and political engagement, focusing on young adults, (2) culture and politics, concentrating on art and popular culture, and (3) the role of identity and narrative in social change. I introduce and develop the theoretical concept of creative politics as a way to situate the untraditional ways that young urban adults in Washington, D.C. politically and civically engaged: poets leveraged the unique properties of art as a way to speak truths, individually and collectively heal, and do new school activism. By doing so, poets honored their subjective truths and identities, and at the same time transcended these subjectivities in order to communicate more universal ideas about social justice and change. Specifically, a universal belief in the power of love guided the poets' creative politics.

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER: SPOKEN WORD POETRY AS POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN THE MILLENNIAL AGE

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mom and dad, for their endless support, love, and encouragement, and to the spoken word poets of Washington, D.C., for whom I have infinite admiration for their courage, talent, and conviction, and eternal gratitude for their kindness.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Art, Identity, and the Puzzling Nature of Youth Politics

Setting the Stage

It was 10:00 p.m. on a comfortably warm Friday night in May 2010, and the bustling nightlife of the U Street neighborhood in Northwest Washington, D.C. was in full swing. Patrons packed themselves into overcrowded bars, couples walked by hand-in-hand with leftovers swinging carelessly in doggie bags by their sides, a group of fashionably dressed women donning clutch purses and 4-inch heels strutted by laughing while a pair of men flirted for their attention, with little success. Turning the corner from U Street, I already saw a line of people beginning to form outside the front door, a full hour before the show began. I took my place in the queue and watched it grow progressively longer as the eleven o'clock hour approached. The line was made up of predominantly young African Americans, between the ages of 20 and 30, decked out in casually hip attire: Bangels, braids, hoodies, and tee-shirts with clever expressions plastered across the front. As we waited, anticipation built and questions began to ripple through the line: "When will the doors open?" "Do you think they'll sell out before we get in?" "Is this your first time?" "Are you performing tonight?"[1] Energy, excitement, anxiety, and competition

[1] I use quotes when I wrote down what people said while I was in the field (by writing it directly in my field notebook), or when I paraphrased what people said while writing up my field notes for that field visit. Since, for the most part, I did not use a tape recorder during field visits, these quotes should be taken as a close approximation. I did, however, tape record all in-depth interviews, so quoted material from my interview data is quoted verbatim, although I edited for clarity and readability, omitting some extraneous words (e.g., "um," "like") and redundant terminology. My strategy for quoting from field note data draws selectively upon Goffman (2009, fn 4, p. 342).

filled the air. The stakes felt high. High enough that we stood in line a full hour, waiting outside, on a Friday night, hoping to make it through that door before the performance space reached full capacity. Passersby gawked with curiosity at the length of the line, extending halfway down a full city block; one gentleman intrigued by the spectacle asked, "What are you all waiting for?" A young woman responded, "The poetry slam." The man chuckled in disbelief without breaking his stride: "All this for poetry?"

As I stood in line waiting for the doors of The Poets' Place to open, I jotted down notes in my small pale blue hardcover notebook, recording the conversations, interactions, and scenery happening all around me. Just a few months earlier, in February 2010, I began conducting fieldwork at the Holla Out Loud Poetry Slam in an effort to explore the political dimensions of spoken word poetry.[2] What initially drew me to this site of inquiry was the close affinity I observed between the contemporary spoken word poetry movement and an explicit concern with progressive social change and social justice. Indeed, once in the field, I observed the power that members of this community ascribed to spoken word as a means of achieving these political goals. I was curious to learn how poets in Washington, D.C. believed this social change process happened, and the role that the artistic practice of spoken word poetry played in this process.

On this particular night, the poetry stakes were especially high, as the outcome of the competition would determine who made it on the final D.C. slam team. The team would consist of four or five poets and would be financially sponsored by the poetry venue, The Poets' Place, to travel to the National Poetry Slam in August, which, in 2010, was held in St. Paul, MN. Near the front of the line, I saw the poets who I knew would be competing—by this time, I had gotten to know them as the "regulars" that competed at Holla Out Loud. Right then, I spotted Deanna, the 29-year-old African American woman who was the slam's emcee or "host," walking the

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[2] The names of all people, spoken word venues, and local organizations have been fictionalized.

length of the line. Deanna was also a poet, although she never competed on nights that she hosted. Describing her style of hosting as “very blunt and sometimes raunchy,” Deanna’s approach to hosting often resembled that of a comedian, as she drew heavily upon wit and humor to keep her audience entertained. She had a seemingly natural performance instinct about her, and I wasn’t entirely surprised to learn that she earned her Master’s Degree in Theatre (although, by day, she worked as one of the hundreds of thousand federal government employees living in and around the District). Deanna helped to start Holla Out Loud in March of 2008, during which time she approached the owner of The Poets’ Place and successfully lobbied the establishment to host a monthly slam. Within months, poets were performing in front of sold-out crowds and, in 2009, Holla Out Loud sent its first team to compete at the National Poetry Slam.

As was the case at every Holla Out Loud slam, that night Deanna was dressed for performance. Her hair was perfectly styled into hundreds of tiny thin braids cascading down her back. She wore tall black heels to match her black leggings, which peeked out from under a long brightly colored shirt kept in place by a thick black belt, showing off her full hourglass shape. Deanna found me in line, hugged me, and gave me a complementary $5 wristband, which I graciously accepted.

Within five minutes Grant, one of the regular competing poets, walked in my direction. I thought he was coming to say hi but instead he greeted the young man and woman standing directly behind me. Consistent with the typical greeting protocol in this community, hugs were exchanged. Grant then recognized me and introduced me to the pair: Neeta, a 34-year-old South Asian woman and Kevin, a 33-year-old white man who I soon learned was gay. Grant described Kevin as “a very important person in the slam community.” Grant, who was twenty-six and identified as white and Jewish, was familiar with my research project and, like so many of the

poets, was extremely generous sharing his time, knowledge, and poetry networks with me. Having graduated from a nearby large state university just a couple of years earlier, Grant was still trying to settle on a career path, which he wanted to entail social justice, spoken word poetry, and working with youth. At the time, Grant was piecing together three part-time jobs in order to pursue work across these various career interests. Grant confided in Neeta, Kevin, and me that he was nervous about performing that night and hadn't yet decided which poem he would recite. Hugging us goodbye, he walked back to the front of the line to reunite with his poetry friends, who would soon become his poetry opponents in just a short while.

After Grant left, I continued talking to Kevin and Neeta, and I learned that they were on a poetry team competing at the upcoming Southern Fried regional slam. When I expressed my interest in gender issues, Kevin told me that slam is a very masculine sport, so much so that two years ago a national women's slam competition started, called Women of the World Poetry Slam (WOWPS). "That has helped," he said. I also learned that Kevin and Neeta were a part of a group of poets involved in starting a new D.C. slam venue in August, located across town in the Eastern Market neighborhood. Named Slam DMV, this new slam sought to draw participants from around the D.C. Metropolitan area, including Northern Virginia and Maryland. Deanna had mentioned this new slam in an interview we had a week earlier, though she knew very little about it. She explained to me:

> From what I understand, it is directed at the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender crowd because someone said that The Poets' Place isn't welcoming to that crowd. And I was like, "No one ever comes to our shows!" You know like, if they came, we'd be welcoming. But it's like they just show up, you know. And so it's interesting that even in poetry we all can't come together in one venue, or some feel that they can't come

> together in one venue to express themselves and even then you feel separated. And I don't think there's a race separation, but of all things I think it's hilarious that there is a sexual preference separation.

Yet, despite Deanna's comments, the few research studies conducted on spoken word performance poetry suggest that ideas about race profoundly shape the social interactions that take place at spoken word poetry venues (Fleming n.d.; Somers-Willett 2009). Indeed, as I continued my fieldwork over the course of the next two years, I heard several times that Holla Out Loud was the "black" slam and Slam DMV was the "white" slam. During this time, ideas about race, gender, and sexuality took center stage—literally and proverbially—as poets performed poems that drew upon their personal experiences with these and other identity categories, including religion, class, disability, ethnicity, nationality, body size, and language status, among others.

That night, Grant made the team. In part, it was his second round poem entitled "Dear David" that secured him a ticket to St. Paul. As Grant walked to the stage, the crowd clapped, whistled, and shouted out words of encouragement. His competing slammers were the loudest, shouting supportive quips such as, "I know him!" and "Go ahead, poet!" Once on stage, Grant adjusted the mic, waited for the noise to settle, took a deep breath and, as the poets say, "goes in." In his poem, he spoke directly to the Star of David, the symbol of the Israeli flag, using the performance poem as a medium to work through the complicated relationship between his own Jewish identity and his disapproval of Israeli government actions against Palestine. Filling every pocket of the room left silent by a captivated audience, his voice echoed through the microphone with acoustic clarity and emotional conviction, rumbling slowly and cautiously through the first two stanzas. Identity and art were cornerstones of Grant's political engagement.

A six-sided star fishes for identity on my chest
Tucked under a mixed family
It dangles like a worm on a hook under American waters

David, you've become a constellation we no longer strain to see
Like a king's crown
Your yellow light showed us through the darkest times
Exposed us to the darkest crimes
When you labeled us a problem
A question
They answered with genocide
Another problem
Another question
They answered with atomic bombs
More problems
We stop asking
And instead promise never again

Grant stepped closer to the mic. His voice grew more thunderous and angry, as he drew attention to the deceit, death, and senselessness that has accompanied the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We lie
Dead
As our babies
Boom
Might as well drop them out of the planes
Makes as much sense as cartoons as war propaganda

Dear David
They gave you a nation but what did you say?
Are you trapped between those two blue bars or can you still get away?
Because Israel was dropped on top of Palestine and is there to stay
Like one triangle
Turned around and dropped on another
You see, David, my brother cannot be anti-Semitic if he is as Semitic as me
Isaac, Ishmael just wants to be free
But you've got him building pyramids out of the charred dust of bulldozed homes
In the Gaza
Stripped of rights
You've let your brother sleep naked and hungry too many nights

Specks of spit flew from Grant's mouth, which were visible in the bright spotlight aimed at the center of the stage where Grant stood. He shook his head and closed his eyes in frustration:

> You pharaoh
> Cashing checks from the West
> Bank
> You've become
> Settled
> In your thinking
> Unlike your Torah
> You do not move
> You have not turned
>
> You six-sided sinner
> You blind Goliath
> You have a hexagon center that points nowhere but inward
> What are you looking for out in that desert?
> Is it another ghetto?
> Are you somehow jealous of the swastika's popularity among disaffected youth?
> I mean, are you trying to be a bad ass?

At that point, Grant slowed his pace, quieted his voice, and asked, "Or are you just an abused child / Now grown up / Molesting your nephew and calling him names?" He continued: "Dear David / Our homeland is neither / Just like the Christian Right…How ashamed you've made us" The audience screamed with approval and admiration of Grant's play on words, signaling their opposition to conservative social politics. Then, Grant confessed to his once beloved star:

> I used to cover all my notebooks with little pictures of you
> Now I tuck you under my shirt in order to hide my association with
> My role in unwillingly supporting your racial, national, religious apartheid
> You make me sick
> David
>
> Oceans away
> You fish for identity on my chest
> Reminding me who I am
> Because of how you can't be
> Reminding me where I come from
> By showing us where we can't go
> You are a fallen star

Not lucky
Nor bright
Yet I still see myself in you far too often
Like some birthright trip to hypocrisy
From Crofton, Maryland
Because all I can say
Is never again
As I tuck my necklace away
And pray that we end this oppression

Identity and art were central to Grant's approach to political engagement. First, he drew upon aspects of his own identity to advocate a political stance; in this case, he used his personal experience being Jewish and American as a window through which to articulate his anti-war message and his disapproval of Israeli governmental policy. Indeed, it was his personal experience that lent a unique political perspective to the situation, and a unique ability to engage in social critique. Such a standpoint was highlighted in his conflicted personal relationship with the "six-sided star [that] fishes for identity on [his] chest," as he once "cover[ed] all [his] notebooks with little pictures of" the iconic Jewish symbol but now "tuck[s] [it] under [his] shirt in order to hide [his] association with [his] role in unwillingly supporting [Israel's] racial, national, religious apartheid." This lived experience or distinct standpoint provided Grant with a unique epistemological perspective.

The artistic elements of spoken word were also central to Grant's social critique. He performed "Dear David" with passion and emotion; his words accompanied only by a mic and occasional hand gestures. He used the tempo and volume of his voice as a tool to accentuate the poem's word play (e.g., "But you've got him building pyramids out of the charred dust of bulldozed homes / In the Gaza / Stripped of rights") and internal rhyme (e.g., "Like a king's crown / Your yellow light showed us through the darkest times / Exposed us to the darkest crimes"). Unavailable through the written form, Grant tapped into the spoken medium of the art

form as he switched from the English pronunciation of David (with a long "a" and short "i" vowel sound, i.e., Dā-vĭd), to the Hebrew pronunciation (with a short "a" and long "e" vowel sound, i.e., Dăvēd, pronounced "Da-veed") after asking: "Or are you just an abused child / Now grown up / Molesting your nephew and calling him names? / Dear David."

In addition to his voice, Grant also drew upon the communicative elements of performance by using his body, conveying the imagery of the Israeli flag by stacking his arms into two parallel lines as he asked: "Are you trapped between those two blue bars or can you still get away?" Throughout the poem, Grant's lines were punctuated by audible snaps and "ahh's" from the audience. After he delivered his closing lines ("As I tuck my necklace away / And pray that we end this oppression"), the young crowd erupted into a boisterous uproar, shouting, clapping, and some even standing in order to express their appreciation for Grant's artistic craft and anti-oppression message.

This form of political engagement entailed artistic expression rooted in social critique. By social critique, I refer to poets that articulated some sense of the social world, an assessment of what was wrong with the social world, and some notion of fixing or changing this current state. To achieve this form of social critique, poets drew upon their own subjective identities and lived experiences as a source of knowledge and credibility. As such, I define politics in this artistic context as a critique of social ills and a commitment to social change. Grant's performance of "Dear David" illustrates how identity and art were central to poets' approach to political engagement. Using spoken word poetry as a tool for social change, poets' engagement in this cultural practice served as site for politicized knowledge building, healing, and activism.

***

I open with this scene to highlight the intersections of art, identity, and politics that I saw during my two and a half years of fieldwork at spoken word poetry venues in Washington, D.C. This scene illustrates how one group of contemporary young adults used the creative arts and their personal biographies as a viable site for political engagement aimed at social justice and change. The art form of spoken word consisted of a peculiar and, at times, seemingly paradoxical combination of poetry and performance, literature and theatrics. Poems were rooted in the personal yet delved into the political, and the art form's practitioners valued a dramatic and entertaining stage performance, yet they insisted on an authentic form of artistic expression grounded in "true" real-life experiences.

Drawing on phenomena such as those described above, one goal of this study is to explain how contemporary young adults politically engage in their communities through the artistic cultural practice of spoken word poetry. This dissertation investigates the relationship between art and politics in a city well known for both: Washington, D.C. I examine this relationship through the prism of spoken word performance poetry, an art form practiced predominantly by young adults in urban areas. This study asks: how do contemporary young adults use spoken word poetry to civically and politically engage? Spinning out of this general question is a set of more specific research inquires. How do contemporary young adults come together to work for common political goals in a context characterized by a multiplicity of identities? How does identity operate in present-day activist efforts concentrated on fighting against racism, homophobia, sexism, and other intersecting forms of inequality? Further, how does art facilitate activist goals aimed at social justice and change?

To examine political engagement rooted in popular aesthetic forms among contemporary young adults, I followed discourses and practices deployed in the D.C. spoken word art

community that centered on “social change,” with an emphasis on the discourses and practices enacted during poetry performances, poetry workshops, and community events that incorporated performance poetry. Social change refers to an alteration in the social order over time. These alterations can include changes in institutional arrangements, behavior patterns, or cultural values and norms. While social change can take a myriad of forms, I’m specifically interested in alterations of the social order that are rooted in a social justice framework. By social justice, I refer to efforts aimed at promoting a fair society that challenges inequality and other forms of injustice, and values diversity. Not all discourses and practices carried out in this spoken word community emphasized social change or engaged in themes of social justice; indeed, many poems, conversations, and actions addressed topics beyond a social justice framework. However, given my interest in art and politics, which informed my methodological attention to discourses and practices centered on social change, social justice topics served as the primary focus of this research project.

Three main areas of scholarly literature helped me shape this study and interpret its findings. First, theories of civic and political engagement in the public sphere serve as the broader context for my project, and I focus specifically on engagement among young adults. I outline some of the distinguishing characteristics of contemporary young adults and the socio-cultural context in which they have come of age. Second, I engage literature located at the intersection of culture and politics, concentrating on the role of art and popular culture in social change. Third, I draw upon literature located at the cross-section of identity, narrative, and social change, specifically engaging work on identity politics, narrative freedom, and testimony to inform my analysis. I extend these literatures by considering the role of art and personal biography in everyday forms of political participation among present-day young adults.

Throughout this dissertation, I explore how young adults in Washington, D.C. deployed artistic creativity to politically and civically engage in untraditional ways, leveraging the power of art as a vehicle for doing social justice work and effecting social change. For these poets, the artistic cultural practice of spoken word poetry was both a means of creative expression and a form of everyday political engagement, meaning that is was hands-on, accessible, and rooted in a local community context.

Political Participation among Young Adults

Contemporary youth are frequently criticized for their lack of engagement in civic and political life (Checkoway et al. 2003; Flacks 2007; Nygreen, Kwon, and Sánchez 2006). In fact, civic and political disengagement is one of the often-cited distinguishing features of contemporary young adults. Collectively referred to as the "millennial generation"—i.e., those born between 1980 and 2000 (Pew Research Center 2012)—contemporary young adults are regularly depicted as self-absorbed, entitled, and uninterested in politics or public affairs (see, e.g., Arum and Roksa 2011; Arum et al. 2012; Bauerlein 2008; Stein 2013; Twenge, Campbell, and Freeman 2012).[3] Social media and other technological advancements are frequently cited as contributing factors to millennials' disengagement, as they are stereotyped as being obsessed with using social media to broadcast a selectively crafted, narcissistic online identity (Bauerlein 2008; Stein 2013). Even their activism, dubbed "slacktivism"—and specifically their activism on

[3] Others have defined millennials as those born after 1982 (Howe and Strauss 2000; Twenge et al. 2012).

social media or, “clicktivism”—has been characterized as a form of political disengagement and apathy (Arndt 2013).[4]

When American youth do participate in political endeavors, variation exists across different demographics, with white, educated, middle-class youth more engaged than their non-white, less educated, and working-class counterparts (CIRCLE 2008). Young women and girls face unique barriers in their efforts to become politically engaged (Gordon 2008) and college, in particular, is cited as an important space for initiating youth political involvement (CIRCLE 2008). This portrait of youth politics suggests that, in general, political interest and activity is absent or lacking among many millennials in America today. Within this framework, it is reasonable to assure that young women, youth of color, non- or pre-college youth, and/or working-class or poor youth might be especially disengaged from political involvement.

There are some exceptions to this narrative about millennial disengagement, perhaps the most notable being millennials’ increased political participation during the 2008 presidential campaign, where Barak Obama’s victory was credited, in part, to youth’s increased participation (Fisher 2012). In her review of research on contemporary youth politics, Fisher (2012) cites studies that point to millennials’ *increased* interest in politics and public affairs, expressed in terms of higher rates of volunteerism (Shea and Harris 2006) and voter turnout since 2000 (Dalton 2008; Kirby and Kawashima-Ginsberg 2009; Sander and Putnam 2010).

Yet, irrespective of whether scholars cite an increase or decrease in civic and political participation among young people, existing research tends to define civic and political activity along conventional lines. This work focuses on such things as participating in public meetings, working for political campaigns, corresponding with political representatives, protesting in the

[4] Other scholars have explored how the web enhances political engagement among youth (see, e.g., Fisher 2012).

streets, reading the newspaper, and voting (see Arum et al. 2012; Cohen 2010; Fisher 2012). These definitions of civic and political activity align with traditional approaches to studying social change, which tend to rely on theoretical frameworks organized around social movements, contentious politics, or conventional forms of public sphere participation.

A social movement's framework conceptualizes political engagement along lines of mobilization, collective action, and large-scale social movements, typically targeted against the state. There is debate over the precise definition of a social movement (Eyerman 2006; Goodwin and Jasper 2004); however, Tilly's (2004) definition is widely cited. For Tilly, social movements must involve campaigns (collective claims on a target audience) that employ contentious repertoires (e.g., petitions, rallies, pamphleteering) and WUNC displays (public claims to worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment) (3-4). Twentieth century social movements organized around labor issues, civil rights, feminism, gay liberation, and anti-war politics are classic examples. The models for social change at the center of these movements were structured around a national agenda and were targeted toward the state, largely focused on changing laws and government policies, or revolutionizing dominant cultural values.

Scholars of contentious politics have sought to broaden definitions of political action beyond large-scale social movements. While some forms of contentious politics can be social movements, most are not (Tilly and Tarrow 2007:8). Non-social movement forms of contentious politics include such things as ethnic conflict, nationalism, revolutions, civil wars, protests, military coups, worker rebellions, and vigilante violence (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). In this way, Tilly and Tarrow (2007) argue that contentious politics are "interactive, collective making of claims that bear on other people's interests or involve governments as claimants, objects of claims, or third parties" (23) or, more simply, contention involves "people struggling with each

other over which political program will prevail" (2). However, even this attempt to expand ideas about political engagement continues to rely on a narrow definition in that political acts are still understood to involve some interaction with governments, even if the state is not the direct target of the claims being made (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 2004).[5]

Recognizing the narrow nature of these conventional definitions rooted in social movements and contentious politics frameworks, some scholars have offered a more expansive perspective by drawing attention to political activity that takes place outside of state institutions, such as the family and workplace (Fraser 1989). This was an important strategy and contribution of the second wave feminist movement, which pointed to the political dimensions of seemingly apolitical social domains, including the personal, domestic, and intimate spheres of social life.

The literature on civil society and the public sphere is useful for theorizing spaces outside official political institutions where politics take place. Civil society is a sector of society that is distinct from government (i.e., state operations) and business (i.e., economic operations). The core principles that organize civil society are different from those that structure political and economic institutions in that civil society privileges democratic communication, solidarity, and justice (Alexander 2006; Emirbayer and Sheller 1999).[6] Examples of civil society include

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[5] Goodwin and Jasper (1999, 2004) critique both social movements and contentious politics scholarship (referring to them collectively as political process theory), asserting that it has become the hegemonic paradigm in social movements research (1999:28). "[P]rocess theorists have usefully emphasized that social movements are situated within a larger field of 'contentious politics,' yet they have not (yet) gone far enough in this regard. Their definition of politics, contentious or otherwise, remains quite narrow and conventionally state-centered" (Goodwin and Jasper 2004:81).

[6] A closely related concept, work on the civil sphere draws upon Habermas's theorization of civil society and the public sphere to demonstrate how politics or "[p]ower is a medium of communication, not simply a goal of interested action or a means of coercion" (Alexander 2006:48). Alexander understands politics and power to be interconnected and operating at a cultural discursive level, not simply at the level of interested action or coercion. In this work, Alexander (2006) argues that classical understandings of civil society need to be transformed in a critical way; in his own attempt to do so, he defines a new sphere of society, in which a community of individuals finds solidarity based on notions of civility and justice.

everything from charities and civic groups, to policy organizations, churches, volunteer groups, trade unions, and professional membership associations.

Jürgen Habermas (1989, 2002) refers to public spaces within civil society where politics are discussed as the *public sphere*. Accessible to all citizens (at least in theory), the public sphere is a place where public opinion is formed through democratic communication among participants; Habermas (1984) refers to these public sphere participants as "communicative actors." In Habermas's original theorization of the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere, individuals engaged in "rational-critical discourse" in public spaces such as coffee houses or salons in order to identify common concerns and advocate for solutions rooted in the common good. By rational-critical discourse, Habermas meant that these public debates were based on reason and not swayed by participants' subjective interests, identities, or status.

Habermas assumed that those who engaged in communicative action and political discourse in the public sphere were, more-or-less, adult actors. This is evident when Habermas explained communicative actors' relationships to their families (as authoritative heads) and the economy (that is, the rise of capitalism afforded actors a greater sense of privacy, control over their property, leisure time, which relates to the greater ability to consume).

Assumptions about communicative actors' adult status prevail today, evidenced by the plethora of portrayals of millennials as civically disengaged and apathetic. While a growing body of literature combats this portrayal of youth civic disengagement, research continues to focus on conventional measures of civic participation, such as volunteering, attending a public meeting, working with neighbors to fix something in the neighborhood, or voting.[7] Research on youth engagement in the public sphere tends to overlook how young people might uniquely participate

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[7] For a recent example, see the *Missouri Civic Health Index 2010: Civic Participation in the Show Me State: Challenges and Opportunities* (Stout, Knapp, and Harms 2010).

in this pillar of society. Work on alternative public spheres, or counterpublics, points to the viability that different groups may engage in different ways. For example, scholars have explored the unique dimensions of female (Fraser 1992; Ryan 1992) and black (Black Public Sphere Collective 1995) counterpublics.

The fact that many studies explore and measure youth engagement within adult-centric models of political participation in the public sphere is significant, as present-day youth approaches to politics and social change may look different from those practiced by older adults or perhaps youth of previous generations. Indeed, a small body of recent scholarship points to such youth-specific approaches to social change. For example, Ginwright (2010) and Clay (2012) distinguish the activist approaches of contemporary youth of color from those of their civil rights predecessors, drawing attention to how youth incite social change through interpersonal interactions in their daily lives. Focusing specifically on black urban youth, Ginwright (2010) shows how transformative healing and collective wellness practices serve as a type of present-day youth activism aimed at dismantling oppression and domination. In her study of youth activists of color in Oakland, Clay (2012) found that millennial youth fight power and inequality in everyday ways, through everyday forms of conversation with family and friends, and anti-oppression workshops with other youth. Clay identifies schools, hip-hop shows, and poetry slams as locations in the public sphere where these everyday forms of communicative action take place. Miranda's (2003) study of young Chicana gang members also points to artistic spaces within the public sphere where young people carry out their social change work. Here, these inner-city young women drew upon the artistic medium of documentary filmmaking in order to challenge and reconstruct how young women of color from their community are represented in dominant discourses. In addition to being carried out through unconventional

practices such as therapy and documentary filmmaking, in all these cases youth's activism is localized and predominantly aimed at affecting change in local communities. Clay (2012) suggests that this localized approach is, in part, a response to the fact that modern day power arrangements are more dispersed and de-centralized (Foucault 1995), and social justice issues are increasingly conceptualized as being interrelated, as different systems of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia) rely on similar logics of power and domination.

In this context of dispersion and interrelatedness, there is no single or obvious target at which to direct social change efforts. As such, contemporary youth activism can look different from the social movement activism of the twentieth century, in which the state was often the target of social change efforts.

Engagement, Emerging Adults, and the Social Construction of Youth

Contemporary youth constitute an important and distinct group to study. However, existing research on youth engagement tends to focus on civic and political activity among teens or college students (Clay 2012; Ginwright 2010; Gordon 2008, 2009; Miranda 2003; Nygreen et al. 2006).[8] Fewer studies attend to an older cohort of millennials that map onto the social category that sociologists have called *emerging adulthood* or *early adulthood*, "that is, an extended period between adolescence and adulthood, wherein young people are no longer seen as 'youth' but have nevertheless not yet attained the conventional markers of adulthood like marriage, independence from their parents, a full-time career, their own home, and so on" (Flacks 2007:62). Arnett (2006) refers to emerging adulthood as "the years from (roughly) 18 to

[8] This work also tends to focus on case studies of youth engagement on the West Coast (Gordon 2009; Youth Speak Out Coalition and Zimmerman 2007), especially in Oakland, CA (Clay 2012; Ginwright 2010; Miranda 2003). For examples of youth engagement taking place across the U.S., see Checkoway et al. (2003).

25 as a distinct period of the life course, different in important ways from the adolescence that precedes it or the young adulthood that follows it" (4).

Demarcating meaningful benchmarks during the transition from youth to adulthood represents a larger effort among youth scholars to grapple with the socially constructed, and thus fluid, nature of this identity category (Best 2007; Lesko 2001). Watts and Flanagan (2007) define youth as spanning the years of mid-adolescence to mid-30s. Similarly, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Education (CIRCLE), which conducts research on the civic and political engagement of young Americans, defines youth as those between the ages of 18-29. Since CIRCLE focuses on young voters, they define youth along lines of voter eligibility and thus consider those who are at least 18 years of age. Other scholars of youth civic engagement point to an age range of 15-25, denoting typical high school- and college-age people (Sherrod 2006). Still others focus their interest on the role of early childhood in civic engagement (Astuto and Ruck 2010).

Irrespective of age-specific definitions, scholars point to a prolonged transition to adulthood as a distinguishing characteristic of youth in contemporary U.S. society (Arnett 2006; Flacks 2007; Flanagan and Levine 2010). This prolonged transition includes delayed marriage and age at first childbirth, both of which are postponed, in part, by increased participation in higher education (Arnett 2006). Other markers of a prolonged transition to contemporary adulthood include a delayed stable career path, financial independence, and homeownership (Pew Research Center 2012). The economic recession of the new millennium has exasperated this prolonged transition time, as more millennials live at home with parents for longer periods of time (Pew Research Center 2012), and even millennials in their 30s report often not yet feeling completely like an adult (Settersten Jr. 2011). Indeed, speaking of the distinctive set of

circumstances facing millennials' path to adulthood, Thompson (2012) writes: "Many came of age in the longest economic expansion of the twentieth century and graduated into the worst recession since the 1930s. The abrupt contraction of opportunity has left a mark. Unemployment among 18- to 24-year-olds was 16% in 2011, twice as high as the national average. Median earnings fell more for the young than any other cohort, and college debt, most of which is held by 20-somethings, is at an all-time high."

Given the unique social characteristics of this generational cohort, emerging adults are an important social group to research in their own right; this includes studying the contours of emerging adults' political participation. Indeed, Flacks (2007) examines "the possibility that researchers have misunderstood and mischaracterized young people's political engagement by paying insufficient methodological attention to the phenomenon of 'emerging adulthood'" (60-1). As such, scholars may have overlooked unique dimensions of contemporary youth politics by failing to consider non-conventional forms of activity, as well as the significance and distinctiveness of emerging adults as an important segment of contemporary youth.

Although scholars recognize that the category of "youth" is socially constructed, the current generation of young adults is, nevertheless, a distinguishable group. In addition to being called millennials (Connery 2008; Dalton 2008; Winograd and Hais 2008), this cohort of youth has been called a variety of other names as well, including generation Y, generation Z, generation next, and generation O ("O" for Obama). Having grown up in a world only known to the Internet and hip-hop, they have been hailed as the net generation, dotnets (Zukin et al. 2006) and the hip-hop generation (Clay 2012).[9] They have also been categorized as a "post" generation,

[9] Kitwana (2002) employs the term "hip-hop generation" to describe the post-civil rights, black youth culture of those born between 1965-1984. Clay (2012) expands this definition to more generally refer to the contradictions and duality experienced by youth in a post-civil rights political context; for Clay, this includes youth born after 1984.

variously referred to as a post-9/11 (Sander and Putnam 2010), post-hip-hop (Asante, Jr. 2008), post-civil rights (Clay 2012), post-feminist, and post-race—specifically post-black (Touré 2011)—generation. Assigning names to generational groups is not a new cultural practice and, throughout the past century, numerous historical cohorts of young people have been named as such. Examples include the lost generation, great generation, G.I. generation, silent generation, beat generation, me generation, baby boom generation, and generation X. As these various names suggest, significant cultural events formatively shape generational outlooks that, in turn, can characterizes an era's entire ethos.[10]

In important ways, millennials have grown up in a different socio-cultural climate than those of previous generations. Millennials who came of age in the 1990s and 2000s witnessed landmark shifts in U.S. demographics, shaped by increased immigration (Migration Policy Institute) and interracial marriages (Pew Research Center 2010a). These young adults are more likely to identify as multi-racial and multi-ethnic (Pew Research Center 2010c) and friendship patterns increasingly cross racial-ethnic boundaries (Pew Research Center 2010b). The election of President Barak Obama in 2008 has also shaped this generation's understanding of race politics (Cohen 2010).

Nonetheless, racial inequality persists in the lives of young urban adults in the post-civil rights era. While de jure racism is generally banned, de facto racism continues to organize the lives of many U.S. youth of color. For instance, although residential segregation patterns are structured along lines of socio-economic status and national-ethnic origin, they still map onto race categories (Iceland and Wilkes 2006; Iceland 2004; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). Despite laws desegregating schools and banning employment discrimination, racial segregation persists

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[10] For more information on generational naming, see Safire (2008) and Pew Research Center (2010c, p. 4).

throughout the American education system (Rothstein 2013), and unemployment rates for all youth, and especially black and Latino youth, remain high (Ruetschlin and Draut 2013). Communities of color—and especially men—experience heightened police surveillance and disproportionate incarceration rates (Goffman 2009), particularly among young people (Rios 2006).

Scholars point to the ways in which these "changing same" features of inequality (Collins 2010) create a "dual" existence for African American and other youth of color (Clay 2012; Kitwana 2002; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). As a result of these shifts in U.S. racial politics, scholars have sought to capture the changing nature of race relations and racism emerging out of the changing U.S. socio, political, and cultural race structures, arguing that racism has not gone away, but has instead become more insidious and colorblind (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Such arguments point to the ways in which race still functions to organize young people's everyday lives and opportunity structures, particularly in urban environments.

Emerging out of these socio-historical conditions, millennials are distinguishable by their own unique demographic characteristics and political beliefs, which have been extensively documented in the Pew Research Center's (2010c) report, *Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change*. In addition to being more racially diverse (39% are nonwhite—14% African American, 20% Hispanic, and 5% Asian-American—compared to 30% of the general population), millennials are also more highly educated than previous generations. Fifty-four percent have had some college education, compared to only 36% of "baby boomers" (those ages 50 to 64) at their age. Not surprisingly, they are also more connected, with 90% using the Internet at least occasionally and 75% using social networking sites, compared to 79% and 30% of boomers, respectively. Given the economic recession, young people today are less likely to be

employed than previous generations were at their age. The unemployment rate for those ages 18 to 24 is almost twice the overall rate (16.3% compared to 8.8%) (Pew Research Center 2012). Politically, millennials lean farther to the left (Pew Research Center 2014), being nearly twice as likely to identify as liberal as are seniors (those ages 65 and above). For example, compared to other generations, millennials are more likely to support access to abortion within their community (68%) and comprehensive sex education (88%) (Jones, Cox, and Laser 2011). An overwhelming majority of millennials support marriage equality (81%) (Washington Post-ABC News 2013) and they demonstrate high levels of support for interracial dating and marriage (Pew Research Center 2010b). Millennials are also a potentially powerful voting block. In 2012, millennials constituted 29%, or 64 million, of all eligible voters. With four million new millennial voters every year, by 2020 millennials will represent nearly 40% of all eligible voters (Teixeira 2010).

A Context of Lies and Deception in the Millennial Age

In addition to changing demographics, shifting policy commitments and technological advancements have also shaped millennials' outlook. Specifically, this generation exhibits low levels of social trust and is more detached from traditional institutions (Pew Research Center 2014). This distrust and detachment may stem, in part, from an awareness of the various ways that people, and especially young people, are mislead through discourses propagated by the media, governments, and their own school curriculums. For many of the millennial generation, and particularly those in marginalized positions, this context of deception leads young people to feel as though the deck is often stacked against them. Cathy Cohen's (2010) work on youth politics points to high levels of distrust and political cynicism, particularly among youth of color.

For example, among black, Latino, and white youth, 66 percent, 62 percent, and 50 percent respectively believe that "the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves and their friends." One 19-year-old black woman in Cohen's study summed up this sentiment of political distrust by describing politicians and politics as "scams…just scams. A bunch of scams, con artists" (Cohen 2010:118).

In addition to harboring distrust in their political system, millennials are also critical of the knowledge they receive in school, especially the public education system. For example, the Oakland youth of color in Clay's (2012) study were highly aware and critical of the inequalities embedded in the American education system and, by comparing it to prison industrial complex, youth expressed a distrust of the school system's mission to educate rather than discipline and control young black and brown bodies (64).[11] Cohen's (2010) youth survey data show that 54 percent of black youth believe that "on average, black youth receive a poorer education than white youth," compared with 40 percent and 31 percent of Latino and white youth, respectively (121-2). The youth in Cohen's study who underscore their substandard education come predominantly from Chicago where, in 2007, 54 percent of black public school students met or exceeded state educational standards, compared with 85 percent of white students (122). Like many urban cities with high African American and Latino populations, the public school system in Washington, D.C. shares similarities with Oakland and Chicago. In March 2013, Chicago announced the closure of fifty-four public schools, a move that disproportionately disadvantages youth of color (Yaccino and Rich 2013). This followed the announcement made by school officials in Washington, D.C. six months earlier, which named the closure of twenty public schools, overwhelmingly located in the predominately African American Northeast and Southeast quadrants of D.C. (NBC Washington 2013).

[11] For more on the school-to-prison pipeline, see Ferguson (2001).

This distrust and cynicism among millennials is not only shaped by their interaction with governmental politics and substandard school systems. Media and popular culture in the millennial age also foster an environment of distrust and deception. With the rise of the cable news industry in the late 1990s and networks vying for viewership and advertising dollars, millennials witnessed the proliferation of sensational journalism and news media outlets such as Fox News Channel and MSNBC. These networks wear the guise of unbiased journalism but are steeped in political ideology. The rise of technological cultural advances through applications such as Photoshop and Instagram allow for the manipulation of images, stories, evidence, and data sources. This manipulated information can then circulate over the Internet and proliferate through social media networks. To take just one of many examples, millennials watched Sarah Palin's vice presidential run in 2008 be accompanied by numerous manipulated images of her in a bikini doing various activities such as toting a gun and wearing a "Miss Alaska" beauty pageant sash across her torso. While advanced democratic technologies provide millennials increased avenues of access for detecting, confirming, or debunking such manipulated information, this generation is also saddled with the challenge of needing to navigate and always being skeptical of the information with which they are presented. In the digital age of the new millennium, young people are constantly engaging in an exercise of deciphering lies from truths.[12]

These unique demographic, political, and cultural characteristics, as well as the changing-same, dispersed, and invisible nature of contemporary inequality, has led some scholars to interrogate the distinctive contours of present-day youth activism and civic engagement. An examination of how present-day emerging adults understand *themselves* to be "acting political"

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[12] Collins (2005) also highlights the role of advanced technology in her analysis of the "new racism" of the millennial age.

in the public sphere can begin to capture some of the peculiarities of youth forms of engagement as they are understood from the perspectives of these young adult political actors. Given that age discrimination politically marginalizes millennials as a group and presents them with unique barriers to activist pursuits (Gordon 2008; Watts and Flanagan 2007; Youth Speak Out Coalition and Zimmerman 2007), we might expect to find young people engaged in political work in non-explicitly political spaces, doing non-explicitly political things. Political scientists have suggested that culture—and popular culture in particular—is an important space to examine the political work of marginalized subjects, who might turn to more accessible pop cultural mediums when excluded from traditional institutionalized politics (Iton 2008). Indeed, Clay's (2012) study of youth activism illustrates the centrality of hip-hop and spoken word poetry in how young adults in Oakland engaged in activist work. Youth used hip-hop and poetry to organize and mobilize other young people, and cultivate a collective identity or community (Lipsitz 1994). Clay points to these everyday, pop cultural characteristics as distinguishing features of present-day youth activism. Such work underscores the validity of looking at alternative spaces and mediums—particularly cultural sites in the public sphere—to locate civic and political engagement among young adults.

Cultural Politics

Traditionally, culture was theorized as an apolitical space, "a separate realm of human expression" (Spillman 2002:3). Defined as material artifacts and special activities, culture was believed to be "the best that has been thought and known" in a given society (Griswold 2008).[13]

[13] Griswold (2008) quotes Matthew Arnold, a nineteenth century British educator, who sought to construct a universal theory of cultural value.

This perspective of culture as a separate and privileged sphere of human activity emerged during the Industrial Revolution in England, a time when economic and political realms of social life were distinguished from "an ideally purer realm of art and morality expressing higher human capabilities and values" (Spillman 2002:3; see also Williams 1983:90-1). Within this paradigm, culture (and by association, art) and politics were conceived as two distinct spheres of social life.[14]

Within the social sciences today, however, and contrary to the separate spheres perspective that understands art *as* culture, art and other cultural objects are recognized as just one feature of culture and cultural analysis. Contemporary cultural sociologists analyze cultural objects *in relationship to* cultural producers, cultural receivers, and the social world (Griswold 2008). In this way, cultural objects, and specifically art, are able to reveal much about a particular cultural system, including a culture's political attributes. Thus, while previous understandings of culture (such as those emerging from the Industrial Revolution) largely conceived of culture (and art) as something separate from politics, more contemporary understandings of culture offer space to consider the political dimensions of culture, as well as the cultural dimensions of politics.

These contemporary sociological perspectives understand culture to be about meaning-making and shared understandings (Glassner 2000; Griswold 2008; Lamont 2000; Maines 2000; Spillman 2002). Unlike classical perspectives that suggest that cultures are coherent and exhibit a sense of unity (see, e.g., Benedict 2002), contemporary perspectives attend to the "incoherent" nature of culture (Smelser 1992), illustrating how cultures can represent various and simultaneous meaning-making processes. Sociologists have not only pointed to the incredible

[14] Overtime, this view of culture has come to be associated more with the humanities (Griswold 2008; Spillman 2002), and sociology's more "relativistic" approach to culture has, at times, put sociologists at odds with cultural scholars in the humanities who seek to preserve high cultural treasures (Long 1997:8).

diversity of ideas and values within a culture, but also to the ways in which the ideas and values of the ruling class (i.e., the culture of the elite) come to stand in for the "coherent" culture of a society.[15] The incoherent perspective of culture necessarily raises questions around power, inequality, and meaning-making, questions that are, of course, deeply political in nature.[16]

Taking place outside the discipline of sociology, some scholars of culture and politics have devoted attention to "politics that don't look like politics" (Duncombe 2002) and to "nontraditional politics" or everyday acts of resistance, which include infrapolitics and hidden transcripts (Kelley 1994; Scott 1990). A hidden transcript, specifically, is a set of practices carried out and recognizable only by the subaltern actors who have specialized knowledge about the meaning behind their practices, which are aimed at disrupting existing relations of domination (Scott 1990). These everyday practices of resistance are invisible to the dominant group and are thus largely hidden from the public view and public record. Similar to those who adapt an incoherent perspective on culture, scholars studying these forms of nontraditional politics recognize the deeply intertwined relationship between politics, knowledge, and power. Since the hidden transcript is necessarily about specialized knowledge aimed at subverting power relations, such a perspective conceives of knowledge as socially constructed and contingent (Berger and Luckmann 1966), often politically deployed to disrupt or reproduce hegemonic relations of domination.

The interdisciplinary field of cultural studies has attended to analyses of "cultural resistance" or, "culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist

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[15] See, for example, Marx's (1978a, 1978b, 1978c) view of ideology (and indeed "culture") as representing the ideas (and interests) of the ruling class and Foucault's (1980, 1990) claim that knowledge and discourse, and thus that which we deem to be "True" or "reality," are really just the knowledges of those in power. Both Marx and Foucault would be critical of any coherent take on culture.
[16] Yet, importantly, contemporary cultural sociologists don't simply reduce culture to power relations (Hays 2000:597).

and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure" (Duncombe 2002:5). Sociologists, however, have been reluctant to embrace cultural studies' "antiscientific" analyses of culture, citing an "anything goes" methodology, a lack of objectivity, and/or a commitment to progressive politics (Hays 2000). Moreover, analyses of cultural resistance or nontraditional politics such as those put forth by Scott (1985, 1990) and Kelly (1994) have been specifically critiqued for valorizing the "mere" survival techniques of the oppressed as a form of politics, which distracts from more authentic forms of politics that could lead to real change in the lives of the marginalized (Reed 2002).

Nonetheless, scholars continue to draw attention to the importance of "everyday politics" and citizen-created spaces where politics take place, including those that take place outside the official political institutions that are populated by political experts and professionals (Boyte 2004). Boyte (2004) locates everyday politics in local places and cultures "where people encounter each other on a regular, face-to-face basis," and he defines this kind of politics as "philosophical and practical, not ideological or partisan, based on values such as participation, justice, community, and plurality…[I]t is not owned or controlled by professional politicians or by professional activists. Everyday politics is of the citizen…" (4). Everyday spaces devoted to various cultural activities, rather than official political ones, have historically served as institutional locations for political activity and consciousness-raising among marginalized groups. These include Southern black churches during the civil rights movement, kitchen tables and other female-defined social spaces during the women's liberation movement (Evans and Boyte 1992), and literary countercultural publics such as the 1950s Beat Movement (Farrell 1997). An everyday approach to politics is particularly important for youth politics since such a perspective is central to an account of the political activity of marginalized social actors (Cohen

2004; Harris-Lacewell 2004; Scott 1985, 1990). This work draws attention to the importance of studying everyday spaces, discourses, actions, and mediums when engaging with the political thoughts and behaviors of marginalized groups.

Culture as a Tool: Art, Performance, and Protest

In these various works, scholars highlight how groups "use" culture to do political work. But what does it mean to use culture? Swidler's (1986) toolkit metaphor is one way to conceptualize how people use culture to achieve particular goals. Here, culture can be thought of as a toolkit or a repertoire of "symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems" (Swidler 1986:273). According to Swidler, social actors strategically draw upon or use elements of culture to engage in various types of activity; this includes political activity.[17] Other scholars of culture emphasize a very loose and flexible relationship between culture and politics, devoting attention to analyses of "cultural resistance" or, "culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure" (Duncombe 2002:5). For Duncombe (2002), culture is a broad concept, referring variously (and simultaneously) to a thing, a process, as well as a set of norms, behaviors, and worldviews. These two conceptualizations of culture highlight how culture can be used to achieve political goals.

Artistic fields serve as one cultural location where scholars have sought to locate politics. Using art to engage in politics is not a new or uncommon phenomenon (Bradley and Esche 2007;

[17] For Swidler (1986), strategic action does not imply a consciously carried out plan, but rather refers to a general way social actors organize their actions, drawing upon culturally shaped pre-existing habits, moods, sensibilities, and worldviews in order to achieve a particular goal. She gives the example of a social actor securing their social status by marrying into a prestigious family (see fn 9, p.276).

Reed 2005). For example, looking back to the 1840s in Italy, Stamatov (2002) illustrates how audience members imposed their own political interpretations of Verdi's operas onto audience co-members, thereby using this artistic culture object to construct political statements and expressive collective action. There are also countless examples of activist communities using art to carry out their activism. Sometimes referred to as art activism or protest art, activist art has focused on a myriad of political issues and has deployed a host of artistic forms, ranging from performance art, graffiti art, and photojournalism, among others (Simonds 2013). Scholars also point to the networking power of art in activist work, which can "help protestors identify sympathisers, creating large informal networks" (Branagan 2003:52; see also Gangadharan 2009), as well as art's ability to attract media attention in activist campaigns (Branagan 2003; Lambert- Beatty 2008). Poetry, specifically, has its own political tradition, which includes the poets of the 1950s Beat Movement (Farrell 1997), feminist poetry of the women's liberation movement (Reed 2005), and the performance poetry of the Black Arts Movement (Somers-Willett 2009). African American performance poetry, in particular, can be located in a larger tradition of political protest (Chepp 2012).

In addition to culture, and more specifically art, being used to *do* politics, culture can also be used to *study* politics. Cultural objects are a type of "shared significance embodied in form"—they are audible, visible, tangible, or can be articulated (Griswold 2008:12); as such, cultural objects are available for analysis. Examples of cultural objects are diverse, broadly including such things as a ballet performance, a hairstyle, a joke, a religious belief, or an idea about what constitutes "good manners." What all cultural objects have in common, however, is their ability to tell a story, that is, to convey something meaningful about the culture of which it is a part (Griswold 2008). From this perspective, the materiality of cultural objects can be studied and

understood as part of the broader cultural system of which it is a part. This includes a culture's (or subculture's) political attributes. In this way, artistic cultural objects serve as a way to study the political, providing scholars with an analytic lens through which to empirically explore the political particularities of a social group. For example, in his study of art worlds, Becker (1982) examines various art works and forms in order to demonstrate how artistic objects are the sum activity of a cooperative network of people. These artistic objects reflect, among other things, the power relations that make up this larger system of social organization, and this network is able to wield power and influence over the meaning and value of different artistic objects (Becker 1982).

In addition to looking to artistic forms to study politics, contemporary work has also introduced the role of performance into cultural analyses of political action (Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006) and, specifically, social movements and collective behavior (Eyerman 2006). Work on performance in social movements begins to expand the boundaries of what constitutes a movement. Specifically, Eyerman (2006) interrogates the boundaries around what "movement" means, asking: "What is or can be said to be 'moved' in the performance of opposition or extended protest?" (193). Acknowledging the debates around what technically constitutes a social movement, Eyerman defines a social movement as: "a form of acting in public, a political performance which involves representation in dramatic form, as movements engage emotions inside and outside their bounds attempting to communicate their message. Such performance is always public, as it requires an audience which is addressed and must be moved" (193).

Eyerman (2006) distinguishes between three distinct yet interrelated social spaces: an emerging social movement, its opponents, and the general public. The first space refers to a sense of solidarity/collective identity. This process delineates boundaries of a second space,

between insiders and opponents. The third space refers to the ways movements speak to and seek to influence (move) the general public. Movement of the general public consists of moving people to display contentious actions or public expressions of discontent (Eyerman 2006:195); this process is filtered through metaphor[18] and an emotional, empowering transference can take place where one is given a sense of belonging to something greater than herself. Eyerman says this occurs through cognitive frames (e.g., narrative structures) and ritual performances. These narratives are stories that broaden the situational to some greater significance (see also Erasga 2010), and are used strategically by movement actors to persuade people to act (see also Polletta 2009). For Eyerman, ritual practices are public displays, or performances, of solidarity that locate the individual in some sort of collective.[19]

Identity, Narrative, and Social Change

Using narrative and personal stories in order to link the individual experience to a broader collective corresponds to the strategic uses of identity in various social change projects, in which social actors draw upon their identities and personal narratives as cultural devices that they deploy for political purposes. This method of politicizing one's lived experience in activist pursuits is reflected in the frequently cited feminist mantra, "the personal is political." Although identity markers such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexuality, and disability status are socially constructed (i.e., there is nothing "real" about them and they only acquire culturally-

[18] See Fernandez (1986) for additional analysis of the ways in which metaphors function to persuade audiences.
[19] Notably, Eyerman's (2006) understanding of performance as a sort of "collective protest" is consistent with Bauman's (1977) performance-centered (versus text-centered) approach to the study of verbal art, in which Bauman conceptualizes performance as a way of speaking or communicating within a culturally-specific context. In both instances, performance is a way of understanding the individual as part of a larger social collective.

specific meaning through social processes), identity markers have very real consequences in that they intersect to systematically shape individuals' and groups' social experiences (Collins and Chepp 2013).

Identity has played a prominent role in many movements for social change. In fact, identity served as one of *the* defining characteristics of Western social movements beginning in the 1960s. This includes twentieth century U.S. movements for gay rights, women's rights, and various ethnic rights movements such as the Chicano/a, American Indian, Asian American, and Black Power Movements. These movements have been referred to as "identity movements" in that they are instances of collective action that "have been defined as much by the goals they seek, and the strategies they use, as by the fact that they are based on a shared characteristic such as ethnicity or sex" (Bernstein 2003:235).

Identity movements correspond with what are also known as "new social movements." Scholars developed new social movement theories as a result of the limitations offered by Marxist explanations of mid-1960s collective action, which privileged capitalist forces and class identity as the central mobilizers for collective social action (Buechler 1995:441-2). New social movement scholars also argued that the previous literature (e.g., resource mobilization and political process theory) defined the goals of social movements in too narrow of terms. While "old" social movements such as the labor and civil rights movements focused their goals on policy outcomes or political bargaining power, new social movements embraced more "nonpolitical" cultural goals, such as those associated with challenging dominant cultural codes, values, and identities (Bernstein 2003:235). In this way, new social movements look to other bases for collective action (e.g., culture) and other understandings of collective identity (e.g.,

race, sexuality). With the rise of new social movements, identity became a concept around which to organize, mobilize, build solidarity, and identify political allies.

The role of identity in new social movements provided the social, political, and intellectual context for what led to a more general understanding of *identity politics*. Since then, identity politics have "come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context" (Heyes 2012).

In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars and activists began to draw attention to the limitations of identity politics, and the utility of political projects organized around identity groups were called into question. Since this time, there have been calls to "reconsider" (see, e.g., Alcoff et al. 2006) or "move beyond" identity politics (see, e.g., Lloyd 2005; Nicholson and Seidman 1995), and it is within this (post-structural, postmodern) intellectual context that "post-identity" work emerged (see, e.g., Clifford 1998; Riggs 2010).

At the same time that the utility of identity politics has been questioned, alternative approaches to conceptualizing identity have emerged. An especially significant innovation from feminist scholars and activists of color is the concept of *intersectionality* (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991). Extending the theoretical foundations established by previous women activists of color (see, e.g., Combahee River Collective 1983), the theoretical paradigm of intersectionality argues that inequality cannot be examined along a single axis of identity or system of power (e.g., class or race), but rather these identities and systems of power insect in various ways to result in particular unequal social arrangements (e.g., classed racism or raced

classism). Intersectional approaches to understanding identity complicate previous "single axis" efforts to fight inequality, which were more characteristic of the mid-twentieth century identity movements.

As such, the political role of identity in contemporary efforts to fight inequality has become less stable. That is, why organize around identity group affiliation when so much variety exists within groups? For example, why organize around issues of sexual identity given women and men's diverse experiences of being gay or, similarly, the diverse queer experiences of, say, Latinos and Latinas, or rural and urban gay men and women? Further, one might argue, why are we still discussing racism when, for example, we have a black president, or why do we need feminism at a time when women outnumber men in college and men no longer overtly dominate women in institutions such as the home and workplace? Indeed, it is within these discursive spaces where discussions about "post-racism" and "post-feminism" reside. As such, many identity movement tactics for fighting racial or gender inequality seem ill equipped to fight contemporary inequality and injustice.

Yet, identity continues to shape politics in the millennial age. One needs to look no further than presidential elections in the new millennium. In 2008, voters witnessed a high profile display of identity politics as candidates' identities became central to campaign strategies and media coverage. This included Barak Obama's race, Hillary Clinton's and Sarah Palin's gender, John McCain's age, and Joe Biden's class. In 2012, voters' identities took center stage again as the dominant media message emerging from exit polls focused on Mitt Romney and the Republicans' inability to secure enough votes from women and racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities, populations that reflect the changing demographics—and political future—of the country. Central to these concerns with the political candidates' identities was the notion that

people's lived experiences, which are deeply shaped by one's identity, serve as an important source of knowledge, as well as a platform from which to build alliances.

Indeed, scholars have pointed to the power of experiential knowledge and personal biography in social change efforts. Zussman's (2012) work on narrative freedom is illustrative. Zussman distinguishes among four (ideal) types of narratives—therapy, confession, self-invention, and reunion—and he identifies an exemplar of each type (psychoanalysis, penance, slave narratives, and collective memory, respectively). These narratives are distinguishable along two dimensions: (1) whether the narrative is directed by an audience from the top down or bottom up, and (2) whether the narrative is restorative or transformative (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1: Zussman's Narrative Types

	Transformative	Restorative
Top Down	Therapy Psychoanalysis	Confession Sacrament of penance
Bottom Up	Self-Invention Slave narrative	Reunion Collective memory

Of the four types, Zussman points to narratives of self-invention as sites of liberation and social change. Here, "we will find the autobiographical accounts of personal (and, often, by extension, of social) self-discovery, self-realization, self-fulfillment and triumph, organized variously, among different groups and at different times, around humble beginnings, sexuality, disability, illness, troubled childhoods, and troubled adulthoods. These are the stories told in writing and orally, told one to one, in every nook and corner of U.S. life, and in the mass media.

If we are to find narrative freedom anywhere, it is here" (817). Zussman cites African American autobiographical writing, including slave narratives, as an exemplar, but he also points to the feminist tradition of autobiographical self-invention, as well as the strong tradition "in virtually every identity movement anyone of us could image" (809).

In this way, Zussman links the significance of narrative, identity, and social change, specifically highlighting the role of narrative in social movement politics. Zussman locates the direction of emancipation as moving from the group to the individual. Through social movements, groups achieve freedom, which in turn offers freedom to individuals. He describes the relationship between narratives of self-invention and social movements as one that "fed[s] on each other" (821).

Literature on testifying is another body of knowledge that looks to the power of narrative and biography in the pursuit of social change. Testifying is the practice of speaking in public in order to inform opinion, and deploying one's own subjective experience or vantage point to do so. There is, of course, a history of testifying in the legal tradition. Although witness testimony is presumed to lend objectivity to a case, practices of testifying in a court of law are always subjective in that it is a witness's subjectivity—their identity and status—that lends credibility to their account. That is, whether an eyewitness or expert witness, the person's testimony is legitimized by their unique knowledge or subjective position vis-à-vis the case.

The practice of testifying has also been central to African American religious traditions and politics (Ross 2003). Like in the legal environment, the objective of testifying in the black religious context is aimed at articulating the truth in the pursuit of justice. However, rather than a code of justice rooted in law, religious testifying is organized around a moral and sacred understanding of what is right and wrong. Theologian Thomas Hoyt writes: "In testimony,

people speak truthfully about what they have experienced and seen, offering it to the community for edification of all…In testimony, a believer describes what God has done in her life, in words both biblical and personal, and the hands of her friends clap in affirmation. Her individual speech thus becomes part of an affirmation that is shared" (cited in Ross 2003:13). Here, the individual practice of testifying or truth-telling is linked to a broader community ritual of affirmation and learning. By bearing witness to this testimony, the audience legitimizes the knowledges articulated in the speech act.

Testifying takes on political dimensions in that it provides a platform for telling the stories and truths that have been marginalized or omitted from mainstream discourses. Hoyt argues that this form of testifying seeks to "keep alive the truth—a truth that society often does not honor" (cited in Ross 2003:14). Drawing attention to the "ritualized mundane" nature of black religious women's efforts to improve everyday conditions for African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement, Ross (2003) highlights how black religious testimonies call for divine intervention in ordinary circumstances. As such, this form of politicized truth-telling is rooted in and directed at everyday life.

Testifying is a performative act. However, unlike other types of performance that require performers to assume roles that are not their own, the claims made in testimony are rooted in an authentic lived experience. Like other forms of moral protest rooted in personal biography (Jasper 1997), testifying can be understood as a political strategy that has been deployed in movements for social change, as this practice offers activists a way of setting the record straight when dominant narratives fail to do so. This literature on testifying points to the ways in which speaking in public about one's lived experiences is a political act. Indeed, black feminists have long recognized the political and social justice implications of "coming to voice" and "breaking

silences" (Collins 1998). Moreover, bell hooks (1984) argues that understanding the experiences of those on the margins is crucial for any liberatory movement for social change. Public performances of testimonies rooted in the lived experiences of those living on the margins can offer one mechanism by which this greater understanding can occur.

Organization of the Dissertation

This ethnographic study of young adults and spoken word poetry is an investigation into contemporary approaches to fighting modern day power arrangements, which are increasingly dispersed, de-centralized, and often invisible. Given the current political and socio-cultural context, some core questions that shape this analysis include: What does political and civic engagement among young adults look like in the millennial age? How do young people come together to fight against present-day racism, homophobia, sexism, and other intersecting forms of inequality in a context characterized by a multiplicity of identities? Further, how can artistic practices, such as spoken word poetry, facilitate social justice and change?

Throughout this work, I explore how identity and lived experience remain central to contemporary efforts to fight inequality and other forms of social injustice. Although approaches to fighting inequality in the millennial age may look different from their mid-twentieth century social movement counterparts, on-the-ground efforts to dismantle unequal power arrangements have not disappeared. Specifically, an examination of these young people's artistic practices reveals features of present-day activist politics as contemporary manifestations of inequality in everyday life have become less overt and visible. Echoing Clay's (2012) findings, these millennial poets displayed unique political tactics by fighting power and inequality in everyday ways, though everyday forms of communication. However, unlike Clay's research on youth

activism in the explicitly politicized spaces of youth social justice organizations, this study of spoken word poets explores how millennials carry out distinctive forms of political engagement in non-explicitly political spaces.

Thus far in this chapter, I have sketched out some of the main ideas that frame this study and that are taken up in future chapters. In Chapter Two, I narrow my scope to focus on the local social, political, and artistic context of Washington, D.C. Outlining the details of my study, I illustrate how the spoken word poets in Washington, D.C. embodied more general characteristics of the millennial generation. I focus specifically on the political significance of diversity (or a multiplicity of identities) for these contemporary young adults. Next, I discuss spoken word poetry as an artistic genre, and I reflect on what led me to research this art form. I describe the methodological parameters of my ethnographic research project, including details about my field sites and the people who participated at these sites. I conclude by introducing the three social change processes that poets used to describe how their involvement in spoken word contributed to social justice and change. I explore each of these in more detail in the following three chapters.

Chapter Three examines the high premium this community and art form placed on "truth." Given how this generation was astutely aware of the ways young people are lied to through discourses propagated by the media, governments, and their own school curriculums, I show how poets drew upon their lived experiences—their truths—as a political and moral source of knowledge to guide and legitimate their social change messages. Using the performative artistic expression of spoken word as an opportunity to testify to that which they knew to be true, poets connected their lived experiences to the larger social world in front of a listening public. In doing so, poets ascribed political meaning to their personal biographies, drew attention to larger

social problems, and transformed dominant narratives so as to offer alternative epistemological perspectives that paved the way for social change and justice.

Chapter Four shows how poets sought to effect change through individual and collective healing. Through the process of writing and performing their truths in the form of therapy narratives, poets healed themselves and others in their community. This was a reciprocal and iterative process. When poets testified to painful or shameful parts of their lived experience in the presence of others, they healed themselves and invited others to do the same. The community validated this experience, which further served to heal the individual. This process of connecting the self to a larger group through artistic healing channels served as a unique model for social change in this poetry community.

Chapter Five illustrates how poets aimed to effect change by leveraging spoken word to advocate for social justice, build political allies and networks, and mobilize others into political action. Using spoken word, poets presented a model for doing “new school” activism. Here, art and activism were not separated, and one’s identity and lived experience remained central to the activist pursuit, albeit in ways that deviated from the identity movements of the twentieth century. As such, the poets’ new school activism sheds light on contemporary approaches to identity politics.

In Chapter Six, I introduce the theoretical concept of *creative politics* to illustrate the possibilities and limitations of everyday politics in artistic fields. I discuss how the artistic properties of spoken word poetry facilitated the three social change processes discussed in Chapters Three through Five. In various ways, art made the poets’ moral messages and personal lived experiences relatable and universal across a diverse constituency, thereby humanizing the social problems they discussed. In this humanizing space, community members were able to

experience empathy, and thus open themselves up to new ideas and new ways of acting. By using artistic creativity to harness the political power of emotions, love, and subjectivity, poets built coalitions across social differences, resulting in a beloved, politicized community that was well positioned to carry out sustainable social justice.

Chapter 2: Building Community in a Melting City: Researching Spoken Word Poetry in Washington, D.C.

Chocolate City is Melting!

It was lunchtime and I was sitting at my desk on a bright and warm April afternoon in 2013 when I received the following text message from Cody: "Hey Valerie this is Cody how are you hope all is well!! Say would you be available to bout manage may 4th and 5th for either a prelim bout or semis??" Though he hadn't provided context, I knew he was asking if I could volunteer to oversee a series of slams or "bouts" at the upcoming second annual citywide youth poetry festival Louder Than A Bomb-DMV (LTAB-DMV). During the weeks leading up to the event, promotional flyers for the festival were appearing daily in my Facebook and Twitter feeds, as well as in my inbox through various listserv announcements. I had volunteered at the inaugural festival the previous summer in 2012 and, although my formal data collection period was already complete when I received Cody's text, I decided that participating in the follow-up event could serve as a beneficial point of comparison to see how, if at all, the event evolved from the previous year. I knew many D.C. poets were involved in the festival, and I was interested to learn more about the relationship between the poets, the art form, and the infrastructure supporting the larger local spoken word poetry community, particularly across generations. I texted Cody back: "I'd love to!! Thanks for thinking of me:) Just send me the details when you

figure the (*sic*) out. Hope all is well!!" to which he replied: "Awesomes (*sic*) will do…thanks hun!!"[20]

Although technically a poetry slam, event organizers refer to Louder Than A Bomb as a "poetry festival" so as to downplay the competition and emphasize the camaraderie among teen slam teams from across the city. Founded in 2001 by Kevin Coval and Anna West of the nonprofit organization Young Chicago Authors, Louder Than A Bomb "was created to give youth around the city of Chicago a platform to share their stories. The festival has since become a 'bridge' for young people from many different backgrounds to come together and find a common ground through their narratives." While the festival is the largest and most established in Chicago, to date, eight other cities, including Washington, D.C., have organized their own version of the event with local teens.[21] Louder Than A Bomb now enjoys the title of " the largest youth poetry festival in the world" and was the title and feature of a 2010 documentary film.[22]

My fieldwork took place during a significant historical moment for the D.C. spoken word scene. The community was implementing new initiatives in an effort to establish itself as an active up-and-coming local scene while struggling to keep older initiatives afloat. Although D.C. had been participating fairly regularly in the National Poetry Slam since 1993, the summer of 2011 marked the first time that the city sent two teams to the national competition: Holla Out Loud and Slam DMV. This was a notable achievement since only the largest metropolitan areas

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[20] I also wanted to participate in order to support the poets. It had been almost a full year since I was in the field. As is the case with other ethnographers (see, e.g., Ellis 1995), my exit from—and periodic returns to—the field over the past year had been accompanied by mixed emotions, as I struggled with feelings of longing to maintain my involvement, guilt for attending far fewer events, and relief to be moving on to the next stages of my research project. Cody's text made me feel excited and honored, as though my relevance and trust among the poets remained in tact despite my retreat from the field.

[21] "Louder Than A Bomb 2013 Radio Special," WBEZ. Series: *Louder Than a Bomb 2013* (59:03 min). Retrieved 11/10/13 from http://www.prx.org/pieces/95929-louder-than-a-bomb-2013-radio-special#description.

[22] This description of Louder Than a Bomb is from the Young Chicago Authors' website: http://youngchicagoauthors.org (retrieved 11/9/13).

(e.g., New York, Los Angeles, Chicago) tended to have large enough local scenes to support more than one slam team. Hoping to one day bring Louder Than A Bomb to D.C., Grant began laying the foundation for this vision in the summer of 2011, when he organized a screening of the documentary in partnership with Still I Rise, a national nonprofit organization of poets, artists, and activists based in the nation's capital. The previous year, in 2010, Curtis and Adrianna founded Blazing Words, a national queer slam that also consisted of poetry readings and panel discussions that took place throughout the city.

While new efforts such as Slam DMV, LTAB-DMV, and Blazing Words flourished, older efforts struggled. Specifically, Sister Spoken, a group founded in 1998 for the purpose of encouraging and cultivating women spoken word performers, was changing leadership and coming to terms with the fact that their events no longer garnered packed venues on a monthly basis. Adrianna, a 35-year-old white poet with a physical disability who identified as queer, had served as president of the group from 2002 to 2010 and was passing the reigns on to Meghan, a 25-year-old white bi-sexual poet.

This time also marked the publication of Kim Robert's (2010) book *Lip Smack: A History of Spoken Word in DC*, which chronicles the initiatives spearheaded by generations of local poets from 1991 to 2010. These initiatives served as the foundation upon which contemporary poets conducted their work, illustrating how this moment of opportunity and struggle in the D.C. poetry scene was part of a larger and longer effort among D.C. poets to build a vibrant spoken word community.

Efforts taking place around the D.C. teen spoken word scene were especially significant. The founding of the DC Youth Poetry Slam League by the DC WritersCorp in 1997 served as the first city-wide youth slam organization in the country, and eventually became a model for the

development of other youth poetry slams country-wide (Roberts 2010). By the time Grant had organized the Louder Than A Bomb film screening in June 2011, he had become especially involved in the teen spoken word community and was dedicated to bringing the youth poetry festival to Washington, D.C. Over the following year, I watched as Grant and other poets worked (often uncompensated) to make that vision become a reality, which entailed lots of grant writing, community organizing, building relationships with local high schools, and spending hundreds of hours working with youth, helping them to write, practice, and perform poetry. This local event debuted in the summer of 2012 and was called Louder Than A Bomb-DMV. The term "DMV" refers to the greater Washington Metropolitan Area, comprised of D.C., Maryland, and (Northern) Virginia.[23] In its debut year, the event consisted of teams of four to six teenage poets from twelve different high schools across the Washington region; just one year later, the event had expanded to include teams representing twenty DMV high schools.

On the first day of the highly anticipated second annual festival, I scrambled around my apartment, trying to finish up some last minute writing before rushing out the door. I knew my next two days would be occupied by volunteering. Cody had assigned me to serve as a scorekeeper and timekeeper for multiple bouts, which included bouts in the preliminary and semi-final rounds of the competition, as well as the grand slam finals. Though my data collection was officially over, I grabbed my trusty notebook just in case I had an opportunity or need to jot down any fieldnotes. Déjà vu and nostalgia swept over me as I scurried around my apartment. I was reminded of the chaotic and high-paced schedule that characterized my two and a half years in the field. I checked my phone: only twenty minutes until I had to report for duty. Even though most poetry events started late, I felt obligated to arrive on time given the detailed email sent out

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[23] Although the term "DMV" has long been utilized by the region's hip-hop and go-go music scenes, it has just recently gained more mainstream popularity (Farhi 2010).

to all volunteers the previous week assigning us to specific tasks at specific times. We were told to “arrive no later than 1pm.” Being all too familiar with D.C.’s weekend Metro schedule, I flagged down a taxi outside my apartment building and, once in the backseat, I typed Cody a quick text: “I’m in a cab on my way. Be there in about 10 min. Sorry I’m a lil late!!!” Within thirty seconds my phone alerted me to a new text from Cody: “All good love.”

When I arrived at the local university where the festival was being held, I turned the corner to enter the outdoor plaza where more than a hundred teens were mingling, laughing, running around, reciting poetry, and receiving last minute advice from their coaches. The excitement in the air was palpable. Many of the young slammers wore their LTAB-DMV sponsored T-shirts that came complimentary with their registration. Some of the teens had modified the shirts by cutting off the sleeves; several girls cut off the neckline so the shirt could hang off their shoulders or tied up the bottoms so as to show off their midriffs. Other slammers wore regular street clothes, though it was clear that many of the teens invested some time in putting together their attire, accessorizing their outfits with fashionable scarves, bandanas, vests, necklaces, and hats. I weaved my way through the crowd until I found Grant, who told me the pizzas had just arrived (donated from a local pizzeria) and asked me to help serve them to the teens. Grant shouted instructions to the boisterous high school crowd: “The pizza is here! All slammers can get in line and are entitled to two slices. Once everyone goes through the line, if there is any pizza left, you can go back for seconds.”

After lunch, the first set of bouts got underway, and the excitement magnified. College classrooms were turned into poetry performance spaces. Teen poets, friends, and family filled the chairs, sat on desks, stood along the periphery of the room, and sprawled out on the floor. Many of the young adult poets from my study were highly involved and visible during the two-day

festival. Grant, Cody, and Derrick were lead organizers. Cody and Derrick also each coached a youth slam team from the DMV area, as did Hannah, Blake, and Aaron. And a whole host of other poets, including Neeta, Nicho, Jade, Kim, Micah, and Marcus, volunteered as bout managers, hosts, scorekeepers, timekeepers, judges, and oversaw registration and merchandise tables, all the while showing their support for the youth teams as they moved through the bracket system leading up to the final grand slam competition.

I worked the first bout with Neeta. I was the scorekeeper and she was the host. Cody handed us a packet of rules, which included all the usual poetry slam regulations as well as a few additional ones such as no profanity. Given that the role of the host was to cultivate excitement and loud reaction from the audience, Neeta kicked off the bout by shouting to the audience, "If you're all ready to hear some poetry make some noise!" to which the teens screamed in response. Neeta went over the rules, and introduced the judges and participating slam teams. She called the name of the first teen poet up to the stage, and all the competing teams cheered in encouragement. A young, slender white woman, appearing about 16-years-old, walked to the front of the room. As she stood facing the audience, she cast her eyes downward, looking to the floor, while she waited for the noise to die down, her long brown hair hanging in front of her face. As the room fell silent, she slowly lifted her chin, and launched into a poem recounting her experience of being raped by a male friend. As she moved through the poem, her voice got increasingly loud, aggressive, and quivering. Uttering the poem's last line, she broke down in tears. Hands covering her face, she walked back to her seat, and her friends jumped up and rushed to her side. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she smiled and her team, as well as the competing poets, screamed in support as they watched a judge award her poem with a perfect ten

score. Emotional, supportive, and artistic moments such as this occurred throughout the weekend poetry festival.

At the end of the bout, after Neeta announced the total team scores and instructions for subsequent bouts, Cody and Blake closed the show with their own "group piece." Spoken word poems with two or more people had become a staple of poetry slam competitions; in fact, each competing team at LTAB-DMV were required to perform at least one group piece per bout. The teen poets went wild when they saw that Cody and Blake were going to perform. Along with the other young adults in the scene, Cody and Blake served as coaches, mentors, and role models for the teens. Standing side-by-side, Cody and Blake launched into a poem about Washington, D.C., a city for which they felt both a sense of loss and love.

His voice monotone and steady, Cody started the poem by mimicking the sound of a heart monitor: "Boop. Boop." Then Blake chimed in singing up tempo, "'Cause it don't mean a thang / If it ain't got the go-go swang." Cody continued to keep time in the background, "Boop. Boop. Boop," while Blake finished singing his verse, "Doo-wop, doo-wop, doo-wop, doo-wop, doo-woooooooop." On his last word, Blake slowed his tempo and drew out the short vowel sound of "wop," which Cody synchronized to a drawn out long vowel in his own verse: "Booooooooop." After this synchronization, they each took a silent quick breath and then, in unison, shouted "CLEAR!," immediately diving into the poem's first stanza.

Blake:	In 1790 / Alexander Hamilton proposed / That the capital of the United States / Be on federal land and / In turn / Giving it no statehood
Together:	The pre-operative period / Welcome to America's purgatory
Cody:	The city is an illusion / A magic trick gone awry
Together:	Tummy tucked behind a Capital Hill

Blake: 1814 / The Redcoats set you on fire

Together: The burning of Washington / The first operation / And you've been addicted to the surgery ever since

Cody: With no anesthesia / They're trying to make monsters out of you

Blake: From The District to District Nine / As if you are ever ugly / The blemishes of your road / Swept under cherry blossoms

Together: You're nice to look at / But they're only here for your sight-seeing / D.C., you are a trophy wife!

Blake: Minority-owned businesses / Cut under scalpels of high-rises

Together: Before U Street / Became Their Street

Blake: We'll let them have a few Ethiopian restaurants here,

Cody: Or a carry-out or two there…

Together: Because we all like that good ol' Mumbo sauce / Ha ha ha ha ha / But most times this city has nothing to smile about

Blake: 1968 / Dr. King was assassinated / Race riots ensued for five days / The inner city economy never crossed the finish line

Together: Surgery Number Two / The addiction continued

Cody: A city so violent / That they sought to go from Bullets / To Wizards / Ironic / How the same black magic still happens

Together: We are still disappearing / Under a new form of violence / Same aim / Different kind of target / But don't expect more

Cody: Face lift the streets / And bleach all of the waters

Blake: Chocolate City is melting!

Together: Liposuction via housing prices / Relative to income / You already can't vote / What makes you think you're allowed to live here?

Cody: This city / Has the gentries / Where the lie go / Spreading at the speed of a slow wildfire

Blake: Buying into a city / Blocks from the rest of us

Together:	Why do you think it is called Wal-Mart? / We are losing the city! / We are losing the city! / Resuscitate! / CLEAR!
Cody:	Lift up the schools / A segregated education / Makes for a better segregated outcome
Together:	CLEAR!
Blake:	Taxation without representation
Together:	CLEAR!
Cody:	Replace whole bodies with Whole Foods
Together:	CLEAR!
Cody:	We want our cities back (*repeats three times while Blake recites city names*)
Blake:	Oakland. Harlem. Saint Louis. Chicago. Philadelphia.
Together:	I want my city back / CLEAR!
Blake:	How many lives will it cost to augment a metropolis?
Cody:	Our businesses don't need your Botox / Our culture don't need your collagen
Together:	Politicians and developers / Playing surgeons / Reconstructing the go-go soul of our land / Gentrification by incision of jackhammers / Turning this city into an illusion / A magic trick gone awry

Cody and Blake closed out their poem by returning to its opening structure, though this time Blake's, instead of Cody's, words were in the background. Blake sang in a soft, slow, and melancholy tempo, "It don't mean a thang / If it ain't got that swang," while Cody said, "D.C. / You are magical / You are beautiful / But there will never be a recovery period / For this surgery." Blake timed his final "Doo-wooooop" with Cody's last line, and then the twosome marked the poem's end by simultaneously shouting: "CLEAR!"

At once an ode and eulogy to Washington, D.C., Cody and Blake's poem about their chocolate city energized the youth at LTAB-DMV that day. The teens stood up, applauded, stomped their feet, and screamed vigorously. But the poem also conveyed a passion and deep sense of concern about their beloved city. This was the environment in which these young poets sought to create an artistic community aimed at inciting social change. The poets in this study were aware of the many ways in which the deck was stacked against them and their city—how their efforts to promote social justice through spoken word poetry often felt like a losing battle.

Cody and Blake's poem expressed a deep skepticism in the future (e.g., segregated outcome), and a lack of trust in formal institutions (e.g., those related to education, formal politics, and economic development). The young poets recognized the changing appearance of discrimination and inequality in the millennial age, as "new forms of violence," such as gentrification, residential displacement, and the political disenfranchisement of D.C. residents, replaced the more overt forms of violence D.C. experienced in the past, such as the burning of Washington in 1814 and the riots following Dr. King's assassination in 1968. These forms of violence have disproportionately marginalized D.C.'s poor and African American communities. Importantly, while Cody and Blake mourned the violence being enacted on poor people and communities of color in their own city, they connected the patterns of marginalization occurring in Washington, D.C. to those taking place in other "chocolate" or majority-black U.S. cities in the twenty-first century.

At the same time D.C.'s community was eroding or "melting" in the ways cited by Cody and Blake, there have been countless on-the-ground efforts that seek to preserve the communities that have made up D.C. for generations, as well as build new communities that do not contribute to the violent extraction of D.C.'s residents, businesses, and cultural identity. The community

cultivated by the spoken word poets in this study is one such effort. The poets used this art form as a vehicle for social change, which they cultivated within and targeted toward a meso-level of social organization: the community. This type of social change was not aimed at the state, nor did it resemble the large-scale social movement organizing of the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, this form of political engagement was not organized around one, two, or even a handful of figureheads. Rather, using the practice of spoken word as a platform, poets non-hierarchically localized their efforts. They focused on their personal lived experiences as a moral compass, healed themselves in ways that transcended the individual and nurtured a healthy community, and engaged in new forms of activist pursuits by raising awareness about local issues and building an infrastructure to give their community, and their politics, staying power.

In this chapter, I describe the urban, political, and artistic landscape in which the D.C. spoken word community enacted their politics. The metaphor of a melting city is two-fold: D.C.'s "chocolate flavor" or, African American cultural identity, was disappearing, as Cody and Blake, as well as others (see, e.g., Hopkinson 2012), have argued. At the same time, as D.C. racially, ethnically, and economically diversified, it more closely resembled the "melting pot" ideal advocated for among early American assimilation theorists (Hirschman 1983; Park and Burgess 1921). The young poets in this study were engaged in a process of figuring out how to build a political and artistic community, as well as maintain their various individual and cultural identities, within a context defined by increasing diversity. This chapter also describes the methods I used in this study, and introduces the poets and the poetry venues where I conducted this research. But first, I describe the art form of spoken word in more detail, and I explain why this art form is a productive and compelling site of sociological analysis.

What is Spoken Word?

Spoken word is both an ancient and emerging art form. Folklorist and linguistic anthropologist Richard Bauman (2011) employs the phrase “spoken word” to describe “verbal art forms of oratory, theater, literature” (6). He highlights verbal art forms such as chants, song, and oral poetry (e.g., folktales, legends, folksongs, epics), and collectively refers to these as “spoken word objects.” Bauman uses the term broadly and interchanges it with “oral expression” and “oral tradition.”

Spoken word can be traced back to a time before the written word existed. In his study of oral epic singing in the Balkans, Albert Lord (1960) dates the art form as far back as the original oral compositions of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Oral culture also has a long history in various societies across the African continent and Diaspora (Asante 1998; Coplan 1993; Kassam 1986). The griots, for example, of West African societies are oral historians, poets, singers, and storytellers dating back to the Mali Empire (1230-1600) (Hale 1998). Oral folk narratives have also played a prominent role in Hindu religious teaching, dating back several thousand years, possibly as far back as the third millennium B.C. (Narayan 1989).

By the 1980s, spoken word had become shorthand for contemporary performance poetry (Eleveld 2004; Olson 2007; Somers-Willett 2009), or “poetry…designed to be performed in front of an audience” (Eleveld 2004:xiii). While performance-based forms of spoken word poetry in the United States were practiced among the Beat poets of the 1950s (Farrell 1997) and poets of the Black Arts Movement of the 1970s (Somers-Willett 2009), today’s spoken word poetry has been heavily influenced and popularized by the introduction of slam poetry—or competitive performance poetry—in 1984.

A white working-class construction worker by the name of Marc Kelly Smith started slam in 1984 at a jazz bar on Chicago's near northwest side called the Get Me High (Eleveld 2004; Smith and Kraynak 2009; Somers-Willett 2009). According to Smith, he "truly upset the status quo by daring to enthusiastically embrace performance as an essential part of the poetic experience," asserting that he and his fellow "Ill-Bred Poets" (as they called themselves at the time) were "radical" for placing equal importance on the performance and the audience, as on the text and the poet (Smith and Kraynak 2009:9). Smith distinguished the Ill-Bred Poets from "establishment poets [who] declared through their upturned noses that performance cheapened poetry" (Smith and Kraynak 2009:10). Slam is not only credited for the recent upsurge in the popularity of spoken word poetry (Olson 2007), but this competitive genre has also informed the art form's short performative narrative structure. In a competition, slam poems that exceed three minutes and ten seconds are penalized; as such, spoken word performance poetry tends to adhere to a short narrative form, even outside the context of competition.

Today, now a global phenomenon, slam has been described as "the largest and most influential social/literary movement" (Smith and Kraynak 2009:13). In 1997, Poetry Slam, Inc (PSI) was founded, which is the national non-profit that represents the slam community. PSI's stated mission is to "promote the performance and creation of poetry while cultivating literary activities and spoken word events in order to build audience participation, stimulate creativity, awaken minds, foster education, inspire mentoring, encourage artistic statement and engage communities worldwide in the revelry of language."[24] PSI oversees the international coalition of slam competitions (though participation is overwhelmingly American), serving as the governing body that grants certification to local slam venues. Certification ensures that local slams are held to a set of formalized and standardized rules for competition. In addition to the National Poetry

[24] http://www.poetryslam.com/content/what-poetry-slam-inc (retrieved 11/13/13)

Slam, PSI oversees two other national competitions: the Individual World Poetry Slam (iWPS) and the Women of the World Poetry Slam (WOWPS).

Slam has also influenced the practitioners who tend to engage in this cultural practice. Spoken word is especially popular among young adults in urban communities (Somers-Willett 2009). This urban focus results, in part, because cities serve as the organizing framework for the national slam scene, as slam teams are based out of metropolitan centers such as New York, Minneapolis, Charlotte, Columbus, Denver, and New Orleans. In 2013, seventy teams representing over sixty of the country's most populated metropolitan areas participated in the National Poetry Slam, an event at which teams of poets compete for the title of National Poetry Slam Champion. Spoken word's popularity among young urban adults can also be attributed to the success and marketing of hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons's *Def Poetry Jam* series on HBO from 2002 to 2007, in which well-known slam poets performed spoken word poems in front of a live audience. In 2008, Simmons and co-producers created another HBO poetry show, *Brave New Voices*, premised on the finale of a popular teen poetry slam of the same name started by the San Francisco non-profit Youth Speaks. HBO's production of *Brave New Voices* mirrors the urban hip-hop aesthetic and sensibility of *Def Poetry Jam*, which emerged largely out of the urban poetry slam tradition closely identified with the Nuyorican Poets Café in Manhattan (Aptowicz 2008).[25]

[25] Given its oral nature, rhythmic tones, and association with black youth culture, spoken word is frequently associated with, and mistaken for, rap; however it serves as its own distinct artistic form and is practiced by poets of all races and ethnicities. Nonetheless, this perception of the art form is what initially led me to select it as a topic of study back in March 2004 when I attended my first spoken word poetry performance at Chicago's famous Green Mill Poetry Slam. I was conducting ethnographic research for a class project, and I chose the poetry slam as a field site because I thought it would help with my ongoing research on hip hop and women rappers. Although I've come to learn all the ways performance poetry constitutes is own artistic genre, over the next eight years I repeatedly bumped up against people's beliefs around the relationship between spoken word and rap. After returning home after long nights of fieldwork at poetry performances, my late night conversations with Ronald, the 50-something-year-old rotund black

Spoken word art forms are rooted in a folk tradition (Lord 1960; Jackson 1974; Narayan 1989; Caton 1990). Folk art traditions consist of artistic expressions produced within the context of a community: they fulfill a community function and are learned through informal channels, either from other community members or through observation and self-teaching (Becker 1982).[26] Quilting, for example, is a form of folk art in that, while the object created serves a practical function (e.g., a quilt provides warmth), the artistic process also fulfills a community function around female bonding, as quilting techniques are learned within (and not outside of) the community, often through women-centric channels of artistic knowledge. Folk art is contrasted to art produced within established or professional art worlds that operate within culturally and institutionally recognized formats, where a network of social institutions and actors (such as art galleries, academia, art critics, museums, collectors, and independent curators) define, judge, and legitimate artistic objects along a hierarchical value system that categorizes art as "good," "bad," "valuable" or, indeed, "art" or "non-art." For these reasons, the value of artistic forms emerging from a folk tradition reside predominantly in their functionality for the community, rather than in abstract aesthetic criteria defined from outside the community (Becker 1982).

Given this folk feature, oral forms of poetry can be contrasted to written forms of literature that are more highly recognized and valued by literary art world critics, such as academically or formally trained literary elites. In contrast to written or "page" poetry, oral poetry is intended for and evaluated by a popular audience (Jackson 2004). For this reason, oral

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man who worked at the front desk at my Washington, D.C. apartment building, spoke to this assumption. No matter how many times I told Ronald over the course of my fieldwork that I was not writing my dissertation on rappers, he continued to understand my research project in this way. Even when I practiced a poem in front of him that I was trying to memorize for an upcoming slam, he wondered why I wasn't rapping my words.

[26] Folk art can be distinguished from outsider or "naïve" art, which typically involves untrained, self-taught artists exhibiting highly personalized, often compulsive artistic practices. Unlike folk art that is produced within the context of a community, outsider art tends to be made in social isolation, for example art done by prisoners, social recluses, or those with mental illnesses (Becker 1982; Chepp 2012).

poetry must be comprehensible and accessible to a general public. As such, oral poetry is delivered in a colloquially way through a popular or folk idiom, and is practiced and performed in publicly accessible social spaces such as town centers, street corners, or at community functions.

The aesthetics and functions of contemporary spoken word poetry practiced by young urban adults reflect many features of the folk tradition from which it emerged. Poets are largely taught through mechanisms indigenous to the community, and, as this study will show, the art form serves important community functions. Contemporary spoken word is also directed toward a popular audience, integrating colloquial language such as slang or pop cultural references. In this way, spoken word poetry is similar to other democratically accessible forms of "street art," in that it is associated with public spaces belonging to "the people." As such, spoken word shares characteristics with other democratic art forms that take place in the urban public sphere, such as murals, public sculptures, street performance, and graffiti.

Like other folk art forms, spoken word poetry is devalued relative to its written, professional art world counterparts, which have been legitimized through various academic, publishing, and other credentialing mechanisms. The poets in this study recognized and were critical of this aesthetic hierarchy, which served as both a source of pride and frustration for poets. For example, poets applauded the ways in which slam undermines the hierarchical structure of the established art world, as slam audiences democratically determine which poems and performers "win" the competition. However, the poets also, perhaps unwittingly, adopted elements of larger artistic value systems, as they aspired for high art markers of what constituted "good" poetry, such as academic credentials and page publishing. Realizing their art form is mostly unknown to the larger art world, the poets struggled for recognition and artistic respect.

Curtis, a Filipino-American gay poet who had been active in the spoken word scene since the 1980s and was a part of the first generation of New York slam poets, spoke to this struggle for recognition when he described spoken word to me as "an undocumented art form." Similarly Kim, a 22-year-old African American lesbian poet pointedly told me, "If you didn't know about [spoken word] you wouldn't know it existed." Time and again I heard poets reference the invisibility and devaluation of their art form given its location on the periphery of the larger art world, yet, at the same time, poets saw value in this marginalized status. Indeed, the marginalized status of their art form often corresponded with the marginalized status of their own social locations. This status provided poets with a sense of collective identity, a basis for healing and support, and motivation for their social justice and change work.

Why Study Spoken Word?

I was initially drawn to spoken word as a way to study the intersection of art and politics. Specifically, I observed a close affinity between the contemporary performance poetry movement and an explicit concern with progressive politics, social change, and equality. This included the art form's association with revolution (Eleveld 2004; Olson 2007) and democracy (Smith and Kraynak 2009; Somers-Willett 2009).

Somers-Willett (2009) locates slam poetry within a larger tradition of American popular verse intended for popular audiences comprised of "the people." These associations are apparent in the popular press and promotional materials that discursively link ideas about revolution with spoken word, describing the poet as a revolutionary and the spoken word movement as a revolution (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: Collage of selected examples from popular press and promotional materials linking spoken word to a revolutionary discourse

Poets also attributed great power to spoken word. Although delegitimized and often unknown in the larger art world, poets believed that spoken word had the power to heal lives, save lives, and change the world. Grant explained to me:

> But even just the medium of it, like getting up and screaming a poem…has power in it and I think it has a lot of its roots in protest. In getting up in front of an audience and screaming. And maybe that's just my own bias because I come from that. You know, a lot of my favorite poems are ones that I can get up and do at a protest as well as at an open mic. Because it has that power to move people and to make people believe: "OK, we do need to change and I'm going to do something about it."

I was interested in learning how exactly poets understood their participation in this art form to be a way of inciting social justice and change.

Spoken word poetry is a rich analytic site to explore the political dimensions of artistic fields for several reasons. First, the *content* of spoken word poems often articulate a traditional politics of opposition, voicing topics that challenge the status quo; this contentious poetic content can be understood as a particular type of claims-making (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Second, as Grant pointed out, the *form* of spoken word resembles a familiar oppositional political aesthetic, rooted in a tradition of protest; this familiar form can also be understood as the performance of opposition (Eyerman 2006). Third, the *ideology* of spoken word is decidedly democratic, drawing upon familiar American political and cultural pre-existing code structures (Hart 1996) that attach importance to values of fairness, accessibility, diversity, and inclusion (i.e., this is poetry for "the people") (Somers-Willett 2009). Fourth, the *challenges* facing spoken word are similar to those that confront other popular artistic cultural forms—particularly those historically cultivated within youth and African American communities—including commodifiation and co-optation. Such challenges are essential to consider when thinking about the impact and shape of oppositional politics in artistic fields given the aggressively co-optive nature of the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno 1998). For all these reasons, spoken word poetry serves as a particularly fruitful site to consider the political dimensions of artistic fields, offering important insights into the relationship between art and politics.

Study Details

The Poets

Deanna, Grant, Neeta, Kevin, Cody, Blake, Derrick, Hannah, Aaron, Nicho, Jade, Kim, Micah, Marcus, and Curtis are just a small segment of the many spoken word poets who

participated in the Washington, D.C. spoken word poetry scene during the time of this study. Although they shared the same artistic community, poets brought unique backgrounds, artistic styles, aesthetics, and political standpoints to their spoken word practice.

Marcus was a 34-year-old African American straight man who taught eighth grade science by day and performed as a poet, comedian, rapper, and storyteller by night. Marcus was one of the most recognized figures in the community, serving as co-host of Speaking ‘N Tongues, the longest-running and most highly respected poetry open mic in the city. Like several others in the D.C. poetry scene, Marcus was a rapper before he was a poet. He moved to the District from New Orleans to attend college in 1995 and soon discovered that the city’s rap scene was heavily centered on improvisational, or “freestyle,” rapping during that time. He told me, “I was excited to come up here because…I thought it was going to be this big hip-hop cipher with all these cats rapping and everything like that. And it was to a degree, but their whole thing was, ‘Yo, no written stuff son, no written stuff, straight off the hit.’…I’ve always been much more interested in what you can come up with when you’ve had some time to sit down and think about it.” While Marcus appreciated the wit and playfulness of freestyle, he also longed for the intentionality of a constructed verse. In a quest to find an artistic outlet that fulfilled this, Marcus discovered D.C.’s spoken word community. Marcus’s hip-hop roots shined through his poetry, as did the playfulness of freestyle. As such, Marcus’s poetry was often based in rhyme and humor; he was especially well known for his spoofs of popular rap songs. When Marcus performed such works at Speaking ‘N Tongues, the audience sang along loudly, chiming in on their favorite lines, clapping, laughing, and affectionately throwing items such as pens or notebooks toward the front of the room in a show of appreciation.

Although part of the same spoken word community, Kim's approach to spoken word differed dramatically from Marcus's comedic approach. Kim was a 22-year-old African American gay woman who described her poetry as "emotional," and she often drew upon the art form to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS, which included sharing her own experience being HIV positive. When I first saw Kim perform, I was moved by her courage to stand in front of an audience and broadcast the challenges of being a young black woman in Washington, D.C. living with HIV. Initially, I found Kim to be shy and soft-spoken. However, I soon learned that her personality followed a similar rhythm as her performance style: slow and quiet at first, yet increasingly loud, bold, and unforgettable over time. Within the community, she was fondly known for her contribution to the well-known spoken word call-and-response ritual (practiced among spoken word communities throughout the country), in which a poet announced that she or he was about to perform a new poem, and the audience responded by shouting, "New shit!" Whenever this ritual was carried out at Speaking 'N Tongues, Kim followed up with, "Fresh out the ass, son!" Every time, the audience erupted with laughter, rejoicing in the vulgarity and vividness of the image, the metaphor of a poem being newly squeezed from one's bowels. The phrase had become so popularized and ritualized at Speaking 'N Tongues that the audience shouted it out even when Kim was not in attendance; I even heard it shouted at other poetry venues in D.C., often to the bewilderment of an out-of-town poet or someone new to the scene.

Like Marcus and Kim, Josh was also an active member of the D.C. spoken word poetry community and a "regular" at Speaking 'N Tongues. As a 34-year-old straight white Jewish man, I remembered the first time I saw Josh at Speaking 'N Tongues, his blazer, receding hairline, and quiet demeanor standing in stark contrast to the predominantly twenty-something-year-old crowd of mostly African Americans. However, Josh was one of the most consistent participants at

Speaking ‘N Tongues, and he was best known for his short spoken word poems which, according to him, were intended to make people happy. Josh was part of a sub-group of D.C. poets called the Haiku Heralds (along with Neeta, the only woman in the group, and Micah, the other co-host of Speaking ‘N Tongues).

Despite exhibiting diverse aesthetic styles and intents, the community displayed much cohesion. They moved through similar social and artistic circles. Poets shared friendships and social media networks. They attended the same poetry meetings, workshops, performances, and fundraisers. Poets publicly promoted each other’s work, provided peer editing and performance feedback, and volunteered at each other’s respective poetry events. The community was guided by an ethos of support and love, and this ethos was reflected in the ubiquity of hugs and friendly competition shared among its participants, as well as its familial ties. Community members frequently drew upon the metaphor of “family” to describe themselves, and poetry venues were likened to family spaces, metaphorically characterized as “living rooms” or “Sunday dinner tables.”

Thus, despite instances such as the introduction of Slam DMV as a space to encourage new voices, and specifically queer poets who felt isolated at Holla Out Loud, the D.C. spoken word community consisted of a close collective of creatively-oriented young adults who shared a commitment to promoting an art form and progressive sensibility they believed were marginalized in mainstream artistic and political discourses. As such, D.C. poets struggled to work through their differences and diverse backgrounds in an effort to advocate for their artistic and political beliefs.

The Location: Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C. is an ideal place to study the contours of modern day politics in the millennial age. As the nation's political capital, Washington, D.C. serves as the literal and symbolic heart of U.S. and global politics, and the city's residents have witnessed some of the country's most recognizable social justice events in the nation's history. This includes memorable instances of oratory protest, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963 and African American opera singer Marian Anderson's performance on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939.[27]

The D.C. region also witnessed great demographic shifts in the first decade of the new millennium, and the District proper became increasingly young, white, and multi-racial (Morello and Mellnik 2013). During this time, the greater Washington Metropolitan Area was one of eight U.S. cities to become "majority minority," meaning that racial and ethnic minorities constituted over half of all residents living in the Washington, D.C. region (Morello and Mellnik 2011). During this same time period, however, the number of African Americans living in the District proper dropped by more than eleven percent, a significant decline for a chocolate city where African Americans comprised a majority of the population for the past fifty years, and where residents have prided themselves on being a black cultural and political metropolis (Morello and Keating 2011). As the District's black population slipped into a demographic minority status during the millennium's first decade, the area also experienced rapid population growth, increasing by nearly 20,000 new residents between 2000 and 2010, with the non-Hispanic white population soaring by almost a third compared to the previous decade (Morello and Keating

[27] King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, and Anderson performed on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial after the Daughters of the American Revolution prohibited her from singing to an integrated audience at Constitution Hall.

2011). Following this boom, the District's population continued to expand, growing by an additional 30,000 between 2011 and 2012 (Neibauer 2012).

These demographic shifts reflect fifteen years of gentrification, beginning at the turn of the millennium. As new residents entered the city, many of the District's black residents were displaced. Although all four of the city's quadrants experienced massive gentrification, the Northwest quadrant, home to most of the city's non-Hispanic white residents, absorbed the majority of the city's economic development dollars. While racial and economic residential segregation characterized much of the city, the Northwest quadrant, which was the site where I conducted most of my fieldwork, witnessed the highest degree of racial and economic integration. In this way, many places in Northwest D.C., including my field sites, were characteristic of diverse urban settings in contemporary American cities (Anderson 2011).

These shifting racial and economic dynamics are not lost on the city's residents, nor were they lost on me when I moved to D.C. in 2007. As a young, single, white, middle-class woman on the upper cusp of the millennial generation, I knew very little about the District when I relocated there to attend graduate school. Talking to friends of friends prior to my move, I was repeatedly told that Northwest was the "good" quadrant, explicitly being told in one instance that, "Basically, that's where all the white people live." Never one to blindly follow advice, I set up appointments to tour rental apartments in all four quadrants of the city. During my two-day walking tour around the city, the effects of gentrification were stark, as the neighborhoods I visited in Southeast, Southwest, and Northeast lacked the businesses, subways stops, grocery stores, and bustling pedestrian sidewalks that typified numerous Northwest neighborhoods. It wasn't long before I became a part of the demographic influx of white, educated, middle-class,

young professionals that settled in Northwest D.C. during the first decade of the new millennium.

The massive gentrification and demographic shifts were also a salient topic of conversation during informal discussions I had with others about social activities and nightlife in the District. On numerous occasions I had taxi drivers comment on the rapid gentrification of the city. Driving past the Walter E. Washington Convention Center (completed in 2003) soon after I moved to the city, one cab driver shook his head, as if still in disbelief, telling me I would not have walked through that area at night just ten years earlier. A white friend from Chicago who lived in D.C. in the late 1990s once told me that, "Back then, we wouldn't go out anywhere east of 16th and U Street." Today, the 8-block stretch of U Street east of 16th, known as the U Street corridor and site of many poetry events, serves as one of the city's most popular nighttime destination spots.

In addition to its unique political reputation and changing demographic landscape, Washington, D.C. is home to a rich arts scene, and specifically a rich literary, black arts, and spoken word scene. Prior to the 1968 race riots following the assassination of Dr. King that blighted the area, the U Street corridor was a vibrant black entrepreneurial and cultural hub. Nicknamed "Little Harlem," U Street was home to longstanding black cultural institutions such as the Howard Theatre, and internationally renowned performers such as Duke Ellington. Many famous African American poets have ties to the District, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Essex Hemphill.[28] The city's strong literary history is reflected in many contemporary poetry organizations and initiatives, including various non-profit organizations such as Still I Rise (which hosts a national bi-annual poetry festival) and

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[28] For information on Washington, D.C.'s literary history, see DC Writers' Homes: http://dcwriters.poetrymutual.org/home.html.

the National Museum of American Poetry, publications such as the *DMV Journal of Poetry*, and granting institutions such as the District Foundation for Art & Culture.

The D.C. arts scene is also home to a vibrant spoken word poetry community (O'Sullivan and Ramanathan 2010), evident in the city's more than 30-year history of open mics, slam teams, and performance poetry groups (Cabico 2010; Roberts 2010). Performance poetry was performed throughout the 1980s at a club called d.c. space, and the city's oldest and longest lasting spoken word collective, The Spoken Word Performance Poetry Ensemble, was founded in 1988. In 1993, the District sent its first team to the National Poetry Slam in San Francisco. This era of D.C. spoken word is also documented in the 1998 independent film *Slam*, set in Southeast D.C. and staring spoken word artist Saul Williams. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, numerous poetry groups with activist or social justice roots were founded, including Sister Spoken (1998), D.C. Guerilla Poetry Insurgency (2003), and D.C. Poets Against the War (2003).

The young adults that make up this study constituted the most recent generation of poets and leaders in the District, spearheading such initiatives as Holla Out Loud (2008), Slam DMV (2011), and Louder Than A Bomb-DMV (2012); under the direction of this current generation of poets, in 2013 the teens on the D.C. youth team finished second place overall at Brave New Voices. The work conducted by the young adult poets in this study built upon the rich spoken word foundation laid by previous generations, though the new millennial context presented new challenges. Poets continually struggled for institutional spaces and resources, constantly fighting to demonstrate the importance of their artistic and political existence to the larger social world.[29]

[29] For more on this history of D.C. spoken word, see (Browning 2010; Cabico 2010; Roberts 2010).

Methodology

In order to explain how young adults understood their participation in a spoken word art community to be a way of inciting social justice and change, I conducted an ethnographic study. Ethnography is an appropriate methodological approach as it is designed to uncover indigenous meanings (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) or the "deep structures of meaning" that constituted the cultural space and the poets' worldviews (Geertz 1973). Given my interest in understanding how young adults perceived this artistic practice to be a mechanism for social change, ethnography allowed me to understand the intersection of art, identity, and politics from the perspective of these young poets.[30]

Data Collection: Experiencing, Enquiring, Examining

Although ethnographic fieldwork often gets reduced to an all-encompassing notion of "participant observation," scholars have sought to specify and categorize the various ethnographic strategies used in the field. I drew upon Wolcott's (2008) discussion of *experiencing*, *enquiring*, and *examining* as a way to approach my ethnographic data collection. Over the course of two and a half years, from February 2010 through June 2012, I collected data via these three ethnographic approaches, which are also known as participant observation, interviewing, and archival strategies, respectively. Participant observation and interviewing served as my primary modes of data collection; my use of archival strategies was less systematic and functioned as a supplementary data source, filling in gaps or informing my primary methods when appropriate.

[30] Ethnographic methods have also been identified as the way to study performance-centered (versus text-centered) approaches to the verbal arts (Bauman 1977).

Mapping onto Wolcott's concept of "experiencing," data that I collected through methods of participant observation included direct observation and my own participation at over 100 poetry workshops, open mics, poetry slam competitions, fundraisers, and other poetry-related events around the city, as well as a week of fieldwork at the 2011 National Poetry Slam competition in Boston, MA. I participated in these activities in numerous ways, serving as a slam poet, an open mic poet, a writing workshop participant and facilitator, an audience member, an event volunteer (which involved collecting money for admissions, setting up and breaking down the room before and after performances, and scorekeeping and timekeeping for slams), and a member of the "entourage" supporting D.C. slam teams at the 2011 National Poetry Slam. During and after all field visits, I maintained fieldnotes, which I subsequently developed into analytic memos (Emerson et al. 1995).

Distinct from collecting data through experiential modes of participation and observation, I also collected data through methods of "enquiring," which involved an active role in asking about what was going on in a particular setting (Wolcott 2008). I employed this technique using two different interviewing approaches. First, I conducted countless informal interviews, consisting of casual conversations I had with people while I conducting fieldwork and engaging in participant observation (Wolcott 2008:55). I documented these conversations in my fieldnotes. Second, I conducted 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 23 core members of the community. I conducted follow-up interviews with seven respondents, since follow-up interviews comprise an important component of ethnographic interviewing (Spradley 1979). I arranged all in-depth interviews at a designated time, outside my field observations; lasting between one and three hours, these interviews took place at locations around the city, including coffee shops, bars, restaurants, a book store, a respondent's office, my campus office, poetry

venues, my apartment, as well as poets' homes. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Although I had an interview guide with general questions and subject areas, the semi-structured nature of the in-depth, ethnographic interview allowed my interviews to have an open-ended quality, in which the interview took shape as it transpired.[31] I conducted interviews with community members that could offer a variety of perspectives (including poets, slam organizers, and hosts), and I stopped conducting interviews once I began hearing the same themes repeated, indicating that I had reached a saturation point (Glaser and Strauss 1967:61).

Finally, I collected data using archival strategies or methods of "examining" the material record left behind by community members; unlike the historian or biographer, the ethnographer's interest in archival work tends to focus on the ordinary or everyday materials left behind by a culture (Wolcott 2008:63). Though not a primary data source, I examined the poets' material culture, which included promotional flyers for events, YouTube videos of poetry performances, Facebook and Twitter conversations, and poets' "chapbooks" or poetry books. While some poets were able to publish their chapbooks with small presses or pay for a bounded soft book cover, most poets self-produced their chapbooks at commercial printing shops such as Kinko's. I used NVivo qualitative analysis software to help organize my data and facilitate my analysis.

[31] My interviewing technique mapped onto this semi-structured conversation. That is, as soon as I realized people had time and were willing to talk and share (which was the case with the majority of poets), I would let them go off on tangents and see if the conversation would go anywhere. Sometimes it did, but eventually I would bring the discussion back in if it didn't prove to be fruitful. An advantage of this strategy was that I had the luxury to really let respondents go where they wanted and possibly strike something I wouldn't have had otherwise, if for example I was interviewing on a strict time limit. The disadvantage was that I had lots of transcribing and sometimes useless information.

Data Analysis: Developing Themes

My approach to data analysis derived from a grounded theory tradition of ethnographic research. Grounded theory is "a general *methodology* for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed. Theory evolves during actual research and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection" (Strauss and Corbin 1998:158, emphasis added). In this way, grounded theory is not so much an actual theory as it is an analytic approach or method for developing theory. This approach is often accompanied by misconceptions, including the assumption that grounded theory develops from an entirely inductive endeavor (Strauss 1987:55). Most practitioners of grounded theory, however, do not deny the role of deductive processes operating in their work; this can include prior personal experiences, exposure to scholarly research and ideas, or previously conducted primary research (Berg 2009:347). Nonetheless, grounded theory orientations to research are fundamentally inductive in that they involve immersing oneself in the data collected (e.g., fieldnotes or interview transcripts) in order to identify themes that emerge out of members' understandings of their world. These inductively produced themes or categories (though categories can also be deductively produced) are tied or *grounded* to the data from which they arise. As such, grounded theory approaches to ethnographic research most typically involve both deductive and inductive processes; however, in order to get at the categories of meaning that constitute members' perceptions of the world, an inductive approach is typically privileged (Berg 2009:347).

When I entered this research project, I situated my general questions about the political dimensions of spoken word poetry within an existing theoretical body of literature. These initial ideas and theoretical orientations served as "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer 1969). Shaped by my disciplinary perspectives, assumptions, and interests, these sensitizing concepts informed the

types of ideas and questions I initially pursued around my research topic. Although I was initially interested in the intersection of art and politics, and this initial interest shaped the sorts of information I attended to while in the field, I became interested in and learned about other avenues of interest as I spent more time in the field. As such, I used my initial concepts of interest as "points of departure" (Charmaz 2006:17); however, the final analytic themes I identified ultimately emerged "from the ground up," based on the data I collected and analyzed.

To begin developing analytic themes, while in the field, I was attentive to patterns and recurring topics (Emerson et al. 1995); these included sensitizing concepts and initial themes I identified early on in the research process. However, I continuously sought to remain open to the possibility of discovering new themes as well (Caughey 2006:90). In general, I followed discourses and practices that centered on some element of "social change," and I documented these observations and conversations in fieldnotes and interview transcripts.

I engaged in an iterative process of data collection and analysis, drawing upon strategies of "constant comparison" (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This required me to move back and forth between data collection and analysis. Such an approach adds rigor to the method, as it builds in a system of checks to ensure that analytic findings are consistent with the empirical world, thereby allowing the researcher to refine her theoretical framework as she goes (Charmaz 2006). While conducting fieldwork and in-depth interviews, I simultaneously engaged in preliminary analyses on an ongoing basis by writing analytic memos (Emerson et al. 1995) and identifying initial emergent themes by open coding my fieldnotes (Emerson et al. 1995; Rubin and Rubin 2005).[32]

[32] My first systematic pass at preliminary data analysis took place about two-thirds of the way into my fieldwork, when I identified initial emergent themes by open-coding my fieldnotes up through October 2011. Based on this open coding, I wrote thirteen analytic memos in November and December of 2011. The main themes identified in these memos informed my subsequent fieldwork as well as the guides for the interviews I conducted in 2012. I wrote one subsequent memo in April 2012, for a total of fourteen initial memos.

Throughout the data collection process, I modified my interview protocol as needed based on this ongoing preliminary analysis.

After some time in the field, I began to see the same themes and I stopped learning drastically new things during fieldwork. At this point, the interviews started to become more valuable for gaining more in-depth knowledge about specific themes I had already identified, but it was important for me to continue fieldwork for several reasons. First, I maintained my visibility in the scene, which was important for securing subsequent interviews, upholding trust and rapport with members, and retaining my relevance in the scene. Second, it kept me connected to the community and helped me to work through more developed ideas and themes that were beginning to form.

Once I finished collecting data and left the field, I engaged in more in-depth and systematic data analysis. This entailed reading through and coding all of my fieldnotes and interview transcripts. I coded the data in three general stages: initial or open coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz 2006). As suggested by Charmaz (2006), I kept my codes active and close to the data; this was facilitated by my use of gerunds rather than nouns to serve as codes, which also helped me to detect processes (see also Glaser 1978). I was also attentive to *in vivo* codes or insider terms and language, with the goal being to unpack concepts and not take them at face value (Charmaz 2006). Examples included members' use of the terms "community," "truth," and "courage."

Following Charmaz (2006), I took a bifurcated approach in the open coding stage, using different strategies to code my fieldnotes and interview transcripts. For interview transcripts, I conducted line-by-line coding. This approach encourages researches to stay open to new ideas rather than impose preconceived notions on the data; this includes imposing existing disciplinary

categories onto the data as well and uncritically accepting respondents' worldviews. By contrast, I coded my fieldnotes incident-to-incident, rather than line-by-line, as this coding approach is more conducive to observational data. Given that fieldnotes are already filtered through a researcher's own words and interpretations, Chamaz (2006) suggests that coding one observation after another in a line-by-line fashion may not spark new ideas or prove particularly helpful. Rather, she suggests comparing across incidents, that is, comparing concrete behavioristic descriptions of people's mundane actions, which in turn encourages the researcher to "see and make sense of observations in new, analytic ways" (Charmaz 2006:53).

Next, I conducted focused coding in order to determine which initial codes were most salient and comprehensive. By narrowing my analytic focus in this way (rather than having to manage the hundreds of codes I identified in the open coding phase), I could compare across data, highlighting similarities and differences across situations and respondents. It was during this analytic stage that I began to consider how codes appeared across fieldnotes and interview transcripts (i.e., across time, place, and people), which allowed me to further refine my codes while further abstracting concepts and ideas from the data. I used these focused codes to write a more developed set of analytic memos. Sometimes a code would serve as the topic for an entire memo; other times I would combine codes thematically to create categories and, using these categories, I would develop an analytic memo.

In the theoretical coding stage, I grouped categories into clusters or "families" based on possible relationships between categories I developed during my focus coding stage (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1978). By identifying theoretical codes, I sought to integrate the various "pieces" of data I identified during the initial and focused coding stages into a coherent, analytic story. Remaining consistent with my grounded theory approach and avoiding tendencies to impose a

forced framework onto my data, I sought to integrate categories into more theoretical abstraction only when the theoretical codes were able to interpret all the data at hand. Unlike earlier, more *structural* ethnographic approaches that prioritized a description of a setting (e.g., a focus on kinship networks or religious rituals), grounded theory approaches to ethnography prioritize a *process*, thereby helping the researcher to "gain a more complete picture of the *whole* setting…raising description to abstract categories and theoretical interpretation" (Charmaz 2006:23, emphasis in original). Using this grounded, three-staged analytic approach, I identified three social change processes that young spoken word poets engaged in through their artistic work. I explore each of these processes in more detail in the following three chapters.

I did not systematically code the material artifacts I collected; rather, these served as a supplementary data source, and I used this information to support, interrogate, and refine my existing categories as they emerged during the analysis of my fieldnotes and interview transcripts. As a supplementary data source (though still filtered through my interpretation), I used these "extant" (i.e., not elicited by the researcher) texts to corroborate or challenge my other data sources, and to frame additional or subsequent questions that I asked of my data (Charmaz 2006).

This grounded theory analytic approach allowed me to tap into an indigenous, youth-centered understanding of art and social change in Washington, D.C. While my focus on one spoken word poetry community can not be generalized across all spoken word poetry communities, I hope these findings productively contribute to future discussions about art and social change, and specifically how artistic creativity can contribute to theories of civic engagement and youth politics.[33]

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[33] Other ethnographers have similarly discussed generalizability and ethnographic research. For one example, see Moon (2004:6).

Data Sample: "Following a People" to Four Research Sites

Like most communities, the boundaries of the D.C. spoken word poetry community were not clearly demarcated. In fact, this community was fairly dispersed, sometimes transient, and included different major players at different times over the past couple of decades (Roberts 2010). The activities and participants of this community were spread across the four quadrants of the District, as well as the larger DMV area. Poets from Baltimore or Northern Virginia frequently participated in the D.C. spoken word scene, although they also participated in spoken word scenes in their respective cities.

The community was transient in that participants moved fluidly in and out of the scene. This transiency resulted from college students who lived in the city for only part of the year, young adults who moved to D.C. for summer internships, participants who moved to different states or were pulled away for work, poets who were on tour, or people who, for whatever reasons, were more or less committed to the community at different times. For some, spoken word poetry was just a temporary passing hobby. Others had been heavily involved in the community in the past but since stepped into the background or moved onto a larger stage. While these folks were less active in the local scene, they frequently were still connected via social media or special guest performances. Given the dispersal and transiency of the community, I did not meet or know of all D.C. spoken word poets during the course of this study. Poets participated in this community in varying degrees, at different times, and in dissimilar ways. For these reasons, it was initially difficult for me to draw parameters around this group of people. I had to ask myself: What is *the* D.C. spoken word community? And, more to the point: Whom exactly am I studying?

To address this challenge, I identified a core community that served as my ethnographic focus. Importantly, the construct of "community" was not something I assigned to this social formation, but rather was deployed indigenously by members of this group. That is, irrespective of the transient and dispersed nature of the group, poets understood themselves to constitute a community, and they habitually described themselves as such. This indigenous understanding informed how I studied this group of people. While many ethnographers focus on the activities and discourses that take place in a single social-spatial location, for example a diner (Duneier 1992), boxing gym (Wacquant 2004), high school (Pascoe 2007), or neighborhood (Modan 2007), I organized my ethnographic parameters differently in that I drew upon the ethnographic strategy of "following a people"—namely those who participated in the D.C. spoken word poetry community—and I followed these people across multiple social-spatial locations (Marcus 1995).

Following the people, I identified four sites as primary locations to collect data: two poetry slams and two open mics.[34] I began this research during a 5-month pilot project, when I conducted fieldwork at Holla Out Loud in Spring 2010. At the time, Holla Out Loud was the only PSI certified slam in the city. The goal of this pilot project was to become familiar with the local spoken word scene, build relationships, and begin to identify patterns. It was during this time I learned that poets were establishing a new PSI certified slam in the District, which was to be called Slam DMV, and I followed the people to this second slam site. Following the people

[34] Poetry slams occurred on a monthly basis, thus allowing me to attend two slams every month; open mics, on the other hand, occurred on a weekly basis. In addition to attending all slams for the 2011-2012 slam season, I also attended at least one open mic per week during the 2011-2012 season. The slam season officially begins in September and ends in May; it is during this time that poets compete to be on the D.C. National Slam Team. For this project, I also attended the summer slams as kicking off the subsequent slam season (June through August), as these months are a time for poets to practice for the upcoming season and, if applicable, the National Slam Competition. Scores earned during these summer months, however, do not count toward a poet's overall season tally, which ultimately determines placement on the National Team. I conducted my pilot research at the Holla Out Loud during the second half of the 2009-2010 slam season (February through May) and I conducted subsequent data collection at Slam DMV during the entire 2010-2011 slam season (September through May).

also led me to Speaking ‘N Tongues, a highly respected and the longest running weekly open mic in the city, and to The Poet’s Den, another significant open mic venue where many poets participated. Table 2.1 describes these four primary fields sites.

Table 2.1: Descriptions of Primary Field Sites

Spoken Word Venue	**Description**
Holla Out Loud	Established in 2008, this PSI monthly slam consistently sold out, drawing around 100 people per slam. Located in a popular restaurant/bar, the slam ran from 11pm-1am on a Friday. Cover charge: $5.
Slam DMV	Established in 2011, this PSI monthly slam took place in an art gallery, from 8pm-10pm on a Tuesday. There was no food or drink available for purchase. About 30-50 people attended each slam. Cover charge: $5.
The Poetry Den	Housed in a community arts space that was established in 2008, this open mic drew a variety of artists from the community (poets, comedians, storytellers, musicians, etc.) every Monday night. Suggested donation: $5-$10.
Speaking ‘N Tongues	Established in 2002, this open mic consisted predominately of spoken word. While locations and hosts changed hands (peacefully), many of the open mic’s loyal participants came from a nearby college, among other locations. The open mic met everyday Thursday night in a community arts center. Suggested donation: $1.

In this way, I used a following the people approach to identify my fields sites, and then used poets’ participation in these field sites to further specify the parameters of my core sample, mapping out poets’ role as a leader (L), participant (P), or neither. I defined leaders as those who organized or served as the face or contact person for an event, and participants as people who attended and performed at an event. I included poets in my core sample if they participated in at least two of my main field sites, and who served as leaders and participants at ancillary sites, such as poetry workshops, non-PSI “money” slams, special open mics, and the National Poetry

Slam. By following the people, I was also led to community fundraisers, political events, the Still I Rise Poetry Festival, and Louder Than A Bomb-DMV, among others.

As such, my core sample represented a group of poets who consistently served as poetry leaders, hosts, featured performers, educators, coaches, and organizers at various poetry venues and events across the city.[35] While I encountered hundreds of poets throughout the course of my fieldwork, I conducted in-depth interviews with my 23-member core community. Given the trust and rapport I established with community members, I had an easy time recruiting core members to participate in interviews, and every poet responded to my request for an interview with enthusiastic willingness. The results of this sampling approach are illustrated in Table 2.2.[36]

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[35] Liebow's (1967) early ethnography of African American men who congregated around a D.C. street corner followed a similar strategy: "The main body of the data comprises a record of the day-by-day routines of these men as they frequented the streetcorner, the alleys, hallways, poolrooms, beer joints and private homes in the immediate neighborhood. Frequently, however, associations which began on the streetcorner led me out of the neighborhood to courtrooms, jails, hospitals, dance halls, beaches and private houses elsewhere in Washington and in Maryland and Virginia (p. 11-2; see also, Kelly 2011).

[36] My approach of following the people recognized the inherent ways in which the boundaries of a community are always contested, changing, and situational (Collins 2010). For example, the year following my fieldwork, Cody became an active participant at Slam DMV. Prior to my fieldwork, Marcus and Angela were both members of local teams that competed in the National Poetry Slam. The classifications presented in Table 2.2 apply to the time I was in the field.

Table 2.2: Core Sample by Type of Field Site Participation

	Primary Field Sites				*Slams*			*Awards Show*	*Open Mics*			*Poetry Workshops*	
					PSI	*Non-PSI*							
	Holla Out Loud	**Slam DMV**	**Speaking 'N Tongues**	**The Poetry Den**	**National Poetry Slam**	**Word Hype**	**SWA Slam**	**SWA**	**Sister Spoken**	**Glitter**	**Breaking Dawn**	**Writing 'N Tongues**	**Poetry Den Workshop**
Aaron	**P**	**P**	**P**			**P**						**P**	
Adrianna		**P**		**P**	**P**	**P**			**L**				
Angela	**P**	**P**			**P**		**P**		**P**				
Blake	**P**	**P**	**P**		**P**	**L**		**P**					
Cody	**P**	**P**	**P**		**P**	**L**	**P**	**P**				**P**	
Curtis	**P**	**P**							**P**	**L**			
David		**Venue Owner**											
Deanna	**L**	**P**	**P**		**P**		**P**	**P**					
Derrick	**P**	**P**	**P**		**P**	**P**	**P**				**P**	**P**	
Grant	**P**	**P**	**P**	**L**	**P**			**P**			**P**		**L**
Hannah		**L**	**P**	**P**	**P**	**P**	**P**		**P**		**P**	**P**	
Idara	**P**	**P**	**P**			**P**						**P**	
Jade	**P**	**P**	**P**		**P**		**P**	**P**	**P**	**P**		**L**	
Josh		**P**	**P**	**P**				**P**				**P**	**P**
Kevin	**P**	**P**		**P**	**P**								
Kim	**P**	**P**	**P**				**P**	**P**	**P**	**P**		**P**	
Marcus	**P**	**P**	**L**					**P**					
Meghan		**P**		**P**	**P**				**L**	**P**			
Mia	**P**	**P**	**P**		**P**	**L**	**P**	**P**					
Micah	**P**	**P**	**L**				**P**	**P**					
Neeta		**P**	**P**	**L**					**P**		**L**	**P**	**L**
Nicho	**P**		**P**		**P**		**L**	**L**					
Ty	**P**	**P**	**P**		**P**	**L**	**P**	**P**					

These various venues served as spaces where poets worked to improve their craft, gain recognition, and support one another. Artists who participated in slams were often those who were more serious about their poetry, enjoyed competition, sought to earn prize money, or who hoped to represent the city—either as a team member or individual—at one of the national PSI competitions. Slams were important opportunities for artists trying to make money or a career out of this work, as national competitions afforded exposure, networking opportunities, and credentialing mechanisms. Open mics served as sites for slam poets to workshop their poetry, or as "safe" (i.e., non-competitive, low-stakes) spaces for amateur poets to perform their poetry. Both types of events—slams and open mics—were central to the Washington, D.C. spoken word scene. Table 2.3 illustrates the relationship among these different types of spoken word venues.

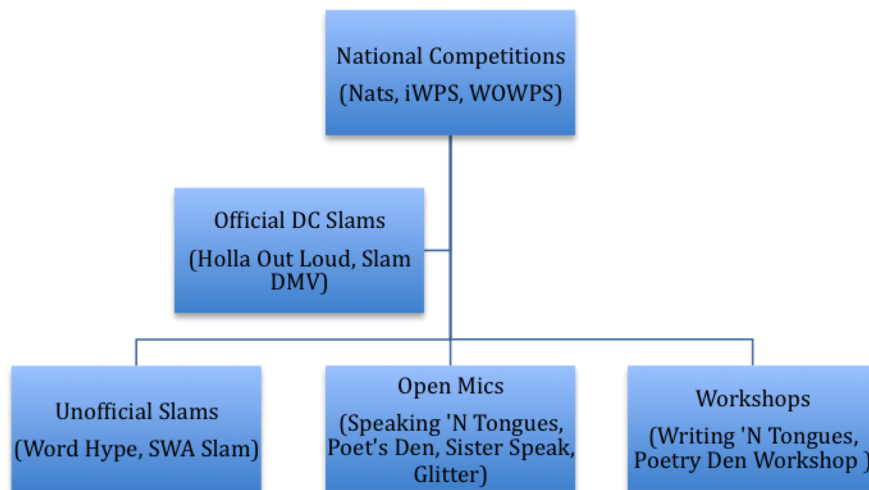

Table 2.3: Relationship among Spoken Word Venue Types

While some poets hoped to make a career out of doing spoken word, not all poets shared this interest, and poets' relationship to the art form spanned across different employment categories. *Professional poets* made their living entirely off of performing

poetry. *Full-/part-time poets* carried out paid poetry-related work, such as performing, hosting events, facilitating workshops, or coaching slam teams; however these poets were typically underemployed and this was predominantly part-time work (even if it was the poet's only job). *Poetry + non-poetry poets* had "traditional" jobs (which offered more financial security) but also engaged in poetry-related work, either part-time or full-time. Finally, *non-poetry poets* did not, in general, make money off of their poetry.

Like other millennials in urban areas, this community of poets was diverse along various lines of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, class, education, and ability (see Table 2.4). One of the poets had a physical disability; two poets worked with special needs populations.

Table 2.4: Core Sample Demographics (n=23)

Age		Race/Ethnicity		Gender		Sexual ID		Education		Employment	
19-25	7	AfAm/ Black*	13	W	10	Queer/Gay/ Lesbian/Bi	6	HS/Some College	8	Professional Poet	1
26-30	7	White	7	M	13			B.A.	9	Full-/Part-Time	8
31-35	7	South Asian	1					Advanced Degree	5	Poetry + Non-Poetry	9
36+	2	Arab-American	1					Unknown	1	Non-Poetry	5
		Filipino-American	1								

*Two of the poets who identify as black are African.

Although a highly heterogeneous group, the poets in this core-sample shared several characteristics. First, they were emerging adults of the millennial generation who

contributed to the cosmopolitan fabric of people living, working, and socializing in Washington, D.C. The young adults of color in this sample, like others who have come of age in a post-civil rights era (Clay 2006), encountered a dual experience in which they were afforded more educational, employment, and social opportunities than prior generations, but were not far removed from an era when the city's African American population was devastated by a crack cocaine drug epidemic, high levels of HIV infection, unemployment, and low education rates. These and other social problems remained very personal and real for many poets, and issues such as teen pregnancy, drug addiction, substandard schooling, and racial discrimination served as common topics in their poetry.

The poets also shared an interest, need, and desire to be artistically creative, and many had been writing poetry since early childhood. However, like others in their generational cohort, poets' primary and secondary education was accompanied by severe federal funding cuts for arts education, and creative opportunities during the school day were further diminished under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which excluded the arts from accountability standards (Beveridge 2009; Grey 2009). Educated, artistic, and politicized, the young poets in this study sought ways to express themselves creatively while harboring a sense of duty to make positive change in their communities.

Reflection: Insider/Outsider, White Girl Poet

Throughout my fieldwork, I was never covert about my ethnographic presence in the field (Davies 2008). Instead, I openly presented myself to community members as a Ph.D. student writing a dissertation on spoken word poetry. Poets often responded with

much interest and appreciation, and asked questions about my specific focus. I responded by explaining the open-ended nature of my method, though I specified that I was especially interested in learning how poets used spoken word as a vehicle for social change and justice.

Presenting myself as a Ph.D. student was an ethnographic strategy; here, I drew upon strategies deployed by Pascoe (2007) for maintaining rapport while keeping a professional distance. However, while Pascoe (2007) employed a "least gendered identity" in order to minimize perceived differences between herself and her subjects, I employed a "researcher first identity" in order to accentuate my difference. Socio-cultural differences between researchers and subjects can serve as an informative, through not necessary, source of ethnographic insight (Wolcott 2008). I utilized this strategy because, on many indicators, I had much in common with the poets. Although I was older than the average poet in my study,[37] like them, I came of age in the post-civil rights era. I grew up and have spent most of my life in large urban areas and, like them, I have racially diverse friendship circles, and I harbor a deep appreciation for art and creativity. During the course of my fieldwork, I lived and worked in the same neighborhood as many of the poets, frequented the same bars and, for two and a half years, my social activities overlapped with the poets. I went to their New Year's Eve parties, shared happy hours, coffee dates, and participated in the same community fundraisers. I ran into poets at the gym, or simply walking through the neighborhood. Grant and I co-presented a lecture on spoken word poetry in two different undergraduate sociology classes. Inevitably, by going to multiple poetry events every week, I spent a lot of time with the poets.

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[37] The average age of poets in my core sample was 29.5. I conducted fieldwork when I was between the ages of 31 and 34.

As such, the boundaries between researcher, research subject, professional collaborator, and friend were often tangled together. Over the course of my fieldwork, my interactions with the poets became increasingly comfortable and familiar. While many ethnographers work to develop strategies to become *more like* the people they study, in my project, given my similarity with my subjects, I often worked to maintain some distance. I did this by accentuating my researcher identity, highlighting the different motivations behind our participation in the community; mine, of course, were research driven. This strategy worked to maintain some sense of distance, as poets almost always introduced me to new people by associating me with my research project.

In this way, throughout my fieldwork, I maintained an insider and outsider status. I was an insider in that, for over two years, I wrote, workshopped, and performed poetry with the poets. I engaged in the same greeting rituals (hugs), shared inside jokes, and watched as my access and role in the community increased: my slam volunteer responsibilities became increasingly important and visible, I was given easy access to audio record performances, seats at crowded performances would be saved on my behalf, I served as a sounding board for poets to practice their poetry, and I coordinated my commutes to and from events with other poets. At times, poets explicitly named me an insider, such as when Neeta emailed me after a workshop saying, "Thank you for writing and sharing that incredible poem! I was SO inspired by it- you are a poet, lady!" or when Hannah sent the following email to Blake, Derrick, and myself: "*Hey fam – I am reaching out because I am trying to get everything squared away for the WOWPS Qualifier on Monday and still need score and timekeepers. It will be a 4 round slam with 4 competing poets…Because I will be hosting, because the system is different this time*

and because this is high stakes, I'm reaching out to you three who I trust the most. Let me know if you are available and what you might need from me to make it worthwhile and meaningful." I also held an insider status in that I experienced, first-hand, poets' ongoing struggle to find time to write and perform poetry and, like the poets, I learned to appreciate opportunities—almost always created indigenously by and for members of the community—to workshop, edit, and practice poetry.

What I did not expect, however, was the way in which poetry became a means for me to deal with personal issues. While I never reached the point of performing poetry with the communal goal to inspire or heal others, poetry did serve as a personal and liberating catharsis for me, which other poets frequently talked about. During my fieldwork, I realized that I had been ignoring feelings of confusion, disappointment, and sadness pertaining to a romantic relationship in my life, and it was personally revealing (and surprising!) when I picked up my journal and pencil and began writing poems as a way to deal with those feelings. Prior to this project, this was not something I would have thought to do. Eventually, I found myself writing poetry when dealing with other aspects of my life that were completely unrelated to my ethnographic research: the one-year anniversary of my grandfather's death, family stressors, and the arrival of spring. For me, this marked a type of insider status in the community—even though it was only observable to me—as poets used poetry in similar ways.

Although I held an insider status in some regards, I was never entirely a full-fledged spoken word poet. I never competed for a slam team slot, nor did I have any poetry features. When given the opportunity, I frequently opted not to put my name on open mic lists. I was forthcoming with the poets about my reluctance and fear to perform;

this was new territory for me and, prior to my fieldwork, I had never been involved in stage performances. However, despite my reluctance, the poets were incredibly patient and encouraging, often exhibiting audible excitement, squeals, and words of support whenever I did perform. Further, while some poets explicitly named me as an insider, such as Neeta and Hannah, others explicitly labeled me an outsider. During our interview, Angela told me, “I love the fact that you’re not a poet. I think it’s essential that you’re not a poet,” as she believed this made me a more objective observer. I was also assigned an outsider status one night after a poetry performance during a late night bar conversation, when Blake asked me to weigh in on a discussion about how to handle poets who express offensive sentiments in their poetry. He asked me pointedly, “What do you think, being the non-poet?” I protested, arguing that I am a poet, and he clarified, “Ok, as a non-performance poet?” Neeta came to my defense, informing Blake, “Valerie is a new regular at Breaking Dawn,” an early morning weekly poetry open mic. This late night exchange captured how my actual and perceived status in the community straddled both insider and outsider roles and points-of-view.

Given the diversity of my research sample, my race, class, and gender did not dramatically set me apart from my research subjects, as other poets were white, middle-class, or women. However, poetry venues were frequented by different racial demographics, with Holla Out Loud and Speaking ‘N Tongues overwhelmingly attended by young black adults, and Slam DMV and The Poetry Den predominated by a white and/or multi-racial young adult crowd. During my fieldwork, at times I worried that I was being more heavily associated with the other white girl poets, namely Hannah and Adrianna, particularly since Hannah and I lived down the street from one another and

frequently commuted to and from events together. As such, I took measures to establish myself as an unattached loner, sometimes intentionally arriving and leaving events alone, purposely sitting next to different, and specifically non-white women poets, and attending and supporting the events and features of poets-of-color—especially women. This included Kim's and Mia's respective features and fundraisers, and Jade's numerous workshops and poetry events.

My ability to blend into the setting, even in majority-black poetry venues, was facilitated by my ethnographic need to take fieldnotes. Because I was participating in a poetry community, practically everyone had a journal and pen in their hands, purses, backpacks, or pockets at all times. Writing during the middle of a show, workshop, or open mic was not at all unusual, and journals were frequently a topic of conversation. Poets would compare journals, remark on journals, note where journals were purchased, or publicly announce the acquisition of a new journal. For these reasons, the fact that I had a journal with me at all times and frequently wrote in it during events was not at all suspicious and actually made me fit in better with the community I was studying.

The ubiquitous presence of notebooks also set my field experience apart from other ethnographers who speak of fieldwork situations in which they observe a community for a designated amount of time and then sneak away to a private setting, such as a bathroom or car, to frantically jot down everything from memory. By contrast, I was able to capture many important field incidents through fairly comprehensive jottings. I would typically write up the jottings into fieldnotes immediately afterwards (Emerson et al. 1995) or, if the show was late at night, the next day. On a few occasions I had to wait a couple of days before writing my jottings into fieldnotes; however, given the extent and

detail I was able to jot during fieldwork sessions, this small gap of time did not prove to be much of a problem, and I was able to produce rich and detailed notes.

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Now that I have described the artistic practice, people, and places that are at the heart of this study, I turn my attention to the three social change processes that I explore in more detail in the following three chapters: speaking truths, healing the self and healing others, and doing new school activism. Through their participation in the Washington, D.C. spoken word community, poets carried out this social change work in the pursuit of social justice.

Chapter 3: Speaking Truths: Experiential Knowledge, Testimony, and Narrative Freedom

"Speak the truth. Be poet."
- June Jordan, American poet and activist[38]

Speak Up. Write Poems.

It was a chilly yet sunny Monday afternoon in mid-January and, as we had arranged, Cody arrived at my apartment promptly at 3:00 pm. Responding to his playful yet sincere Twitter request for "snackage" during our interview, I placed a bowl of microwave popcorn and a plateful of chocolate chip cookies on my living room coffee table. I was looking forward to my conversation with Cody, as he was one of the most visible and active participants in the D.C. spoken word community, serving regularly as a host, workshop facilitator, and slam poet. He also consistently won slams and was widely recognized among other slammers as "the poet to beat." He won the D.C. Grand Slam Champion titles in 2010 and 2012, representing Holla Out Loud and Slam DMV, respectively.

At age twenty-three, Cody was a bright and talented poet who, more than any other in the D.C. spoken word community, was active in the national youth slam scene as a teenager and competed at Brave New Voices several times. After high school, Cody spent one year at a four-year state university but dropped out in order to focus on his poetry and establish a performance career; late night poetry gigs in the city were not

[38] Cited in (Muller & Blueprint Collective 1995:22).

conducive to early morning classes. Cody's parents, who were from the Republic of Cameroon, were not pleased with his decision to drop out of college. As an African immigrant kid living in America, Cody was expected to become well educated and pursue a high status career such as a doctor or engineer. "Spoken word poet" and "starving artist" didn't come close to fulfilling these expectations. After bouncing between majors, Cody eventually received his Associate's degree in Communications from a local community college.

When Cody arrived at my place, I watched as he got settled into the white cushioned, low-seated wooden chair that sat across from my green futon where I had set up my audio recording equipment. I wasn't surprised to see him wearing one of his many short brimmed fedora hats and bow ties. He adjusted his dark-rimmed black glasses and, as he did at all poetry events (whether performing, teaching, or spectating), Cody opened up his laptop and loaded TweetDeck, an application that allows users to engage in multiple Twitter conversations at once. Like many of the poets, Cody was a prolific tweeter, and he frequently moved skillfully between simultaneous conversations taking place on Twitter and face-to-face interactions. Our own conversation that day carried on for hours, and the afternoon sun gradually transformed into a dark winter evening sky.[39] Eventually, after talking about his artistic background and his path toward finding spoken word, Cody explained to me why performing poetry was so important to him.

> My entire mantra throughout my career in the realm of poetry and all things associated, it kind of started that eleventh grade year when I won that talent competition and a little before then because at that time I was doing more like

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[39] As was the case with so many of the poets in the D.C. community, Cody was incredibly generous with his time, interviewing with me far beyond the one hour I requested.

> political poems and more aware poems: being aware of who I am, what it means to be an African in America, what it means to be an African American in America, what it means to be a black artist in America, and how you proceed here and throughout the world. And being just a person in a community. How you react to your environment, and how the environment reacts to you. Just becoming aware of all these things.

Cody leaned forward and grabbed a cookie. Without breaking his conversational stride or moving his laptop from its perch on his thighs, Cody continued:

> I remember specifically one time I was at an open mic and I did this poem. I don't exactly remember which one, but this kid comes up to me and says—this little kid, he's maybe seven years old, and I'm pretty young myself. And he comes up to me and says, "That was so good. I really would like to be able to write like you one day and do good. Thank you so much for just being here and inspiring me." And that was—it kind of shook me a little bit because I didn't know the power in words. I wasn't aware yet of the power in words.

Cody saw more evidence of "the power in words" when the boy's mother introduced herself to Cody and, crying, she told him, "Today, I was ready to give up on everything. But your guys' poetry really sparked life back in me to keep pushing forward and do better." Proof of the art form's power was exhibited further as Cody continued to participate in and perform at spoken word events.

> And then going to Brave New Voices and just seeing the whole thing that's advocated there [which is]: be an advocate of words, be an advocate of your environment, be an advocate of you. Speak like this is—this is your opportunity

> to speak. There are not a lot of mediums or places given for you to speak—especially for young people who feel always like your voices are stifled. [Spoken word] is your place to speak. Speak up. Write poems about how you feel, about your environment, your life, everything. So soaking in all these different things, my mantra and my career—my purpose in performance poetry and in writing poetry—has kind of been to give a voice to those who have been stripped of theirs.

Several significant themes were highlighted during this interview exchange with Cody. First, Cody and other poets placed much value on the ability to speak, and the art form's ability to offer an outlet for speaking, particularly among those whose voices have been historically marginalized from mainstream discourses. Often, what poets spoke about were aspects of their own identity and lived experience, such as when Cody was in high school and he used his poetry to explore what it means to be an African, African American, and black artist in America. Poets referred to this personal and subjective experience as their *truth*. Truth was an important concept to these young poets, and a pervasive discourse pertaining to truth permeated spoken word culture in D.C. Throughout my fieldwork and interviews, I heard poets talk about how they valued poetry that was "honest," "authentic," "pure," and "real." Using their voice as a tool for truth, poets encouraged one another to "speak the truth," "speak their truth," and use poetry as a vehicle for telling "true stories" about their lived experience.

Second, poets' creative expression and exploration into the self via spoken word poetry did not stop with their own individual truth. Rather, they consistently placed their truth within a larger social context. Cody's poems about "being a person in a community"

and interacting with his "environment" illustrate this tendency to connect the individual and the social.

Finally, the *practice* of performing poetry served as a bridge that connected individuals to a larger community. Poets frequently recounted stories of audience members approaching them after shows, often in a highly emotional state, moved by the performance poem. These social interactions revealed, as Cody said, "the power in words," and provided poets with evidence for the art form's ability to effect social change in their community. Given this power, poets perceived themselves to have a great social responsibility in that they were to leverage their artistic talent and the power of words to "be an advocate" for themselves, their communities, and the larger social world. As such, the poets did not draw a distinction between their artistry and their social advocacy; in fact, their artistic and activist work was often one in the same. Given the limited spaces that exist for people—and especially young people—to use their voice as a tool for social change, the poets perceived their ability to speak and advocate on behalf of themselves and their community through spoken word as a privileged opportunity and a political obligation.

In this chapter, I show how poets drew upon their lived experiences—their truths—as a political and moral source of knowledge to guide and legitimate their social change messages, which they articulated through artistic channels. Specifically, I explore how the practice of *speaking truths* via spoken word poetry was central to poets' social change efforts. A close analysis of this social change process reveals one way this generational cohort confronted modern day power arrangements. My analysis highlights how these millennial poets used spoken word poetry to cultivate a political platform by

strategically drawing upon their identity and lived experience in order to position themselves as experts on social justice issues. By connecting their lived experience to the larger social world in front of a listening public, speaking truths served as mechanism for poets to ascribe political meaning to their personal biographies, draw attention to larger social problems, and transform dominant narratives so as to offer alternative epistemological perspectives that paved the way for social change and justice.

Spoken Word and the Lived Experience: Embodied Testimony and Marginalized Identities

Issues of identity and lived experience are a central, if not one of *the* core defining features of this art form (Somers-Willett 2009). Throughout my fieldwork, I repeatedly observed artists recite poems that chronicled deeply personal experiences rooted in their biographies, such as coming out of the closet, professing same sex love and desire, living with HIV, being a teen parent, having an abortion, being victim to racial profiling, surviving sexual assault, incest, and addiction, growing up poor, battling body image issues and eating disorders, immigrating to the U.S., living with a disability, and mental illness, among many others. While these experiences were rooted in struggle or suffering, more lighthearted experiences and non-social justice themes were also expressed, such as living with a "nerd" identity or being subject to a "nice guys finish last" dating phenomenon.[40] Whether serious or playful in tone, or whether or not rooted in some form

[40] At the 2011 National Poetry Slam I attended a special "Nerd Slam" where competing poets performed poems that demonstrated their nerdiness. For more information on the Nerd Slam, see Michael Boynton's dissertation, *Performing Nerd: The American Nerd, Popular Culture, and Identity Formation* (forthcoming).

of social critique, the poet's identity—and the lived experiences that resulted from this identity—was a frequent topic of the spoken word poem.

Artistic elements intrinsic to the art form, as well as social mechanisms extrinsic to the art form, accounted for the highly personalized feature of spoken word poetry. From an intrinsic perspective, given that the art form is performance-based and presented in the absence of scenery or props, the artist's body and words served as the sole artistic focal point. This embodied aspect of the art form placed the poet's identity at the center of the work. Meghan hinted toward the visual, performative, and embodied implications of the art form when she told me: "You really can't separate the poem from the poet." Kevin elaborated:

> Anytime you take an art form of any sort and make it a performative art, you put a face on it. And it's the same principle that governs a lot of discussion and debate even to this day about whether you're telling your own story and if it's dishonest to portray a story that's not your own, as your own. And I think these are issues that page poets don't come across because if you're not looking at somebody's face you're not assuming that it's them, right? And so, in that same way, representation becomes a huge issue because I'm looking at you. I assume you have a story. I assume you have some kind of identity. If you weigh 500 pounds. If you walk with a cane. If you're missing an arm. Those things will come up if you're performing. Even if your poem has nothing to do with that, an audience will think about those things because they can see you. And you will never come across those things if you are just writing them and someone is simply reading

> what you have written. So yeah, representation is just a built-in component of performance, because you come there with your body, you know?

As a poet with a physical disability, Adrianna was highly aware of her body on stage. In fact, she understood the visual, performative, and embodied feature of spoken word to be what gave her poetry so much power. She said:

> I have a physical disability. I have spastic cerebral palsy. You can see it. And I think the most empowering thing for me about being on a stage or being in front of a microphone—whether it's a feature or an open mic—is people are going to think or feel whatever they do when I climb onto a stage, or walk across a stage, or fall down, you know? Whatever I do in the public eye, I can't control how people see my disability initially. Not to say that they're judging, but they are having an experience, right?

Meghan, Kevin, and Adrianna all pointed to the significance of the poet's physical body, and the social—i.e., "lived"—implications of this particular body, in the spoken word experience. As both Kevin and Adrianna said, this embodied feature of the art form shapes how an audience receives the poet's words.

In this way, a poet's identity was necessarily a part of the performance piece. "Visible" identity markers, which could include race, gender, ability, age, and accent, were often prominent features of the spoken word poem, but so were other less immediately visible identities, such as sexuality, religion, class, or career. Of course, the boundaries between visible and invisible identities are not always clearly marked, as some identities, for example religion and class, are seemingly invisible in some cases, but highly visible in others, such as when they are signaled through physical markers such as

clothing. Often, in their performance piece, poets highlighted stigmatized (Goffman 1963) or socially marginalized aspects of their identity, such as their membership in a minority group, and the myriad of social experiences and injustices that stemmed from this social marginalization (e.g., racial discrimination, sexual assault, substandard schooling).

Even when artists did not testify to an event or circumstance that they personally experienced, their subjectivity remained present in the poem, as Kim told me: “But I do feel like everybody’s poetry is personal in some aspect even if it may be a fictional story. There is something that drove them to write that piece. So I feel like all poetry is personal.” While Kim highlighted the artist’s motivation to write, Angela, a thirty-five-year-old African American poet, underscored the artist’s subjective presence in terms of perspective. Angela told me: “I’ve heard amazing work that doesn’t have anything to do with the person who wrote it other than their ability to bring language to the observation or experience…It is okay for me to be in the poem as an observer, as the person the experience is happening to, as a person with an opinion.” For Kim, Angela, and other poets, the personal was always present in the spoken word poem, even if the poem did not directly reflect the poet’s personal experience.

Yet, there were varying degrees of tolerance for poets who told stories that were not their own. For example, persona poems were a popular and acceptable spoken word format, since most persona poems made it clear to the audience that the artist was presenting a fictionalized experience. Some of the persona poems I observed during my fieldwork included those presented from the perspective of Jeffrey Dalmer’s mother, the Geico Insurance Gecko, and various inanimate objects such as a murder ax. In all these

cases, the audience was clearly aware that the poet on stage was not actually the serial killer's mom, a computer animated talking reptile, or a chopping hand tool. More ambiguous persona poems elicited more controversy. One such instance took place at the 2011 National Poetry Slam during Slam DMV's semi-finals bout. I was standing next to Adrianna when a poet from another team was called to the stage. A hush settled over the crowded room as he walked toward the microphone with a dramatic and slow limp, his arm crouched and held snug against his chest. Adrianna rolled her eyes and said not-so-quietly to me, "I hate this poem." As the poet spoke, his words were slow and slightly slurred, appearing as though he had a physical and perhaps developmental disability. Yet, over the course of the poem, in an emotional turn of events, the poet transitioned into a clear speech pattern and walked off stage without a limp, arms fully extended, swinging loosely by his side. The judges scored the poem with high marks, which ultimately secured the team's semi-finals' victory and knocked Slam DVM out of the competition.

While the poem was well received among those particular judges, the poet's performance revealed the delicate and sometimes contentious relationship between truth and fiction within this art form. Typically, poets were expected to testify to their own lived experience, and any departures from this expectation were to be clearly demarcated. Poets frowned upon artists who claimed the experiences of others as their own, particularly the experiences of marginalized groups. Although the poet at the 2011 National Poetry Slam never fully claimed a disabled status, he took an unsuspecting audience for a ride, temporarily "duping" us into believing this fictionalized experience was his own.

Kevin was a part of the team representing Slam DMV in this semi-finals bout. During our interview two months later, I asked him about this particular poem and he told me:

> Within the last couple of years, the persona piece has really become a staple in the slam community. And in some ways, I think that has polarized the representation issue. Because now there is a niche. There is an established notion of a persona piece. And so if you are telling someone else's story but it doesn't fall into the persona notion or it's kind of on the fringes of that, like the poem that you're talking about, then there's a gray area and debate breaks out. And also there are some issues that are so taboo and hot button for even artists that sometimes we feel like that it's not respectful or the appropriate way to speak for them. You know, talk about them but don't talk for them is sometimes the attitude. And I think that with a poem like that, because when you get communities that haven't quite come into the limelight yet, like a lot of races and ethnicities, a lot of sexual orientations have become the more embraced minorities but then there are a lot that are the more silent minorities. And so the question becomes: Is it ok to speak for them when they haven't even gotten the chance to speak for themselves? And it becomes super sticky.

Ty, a 25-year-old African American straight poet, also spoken to the varying degrees of tolerance around this tension between truth and fiction, and he echoed Angela's point that others' stories should be presented through the eyes or perspective of the performing poet. "That's not to say that if I saw my niece and her father going through a bad thing, I couldn't write a poem about that," he told me. "But if I did, I

would rather that it'd be from my perspective and what I'm looking at versus trying to take on my niece's story, because I don't really know her story…. I think that's the biggest thing—making sure that it's your perspective and it's not someone else's that you're trying to, I guess, mimic." Thus, overall, D.C. poets were critical of this mimicking and, in these various ways, the intrinsic, performance-based, and embodied features of the art form encouraged poets to focus on their own identity and lived experience.

Extrinsically, social mechanisms of the larger art world (Becker 1982) encouraged poets to focus on their lived experiences when writing and performing poetry; specifically, the ways in which the art form was taught, valued through slam scoring, and structured through events such as special slams, open mics, and workshops contributed to a highly personalized, identity-based artistic genre. Poets responded to and reinforced this larger structure by marketing themselves around their identities.

First, poets were formally taught to write about their identities and lived experiences. Formal instruction was evident in workshop structures and writing prompts. An example of this formal instruction was exhibited at a Writing 'N Tongues workshop facilitated by Hannah, a 27-year-old white straight Jewish poet who was also the slammaster of Slam DMV. When I arrived at the evening workshop, Hannah, Micah, Jade, Aisha, and Sadie were mingling as they waited for the workshop to begin. In the center of the room, eight chairs were set up in a circle formation, facing inward. Soon after, Aaron walked in the door. Checking the time on her phone, Hannah announced that it was time for the workshop to begin. As we all found a seat and got settled with notebooks and writing instruments, Hannah introduced the session with a quote by the

well-known spoken word poet, Andrea Gibson: “When I was a teacher, a little boy named Boone brought his umbilical cord to show-and-tell. That’s what I think about when I think about writing poems or loving someone well: being willing to bring your umbilical cord to show-and-tell.” We sat in silence for a moment while Hannah put away the paper from which she read Gibson’s quote, and then she said, “For me, this quote means two things about writing. First, there’s something about writing that has to do with where I come from, and second, that what we write is not always pretty.” She explained that the first point meant that we write about our experiences or, as she said, “Write what you know best.” Nicho, a contemplative 33-year-old African American poet who described himself as an “introvert” had given me similar advice about a year earlier when he told me, “You can only write that with which is within you.”

Hannah’s second point was a call about *how* to write about our experiences—that we should write from a space that is raw and unpolished. She reminded us that, “We all have permission to do that here: to be and to write ‘ugly.’ There’s no pressure to be clever. There’s no right and wrong.” Hannah’s workshop structure encouraged participants to write about their own stories—i.e., “what we knew best”—and she encouraged us to write from a place of vulnerability, honesty, and not to get caught up in making our writing pretty, which might detract from the work’s ability to be authentic and true. Time and again at the poetry workshops that I attended, facilitators structured sessions in a similar way, reminding participates that there was no right or wrong, and challenging us to tap into an honest place within ourselves from which to write.

Formal writing prompts also taught poets to focus on their lived experiences. For example, Grant introduced a Poetry Den Workshop session that he facilitated by reading

the renowned spoken word poet Taylor Mali's poem "What Teacher's Make." Grant recited the poem in its entirety, somewhat performativley but still seated. He then introduced a writing prompt, telling us to think of a moment or conversation when, looking back, we thought to ourselves "I should have said this." He linked this writing prompt to Mali's poem, in which Mali took a real life experience, which might be considered something small (e.g., a dinner conversation about teachers' salaries), but then used that lived experience to talk about something much bigger. Following Grant's instructions, each workshop participant brainstormed for five minutes, thinking about instances in our lives when we "should've said something." After sharing our examples with the group, Grant asked us to pick one and think about the different ways we could have, or perhaps should have, responded. He said the goal was for us to look at the situation in different ways, with different possible endings. He then instructed us to connect this experience to a larger societal thing, just like Mali connects his experience to a larger discussion about how our society values education and educators. Formal instructions in the form of such writing prompts encouraged poets to focus on their lived experiences, as well as connect their lived experiences to larger social problems.

Beyond formal instruction, special slams and open mics were also structured in such a way so as to focus on the lived experience. Blazing Words, the national queer summit and slam organized for the first time in 2010 by Curtis and Adrianna in Washington, D.C., was an example of this. Here, queer-identified spoken word poets gathered for poetry panels, workshops, and performances. Similarly, the National Poetry Slam typically organizes a series of open mics around identity group affiliation, which includes readings for those who identify as Asian American and Pacific Islander, Jewish,

part of the African Diaspora, Latino/a, and QILTBAG (queer, intersex, lesbian, trans, bisexual, asexual or gay). The value that poets placed on these events was highlighted in 2011 when the individual identity group readings were dissolved and replaced with a more general "Where I'm From Open Mic," described in the official festival guide as: "A celebration of our various backgrounds: ethnic, national, racial, gender, and sexual orientation. This open mic gives us the opportunity to talk about the labels that other people use to define us, whether or not we perceive them as accurate or appropriate. Not just a place for serious commentary on our backgrounds, also a place to share the humor of our common experiences." During our interview, Hannah explained her understanding of the event organizers' motivation to restructure the open mic format:

> I think it was just testing to see how it would go. I think that partially it may have been a response to people feeling either (A) my group was not represented or (B) I don't fall to any of these groups but I want to read and I come from somewhere. So ["Where I'm From"] is sort of all encompassing. I personally would have—I'm a Jewish woman and there are no really other Jewish women in the art scene here in D.C. …It would have been a nice way for me, personally, to have my two worlds collide for an hour because that never happens. So I was looking forward to that and I was a little disappointed. And I think it's a conversation that Nationals is having because a lot of people were not necessarily thrilled.

Indeed, many poets were upset by the revised open mic format, and this dissatisfaction was openly expressed at the "Slam Fam" meeting I attended on the last day of the festival. There, I learned that an impromptu queer reading was held the night before, but poets at the meeting expressed concern over the missing affinity group readings usually

present. The presence of the original open mic structure, as well as the resistance directed toward event organizers when the structure changed, highlighted how central poets' identities and lived experiences were to this artistic genre, and how these diverse identities and experiences were valued among the genre's practitioners.

Finally, poets responded to and reinforced the larger structure of the art world by marketing themselves around their identities. This was evident when Kevin explained to me how poets go about booking shows, specifically on college campuses: "It's really good to get in with Student Life or if you represent some sort of niche. You know, some sort of special interest group—that helps a lot. So, any college that has a Gay Student Life, like that's really good for me. And I can get in with them. If people do disabilities-themed events and stuff, a lot of my work centers around that." As a gay man who worked with children with disabilities, Kevin leveraged this lived experience, which was reflected in his poetry, and marketed his work to events and groups that shared similar interests and identities.[41]

This professional strategy of finding an "identity niche" was reiterated by Derrick, who aspired to become a professional touring poet but, as with most performance poets, struggled in this pursuit:

> I have friends now that have niches. Lindsey Rubinstein…does Jewish issues and body image issues. That's her niche. So she's going around to clubs: Jewish organizations on college campuses and any organizations about women—women and the way they feel about their body. Those are the two things that she goes to.

[41] This practice of using one's marginalized identities to market oneself extends beyond the D.C. spoken word community. For example, when the professional poet Tara Hardy stopped in D.C. during her poetry tour in October 2011, her promotional material included the following descriptive statement: "Tara Hardy is the working class queer femme poet who founded Bent, a writing institute for LGBTIQ people in Seattle, WA."

> That's how she gets gigs and sets up shows. I was looking at the things that I feel I could speak about, addiction, battling addiction, which a lot of colleges and group homes and things of that sort are interested in.

Derrick sought to draw upon his friend Lindsay's strategy of marketing herself based on her own experience being Jewish and battling an eating disorder by leveraging his own experience with drug addiction in order to secure poetry-related work.

Somers-Willett (2009) offers an explanation for why lived experiences and identity, and particularly those rooted in struggle and suffering, are such a centralized feature of the art form. She concludes that performances of marginalized identities are given the highest scores at slam competitions. Asserting that slam is part of a larger American art tradition rooted in black popular verse, she argues that slam performances of blackness score the highest. Yet, Somers-Willett's theory does not fully explain why people whose experiences are not represented by the status quo are attracted to performance poetry in the first place. I mentioned Somers-Willett during my interview with Kevin, who was familiar with her work. Kevin offered the following, alternative explanation: "I think that slam is still very much fringe—it's not the mainstream of poetry, which itself is not the mainstream of anything—[so it] is obviously going to attract more people who don't or don't feel as though they have access to more mainstream avenues. And those are your people who are more marginalized."

Curtis's story of discovering performance poetry supports Kevin's explanation. Speaking of the exclusion he experienced in castings for theatrical productions as someone of Filipino descent, Curtis explained how this discrimination shaped his teenage consciousness: "It made me aware of my own identity and my own alien-ness. I was a

good actor but people were like, 'Well, you have to change your voice. Or your accent. Or I don't think you'll be able to do this. Or you can just do Shakespeare.' Along the way, I've always had to deal with that." Curtis contrasted this to his experience in the performance poetry scene, and specifically at open mics, saying that "I did a lot of open mic culture because [at an] open mic you don't have to be, like, a certain look. It's an open mic." In part, Curtis attributed the valuing of different voices, identities, and experiences in spoken word culture to the timing of when performance poetry and slam gained popularity, which was in the 1980s and early 1990s when special attention was given to "multicultural casting."[42]

At times, however, poets were critical of this focus on marginalized identities and lived experiences, particularly when deployed as fodder for slam scores. Derrick explained:

> There are certain topics that have become cliché. You know, black people talking about oppression. Women talking about rape or spousal abuse or the injustices between gender imbalances. Black women talking about African Queen this. And the white dude with dreads talking about corporate America is the devil. All of these things have been clichés so we started to walk away from talking about the issues in our society because people who wanted to be popular decided that they wanted to talk about these things, too.

This critique and fear of sounding cliché was, at times, stifling for poets, something that Derrick experienced when trying to write a team piece with Jackson for the 2011

[42] Nester (2008) also draws attention to the significance of this time period and the rise of slam poetry, highlighting the era's "newfound interest in 'multiculturalism' and 'canon-busting'" (xiv).

National Poetry Slam. Both black men, Derrick and Jackson had planned to write a poem about social fears of blackness and, specifically, society's fear of black men. He told me:

> We're trying to write a poem about black men being an object of fear and contrasting that to irrational fears that other people have—the thing that is feared doesn't have any awareness that it's being feared. Like a spider doesn't know that you're scared of it. But every time we started writing something about this idea, it seemed like, "God, we're those guys." And we both desperately don't want to be—which is why neither one of us have any poems about the overbearing oppression of being a black male. We figure—and the reality of it is—that every poem I write is about being black if it's through my eyes…So we got frustrated with the fact that we couldn't write this poem…And I said to him, if we weren't going to the National Poetry Slam, I could write this poem, because this poem needs to be written. But I can't write it and go to the National Poetry Slam—like my first gut reaction when I hear this having gone to so many open mics is "Are you serious? Not again. Boo-hoo you, it's hard being black."

Adrianna expressed a similar concern in her attempts to write about new topics beyond her experiences with disability and childhood trauma. Yet, in a similar way Derrick claimed that his poem about fearing black men "needs to be written," Adrianna underscored the legitimacy of her experiences and the fact that they should not be shunned:

> Do I really want to write another poem about my body? Is it important for me to write another poem about my childhood? And it's a good point but—and we had this discussion at the last Women of the World [Poetry Slam], I mean, there was a

> panel on this. Like, do we need another rape poem? People get, you know, that that's a common topic for women performers or women identified. If it's your experience, absolutely you deserve to write about it and be heard. But I also understand how can you, especially in slam, I mean, let's just say you don't know what other people are going to perform, right? So there could be like five domestic violence poems and five sexual assault poems on a stage, and the goal is to make yours memorable because that's what the audience is going to take home with them. You want your poem to score the highest, so hopefully there is something in there that is so authentic that it makes your piece memorable.

Nonetheless, despite such critiques and challenges associated with the genre's attention to marginalized identities and lived experiences, intrinsic and extrinsic features of the art form functioned keep the focus on highly personalized accounts.

Speaking Truths and Social Change

Through the practice of telling these highly personalized stories to a listening community, poets engaged in a form of social justice work aimed at social change. Poets referred to their lived experience as their truth because it was that which they personally knew to be true about the world. As such, a poet's truth served as a form of experiential knowledge or, "truth based on personal experience with a phenomenon" (Borkman 1976:445).[43] Borkman (1976) contrasts experiential knowledge with "truth acquired by discursive reasoning, observation, or reflection on information provided by others" (446).

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[43] Experiential knowledge is akin to Polanyi's (1958) "tacit knowledge" or "personal knowledge" in that it is difficult to codify or transfer to others through written or verbal channels.

Thus, as a form of experiential knowledge, an artist's truth was necessarily a subjective epistemological orientation to the world. In this way, the performance poem served as a type of testimony. In similar ways that epistemological standpoints have provided an "important source of analytical guidance and intellectual legitimation" for other marginalized groups (Collins 1998:201), these testimonies granted poets with an opportunity to speak from a position of expertise on something they knew was true, which was their own lived experience. By testifying their truths, spoken word poets named their stories and their lives into public existence, thereby testifying to knowledge typically missing from mainstream discourses.

The socio-artistic cultural practice of *speaking truths* refers to the process by which poets used the spoken word poem as an opportunity to place their testimony within a larger social context. Focusing on the lived experience, poets highlighted their membership in various oppressed or privileged groups, and the struggle, pain, injustice, or general malaise that emerged from these systems of social hierarchy. Using their art as a vehicle, poets transformed the meanings of these personal experiences of hardship or dissatisfaction by linking their stories—their truths—to larger social problems.

When poets connected their lived experience to social problems, this constituted their *message*. Idara, a tall, slender 19-year-old poet whose parents were from Nigeria, explained how she came to find her message, which centered on issues of self-esteem, particularly for black girls. Idara struggled with low self-esteem herself when she was younger, and she talked about how spoken word was a useful vehicle "to tell stories that don't get told all the time." When I asked Idara which stories don't get told, she laughed and replied:

> Definitely mine from when I was younger!…I guess a part of my motivation, like I started reading up on self-esteem and like, the black culture and kind of where that comes from or why it is the way it is, and that really made me want to get the word out to let the people know that this is a problem, that it's not in our heads. Like, there are reasons why we feel the way we feel and I want people to know it's not their fault, especially young people who don't know…I wanted to bring it out through my poetry 'cause I didn't know how else to share that information—how to get a whole bunch of people to listen to what you have to say...I think that that's the best thing that you get from poetry, like writing a poem and being able to put in your own values, being able to put in your thoughts and your views. And people want to hear your perspective on the topic. It's unlike anything else. I don't know anywhere else where you can get that.

Idara used her own biography and spoken word poetry to convey her message about self-esteem; in doing so, she connected people's individual experiences with low self-esteem—including her own—to a larger social context in order to "let the people know that this is a problem, that it's not in our heads." Specifically, she transformed meanings around blackness to invoke a larger narrative and commentary about racism and white beauty ideals. For example, in her poem "Barbie Syndrome," Idara critiques the Barbie doll's narrow and unrealistic representations of beauty:

> I am battered Barbie
> My accessories include narcissism and extreme self-consciousness
> Often, I am unsure which is worse because I stress
> That everyone is staring at me
>
> But I obsess, that you can only see me for my flaws
> My line has been recalled
> And I am followed by hundreds of black skinned girls who recall

> Why they want to look like me
>
> And I'm like, Baby girl, I don't even look like me!
> Like, my European disguise of make-up on my eyes
> The smallness of my thighs
> The padded bra that makes me go up a half-a-fuckin' cup size
> 'Cuz really my chest is just fun size
> But who said that Barbie needed to come in one size
> And once I realized that black Barbie dolls have all white features…
>
> So no
> Buying black skinned Barbie will not solve this sick cyclical cycle that we have created

By placing their lived experience within a larger social context—i.e., by speaking truths—Idara and other poets understood themselves to be exposing audiences to new angles or perspectives of the world. Meghan offered the metaphor of a gem to illustrate the ways in which poets conveyed truth by providing alterative perspectives and standpoints:

> I think what poets do is they observe…I heard a really great quote on this that I can never remember but the image is of like, this crystal, you know? This really intricate kind of a gem or something that you just kind of turn over and over again. And the poet's job is to just kind of turn it a little bit and show the reader that new angle and that new little piece of truth about that object, that image.

Poets often talked about their job or obligation as poets to speak the truth, and they understood the practice of speaking truths in moral terms. As Idara said, spoken word poetry gave her an opportunity to put her "own values" in a poem. Thus, poets' experiential knowledge not only offered intellectual legitimation and analytic guidance, but it also provided poets with a moral compass with which to determine what was right and wrong, and what constituted justice and injustice. Based on what they experientially

knew to be true about the world, poets built a case for what was socially just, fair, and right. In this way, truth reflected more than a subjective epistemological standpoint grounded in a poet's biography. Rather, the moral quality of truth also ascribed a certain universalism to the message being articulated about the poet's subjective lived experience. Like Idara, poets grounded their messages in universal values of equality and justice. As such, poets' understanding and strategic deployment of truth offered a way of seeing the world that accommodated for subjectivity while avoiding an apolitical rabbit hole of idiosyncratic individualism. In this way, poets drew upon their own personal biographies as a source of knowledge, a body of evidence, and a moral justification for their social justice agenda.

By connecting their personal biographies to larger public issues, poets transformed knowledge about social ills from dominant neoliberal discourses rooted in personal accountability to more social understandings of inequality and injustice (Mills 2000).[44] Poets strategically drew upon their membership in various marginalized groups to expose alternative truths through their poetry. This subjective and counter-discursive approach to truth and knowledge was central to the poets' social change agenda.

Poetry, Truth Telling, and Social Justice

In this way, speaking truths served as a form of narrative freedom (Zussman 2012) because poets told "stories about [themselves] in the ways [they] want[ed], not simply to muster particular facts and events but to draw meanings and morals about

[44] Mills (2000) referred to the practice of connecting one's personal troubles with larger public issues as exercising one's sociological imagination. By linking personal troubles to larger social problems, poets offered themselves and their audiences a way of seeing or imagining the world that deviated from, as Mills (2000) said, indifference or uneasiness.

[their] own lives" (808). According to Zussman, what makes narrative meaningful is the process of selection and connection. This gives narrative a moral quality that is not concerned with objectivity; as such, narrative is necessarily and unapologetically subjective. In addition to *selecting* and *connecting*, Zussman argues that narrative freedom also entails *transforming* the meanings we ascribe to particular actions and identities. This element of transformation is where the emancipatory component of narrative lies; it is both an *expression* and *act* of self-invention. In this way, the narrator not only reflects a self, but creates one (809). As such, creativity—the act of creating a self and creating new narrative knowledge—is central to acts of narrative freedom.

Given Zussman's (2012) criteria, the poets' cultural practice of speaking truths was an example of self-invention and could therefore serve as a source of freedom and social change. The biographical narrative structure of the performance poem resulted in poets telling stories about themselves in the ways they wanted. While intrinsic and extrinsic features structured the art form to focus on the lived experience of the poet, the narrative's ultimate value lay in its ability to convey truth and authenticity. This truth was generated from the poet. As such, there was no top down authority directing poets on what to say. The poem was performed in the company of an audience and authored by the poet. The art form had a moral and subjective quality—or message—attached to it. Poets conveyed their message by using their own lived experience as a way to bring meaning and morals to the society at large. By testifying to their own marginalized experiences and knowledge in this way, poets protested dominant messages purported about society's problems, transforming knowledge about social ills rooted in personal accountability to more sociological understandings of inequality and injustice.

Returning to Idara's work as an example, in addition to selecting events rooted in her personal experience and connecting them to larger social issues, Idara's practice of speaking truths was a form of narrative self-invention in that she transformed meanings around blackness to invoke a larger narrative and commentary about racism and white beauty ideals. Importantly, the narrative offered by Idara conveyed knowledge about race, beauty, and value that is frequently missing from mainstream discourse. Similar to Meghan's metaphor of the gem, Idara used her poetry to expose a slightly different reading of the world, shifting her audience's perspective just a bit so as to reveal an alternative truth that is distinct from the dominant discourse. She did this by sharing her own biography, her own truth, through spoken word art.

Speaking truths is part of a larger political project organized around poetry. The poet June Jordan (1995) underscored the ways in which truth telling through poetry is a political endeavor:

> You cannot write lies and write good poetry. Deceit, abstraction, euphemism: any of these will doom a poem to the realm of "baffling" or "forgettable," or worse. Good poetry requires precision: if you do not attempt to say, accurately, truthfully, what you feel or see or need, then how will you achieve precision? What criterion will guide you to the next absolutely "right" word?
>
> And so poetry is not a shopping list, a casual disquisition on the colors of the sky, a soporific daydream, or bumpersticker sloganeering. Poetry is a political action undertaken for the sake of information, the faith, the exorcism, and the lyrical invention, that telling the truth makes possible. Poetry means taking control of the language of your life. Good poems can interdict a suicide, rescue a love affair,

> and build a revolution in which speaking and listening to somebody becomes the first and last purpose to every social encounter. (3)

Just as Jordan links poetry and truth telling to political action, D.C. poets understood their role in conveying messages rooted in truth to the larger public to constitute a political act. Speaking specifically about the political implications for marginalized groups to have poetry as an outlet to speak their truth, Meghan told me:

> The power of poetry as an activist tool is its purpose to get at the truth, you know? And if someone who's disenfranchised in some way, [if] they are speaking their truth and being honest, it's putting a face on their experience for other people…I've been thinking about this a lot lately, like, what [do] I write for? What do I do anything for? Having a quarter-life-crisis, you know? Like, why do I do anything? Why? What is my purpose in life? What is my special thing? Why do I write? And I was really agonizing about why I write, like, what difference does it make? It's such a self-involved, self-indulging kind of thing. But being self-indulging is kind of like—especially as women or as people of color or as any oppressed minority—it's kind of a political act in of itself. Taking care of yourself is a big deal, you know, for women who have been raised to take care of other people especially. And if you read about that enough, other people will understand you if you just write your truth. And that's a feminist act, you know?

Here, Meghan pointed to the political act of disenfranchised groups speaking their truth. Speaking truths has the ability to disrupt dominant narratives and expose different sides of reality (i.e., "puts a different angle on the same truth"). This humanizes (i.e., "puts a face on") the personal trouble and public issue.

Meghan also spoke to the activist nature of caring for oneself. Expanding upon her statement about the political implications of self-indulgence and self-care, Meghan told me, “I really just write because I don’t have a choice, you know? I write because I like it. I write because I feel compelled to write and then, because I’m allowing myself to do that, other people can hear my truth, you know? I think doing things just because you like them is kind of a powerful thing. Especially in our, like, kind of over-commodified society where it’s important to be productive all the time. Sort of opting out of that and doing something just because you like it, it’s kind of radical.”

While the poets’ practice of speaking truths was a political project aimed at emancipation and social change, it did not adhere entirely to Zussman’s (2012) model. Narrative freedom in the form of speaking truths operated outside of a recognizable social movements framework. Zussman argues that narrative freedom has been central to social movement politics. He points to identity movements as sites where self-inventive narratives have been especially visible, such as the autobiographical traditions of African American and feminist politics. Given the empancipatory potential with which he credits narrative, Zussman is curious about when we are able to narrate our lives as we like, and what social constraints prevent us from doing so.

Zussman argues that narrative freedom most often reflects an act of liberation for entire groups when accompanied by social movements. For example, referring to slave narratives he argues: “To say that slave narratives were formulaic is not to deny their power, but it is to acknowledge that the narrative freedom they represent is collective, a freedom won only by participation in a social movement, rather than individual” (818).

Yet, in an era where modern day power arrangements are characterized by logics of complexity and invisibility, and contemporary efforts to combat inequality—particularly among youth—take place in everyday ways (Clay 2012), attention to liberation outside a social movement paradigm is important. This analysis of speaking truths reveals that an orientation toward a social movement framework might obscure the ability to see certain types of narratives as contributing to narrative freedom or challenging conceptions of social movements.

***

In this chapter, I showed how poets used spoken word poetry to construct a political message, whereby they contextualized their own lived experience within a larger social framework in order to shed light on social problems and solutions. In the next two chapters, I present two social change processes related to the practice of speaking truths: healing the self and others, and doing new school activism. While each activity is different in form, like speaking truths, both aim to promote social justice and change.

Chapter 4: Healing Self, Healing Others: Therapy Narratives and Social Change

"I got into poetry for girls, but then I did it for therapy."
- Blake, D.C. spoken word poet

"Every time we heal ourselves, we give other people the permission to do the same."
- Angela on Body Pride, the radical self-love movement she founded

Welcome to Vulnerability Night

It was a hot July night at Speaking 'N Tongues. Summer nights at the legendary open mic were notorious for being sweltering, and this night was no exception. Despite attempts to cool down the small second story room where the open mic took place—with ceiling fans frantically spinning and two window air conditioners struggling to compete with the D.C. humidity and overcrowded room—the heat hung heavy in the air. Earlier that day, poets had tweeted about the encroaching night of heat; Micah advised his Twitter followers to dress appropriately and bring water, adding the playful yet telling hashtag: #YouveBeenWarned. Contemplating Micah's advice, I deliberated over whether to wear a sundress. Given that the event ended close to midnight, I was always hyperaware of my late night walks home, which, particularly when I commuted alone, were often accompanied by some form of street harassment. On this particular night, the oppressive heat environment beat out the oppressive street environment, and I headed to the open mic with a sundress on and my notebook in hand.

When I arrived, the summertime scene resembled that of churches across America on Sunday mornings. The room was already packed full of devoted attendees. Throughout the night, sweat dripped off brows and women fanned their faces to the rhythm of the spoken word. Audience members were gathered together in a shared belief in the power of spoken word poetry and the collective sense of meaning, healing, salvation, and comfort found in one another's company.

In this shared experience of community, conviction, and humidity, Marcus called Blake up to the mic, affectionately referring to him as his "brotha-from-another-motha." Everyone clapped and hollered as Blake walked to the front of the room. As the crowd grew quiet, Blake announced that he was about to share a new poem, one that he had yet to perform at Speaking 'N Tongues. The audience received Blake's news warmly and with excitement. A small cohort of spectators shouted "New shit!," to which Blake flashed a wide smile. Blake's demeanor then turned serious, and he introduced his poem by preparing us for the emotional significance of his new piece. He asked us for "lots of support," telling us that he had just memorized the poem, which was a tribute to his mother. Despite being only 26-years-old, Blake had already lost both of his parents. Appearing nervous, the young poet shifted around on his feet, shoved his hands deep into his pockets, and rocked back-and-forth onto his heels. Looking up toward the ceiling, he took a few deep breaths before launching into what would become an iconic first line that I heard countless times since: "I / am the son / of a coalminer's daughter." The poem chronicled Blake's working-class, rural Pennsylvania roots, his deep love for his mother, and her struggle with alcoholism. Just before sharing his new poem, Blake told us, "I got into poetry for girls, but then I did it for therapy."

Blake corroborated this sentiment in our interview five months later, telling me: "I think in the beginning the reason why you write poetry is for yourself. It's a form a therapy kind of." While his reference to poetry and girls at Speaking 'N Tongues was familiar and consistent with his reputation as a "ladies man," in both instances Blake ascribed healing attributes to spoken word *therapy narratives*.

Blake's discussion of therapy was not unusual, and D.C. spoken word poets consistently referred to spoken word as a form of therapy and a source of healing. Blake's decision to debut his new and deeply personal poem at Speaking 'N Tongues was also consistent with the way other poets perceived and behaved in this particular physical and communal space. Poets repeatedly underscored the unconditional love, acceptance, and support that characterized Speaking 'N Tongues. For D.C. poets, this open mic was a special place where artists felt they could safely explore and express themselves, both artistically and emotionally.

This sentiment was especially accentuated during Kim's Speaking 'N Tongues feature in April 2012. Prior to the event, Kim sent out tweets and Facebook postings announcing that "vulnerability night" would be the theme for that evening's open mic. While Kim's theme, in part, reflected an already built-in feature of the art form rooted in personal and often challenging life experiences, by specifically dedicating a night to vulnerability-themed poetry, poets were provided with even more encouragement to dig even deeper and challenge themselves to become even more in touch with their own truth. That night, every performer participated in Kim's vulnerability challenge or referenced it in some way. Even poets I had been watching perform for years shared poems I had never heard before, testifying to such things as depression, self-inflicted

cutting, suicidal attempts, father abandonment, and teen pregnancy. There were tears. And information about additional support services was shared. For example, prior to performing, Jason spoke about his support group for people with psychotic illnesses, inviting anyone to participate, even those without a diagnosis or who were not on medication. As hosts, throughout the night after each poet performed, Micah and Marcus thanked the artist for sharing their vulnerability. The love and support in the room was palpable and, at one point, Micah told his poetry community: "If you're going through some stuff, holler at me or Marcus. We're here for you."

In this chapter, I examine how performing self-authored therapy narratives served as a model for social change for D.C. spoken word poets. Through the process of writing and performing their truths, poets healed themselves and, by extension, others in their community. Importantly, despite poets' habitual references to their "community," this spoken word group was not clearly defined. Nor was it limited to active members in the scene, people who physically attended events, or even poets. Rather, these young adults understood their community—and the people who could benefit from spoken word's healing properties—to constitute a loose collectivity. This collectivity consisted of local, national, and international spoken word artists, but also included people who attended their poetry performances, whether a poet or not, and those with whom they engaged over social media.

Healing the self and others was a reciprocal process. When poets testified to their lived experience in the presence of others, they understood their self-healing as an opportunity for others to do the same. The community's supportive ethos validated the experience and the poets' emotions about that experience. This process of connecting the

self to others via performing therapy narratives provided a model for social change outside of a social movements framework.

Therapy Narratives: What are They?

Therapy narratives serve as one of the four narrative types identified by Zussman (2012). Found in "the various helping professions—social workers, physicians, guidance counselors, and, in their secular roles, ministers and priests," Zussman cites the narratives generated in psychoanalysis therapy sessions as the quintessential example of a therapy narrative (814). Developed by Sigmund Freud around the turn of the twentieth century, psychoanalysis has been highly influential in shaping subsequent forms of clinical practice.[45] A typical psychoanalytic therapy session consists of a dialogue between a patient and therapist, during which time the patient recounts past and present experiences that the therapist analyzes. The therapist asks the patient pointed questions in an effort to uncover the deep meanings attached to these experiences, as well as uncover experiences that the patient may have buried deep in his or her subconscious. Through this process, the therapist seeks to identify and address the psychiatric factors resulting in the patient's neurosis.

As Zussman (2012) argues, Freud was cognizant of the narrative implications of this therapeutic model and how the process of self-narration was central to a patient's healing.

[45] For an overview of Freud's theories, see his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, which he presented at the University of Vienna in 1915-16 and 1916-17 (Freud 1966).

> In Freud's account, one of the striking characteristics of neurosis entails the patient's inability to give a coherent account of his or her own illness. This "inability to give an ordered history of their life in so far as it coincides with the history of their illness is not merely characteristic of neurosis," Freud wrote (1963:30). "It also possesses great theoretical significance." Indeed, for Freud, the task of psychoanalysis was precisely to provide the patient with an ability to narrate her own story… (Zussman 2012:815)

Although psychoanalysis was developed in order to heal and ideally liberate patients of their neuroses, this clinical method has been criticized for being oppressive and reifying existing power relationships, and for locating illness within the individual rather than in society. Feminists have critiqued the patriarchal assumptions embedded in the model, such as Freud's theory of penis envy and the Oedipus complex, as well as the power imbalance between the patient and the all-knowing (often white male) psychoanalyst (Chodorow 1978; Irigaray 1985). Foucault (1990) also drew attention to the power imbalance of this social interaction in his theory of the confession, in which individuals are compelled to confess intimate details of their lives (and particularly their sexual lives) to more powerful others—such as psychoanalysts or priests—who claim to have specialized expertise or knowledge about the confessor. Foucault argues that, by buying into this idea, we end up disciplining our own actions and inner desires based on presumed knowledge imposed upon us by these more powerful others. While Zussman (2012) acknowledges the transformative properties of therapy narratives such as those articulated in psychoanalytic settings, like Foucault's confession, Zussman argues that these narratives operate from the top down, imposed on the narrator from an outside

expert (i.e., the therapist) who ascribes their own authoritative meaning onto the patient's experience. For Zussman, this top down feature of the therapy narrative prevents it from being a potential form of narrative freedom and, as such, social change. "By this reading, therapy, far from a contributor to narrative freedom, is a powerful system of social control" (Zussman 2012:815).

Ginwright's (2010) work on youth activism and radical healing offers a different perspective on the extent to which narratives rooted in transformative healing can serve as a source of freedom. Focusing specifically on black urban youth communities, Ginwright points to the ways in which healing and hope serve as a radical antidote to black youth's experiences of internalized oppression (shame and hatred of blackness) and external marginalization (colonialism, structural racism, and poverty) (6). Healing and hope are promoted through the development of individual and collective wellness, which are each cultivated through critical consciousness or, "an awareness of the systemic forms of oppression builds the capacity for self-determination to take action to address social and community problems" (Ginwright 2010:17; see also Freire 1993).

Ginwright's theory of radical healing articulates with the ways in which therapy narratives functioned in the D.C. spoken word community. Specifically, he draws attention to spoken narratives grounded in personal biography, the importance of speaking these narratives in the context of community, and the ways in which these narratives serve as a form of political activism aimed at broader social change.

First, like Zussman, Ginwright locates transformative healing in the practice of speaking narratively about one's own painful biographical experiences. However, unlike Zussman's focus on psychoanalysis and its individualized approach to pathological

causes and cures, Ginwright takes a more social structural approach. He points to the therapeutic power of speaking narratively about painful experiences rooted in social structural pathologies organized around oppression and domination. He writes: "The power to speak about painful experiences related to racism, sexism, and poverty facilitates healing because the act of testifying exposes the raw truth about suffering and releases the hidden pain that is a profound barrier to resistance" (9). Ginwright echoes others (see, e.g., Mills 2000) who underscore the emancipatory potential of cultivating a visionary way of seeing or imagining how our biographies connect to history, and how our personal troubles relate to larger social issues. For Ginwright, this way of seeing and ultimately healing can be cultivated through the practice of speaking narratively about one's own lived experience within the context of a larger social world.

Second, Ginwright draws attention to how the transformative powers of radical healing take place within the context of a larger listening community. For Ginwright, the practice of speaking about one's pain *in the presence of others*—i.e., the act of the testifying to one's pain—is a healing, self-empowering, and freeing experience for the teller. Such healing narratives are self-authored and validated within the context of community; according to Zussman, the fact that they are self-authored and not generated from a top down authority figure, they have the capacity to be liberating. Further, healing narratives can serve as a transformative therapeutic experience for the listening community as well as the self-authoring individual.

> Radical healing is much broader than simply moving from pathology to wellness. The concept focuses on how hope, imagination, and care transform the capacity of communities to confront community problems. For young people, healing fosters

> a collective optimism and a transformation of spirit that, over time, contributes to healthy, vibrant community life. (Ginwright 2010:11)

Drawing upon the concept of "beloved community," Ginwright argues that, by sharing narratives with others that are rooted in some form of collective experience, we are able "to more deeply identify with one another, despite our various differences, and form mutual ties and healing spaces" (10-11). In this way, the sharing of therapy narratives in the context of a larger collectivity helps individuals to identify or empathize with others, even if their lived experiences or personal biographies are drastically different. This empathetic feature of radical healing helps to transform communities, which can lead to social change.

Third, given this social change component of radical healing, Ginwright underscores the politicized nature of this form of healing, which he characterizes as a form of activism. He distinguishes this type of activism from that of the 1960s, and he characterizes healing, hope, and imagination as unique attributes of black youth activism in the post-civil rights era. "Hope and radical imagination are important prerequisites for activism and social change" (11). For Ginwright, the power of radical healing extends beyond racial oppression to apply to other forms of oppression as well: "Healing from the trauma of oppression caused by poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and class exploitation is an important political act" (9).

Like Zussman and Ginwright, Brené Brown (2012) draws attention the liberating and healing power of speaking our stories. In her research on vulnerability, Brown argues that making oneself vulnerable is the key to what she calls "wholehearted living" or, being resilient to shame and believing in one's worthiness (i.e., loving oneself). She

argues that wholehearted living allows us to heal from and transform the meanings attached to shameful experiences. To do this, she argues, we must have the courage to be vulnerable and speak our stories without shame.

> Shame derives its power from the unspeakable…If we cultivate enough awareness about shame to name it and speak to it, we've basically cut it off at the knees. Shame hates having words wrapped around it. If we speak shame, it begins to wither. Just the way exposure to light was deadly for the gremlins, language and story bring light to shame and destroy it. (Brown 2012:67)

Like Zussman, Brown argues that this liberating power derives from the ability to assign our own meanings to our own biographies. Specifically, Brown refers to the power of transforming our stories of shame into stories of love and self-worthiness, which can only happen when we're willing to be vulnerable in an authentic and truthful way.

In therapeutic settings defined along more communal terms, such as self-help groups (rather than top-down structures of expertise characterized by most other human service organizations), experiential rather than expert knowledge is privileged, and the practice of testifying to one's truth is central (Borkman 1976).

> The claims of self-help groups that they can solve the problems of their members by mutual efforts and the presence and testimony of persons who have solved their own problems through participation in the group are manifestations of the importance of experiential knowledge and expertise. Public confessions or testimonials—a ubiquitous feature of self-help groups, in which individuals recount some aspect of their personal experience with the common problem—are

> probably the major means by which experiential information is expressed and shared in self-help groups. (Borkman 1976:447)

In these communal therapeutic settings, the group rather than an authority figure validates the narrating individual's expression of experiential knowledge.

Therapy Narratives and Spoken Word

Angela was a 35-year-old African American poet with a commanding presence that had the unwavering ability to turn heads whenever she stepped into a room. This was, undoubtedly, partly due to her physical appearance. Standing close to six feet, her figure was full and her sense of style was eye-catching. Particularly when she performed, she would don outfits that accentuated, rather than concealed, her large shapely silhouette. In the beginning months of my fieldwork, she also wore fashionable wigs, sometimes accented with a synthetic flower or feather, always perfectly coiffed. However, she had always felt a deep sense of shame around her hair and her efforts to hide it so, in July 2011, she shaved her head as part of a self-described radical healing project, and she publicly documented this project in a series of vlogs that she posted to YouTube.

Yet, it wasn't only Angela's statuesque, and eventually bald, appearance that endowed her presence with an almost larger-than-life quality. She was also an incredibly talented performance poet, as well as a well-respected social justice advocate within and outside of the poetry community. Angela was one of the most well-known poets from Washington, D.C. and, of the artists in my core sample, was most successfully "making

it" as a professional poet (i.e., she was able to live solely off the income she earned from her poetry-related work).

In February 2011, she started a social justice movement called Body Pride, "focused on radical self love and body empowerment." As stated on its website: "Through education, personal transformation projects and community building, Body Pride fosters global, radical, unapologetic self love which translates to radical human action in service toward a more just and compassionate world." The movement, which to date has thousands of "posse members" from around the globe and over 30 thousand followers on Facebook, offers people multiple opportunities to engage in various projects dedicated to self-love and healing; Angela's own experience shaving her head and documenting this journey on social media served as one of these projects.

Because of her interest in and work around radical healing, Angela had thought a lot about how therapy narratives operated in the context of practicing spoken word, and she told me:

> What I found in performance poetry was a place to tell my authentic truth in a way that was accepted…I find that performance poetry is a medium where it's okay for it to be about you and your experience. There are so many other art forms that ask you to not be in the art or for the art to come through you [rather than] be of you…Performance poetry is the place where it's totally okay for it to be of you. I just found it phenomenally healing and a way to process things that might not otherwise been processed. Things that I might not have dealt with in any other form feel manageable through this art form.

The highly personalized nature of the art form created an environment that was conducive to Angela's healing in that it allowed her to "process" and "deal with" personally painful experiences.

For Blake, the artistic features of this form of self-narration also facilitated healing.

> You gain how to express yourself in a way that you couldn't in society. In a poem, I can tell a girl, "I fell in love with you before I knew what your name was." I couldn't go to a girl and say that right now, that is so true and unacceptable as a person to go to a girl in here and say, "I don't know what your name is but I'm in love with you." So, it allows you to express things that aren't socially acceptable. So for me, it has become my therapy. I can go up there and I can talk to a bunch of strangers about my father. I can go talk to a bunch of strangers about relationships. I can go talk to a bunch of strangers about how I feel about situations in Japan or politics, and people are receptive to that because you put it in a manner that sounds nice.

As Blake highlighted, the performance poem allowed for a form of self-authored narration that was unavailable in everyday conversation due to social conventions around personal disclosure. The creative and artistic medium allowed for new and different types of "socially acceptable" conversations to be had. Moreover, artistic features uniquely allowed this message to be heard in ways that were inaccessible in non-artistic modes of communication. As Blake said, "people are receptive to [the message] because you put it in a manner that sounds nice." Here, "nice" refers to the aesthetic beauty of performance poetry.

Poets also used poetry to therapeutically work through a more collective sense of trauma or injustice, even if they hadn't personally experienced the injustice. Upon learning the story of Kane Masselli, a woman who died following Hurricane Katrina due to her lack of health insurance, Adrianna was inspired to write a poem about the tragedy.

> [My friend] called me right before her funeral and we were talking and I said, "You know, I know I didn't know Kane Masselli but please can I put this in a poem?" And you know, in some ways it's the only way that I can deal with it. I feel like it's the only way other poets can deal with it. Frustration or anxiety or sadness or joy. You know, there's so much of it in a way, you have to write it down for your own sanity.

As a woman with a physical disability, the bureaucracy of the American healthcare system is a feature of everyday life for Adrianna. Throughout my fieldwork Adrianna and I would meet for happy hours and she spoke frequently of her healthcare challenges and costs, such as the battle she fought (and lost) with her health insurance provider to replace her broken motorized wheelchair, which would have cost her about $5,000 out-of-pocket, or not having enough money to cover a prescription medication until her next paycheck. Given Adrianna's reliance on health insurance for her own survival, it was not surprising that Kane Masselli's death especially resonated with her—without health insurance, Adrianna would also be confronted with the possibility of an unnecessary premature death. For Adrianna, Masselli's fatality was likely a personal reminder of her own precarious position vis-à-vis the American healthcare system. Thus, despite the fact that individuals' painful experiences differed from person to person, poets used spoken word

poetry as a way to heal from a more collective sense of marginalization, discrimination, stigma, or social injustice.

A Supportive Ethos

In Washington, D.C., spoken word therapy narratives were not driven from the top down but rather generated from the bottom-up, whereby narrating poets assigned their own meanings to their personal biographies in order to heal from past traumas. There were no powerful others in a position of authority controlling the content and form of what was said. Rather, a listening community served as a witness to the experiential knowledge or truth being testified to by the performing poet. As a witness, the community validated the poet's experience, and thereby legitimized the knowledge being expressed. Angela underscored the central role of others in this knowledge validation process.

> I think it is that action of being allowed to be in [the performance poem]. I think that other things make great conduits. A lot of actors utilize [acting] as a therapeutic tool. Part of that is about unpacking yourself so that you can be packed with a different identity. Something about this art form says, "It is okay to step into you and then to share that." If there's some place where the world will validate you, maybe in a planet where no one has validated you for you. Like only for what you have to offer. In some ways this is just about not only are we appreciative of the way in which you framed that story. Part of it is like we appreciate in welcoming your story and value it. (*I interject: "We actually love that!"*) We love your story! Bring us your stories. We want your pain. Bring it.

> There's not really any place else in the world where somebody says, "We want your pain." So yeah, I do think that's a unique part of this.

Angela explained how the community, which she loosely defines as "we," validated the narrator's lived experience (i.e., experiential knowledge), and how this form of validation contributed to the poet's healing process. The supportive ethos embraced by the listening community "welcomed" and "loved" the poet's story, despite the pain attached to that lived experience. Spoken word offered a "place" where one's lived experience was accepted unconditionally, "framed" (i.e., interpreted) from the ground up through the narrating poet's own words. In this way, the communal therapeutic setting of the D.C. spoken word scene mirrored that of a therapeutic self-help group in that the performing poets were the experts of their own life experience, and the community validated this form of expertise (Borkman 1976). They did this by continuously establishing and fostering an environment of love and support, which they accomplished by enacting various ritualistic practices that communicated inclusiveness, appreciation, and encouragement.

Displays of inclusiveness included rituals that made all participants feel as though they belonged to the group. For example, poets habitually and affectionately described one another as constituting a supportive "family."[46] Nicho referred to himself as a "big brother" to younger poets, and younger poets such as Deanna described Nicho as a big brother as well. Jackson, an African American father of three (including a teenager) and one of the more veteran poets still active in the scene, was warmly, if not a little

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[46] Slam poets, specifically, have been described in communal and familial terms, affectionately named "Slam Fam." In outlining five distinguishing characteristics of slam, Marc Smith (2009) writes: "Slam is community. Sometimes it calls itself a family, albeit a dysfunctional one at times, but an international family of people who love to participate in and celebrate both poetry and the performance of it" (6).

teasingly, called “Uncle” by the younger poets, a reference to his older age. When new people walked through the door or performed for the first time at Speaking ‘N Tongues, Micah or Marcus took a moment to greet the newcomer by saying, “Welcome to the family.” And, at times, poets humorously referred to each other as “my brotha-from-another-motha” and “my sista-from-another-mista.”

Hannah associated the loving and family-like qualities of the spoken word community with therapeutic properties, telling me that she participated in the D.C. spoken word community because she “love[s] the people. It really feels like family. It feels like therapy.” The communal and familial elements of D.C. spoken word culture were central to its healing powers, as they established an overall ethos of support that ran throughout the sub-culture and validated the knowledge being articulated.

The hosts of poetry events played a central role in establishing and fostering this environment of love and support. Hosts went out of their way to welcome new performers to open mics or slams, such as when Grant and Neeta or Micah and Marcus asked new people to raise their hands at The Poetry Den or Speaking ‘N Tongues, and the audience gave the newcomers a welcoming applause. After each poet performed at these open mics, hosts would typically thank the poet for sharing their truth, and often offered some affirming short commentary, such as repeating a line from the poem that the audience could ponder further, or commenting on the courage or strength of the performer. For “regulars” in the community, displays of inclusiveness and belonging were also reflected in the ubiquitous exchange of hugs, and the familiarity poets had with each other’s work. This familiarity was exhibited when poets clapped and snapped at the opening lines of a fellow poet’s poem, or when poets shouted out their favorite lines in

unison with the performing poet. Such displays showed new and old poets alike that they were welcomed and belonged to this group of people.

The supportive ethos was also reflected in public displays of appreciation, such as clapping, whistling, yelling, and snapping. At Speaking ‘N Tongues, appreciation also took the form of playfully throwing objects that were within reach at performing poets. Typically these objects were pens, but I also saw notebooks, shoes, umbrellas, and even a chair humorously (albeit gently) thrown in the performer’s direction. These displays of appreciation were enacted when audience members especially liked something that the poet did or said.

Given that such displays were important to maintaining a supportive ethos, hosts typically went out of their way to announce this expectation prior to open mics or slams. If hosts felt that the audience was not showing a sufficient amount of appreciation, hosts would intervene and remind audience members to show energetic support for the performer. That’s not to say that poets were not critical of other performers’ work, but this critique tended to be reserved for “behind closed doors” or was directed at those who were less known and integrated into the poetry scene. There was an expectation that, at least publicly, audiences were to be energetic, loud, and supportive when a poet was speaking their truth, especially when this truth took the form of a therapy narrative.

In addition to displays of inclusiveness and appreciation, various forms of artistic and emotional encouragement also contributed to the overarching supportive ethos. Encouragement of artistic success entailed supporting each other in competition and promoting one another’s work. Poets coached each other during slams, even when competing against each other, warning of encroaching time penalties or strategizing

which poems would score well with a particular composition of judges. They wanted to see each other succeed and they took joy in one another's success. Perhaps success was seen as a way to pave the way for what they perceived to be a delegitimized art form. Publicity was a central feature of this encouragement, as poets expressed love and support for one another during performances and over social media.

One night at Slam DMV, Aaron performed his poem, "Perspective." After reciting just a few short lines, Cody tweeted to his more than two thousand followers, "I love this perspective poem by @Aaron." Cody was in the same competition, but was nonetheless public in his support for his competitor, and promoted Aaron's work, as well as Aaron's Twitter handle, through his own social network. The poets also publicly promoted each other's events, chapbooks, or other artistic wares. It was common for the host of an event to name and endorse other poets' upcoming events around the city, such as youth slams, open mics, adult slams, or fundraisers.

Since performers were often placed in a position of vulnerability when sharing their personal and difficult experiences, the group developed various ritual practices centered around emotional encouragement as well. This emotional encouragement helped to cultivate a safe and supportive environment in which performers could be vulnerable enough so as to transform stories deemed embarrassing or shameful by dominant discourses—such as stories about sexual assault, addiction, teen pregnancy, or, as Angela highlighted, racist and sexist discourses about "good hair"—into stories of self-worthiness. For example, if a poet prefaced his or her piece with a statement about how their poem was "not good" or "brand new," the audience responded by making the poet comfortable to forge ahead despite their trepidation. This is why the "new shit" ritual was

powerful. It transformed the vulnerability of performing a new poem into a special occasion.

An example of this emotional encouragement happened when Jenna performed her Peace Corps poem at an open mic and prefaced her performance by saying, "I apologize for repeating it for those who have heard it." Adrianna and Derrick immediately shouted back from the audience, "Don't apologize!" Poets were often sensitive about performing the same poems over and over without introducing new material into their repertoire. However, the belief was that performing the poem was powerful in of itself, and someone in the crowd might need to hear that message, even if the poet had performed it fifty times before. Upon receiving the emotional encouragement from Adrianna and Derrick, Jenna smiled and launched into her poem about being a Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi. When lines were forgotten, audience members snapped their fingers in a sign of support and yelled such things as, "You got it!" "Take your time," and "You know it, poet!"

Poetry workshops were another site where various forms of emotional encouragement took place. Facilitators routinely reminded participants that they were in a "safe space" to write honestly and without judgment. After writing sessions, members were encouraged, though not pressured, to share what they wrote with the group, and it was customary to give some form of positive feedback after the person shared their poem. These different displays of encouragement functioned to create an environment in which the performing poet could feel comfortable to excavate and share their vulnerability, whether they were shy about a particular poem being "good enough,"

whether they fumbled during a performance, or whether they needed encouragement to honestly explore their vulnerability during the creative process.

This supportive ethos was important because it cultivated an environment in which poets felt empowered and courageous enough to be vulnerable when they spoke their truths. As illustrated below, in this supportive environment characterized by vulnerability-themed truth telling, poets could embark on a self-healing journey. Yet, this healing extended beyond the narrating poet to constitute a reciprocal process between healing the individual and healing others.

Self-Healing, Authenticity, and Transformation

Self-healing happened when narratives were transformative. The practice of spoken word accomplished transformative therapeutic work for D.C. poets because it provided a vehicle for poets to be vulnerable in the presence of a supportive listening community. The transformative properties of spoken word were contingent upon the poet's ability and willingness to speak the truth, which required them to be honest with themselves and with the community bearing witness to their testimony. Thus, poets' ability to authentically engage in a process of speaking truths was a prerequisite for healing to happen. This was consistent with Zussman's (2012) notion of how therapy narratives operate: "The success of the narrative of therapy depends, at least in the therapist's conception, precisely on the willingness and ability of the patient to give an account that is not only sincere but authentic" (814). Zussman understands authenticity to mean the articulation of truth based on an often difficult to attain element of self-

understanding.[47] Once truth and authenticity had been established, self-healing in the D.C. poetry community was achieved through two primary mechanisms: the creative process and the cultivation of publicly accessible physical spaces where the creative process took place.

The Creative Process: Writing and Performing

Poets highlighted the creative process of writing and performing poetry when assigning therapeutic properties to spoken word. For example, poets talked about how writing and performing poetry helped them "cope," "manage," "process," and "deal with" issues affecting their lives. Through writing and performing, poets engaged in a journey of self-reflection and self-discovery that facilitated healing. Because this journey often required poets to confront difficult experiences from their personal biographies or express deeply held opinions that, as Nicho once described, "clash with the mainstream," poets spoke frequently about the courage and risk-taking involved in this creative process.

Writing and performing authentic therapy narratives was risky business because it required poets to dig deep into their vulnerabilities, publicly voice these vulnerabilities, yet still remain emotionally, mentally, physically, and creatively stable. Neeta once described it as poets having to "carve words from our flesh and still remain whole." Adrianna also described the courage and risk involved in the work of the performance poet, and how this willingness to take risk entailed an element of being true and authentic to oneself and one's listening community. She said, "I like to stay away from the safe subjects. I mean, I think the function of an artist is, in some ways, to risk as much as you

[47] Zussman (2012) draws upon Trilling (1972) to distinguish sincerity and authenticity (see fn 7, p. 814).

possibly can and still feel like you're in a place of being able to perform and not in a place of crisis. And that is a very, very thin line." When I asked Adrianna to say more about the relationship between artistic creativity, risk-taking, and emotional stability, she told me, "I mean, I don't know. I've never met an artist that doesn't, somewhere in their history, have a breaking point where they say 'I have to turn this into something creative otherwise I will not be able to exist in the way that I want to.'"

Both Neeta and Adrianna spoke to the courage and risk-taking involved in creative work, its importance for whole-hearted living, but also the dangers that this work can trigger. Attentive to the delicate balance between healthy vulnerability and crisis, the poets used the creative process to heal and care for themselves in a safe and supportive way. As Meghan described, this attention to self-care can be a radical act in of itself. Yet, this commitment to wellness and self-healing was also a way in which poets carved out a productive and healthy space "to exist in the way that [they] want[ed] to." In this space of well-being, poets could conduct their social change work in a sustainable manner. Indeed, as Grant once told me, poetry can "encourag[e] people to be self-reflective and say, 'Look, there are problems outside we need to work against but there are also problems in ourselves and until we change ourselves we can't hope too much to be changing the forces outside of us.'"

The association between risk, a healthy existence, and authentic artistic creativity was prominently displayed during a poetry panel discussion at the Still I Rise Poetry Festival. The panel was entitled, "Even in Polite Company: Women Write Their Own Truths." During the session, one of the panelists, a middle-aged black woman, told the audience: "Writing is dangerous business…Through writing, we discover stuff about

ourselves." While writing her book of poetry, this poet realized that, in addition to being verbally and physically abused, she was also sexually abused by her mother. The woman explained how this painful realization, discovered through the creative process of writing, felt dangerous: "It challenged some of my core beliefs, leading me to re-evaluate my relationship with women, feminism, and motherhood. From this experience, I learned how writing exposes us to ourselves and the wider community in new ways." Like more traditional therapy models, the process of self-discovery through writing poetry allowed the woman to discover and deal with experiences from her childhood that she had repressed.

The writing process also served as a source of healing for Adrianna when she wrote the poem about Kane Masselli, as she said, "In some ways it's the only way that I can deal with it. I feel like it's the only way other poets can deal with it. Frustration or anxiety or sadness or joy. You know, there's so much of it in a way, you have to write it down for your own sanity." The creative process of writing provided Adrianna with a way to manage the spectrum of emotions that accompanied the trials and tribulations of everyday life, in this case, triggered by the untimely death of a woman she had never met. Specifically, Adrianna linked the *need* for a creative outlet, which she found by "writ[ing] it down," with how she managed her mental well-being or "sanity." In the case of Masselli's death, writing this story of injustice in a performance poem was a way for Adrianna to deal with the tragedy of the situation, thereby offering Adrianna a mode of expression that helped her to heal from this social injustice to which Masselli, she, and countless others are subjected.

In addition to the writing process, poets attributed therapeutic properties to the creative process of performing or, as they said, “sharing” a poem. The healing properties of sharing one’s poem were rooted in the process of narrating one’s self-authored truth in front of others. Like writing, performing therapy narratives took courage and risk. As an ephemeral art form that is never identical across different situational contexts (V. Chepp 2012), the knowledge acquired through the repetitive process of performing poetry over time was a source of healing. While on tour in October 2011, the nationally renowned performance poet Tara Hardy had a special feature and writing workshop at Sister Spoken. Tara is based in Seattle and describes herself as “the working-class queer femme poet.”[48] During her feature, Tara spoke to the healing properties associated with the repetitive nature of performance art, informing the audience: “A poem will tell you what it wants out of you; that’s why you don’t perform it once or twice.” In saying this, Tara was referencing her poem that chronicles her journey to visit her dying father in Florida. Tara is a father-daughter incest survivor, and she described the difficulty involved in writing and performing that poem, which required her to confront painful childhood memories and grapple with issues of survival, forgiveness, and perseverance. Tara’s commentary highlighted how new ideas come to the spoken word poet over time through the process of performing. Similar to the way in which, through the writing process, the panelist at the Still I Rise Poetry Festival discovered that she was sexually abused as a child, for Tara, through the process of performing her poem about her father, she acquired new knowledge about her experience as an incest survivor. This process of self-discovery helped Tara to heal from this trauma.

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[48] Cited on Tara Hardy’s official website: http://www.tarahardy.net/about/.

Writing and performance went hand-in-hand. The writing offered a way for poets to self-author their experiences and assign their own meanings to those experiences, and the performance provided an opportunity to testify to that experience in front of a supportive audience that validated the self-authored meaning and knowledge that the poet assigned to that experience. Ty spoke explicitly about the dual importance of writing and performing poetry in order for his therapeutic healing to take place. He said, "I started out writing just kind of as an outlet slash therapy, really. And it got to a point where something in me just felt like that wasn't enough, and so I needed to vent…[Y]ou know how like, if you have feelings, like you can have them and you bottle them up, but sometimes you have to let people know how you feel so you won't go crazy [Laughter]." For Ty, writing poetry initially served as a therapeutic outlet, but he also needed to speak his words out loud in front of a listening audience in order to complete this therapeutic process. In a similar way that Adrianna used the writing process as a way to manage her "sanity," Ty used the performance process as a way to "vent" in order to keep from going "crazy."

Poets distinguished between the healing properties of the creative process and the aesthetic value or quality of the art, and they routinely prioritized healing over aesthetics. The distinction between "good" poetry and healing was made at countless poetry writing workshops I attended, in which the value of the creative writing process regularly took precedence over the quality of the poetry product produced. For example, at almost every workshop I attended, facilitators routinely gave permission to participants to "abandon" the structure of the workshop prompt if it was not serving them in some productive way. Such instructions suggested that the poetry product was not the most important part of the

creative process, and rather participants were encouraged to take something more important from the writing workshop; namely, the opportunity to work through difficult life experiences. Nicho echoed this distinction between the aesthetic and the therapeutic when he explained to me why he started to write.

> A couple of things [made me start writing]. I was a really big fan of Tupac. He died on my twentieth birthday. All of the things that inspired me, all the things that had frustrated me, those were things he talked about in his music. When he died I was actually in the midst of a depression already. And that day I had, I don't know how else to describe it but it's like the equivalent of what I guess a psychotic break would be, in the sense that I was faced with these two things. A celebration of my life and the mourning of someone who had inspired me occurring at the same time, and I couldn't reconcile the two. So I just kind of spent that entire day in this kind of daze. A week later my cousin, just out of the blue, started rapping. [His cousin invited Nicho to join in]. When I started rambling gibberish there was this release of energy that occurred. And I was like, "I have to do this again!" And I knew I was horrible and I was like, "I just have to do this again"…So I just kind of disappeared, writing everyday, and here we are.

Like many of the other poets, Nicho had a propensity to create and he turned to writing as a way to cathartically work through a difficult experience, despite his sense that his writing was, from an aesthetic perspective, "horrible." Nicho pointed to the creative writing process as the way in which he was able to break through his depression.

A Place to Heal: Poetry Venues and Workshops

During our interview, Angela spoke at length about the relationship between self-healing and the need for a *place* to release the feelings that get bottled up over time in our minds and bodies. In Angela's case, spoken word poetry, and the venues where it is performed, offered a healing place to self-author her struggle with depression and transform the meanings of shame traditionally assigned to such experiences. She spoke frankly to me about her depression and thoughts of suicide:

> So prior to discovering performance poetry…I was grappling with a whole lot of challenging things in my life. I had just been fired from a job and just been dumped from a long time relationship and was beginning to come into awareness about some really destructive habits and patterns that I'd been living on in my life that I identify today as addiction and I suffer with depression. So literally if I discover poetry in April of 2003, six months earlier I was hospitalized for suicidal ideation.

Angela went on to describe the suicidal thoughts that she had on a particular night when she accidentally mixed up her class schedule; for Angela, the crisis that this seemingly simple mistake triggered reflected a larger struggle she was experiencing with her life not following a predictable pattern. She told me, "I lost it. I literally was driving home. I was hysterical. I was like, 'I'm going to drive my car into a tree.'" Instead, Angela drove herself to the emergency room, where she was hospitalized for clinical depression. She explained:

> All of these things that I had been holding for years and years and years all of a sudden needed a place, they had fallen out of the closet. I've been stuffing my

> closet for twenty some odd years of pains and shames and traumas and fears and all of those things. That night, the closet door sprang open and I had shit everywhere. Poetry was how I started collecting it and organizing it and putting it in my life in a way that wasn't about shoving it to be hidden, but presenting it. Almost presenting it as beautiful, presenting the chaos as beautiful. So without that outlet, I don't know how I would have managed those things. I don't know that I would not have gotten lost in the chaos and never been able to find my way out.

Through a process of self-narration, spoken word offered Angela an outlet to reinterpret the painful and chaotic experiences of her past. By writing and performing poetry, Angela transformed the meaning of her depression and turned it into a beautiful experience. She did this by collecting, organizing, and narrating her experiences in a new way, transforming the meanings of past pains, shames, traumas, and fears. In addition to leveraging the healing properties of the creative writing and performance process, Angela needed a "place," an "outlet," to present her self-authored story and have it validated by herself and her community. Here, the physical spaces of poetry venues served as an important institutional site where the creative writing and performance process was cultivated and carried out. Poetry venues such as open mics and workshops, and the supportive community cultivated within them, were essential to providing publicly assessable spaces where healing happened.

Speaking 'N Tongues, in particular, was revered among poets and frequently likened to a sacred and spiritual revival; indeed, poets repeatedly referred to this physical space as "church." Here, they found a place to heal the spirit and soul. In this way,

perhaps more than any other venue in D.C., Speaking ‘N Tongues was the therapeutic epicenter for performing poetry, described by poets as a freeing, accepting, non-judgmental, and supportive space where healing and creative self-expression took place. During our interview, Marcus reflected on his role as a Speaking ‘N Tongues co-host, a role he filled since the open mic’s inception ten years earlier. Specifically, Marcus referenced Speaking ‘N Tongues’ resemblance to church, and how the space’s healing properties are rooted in the community cultivated there rather than any single individual, including himself.

> Speaking ‘N Tongues doesn’t have to involve me directly, it doesn’t have to be called that. Whenever two or more people come together and want to share their work in an intimate and accepting space, then Speaking ‘N Tongues is there. Not to wax too biblical, but when he say, “Whenever two or more are joined in my name [*Marcus laughed*], that’s church!” And you’ve been to Speaking ‘N Tongues enough, you hear how people compare it to church or what church used to be for them or what church should be. You could compare it to therapy; you hear how they talk about it. It’s past me now. It’s beyond my ability to control it. It’s what the people have made it.

Cody articulated similar sentiments.

> The thing about Speaking ‘N Tongues is that it’s remained word-of-mouth. It’s remained about the people. It’s remained about you as a person having a place of comfort where you feel safe and secure to spill your feelings and know that there will be somebody there listening. That’s what Speaking ‘N Tongues is to me. That’s why, for a lot of people, Speaking ‘N Tongues is church. Speaking ‘N

> Tongues is therapy and it's real. It's real like that for a lot of people. Our people will be having the worst—I mean their shittiest of days. They come to Speaking 'N Tongues and come out of Speaking 'N Tongues just feeling so much better, so much renewed. I mean I can attest to that personally. I've had days like that. It's just like I need to go to Speaking 'N Tongues because I just feel like my entire world is crashing down right now and you come out of there and you feel like it's a better day already. Things are going to look up.[49]

Open mics such as Speaking 'N Tongues were not the only spaces where healing happened; poetry workshops also served as a type of therapy session. Cody said this explicitly in our interview when he told me: "[A] lot of my workshops, whether with young kids or adults—I like more communicative workshops. I like where we would respond and we're more like—it's more like, you know, I really kind of treat it like a therapy session." Cody served as the lead facilitator for the Writing 'N Tongues workshop series, which was spearheaded and organized by Jade.

Poets who led workshops were well aware of this healing power. The 2011 National Poetry Slam featured a workshop entitled, "Workshopping the Workshop," intended to help participants learn how to facilitate poetry workshops in their own communities. The workshop was facilitated by two Brooklyn based poets, Geoff Kagan Trenchard and Jon Sands, and outlined three goals: (1) Discuss strategies on how to generate and refine creative writing curriculum, (2) Discuss experiences working in

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[49] I knew what Cody meant when he said he could personally attest to the renewal and rejuvenation that comes from Speaking 'N Tongues. On countless Thursdays, after coming off of a 10-hour workday at my daytime research job, it would take all my energy and self-discipline to get myself to Speaking 'N Tongues (sometimes my second poetry event or workshop of the evening!), knowing that the open mic would let out around midnight. But every time I left energized (if not exhausted) and in high spirits.

institutional environments, and (3) Provide resources for curriculum. At one point during the workshop an audience member raised his hand and asked, “What do you do when the tears start falling?” He was referring to the tears of workshop participants. His question, as well as Geoff’s and Jon’s response, spoke to the familiarity and frequency of this scenario. Without hesitation or asking for clarification, Geoff and Jon addressed the man’s question and invited the rest of the room to weigh in. The man’s comment highlighted the fact that poetry workshops could serve as highly emotionally charged spaces, and workshop facilitators and participants, through the medium of spoken word, often confronted tears of sadness, anger, shame, guilt, and other emotions.

During this workshop, Jon was explicit about the role of the facilitator in creating a space where healing was possible, describing the workshop facilitator as “an advocate for the room.” He said: “It’s not about your own comfort level or doing things that will make you feel more comfortable. It’s about doing things on behalf of the room.” He went on to say, “You can’t save people. You are putting art in a position to do what it does. Art is more empathetic than everyone here. You’re not saving people. You’re using art to facilitate a discussion or to do the healing or self-reflection—this is what art does best.” Jon’s advice articulated a link between poetry and healing from the perspective of the workshop facilitator, as he told his fellow poets that art, not the workshop facilitator, does the saving: “Like when you are performing, when facilitating, you are giving people the opportunity to let go.” This approach to facilitating poetry workshops, he said, also protects teachers from burning out.

One of the workshop facilitators at the Still I Rise Poetry Festival also talked about the relationship between the poetry workshops and healing, and suggested using

structured discussion questions so that poetry isn't just a triggering experience but a healing experience. She suggested establishing "ground rules" (such as listening to one another) and seeking out trainings beyond teaching poetry, such as trainings around how to facilitate difficult conversations. She cautioned her audience to know their limits, as being a poetry teacher is "at times more the role of a social worker." By likening the work of the poetry teacher to that of a group advocate or social worker, these various poets spoke to the therapeutic space poetry workshops provided.

Even in slam spaces, where competition was a central organizing principle, healing typically took precedence over winning. During our interview, Aaron described his first impressions of the support that competing teams showed to one another at the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI):[50] "I also had so much respect for the fact that [poets were cheering loudly for opposing teams]. Because I hope to get to the point in my writing, in my understanding the purpose of why we are here as a collection of writers where the competition is secondary to the healing or the community that is being shared and taking place."

Notably, these poetry venues were easily accessible to the public. Writing and performing poetry served as common and easy "go-to" strategies for poets to deal with difficult circumstances. Blake explained: "I can't afford a therapist…But you can go up and you can spew your emotions and you don't necessarily have to get questions back. You can just say what you want to say." Unlike other therapeutic spaces that entail barriers such as complicated health insurance bureaucracy, office co-pays, or doctors' fees, poetry venues—and the writing and performing that took place inside them—were

[50] Organized by the Association of College Unions International (ACUI), CUPSI offers college campuses with Poetry Slam programs to compete at this national poetry slam competition (http://www.acui.org/poetryslam/).

accessible to a wide public. Indeed, the fundamental concept of an open mic was that anyone could participate, and everyone was encouraged to do so.

In these ways, spoken word therapy narratives served as an accessible source of self-healing. There was no single universal experience from which all performers healed; rather, poets focused on the power of the healing *process*, achieved through the *practice* of writing and performing therapy narratives. As I show below, this practice served to heal others in the community as well, thereby resembling a healing space where "the act of testifying exposes the raw truth about suffering and releases the hidden pain that is a profound barrier to resistance" (Ginwright 2010:9). Without such barriers, poets and others in the community could engage in a collective healing approach that provided the groundwork for sustainable social change.

Healing Others, Empathy, and Social Change

Collective healing in the D.C. spoken word community did not derive from members having identical experiences, but rather from people relating to the emotions associated with those experiences. Brown (2012) argues, "Empathy doesn't require that we have the exact same experiences as the person sharing their story with us…Empathy is connecting with the emotion that someone is experiencing, not the event or the circumstance" (81). Hooks (1995) similarly highlights how communities built on love and compassion are united in the acknowledgement and celebration of difference rather than similarity. Like Brown (2012) and hooks (1995), poets also highlighted the transformative power of love and healing that took place within their community, which was not achieved through the presence of social sameness, but rather through an

empathetic validation of each other's unique lived experiences and the knowledge that resulted from these experiences.

The self-healing that took place during the performance of therapy narratives extended beyond the individual and constituted a reciprocal process between healing the self and healing others. Angela spoke to this point when she explained to me why she found performance poetry to be a healing experience.

> Part of it is that I'm able to process experiences that I've had. Then part of it is that my sharing [of] my experience builds connection. So sort of what I talk about is that in writing I'm always looking for the "we" and the "I." Like, how does my experience translate to the larger world? How does my circumstance translate to the larger world, and irrespective of the things that normally would separate us: gender, class, race, those sorts of things? What's the common human thread in my experience and in the larger world? I find that this art from lets me explore that.

Like others, Angela used poetry to "process experiences" she had. For her, sharing these experiences through spoken word allowed her to build connections with other people, as she was "always looking" for how to transcend her personal experience through her art in order to tap into more universal human experiences to which community members could empathetically relate, regardless of identity categories such as race, class, and gender—socially meaningful concepts that "normally would separate" people from one another. Angela used the medium of spoken word, the artistry of it, to cultivate empathy and make connections across different human experiences, namely, her own lived experience and the larger world. In doing so, Angela aimed to link her self-healing to a more collective sense of healing.

Idara also highlighted the recursive relationship between self-healing and collective healing. We were sitting in my campus office on a cold February evening. She had arrived late to our interview because her class ended later than usual that day. A sophomore at a local state university, Idara was majoring in mechanical engineering and was active in various professional associations that supported black and women engineers. On numerous occasions, Idara expressed her desire to participate in more D.C. poetry events, yet she lamented over the challenges of doing so given her busy schedule as a full-time student. When I asked Idara why she participated in spoken word, she told me:

> I used to tell people it's kind of like my therapy. I love performing. Especially on stressful days or on days where I'm really worn down or I don't feel as good as I want to, I like, go to an open mic or I go to a slam and I feel so much better. I'm smiling the rest of the day. Even if I don't win, I'm still—I'm just elated, and I just love the rush of being on stage. And I think I do poetry specifically because I want to reach people. But it also kind of heals a lot of the things that I've gone through, just to have more people and more people and more people hear the same story or hear, like, hear me share such an intimate part of myself. It helps. And one guy came up to me after the Word Hype Slam, cause I did—well, I'm sure you heard everything, but I did the poem about the sixth grade girl and the fashion show and everything, and he told me, "I loved your poem because I have an 11-year-old daughter and she tells me all the time, 'Daddy, how come I'm not beautiful?'" And he said, "I really wish she would have heard that poem 'cause I really want her to know that she is beautiful and, like, I really want you to keep

> going on with your message to tell every little girl that they don't have to be this way or that way, they don't have to look like this person. Just keep getting that message out there, 'cause a lot of little girls need to hear what you have to say." And even that helped me so much, 'cause I wish I would have had somebody like me who cared about little girls like that. Who knows where little girls like that are coming from or how they feel, or what they're going through or things that they think.

Idara moved her backpack, which was resting beside her chair near her feet, and leaned it against my desk. She repositioned her petit frame in her seat. I asked Idara how she felt when the father of the 11-year-old girl approached her after her performance at the slam.

> It made it all worth it. Like, I was so upset—I was really happy for Aaron when I lost—but I was disappointed in myself 'cause I was like, "Oh, this is the second time." I was so embarrassed. I didn't want to show my face. But when he said that—he said it to me right after everything was all said and done—that made me feel so much better. I can't even explain. I think I went home and just wrote, and I swear, like part of the Barbie poem kind of came from it. I was just—he just made me want to keep writing. I wanted to get right back on stage and I wanted to talk to even more people. I wanted more people to hear it. I wanted more people to go back home and tell their children, like, I don't know, it inspired me to keep going. Definitely it was great, it was very touching.

Idara nodded her head in affirmation, as if she was replaying the scene in her mind, reminded of how inspiring and touching the father's words had been for her own

understanding of the power of spoken word. I asked Idara to talk more about why performing poetry felt good and how spoken word served as a form of therapy for her.

> It's like giving somebody a brief clip of your life story and everybody just, like—everybody sitting there, like they understand—not only do they understand, they love it. They are just like, "This is great!" They are clapping for you, they're snapping like, "Oh my God, I can't believe you put it that way" or "I can't believe you thought of this" or "I can't believe you said this" or "This is the same thing I'm going through. It's the same thing I saw." It's funny—I don't even know how to explain that. I just feel like I'm in control of the whole room, and I like having that power over everybody else, to kind of force them to hear what I have to say and to tell stories that don't get told all the time.

For Idara, performing spoken word healed herself and others in her community. For her own self-healing, conveying vulnerability or telling "an intimate part" of her life story in public to a community of listeners, "heal[ed] a lot of the things [she'd] gone through." The community validated her experience through supportive rituals such as clapping, snapping, and verbally articulating their appreciation of her perspective and artistry. This validation from the community, such as that which was expressed by the father of the 11-year-old girl, inspired Idara to carry on with her social justice message through the creative and therapeutic process of writing and performing poetry in order to reach "even more people."

The practice of spoken word also served as a healing force for others in Idara's listening community. Idara's performance moved the father to reflect on his own daughter's struggle with self-esteem. The next time his daughter asks him why she isn't

beautiful, he is able to draw upon Idara's story and the experiential knowledge she shared in order to help his daughter and her struggle with oppressive beauty ideals.

This reciprocal healing process via spoken word served as a model for social change. Angela explained:

> Because poetry for me is about human connection, I need the poems to continue to build the bridge to this movement. It's how people get here. They hear something that reminds them that it's okay to love themselves. Then they choose to engage in some sort of action that solidifies that belief. (*How does poetry serve as the bridge?*) One of the things that I say, one of the sort of mantras of Body Pride is that every time we heal ourselves, we give other people the permission to do the same. So for me, poetry is this public space where I share my truths. The things that chain me, that hurt, that have been hard, that I'm working to heal from. In that space, I invite other people to begin to do that searching for themselves. So as they do that searching, that's the beginning of that road. That's that bridge.

Angela went on to explain this reciprocal healing process by using the example of when she performs her poem entitled, "Dreams From My Father."

> All the time after that poem, someone comes up to me and says, "I'm going to call my father." All the time. It's categorical. In that moment somebody decides that they are going to engage in some sort of beginning step on a journey to healing. So the poem is the bridge. The poem is the invitation to do your own work. So for me, the poems are the invitation to this concept of radical unapologetic self-love. It's the invitation to healing our pain, shame, trauma, and fear through a Body Pride Healing Project maybe. It's the invitation to post a silly picture [on

Facebook] for Bad Picture Monday or whatever the case may be. So the poem becomes the invitation.

Angela's reference to poetry as a "bridge" between her own experience and something larger highlights the role that this approach to self and collective healing played in the poets' social change efforts. A commitment to loving oneself and living without shame was a radical existence rooted in a larger social justice framework in that poets understood a healthy individual and a healthy community to be prerequisites for social change. Through the practice of spoken word, personal and communal transformations took place. This healing process was therapeutic for the narrating poet and for others in the larger listening community. As Angela said, "Every time we heal ourselves, we give other people the permission to do the same." Indeed, Kim's decision to share her own vulnerabilities at Speaking 'N Tongues served as an invitation for others to share their vulnerabilities. This sharing also allowed members of the listening audience to know that they were not alone and, even more, their experiences were validated and deserving of love and worthiness. This supportive ethos let people in the community know that, despite any pain or challenges they may have faced, they are a part of a social collective that is there to support and accept them.

This community was loosely conceived. While collective healing was accessible to poets and audience members, it extended to poets' social media networks as well. For example, on any given night numerous people would be remotely participating at Speaking 'N Tongues via Twitter, either through the open mic's direct Twitter feed or through the various poets who live tweeted throughout the event. Even though these group members were not physically in attendance at Speaking 'N Tongues, they still

constituted and participated in an important part of this poetry community, including the social interaction and collective healing that took place. Via Twitter, these group members sent supportive messages to narrating poets, and they could receive the healing benefits of this poetry collective through the live tweets. Similarly, social media, and specifically Facebook, was a cornerstone of Angela's Body Pride community, serving as a primary channel through which healing practices were publicly shared, such as when she posted her own Radical Healing Project vlogs or when she and her Facebook followers shared weekly photos of themselves that they perceived to be unflattering.

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This chapter illustrates how, by building a supportive and healthy community, poets were better positioned to authentically speak their truths and cultivate a critical consciousness. As a result, they were better equipped to confront social problems. The next chapter examines how poets used spoken word poetry to confront such problems through their activist work.

Chapter 5: Doing “New School” Activism: Art and Everyday Politics

“[Spoken word] gives power to people who often in this society don’t have much power, because all you need is your voice and your story and your art.”
- Grant, D.C. spoken word poet

Instilling a Passion for Justice

Micah was a 28-year-old self-identified activist. Micah also described himself as a break-dancer, poet, Haiku Herald, pacifist, fashion designer (he crocheted), and co-host of the legendary Speaking ‘N Tongues. Micah had a playful demeanor, short stature, and youthful facial features; he often donned himself in baggy, oversized clothes. Standing no taller than 5’4”, Micah could be found every Thursday at Speaking ‘N Tongues, often bouncing around, cartwheeling, and swinging his long thick locks through the air as he rapped in a duet with co-host, Marcus. When not swinging his hair to a beat, he’d tie his locks back or tuck them under a floppy, colorful crocheted hat that he skillfully made. Yet, despite his high-energy, playful personality and youthful look, Micah had a wise soul. The father of a 2-year-old boy, Micah’s presence was calming, and his smile contagious. Much of his poetry explored themes of romantic love and fatherhood or, on a less serious note, celebrated his fandom of geeky fantasy video games. Micah’s talent and dedication to his craft were undeniable, and he commanded an enormous amount of respect within the D.C. spoken word poetry community. This respect stemmed, in part, from his kindness, which I experienced firsthand on numerous occasions. For example,

one night after Speaking ‘N Tongues as the clock approached midnight, Micah walked me home so I did not have to make the trek alone in the dark. His kind gesture easily added over a mile and forty-five minutes to his own late night commute, but it was a gesture I appreciated and readily accepted since late night violence was fairly commonplace in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods connecting my apartment and Speaking ‘N Tongues. Micah was also respected for his numerous artistic gifts (which included dancing, writing, performing, and crocheting), his commitment to Speaking ‘N Tongues, and for his activist work, which centered on HIV/AIDS, and was particularly targeted toward teens.

I interviewed Micah on a warm spring night just prior to the legendary open mic. We each sat in one of the rocking chairs on the porch of the local community arts center where Speaking ‘N Tongues was held. The arts center operated out of a large three-story nineteenth century row house built high up on a hill. Visitors had to ascend three flights of winding, uneven—and in some areas crumbling—concrete stairs to reach the front door. As we talked, guests began arriving for the open mic, and Micah occasionally broke stride in our conversation to greet people: “Peace. Peace.” At one point, he sold one of his crocheted wears, and jumped back into our conversation.

Figure 5.1: Building where Speaking ‘N Tongues takes place

Micah spoke extensively about his HIV/AIDS activism and his job at Youth AIDS Network, a local youth organization dedicated to HIV/AIDS prevention. Periodically, he recited lines of poetry during our discussion that sounded as though they could have doubled as rap lyrics, and he explained to me how and why he integrated spoken word poetry into his HIV/AIDS activism:

> Using poetry to raise awareness around HIV and AIDS, a lot of times, it’s taking the HIV message and structuring it in a way that’s more digestible. When I get in front of a group and I say, “HIV stands for Human Immune Deficiency virus” and like, break down the science behind HIV, there are some folk who get it because that’s interesting to them…[*Peace. Peace.*] Science is one of their things, so they grasp to that. There are other folks that think differently and science isn’t for them. So when I say, you know, “She was fourteen / She was close to the edge /

> Life pushed her too hard / God's really there / This will be time for one of those miracles / She just found out she's HIV positive," they're ready to receive some sort of message. They realize, "OK, he's telling a story. I can follow the story." And then like, when I talk about, "Met heaven's gate at 11-years-old / Pneumonia took his body / But couldn't keep his soul," [people realize], "Oh, the little boy had HIV but he didn't die from HIV. He died from something else." And that opens the conversation about opportunistic infections, whether people actually die from HIV or from complications due to AIDS. It's about creating a way to get the message across without beating them upside the head with HIV.

Micah highlighted Kim's poetry as an example, and her ability to use spoken word in order to convey stories about people living with HIV and AIDS, and how they deal with their status on a day-to-day basis: "She's just an incredibly creative, incredibly strong artist." Micah told me that he is "constantly amazed by others who are able to do this activism work," and he situated his own work within the context of the larger activist community.

> I've done my share of the performance piece. Like, I perform and do my awareness raising stuff. But now my job and my goal as the performing guy—like the elder performer guy, I guess—is to instill that message within the younger folk. Because now I manage a team of peer educators who do HIV prevention work through social media; through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube doing videos, hosting events, and performance as well.

At this point in our interview, the sky had already turned to dusk and I knew our conversation would end soon since the open mic was about to begin. But Micah

continued to talk about his own work, highlighting his experience mentoring younger activists, and the importance of creating a culture in which activism is grounded in sustainability and passion.

> And so it's almost like I've gone full circle. And I'm getting my boy Devin into writing and performing his poetry. He realizes now, "Oh, I'm at the venue. I want to do something that I perform on a regular basis. I have all these HIV prevention poems, like, word." So even when I'm not on the clock performing, I'm still performing HIV prevention stuff [through mentoring others]. And when you instill that in the artist, that message never dies within them. It becomes their passion. It becomes something that they need to do for the rest of their lives. I took Devin on his first cross-country trip last April…[We] went to the conference and he spoke on a panel to talk about young people doing innovative programming around HIV and AIDS. He stole the conference pretty much. Now he's like, "Yo, I want to do it. Like, when's the next conference? When's the next opportunity?" And that's what art and poetry can do when applied to social justice and social marketing. That's the change that really can happen. That's why I love the work that I do because I get to balance out my need to perform and my need to create change.

In this way, Micah very consciously linked his poetry work to his activist work. Micah identified spoken word's narrative structure as a feature of the art form that made it an effective awareness-raising tool. Perhaps not surprisingly, Micah discovered his artistic voice in tandem with his activist voice.

> I became a performer officially around twelfth grade, my senior year, I started working for Youth AIDS Network.[51] So my performance history and my HIV prevention history are almost parallel. And that's an ongoing thing with me. It's always been social justice through art. I started working for Youth AIDS Network as a peer educator. And our peer education group was called the "New School Activists." The whole idea was using poetry, hip-hop, [and] song as an HIV prevention tool…I started writing more pieces around HIV prevention, we started to go to different conferences. We were invited to go to the Ryan White National Youth Conference. And this was 2001. Still in high school, about to graduate. Oh my gosh, February 15, 2001, my first flight ever. Flew to Denver, Colorado to be at this conference and speak on HIV and AIDS and perform with the New School Activists. It was the first time that I realized, "Wow, you could really make a career out of this! [*laughs*] I'm doing some good stuff, I'm getting paid to do it, and I'm doing my art as well. And people from across the country now are starting to recognize that this work is being done." And that's kind of when it started to click.

"New school" is an expression popular among hip-hop generationers to describe something as contemporary; the term can be contrasted to "old school," which refers to an earlier era way of doing things (e.g., a musical technique or a fashion trend reminiscent of the 1980s or 1990s). Micah's discussion of how he integrated poetry into his "new school" activism highlights some of the unique features of the activist work carried out by the young millennial poets in Washington, D.C.

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[51] Micah later corrected this timeline and said this was his eleventh (not twelfth) grade year.

First, spoken word offered young adults an alternative and effective form of communication and means by which to convey their political messages. Part of this derived from spoken word's narrative or storytelling structure, which made the message accessible or, as Micah said, "digestible."

Second, poets stressed the importance of teaching the knowledge and craft behind this form of art and activism to a younger generation; this instilled an element of sustainability into their social change approach. By doing so, Micah said that "the message never dies" and the work becomes a "passion" that people "need to do for the rest of their lives." Indeed, poets frequently referred to poetry as a passion, a calling, and an obligation.

Third, poets had an expansive understanding of where and how activist work took place. Activism could happen through social media, such as on Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube, or it could happen during poetry events, either through hosting or performing.

Finally, Micah talked about the "balance" this form of activism provided, allowing him and other young adults to fulfill their personal needs for artistic expression and creative production, and their public need or obligation to be change agents in their communities.

Micah was not the only person in the D.C. scene to integrate his poetry with his activism, and the boundary between "poet" and "activist" was often blurred for these young adults. Indeed, as Hannah told me, "We're lucky to have a pretty big activist community in our poetry scene" and that activist work "usually comes out in the poetry." In this chapter, I examine how poets integrated spoken word into their activism. Namely, poets used spoken word as a tool to do advocacy work, build political allies and

networks, and mobilize others into political action. While advocacy, allies, and mobilization are common political goals and tactics, poets engaged these tactics in new or uncommon ways by using their art and creativity to do so.

Spoken Word as a Tool for New School Activism

Poets frequently used the metaphor of a *tool* to describe spoken word. Like other cultural tools, poets deployed the practice of spoken word to strategically carry out particular functions (Swidler 1986), and these functions were tied to political goals. Specifically, poets used their poetry as a tool for (1) advocacy, specifically in the service of education and protest, (2) "building bridges" by establishing allies, networks, and organizational infrastructure, and (3) engaging and mobilizing these allies and networks using the infrastructure they developed. Poets found spoken word to be especially well suited for achieving these political goals given that the art form was democratic and accessible.

Poets referred to spoken word as a tool for social change in various ways. For example, Meghan described poetry as an "activist tool [whose] purpose is to get at the truth. If someone who's disenfranchised in some way, [if] they are speaking their truth and being honest, it's putting a face on their experience for other people." Here, Meghan suggested that poetry's activist power resided in its ability to communicate a myriad of experiences, including those of marginalized subjects whose stories and perspectives are often missing from popular discourse. Poets highlighted this communicative feature of spoken word time and again, with many comparing the art form to "a conversation." For example, Ty said, "It's a good tool to kind of just get the lines of communication going,"

and Neeta described it as “a tool for advocacy or for starting a dialogue.” Kim spoke about her inspiration for her poetry and her need to “get things off [her] chest.” When I asked her what this meant, she told me:

> Like, things that I just need to talk about, like something that’s really bothering me or a pressing issue or something that I want to talk about but I feel like it won’t be expressed the right way in a conversation so I just have to write a poem about it because that’s all what poetry is. It’s a conversation between people. It’s just, I’m on stage and people are in the audience. That’s the only difference.

Kim likened the act of performing poetry to the act of having a conversation, though she distinguished the two by drawing attention to the presence of a stage. Neeta made a similar comparison and distinction and, like Kim, suggested that the stage is a notable but not divisive feature of the speaker-listener (or, performer-audience) interaction. Referring to spoken word open mics, Neeta said:

> As much as any art is a give and take between the audience and the other participants, it is an event unlike most other performing arts events. The people who get up on stage, five minutes ago and five minutes from now are like, the guy sitting behind you or, you know, the woman who looks really nervous in the corner hovering over her notebook. So it’s never, “I’m the expert and you are here to be the recipient of my great wisdom.” It’s, “I’m your equal. But from my perspective, this is the situation.”

Neeta went on: “Compared to anything else that I can think of in the arts world, it is a conversation, even though—it’s a conversation that is not two ways during that short

span of time, it can become two ways after you get down off the stage and have a chance to talk to people. It's the beginning of a conversation."

Kim and Neeta echoed what many poets claimed: spoken word poetry was a unique way to communicate with other people. The presence of a stage was noteworthy; however, unlike other performing arts, the power dynamic between speaker and listener was equalized in that the performer was on stage for a short amount of time and became a part of the audience once their performance was over. In the same way performers occupied the role of audience members at spoken word events, audience members often (though not always) took on the role of performer as well. By occupying both roles, participants collectively contributed to the knowledges and messages produced and validated during the event. As Neeta and countless other poets told me, these knowledges and messages often served as springboards for further discussion, as participants frequently carried on the discussion after the performance ended.

In this way, performance poetry was a type of action-oriented conversation, used to carry out particular functions in the public sphere, namely political acts aimed at social change. Spoken word provided a public forum for poets to have this action-oriented conversation with a broad swath of people, enabling them to communicate their social justice message to a wide audience. Slam, especially, offered poets an opportunity to reach an even broader audience. Grant explained his motivations for getting involved in slam: "A lot of it was also the content that I was dealing with. I felt like I had a message that I wanted people to hear and that slam was a better way for more people to hear what I'm saying."

Yet, poets were also attentive to their audience, and they were aware of the fact that, in their efforts to get their messages across at open mics or slams, they were frequently “preaching to the choir.” As such, poets sought out spaces beyond open mics and slams in order to engage in their communicative action. For example, Derrick talked about finding “viable and productive ways to get audience with people who would not normally be exposed to what I do.” He said:

> That’s why I’m so adamant about this tour I’m trying to set up being less at poetry venues and more in colleges where kids from heartland U.S.A. that need to be exposed to something outside of—that’s why you go to college, to be exposed to different points of views of things so you can finish that process of making yourself a viable citizen of the society, which a viable citizen is someone who questions the way things are and often attempts to make them better as opposed to someone who sustains the status quo…So if we already know that, why are we still talking to each other? Why are we not at churches? Why are we not at business centers? Why are we not at malls or on soapboxes?

Answering his own questions, Derrick told me that part of the reason poets preached to a choir was because it was scary to have a stern opinion about something. Derrick’s point spoke to the fact that, like speaking truths and performing therapy narratives, doing new school activism took courage, particularly when performed to front of audiences in which poets were unsure how their social justice message would be received. Nonetheless, poets used the practice of spoken word as a tool to carry out their new school activism and engage in communicative action strategies aimed at political advocacy, networking, and mobilization.

Tool for Advocacy: Education and Protest

Poets used spoken word as a tool to advocate for various social justice causes, which entailed educating the public about social ills and solutions, and protesting these ills and inadequate solutions. Poets' education efforts mirrored other political education efforts rooted in raising awareness and consciousness through communication and conversation, such as the consciousness-raising groups of the second wave feminist movement (Evans and Boyte 1992). Poets centered their consciousness-raising efforts on social issues related to power and inequality, which addressed a myriad of topics including homelessness, HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, eating disorders, street harassment, LGBT health issues including suicide and cigarette smoking, safe sex practices, reproductive rights, self-esteem and white beauty ideals, gold mining in South Africa, anti-war and peace messages, militarism, a critique of the music industry including hip-hop, disability and ableism, exploitative sweatshop labor, and a failing education system, among many others.

In a similar way that therapy narratives did not center on a single universal healing experience, the poets' political agenda did not revolve around a single issue area or goal. Rather, poets believed that, by raising awareness about a variety of issues, they could change the way people might think about numerous social problems rooted in injustice, all of which were important and deserving of attention. For example, Adrianna hoped that her poetry would change the way people saw disability and understood ableism.

> If I'm on a mic for three minutes or twenty minutes or forty minutes, I have the ability to refocus [the audience's] attention, whether it's specifically on my disability or moving away from that into things that I hope are more universal or not just about the way my body looks like it functions. And whether or not I think I gave a good performance or a good poem…my goal is to have them walk outside, able-bodied or not, and if they see somebody who uses a scooter, or walks like me, that they don't necessarily dismiss that person as their disability, that there's always a lot more going on and my outlet for dealing with myself and my condition, but also ableism in general cause we live in an able-bodied world, is to perform my way in and out of that and through that and to challenge myself but also to challenge them.

Adrianna used her own lived experience, her embodied performance, and spoken word poetry as a way to raise awareness about disability issues and discrimination. By doing so, she sought to change the way people thought about these issues. Ty also spoke to this point:

> There are people who do poems and you would have never thought of this specific subject in that way until they presented it to you that way. And now you kind of have a different outlook on things just based on how they gave it to you…[L]ike there was a poem, the first Nationals I went to, and they were speaking on how all of our smartphones are made in sweatshops and how a lot of people feel like they can't live without their smartphones. And there are people all over the world who are dying, like being treated wrong for using—for making the phones. And it was something I wouldn't never even thought to look into until

> that poem was presented and then it's like, "Okay, now I have something to look into."

Speaking from the perspective of an audience member, Ty explained how he learned about social issues previously unknown to him through spoken word poetry, and how he learned about social issues from new perspectives. Once his awareness of these issues had been raised through poetry, he was prompted to learn more about the issue on his own.

In addition to raising awareness about social issues, poets also used spoken word as a tool for raising awareness about local organizations that addressed social problems. This was evident in various ways. When Neeta hosted her weekly open mic, she invited local non-profits to share information based on the messages that the featured poet spoke about. For example, when Kim featured at Neeta's open mic, a youth representative from Youth AIDS Network spoke about the organization and passed out free condoms. Sister Spoken featured a different local organization at each of their slams and open mics; a representative from the featured organization shared information about their social justice work during the event, and Sister Spoken donated a portion of the money collected from that night's admissions to the organization. In a similar vein, Mia started her own monthly poetry event, with the purpose of raising money and increasing volunteer support for various community organizations around the city.

Whether raising awareness about social problems or the local organizations that aimed to ameliorate these problems, poets interpreted their efforts to use spoken word as a way to educate the general public and advocate for social change to be even more salient given the media's failure to fulfill its democratic mission of educating the masses

about important social issues. In this way, poets understood themselves to have an important obligation to educate their communities. Josh highlighted this role of the poet in his spoken word poem "Art Burn." Here, Josh described poets as "people who speak in truths" and, unlike other artists such as musicians who provide an escape from reality, Josh argued that poets make people confront reality—even when it is uncomfortable—in a way that mass media does not: "But when the TV news / Can pick and choose / What they want us to see / Instead of facts we can use / We need people who speak in truths." In this stanza, Josh pointed to the pedagogical role fulfilled by spoken word poets in light of a slanted media industry.

While poets used spoken word as a form of advocacy to educate the general public, they also targeted their education efforts specifically toward youth, namely teens. In a similar way that the media failed to educate the public, poets felt that the education system failed to educate youth. Performers and hosts recited running jokes at open mics and slams about the poor quality of education offered by D.C. public schools. For example, when hosting Holla Out Loud, Deanna often kept the show rolling between performers or rounds of competition by performing haiku.[52] Prior to performing haiku, poets often primed their audience by saying the word "haiku" before launching into their short series of verse. When Deanna signaled to her audience in this way, she often followed up by joking, "And for those who went to D.C. public schools, haiku is a three-line poem, each line consisting of five, seven, and five syllables, for a total of seventeen syllables." Although everyone laughed, the culture of the joke was telling in that it revealed how poets and audience members were fully aware of the inadequacy of their

[52] Haiku is an important form of spoken word poetry; for example, there is a special Haiku Slam at the National Poetry Slam and D.C. has its own contingency of haiku poets, some of who have come together under the group Haiku Heralds.

public school system. As such, poets believed that spoken word could serve as an important educational outlet, particularly for youth, given the state's failure to do so.

In addition to education, poets also advocated for social justice by using spoken word as a tool for protesting social problems and inadequate social solutions. Nicho described traditional performance poem topics as "clash[ing] with the mainstream," tackling such issues as poverty, police brutality, racism, a critique of the record industry, genocide, and a critique of the corporations that benefit from various atrocities. Spoken word's social critique did not always take on such serious tones, and poets often deployed comedic approaches in order to engage in protest (and impress slam judges). For example, I heard tongue-in-cheek poems critiquing the institutionalization of slam poetry and the commodification of the modern-day bourgeois U.S. yoga movement. The fact that spoken word poetry in D.C. routinely challenged ideas associated with the status quo was not surprising, as the art form has been tied to various "counter-cultural" traditions including those associated with a working-class, anti-establishment, anti-academic ethos (Smith and Kraynak 2009), a history of American popular verse of bourgeois cultural resistance (Somers-Willett 2009), and an African American tradition of oratory protest rooted in lived experience (V. Chepp 2012). Grant, also, described protest as a feature endemic to the art form and he situated spoken word within a larger tradition of political protest when he told me:

> But even just the medium of it, like getting up and screaming a poem…has power in it and I think it has a lot of its roots in protest. In getting up in front of an audience and screaming. And maybe that's just my own bias because I come from that. You know, a lot of my favorite poems are ones that I can get up and do at a

> protest as well as at an open mic. Because it has that power to move people and to make people believe: "OK, we do need to change and I'm going to do something about it."

Grant highlighted the resemblance between a political protest and a spoken word event, and he articulated the ways in which he blurred the boundaries between his artistic and activist work, as his "favorite poems are ones that [he] can get up and do at a protest as well as at an open mic." This passage also points to how Grant saw his artistic performance of "protest" as a political performance as well, in which he believed his performance had the power to "move people" (Eyerman 2006), either in terms of moving them to think and cultivate a critical consciousness (i.e., "make people believe…we do need to change") or move them to act (i.e., "and I'm going to do something about it").

Grant went on to explain how this protest feature of spoken word initially brought him to the art form as a college student, as it offered him a platform to advocate his anti-war message at the time of the Iraq War. Grant located hip-hop within this tradition of social and political protest as well, and he characterized this protest feature of spoken word as being well suited for working with youth.

> I had been doing a lot of anti-war organizing work and I needed a way to reach people. Particularly I was just reaching out to young people who listened to hip-hop who were in that sort of mode and who had more important things in their lives or who saw violence as something cool, which a lot of people do, in this city too, a lot of people see violence as awesome: "How do I get more power? I can go out and kill someone. That gives me power." And so it was very much analyzing that from a perspective and saying, "No, it's actually not cool being a gangster

> and killing people and taking their things, be it oil, house, land, whatever. It's actually much cooler to be protesting, and where hip-hop came from, the roots of speaking out about issues that are affecting our communities."

For Grant, performance poetry was a form of political protest, one that was conducive to critiquing the broader social forces that affected his local community. Grant understood performance poetry and other oratory art forms, namely hip-hop, as a medium through which to "reach people" in order to make claims (Tilly and Tarrow 2007) and "[speak] out about the issues" important to his community. Like other millennial youth activists (Clay 2012), Grant found spoken word and hip-hop to be effective ways to protest social ills and reach out to people, specifically younger people. Through education and protest, poets sought to, as Grant said, "change minds" and raise critical consciousness. This communicative action aimed at offering audiences new knowledges and social perspectives was a necessary precursor to building networks and mobilizing publics or, as Grant said "moving people to act."

Tool for Building Bridges: Allies, Networks, and Infrastructure

Poets also used spoken word as a tool for "building bridges" or, creating allies and building networks. These bridges were not only built around social justice issues and the emotions attached to those issues, but poets also built bridges around personal and artistic experiences and the emotions tied to those experiences. By creating allies and building networks based on friendship, lived experience, emotions, artistic kinship, and political views, poets participated in a larger infrastructure building effort, aimed at maintaining sustainability and longevity for their art and activism.

The conversational element of spoken word was important for building bridges. As with other forms of conversation, this allowed poets to make connections with people, including those who were seemingly different from one another. Nicho spoke to this bridge-building sentiment when I asked him to reflect on the ways that audience members recited his poems in unison with him as he performed.

> I think that goes back to the whole…the bridge building. You know, some of those people probably own my CD. It would be synonymous to a rapper or a singer that you enjoy their work and maybe there's an event going on that you decide to be a part of that, as a rapper or a singer, they come and are a part of that event. So they do some material that the rest of the crowd might not be familiar with but you, being familiar with their work, like they start to sing a song and you're in the back singing along and people are like, "How do you know this?"…So I compare it to that. I'm flattered. And I hope that whatever they were reciting, it's beneficial to them. I'm hoping that they're reciting it when I'm not around, when I'm not on stage, when I'm not sharing. I'm hoping that it's impacted them enough that when they're in their kitchen doing dishes, I'm hoping that it pops in their head then.

Much of Nicho's poetry was overtly political and highly, albeit artistically, critical of white supremacy and capitalism, among other structures of power. His poetry also contained strong themes about spirituality and a higher being. Nicho described his search for a space to write, "where everything overlaps," because this would "give [him] the ability to communicate with people of all walks of life." Nicho understood his poetry as a

way to make connections with different groups of people, who came from different backgrounds and had different perspectives of the world.

Similarly, Angela used the metaphor of a bridge to describe spoken word's ability to build connections among seemingly disparate groups of people. She said, "So, because poetry for me is about human connection, I need the poems to continue to build the bridge to this movement. It's how people get here," and went on to illustrate how, "my sharing [of] my experience builds connection." In doing so, Angela sought to discover "the common human thread" between her experiences and those of others', "irrespective of the things that normally would separate us: gender, class, race, those sorts of things."

Ty also evoked spoken word's communicative powers and ability to connect people. Describing spoken word as "communal art," Ty said this connectivity occurred because of the art form's ability to make messages relatable. Echoing Josh's and other poets' claims about the spoken word poet's responsibility toward truth and social justice, Ty said this relatable quality should instill a sense of obligation in the poet to use the art form to promote social good.

> There's a certain responsibility when you're out there [performing]. Poetry—it's a very communal art. It brings people together, and especially with spoken word, it's a very communal art that people connect to. And when you know that, it kind of makes it hard for you to not give them something that you feel like they could benefit from and they could kind of get something from. And so yeah, like, every so often now, I do poetry in schools and things of that nature, and it's a good tool to kind of just get the lines of communication going. Whereas like, even just growing up and youth-wise, there are people who, on an ordinary basis, they may

> not talk about their family issues. But if you bring it up in a poem in a way that they can relate to, they might come up to you. They'd be like, "You know what, that poem really touched me. My father is this... My mother is this..." x, y, z, and it just kind of gets the lines of communication open.

By leveraging the communal and communicative qualities of spoken word, poets used the art form to build bridges and create community.

Poets understood this community building process as a political project, in that they sought to establish a larger social change infrastructure within the D.C. spoken word community that could provide the framework and sustainability for their activism. Similar to the emotional capacity they built through collective healing, poets built their own structural capacity to create the space that made their work possible. By doing so, poets laid the foundation for a creativity and activist infrastructure. This entailed putting new structures in place, and leveraging existing ones, in order to facilitate creativity among their community, promote their art form, and advance their political agenda.

The extensive work that poets did to establish a robust teen spoken word scene was evidence of the new structures that poets implemented in order to build this infrastructure. This included their work to bring Louder Than a Bomb to the District, as well as their nurturing of a strong teen slam scene. As Micah said, by getting the younger generation involved in this cultural practice aimed at social change, "the message never dies" and the social justice work via creative artistic expression becomes a "passion" that people "need to do for the rest of their lives." In addition to serving as a source of income and/or artistic credential (thereby allowing poets to do this work in a sustainable way), poets' work with youth helped to cultivate a new cadre of local leaders in the scene. I

watched several of the youth poets "graduate" from teen status and transition into their own hosting, coaching, and feature poet positions that were held by young adult poets.

I also saw evidence of how poets' work with youth served to politicize the younger generation, either by introducing new political ideas or fostering ideas already held by the youth. For example, at LTAB-DMV in 2012, the high school team that Hannah coached got eliminated by a fraction of a point in their semi-final bout. Hannah was very close with her team of all-girl poets. Serving as their coach for the second consecutive year, I watched as Hannah and the girls routinely exchanged hugs, or posted photos and statements of affection for one another on Facebook and Twitter. Since they had been eliminated, the girls served as calibration poets on the LTAB-DMV final stage, just prior to third round of competition.[53] Preparing to perform a team piece in front of an audience of hundreds, the girls lined up in a horizontal line, facing the audience, each one behind a microphone stand. A young white woman in a flannel shirt introduced herself to the audience by stating her name. To her left was a young black woman donning a headscarf and long skirt. She stepped to the mic and said her name. The next two women went down the line and did the same. After the fourth poet, a young Indian woman, stated her name, she followed up by saying, "We're representing Jackson High School and the name of this poem is 'A Letter to Girlhood from Walt Disney.'" The poem was an outspoken feminist critique of the sexist images and messages delivered to young girls through powerful, yet seemingly innocuous, socialization mechanisms such as Walt Disney cartoons. Being very familiar with Hannah's work, I could see how her coaching

[53] In every slam, a poet or team of poets serves as a calibration mechanism. This performance is not a part of the competition, but it allows judges to have an opportunity to score a performance, and judges are instructed to score every subsequent performance in the competition against this benchmark.

and guidance likely shaped the young women's poetry, as well as their political consciousness. Time and again, I saw evidence of this type of youth politicization via poetry, in which poets' work with youth served to instill a burgeoning commitment to social critique and social change via spoken word.

The Spoken Word Awards (SWA) was another, yet very different, example of poets establishing new structures to foster sustainability of their art and their activism. In collaboration with his wife, who was also a poet, Nicho founded the SWA's in 2003. Coined "the Grammy's for Poets," SWA was a well-publicized, sponsored event where poets dressed up and gathered together for a night of dinner, awards, and dancing. Prior to the ceremony, registered SWA members could nominate others for various awards, and members of the public then voted to determine the winners. Marketed as a national event, the ceremony attendees and nominees were heavily represented by poets from the East Coast, and predominantly the DMV. Awards were given for such things as: Best Writer Male/Female (Angela won the female category in 2011), Best Spokenword Performance Male/Female (Ty 2010; Mia 2010; Angela 2011), Best Spokenword Performance Youth (must be under 21), Poetry Book of the Year (Kim 2011), Spokenword Album of the Year (Marcus 2011), Most Inspirational Poet, Host of the Year (Marcus 2010), Best Venue (Speaking 'N Tongues 2010, 2012), Haiku Award (Micah 2010), and Community Oriented Poet (Grant 2010, 2011).

During our interview, Nicho talked about the SWA's explicitly from a community-building standpoint, and from the political perspective that poets must maintain control of spoken word to prevent its cooptation and ensure its sustainability as a mechanism for social change.

> I think the only way over that hump [referring to challenges of commercial success in spoken word because ideas tend clash with the mainstream], it would really require the artists themselves, the ones who have been successful at it, who have been able to create a measure of success for themselves. They would have to set up the organization that made it possible for other poets. Because it's an art form they believe in… So I think it's going to require people within the spoken word community to make it happen… Spoken word is in a process of building its own economy and it would benefit us to be on the business side of that. And that's really what SWA, the awards show, is about. It's encouraging artists to recognize the power that they have where they are. The things that they can do.

In a follow-up interview, Nicho elaborated on what he sought to accomplish with the awards ceremony.

> One of the things that is missing from spoken word overall is a collective organization. It's essentially—it's an industry that has no structure and one of the reasons, the primary reason that the awards show exists is to encourage building that structure by the artists themselves instead of waiting for someone to come along, some other organization already established in other business ventures that just turns and looks one day and says, "Hey, look at all these poets running around in circles with nothing to do. Let's step in and organize them and throw some money at them." We could be the Russell Simmons and the Quincy Jones of our art form but we have to take control of it now before it's in the stages of producing millions of dollars. We're going to have to be the ones to do that. And that is the reason why I am so adamant about this awards show existing…The

> award is to encourage the participants in the art form as a collective to kind of figure out what their overall role is and then let's start moving as such.

Nicho established the SWA's so as to empower poets to maintain control of their own art form so it would not get co-opted (and depoliticized) by an outside entity.

Moreover, like their participation on slam teams and their work with youth, the awards show also provided poets with a professional credential opportunity, in that an award was an institutionalized mechanism that could further legitimate their work. This professionalization interest was expressed by Grant when he explained why he got involved with slam: "There was a large idea in my mind that [slam] was a springboard in terms of getting yourself known…it's a way of getting yourself known or getting other deals or creating a career out of being an artist, which is not easy these days. Especially for poets. Especially for spoken word poets." Grant articulated a common sentiment among the poets in that spoken word (and slam specifically) was not only a useful platform from which to circulate a social justice message and reach a broader audience, but it was also an effective vehicle for networking and establishing an artistic career.

The professionalization opportunities brought on by this infrastructure helped poets to do their activist work. For example, Kim used poetry and her professional poetry status as an organizing concept for a new HIV/AIDS activist organization that she was spearheading, Poetry Mission.

> It's going to be an organization in which I use my public status, or whatever you want to call it, to do things for my activism. So like, if somebody wants me to come perform somewhere, then I can go under Poetry Mission and whatever proceeds I get from that, I can put it into the account for Poetry Mission and use

> that for nonprofit, or whatever I want to do with that. So that's what Poetry Mission is. And eventually, I plan to have other poets under that umbrella and just do it like that…[P]oets who use their poetry for a purpose.

Kim went on to explain how she connects poetry and activism.

> [T]hat's where my activism started, through poetry. I mean I was doing things before, like I had planned to start a nonprofit way before I started performing poetry, but as far as actively doing things, poetry is where I got started…Because people hear [my poems] "Dandelions" or " I Know What HIV Looks Like," and they're like, "Yes, I want you to speak at my event." So that's how it happens. [*So it's because of a poem that you've been invited to participate more in these activist things?*] Right…So I use poetry as, yes, a way to open doors for me. And I honestly, honestly, honestly did not plan to be here. Didn't think that for me, spitting a poem at Speaking 'N Tongues, that I would be where I am today. I honestly didn't. I mean I knew that I wanted attention from people at Speaking 'N Tongues, but I never imagined that people in other states would know my name without me even knowing them. That's crazy to me.

Kim flashed a wide smile. I asked her to tell me more about how exactly poetry helped her do her HIV/AIDS advocacy work.

> It just opens doors. It helps people know who I am. And so most of the shows that I have coming up, I just invite people who know me and people who know that I am willing and open enough to share my story. So it just—poetry does wonders. People know me. So it's like, I can guarantee some shows around December 1st [on World AIDS Day]. I just know that that's going to happen because people

> know me and so people are going to say "Hey, I need an HIV positive poet."…I feel like there's a need for somebody like me. And I feel like that because I didn't have anybody. I didn't have anybody with Magic Johnson's [status] to be like, "Oh, you know what? They're in the public eye, and they're making it." So I feel like since I didn't have that, then I could be that for somebody else…But I still don't feel like [Magic Johnson] uses his HIV status to really reach people like me. I still feel like he's not a model for me because he's a sports dude. He talks about sports all the time. I follow him on Twitter. So all he talks about is sports. I mean his anniversary of the day he came out publicly with his status just passed. They were talking about that for a little while, but he doesn't do anything specifically for AIDS and HIV. I mean he does a lot. He does, and I give him that, but we don't have a public figure that's just specifically for AIDS and HIV. You know what I mean? And if we do, it's like Alicia Keys and she is not HIV positive…So I want to be that person. So that's what I want to be.

Kim used her public status as a poet, which was facilitated by the professionalization opportunities cultivated by the larger infrastructure that D.C. poets established, in order to bring attention to her HIV/AIDS activist goals and organization. She compared this strategy to those of other celebrities who leveraged their publicity status as a way to bring attention to social problems, and Kim spoke specifically in terms of poetry being a gateway to activism.

In addition to establishing new structures, poets also leveraged existing structures in order to cultivate an activist infrastructure organized around creativity. They did this by drawing upon local venues already committed to art and social change to host and

bring attention to their events. These community venues served as a type of “free space” (Polletta 1999) in that they perceived themselves to be community institutions that supported counter-hegemonic ideas and identities, where members could dialogue and cultivate a political agenda. Excerpts from the venues’ mission statements illustrate this point:

> The Poets’ Place is a community where racial and cultural connections are consciously uplifted...a place to take a deliberate pause and feed your mind, body and soul...a space for art, culture and politics to intentionally collide...we believe that by creating such a space we can inspire social change and begin to transform our community and the world. (Venue for Holla Out Loud)
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> *
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> Both innovative and old-school wisdom, Artistic Sanction is turning a concept to unite communities through the arts into a model for energizing and inspiring communities to strive for personal and collective progress….Our vision is a global network of Artistic Sanction-like spaces that serve as a training ground for a new generation of change agents who believe in the transformational power of art to affect positive growth in the community…We believe art has a critical role in community building, social justice, advocacy, youth development, and health and wellness…We believe art can be a powerful conduit to link individuals inspired to serve, and communities and organizations in need. (Venue for The Poetry Den)
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> *

> The Arcade is an art gallery, performance space, music venue and classroom…Our mission is to foster creativity and community dialogue by serving as a conduit for expression through the arts and providing exhibition space to emerging and established artists. From exhibitions by well-known artists to shows by our local youth, The Arcade is dedicated to making the arts accessible to everyone. (Venue for Slam DMV)

Given their compatible social justice objectives, poets capitalized on these community spaces, complete with their own resources and networks, as institutional locations for their own political activity and consciousness-raising. In this way, poets leveraged existing structures, and established new ones, in order to cultivate their own artist-activist infrastructure that was, in turn, well primed to engage and mobilize in efforts for social change.

Tool for Engagement and Mobilization

Poets also used spoken word as a tool for political engagement and mobilization. This political function entailed getting others involved in social justice issues, encouraging people to "think and do something differently," donating money to a cause, organization, or venue (sometimes referred to as a "love donation"), or embarking on a journey of self-healing and self-love. Here, poets focused on action, or using performance to "move" people (Eyerman 2006), and specifically, to move them to think and act differently. As Grant claimed, spoken word "has that power to move people and to make people believe: 'OK, we do need to change and I'm going to do something about it.'" Using spoken word to advocate for messages rooted in social justice and to build an

activist infrastructure, poets aimed to mobilize this politicized, informed, and organized community on behalf of progressive social change. In this way, poets often called upon their audiences and each other to move beyond speaking truths and raising awareness, and they emphasized the importance of taking action. I observed this call to action countless times and in various ways, from Grant telling teenage poets at a workshop to "put down our pens and do something"[54] to Kevin underscoring the importance of actively recruiting marginalized voices to participate in the art form.[55]

In their effort to move people to think differently or, raise consciousness, poets tied this shift in epistemological orientation to a type of political action. Indeed, Grant told me, "The best poems…are the ones that make people think differently about a subject. The ones that make you reconsider something and make you want to do something about your life—do something different than you would have before." Poets' often cited objective to "inspire" their community through their art reflected this political goal. For example, Nicho spoke frequently about his desire to inspire others, describing this as *the* central objective of his artistic work:

> All I care is if I can inspire you to want to become more than you are—enough that you actually move on it. Then I've done what I was there to do. And I don't need to be credited with making a person's life better. I feel like if I influence someone, and then they influence someone, then, if enough people are

[54] Grant said this at a youth-centered panel at the Still I Rise Poetry Festival in 2011. The panel was organized as a fishbowl event, where teen poets sat at the center and talked about various social issues, while adults sat on the outside of the circle and listened. At this time, the Trayvon Martin case dominated the headlines and was a theme of many poems in the D.C. poetry community. Referencing the case, Grant asked the youth, "Is my Trayvon Martin poem going to stop someone from getting stopped (by the cops)? As poets, do we gotta put our pens down and do something?" The youth collectively shouted in response, "Yes!"

[55] Kevin focused his efforts especially on LGBTQ voices.

influenced…that just proves to me that the world is better and hopefully that karma is working itself out.

Nicho recognized the ability for performance to move someone (Eyerman 2006) in order to become "more than you are." He saw this ability for spoken word to inspire people and make people's lives better as having a ripple effect, thereby eventually making the world better. Notably, this objective to inspire the community through art was similarly reflected in the venues' mission statements and was institutionally recognized and valued through the SWA Most Inspirational Poet award.

Working on behalf of the larger community by taking action was often described by poets as an obligation or duty to "give back" to the community. Deanna expressed this sentiment when she described in detail the wide range of community projects in which she and her poet friends were involved. This included working with women's empowerment groups, battered women's shelters, youth groups, HIV activism, and safe sex education and condom distribution. "And so it's like, we're all community-oriented," she told me. "A lot of people just see us when we hit the stage but if you're a poet and you don't help out in the community, I don't think you're really a poet." Deanna highlighted this community service and social justice work as part and parcel to being a spoken word poet. As highlighted above, mobilizing teens, in particular, served as a core feature of poets' activism; in addition to working with youth through slam, poets also frequently conducted poetry workshops in schools around the city.

Some poets were also commissioned to write and perform their poetry for special events and projects centered on social justice. For example, Angela was commissioned to perform a poem at the Dentistry Association's annual meeting. The Association did pro

bono work for victims of partner violence, a service that Angela spotlighted in a poem that highlighted the power of smiling (i.e., showing your teeth) and changing someone else's day. Like Nicho's ripple effect, Angela's message centered around the power of how interpersonal social change could lead to broader scale social change. Aaron was commissioned to write and perform a poem in a documentary film on the gold mining industry in South Africa in order to raise awareness about how the industry feeds the country's tuberculosis and HIV epidemic. In such instances, poets used spoken word and their status as a poet to convey a social justice perspective on a social problem.

Collectively, these efforts served as politically oriented actions aimed at social change, facilitated through spoken word's ability to move, inspire, and institutionally support artist-activist work. While some of the poets' political actions were consistent with more recognizable forms of political activism, such as when they performed poetry at Occupy D.C. or Campus Progress events, poets also carried out their activism in less politically recognizable ways, such as coaching youth slam teams, inspiring their community to be better, or drawing upon their own experiential knowledge in a spoken word poem in order to raise awareness about social problems and solutions.

Accessible Art, Accessible Activism

It was nearing the end of our interview and, by this time, Angela and I had fully picked through the snack plate I laid out for us with cheese, crackers, and apple slices. In response to one of my final questions that pertained to a workshop she organized and facilitated at the 2011 National Poetry Slam entitled "Slam as a Safe Space?," Angela described spoken word as a "Swiss Army knife." Specifically, I had referenced a line

from the workshop's description posted on Facebook (*This workshop will engage the community in: a commitment to working toward dismantling all oppression as it exists in our community; practicing and supporting each other in creating space to engage multiple perspectives effectively; empowering each other with tools and fellowship in support of sustaining this tireless work*), and I asked Angela: "Do you think spoken word has the power to dismantle oppression?" Angela smiled and said, "That's a big task for such a little art form." I laughed and offered her an opportunity to move on, "You can say 'pass.'" Never one to shy away from tough conversations, especially ones that involved discussions about power and privilege, Angela said:

> No, I will tackle this one. I believe that humans have the power to dismantle oppression. I think that spoken word can be one of the many tools that go into that work. Unto itself, no. Because unto itself a clarinet can't play music; it's only about how people use it. So I think that if people chose to use this as a tool for that work, then it absolutely can be done…I think in some ways it's: What is the right tool for the right job? I feel like this art form is sort of like the Swiss Army knife of tools. It can do lots of different things depending on what you want to use it for. So that's where its utility lies. It has lots of tentacles if we engage them.

As shown throughout this chapter, poets found spoken word to be a useful tool for carrying out their social justice advocacy, networking, and mobilization work. The democratic and artistic features of the art form effectively made this activity an "accessible" form of political engagement. Characterizing spoken word as "public art," David, the owner of The Arcade, explained: "[Public] art is outside and I mean, free to look at, I guess. But it doesn't have to just be outside. You know, it could be anything

from the Washington Monument to the mural that we just painted under the highway overpass where the kids go to skate." Like other artistic sites in the public sphere, spoken word poetry spaces were easily accessible to a wide spectrum of people. Specifically, poets spoke about the art form's accessibility in terms of its welcoming cultural ethos and open organizational structure.

First, spoken word culture was accessible in that it projected a democratic "everyone belongs" ethos. Micah explained how this ethos was embraced at Speaking 'N Tongues.

> [W]e look at Speaking 'N Tongues as a movement, and not just an event. The idea behind Speaking 'N Tongues is to create a culture where folks feel accepted. Like, first and foremost, when you create a culture, that culture doesn't die. Like, culture is something that survives no matter what the situation is. You have to eradicate everyone that is a part of that culture for that culture to die…Marcus and I never sat down and said, "Yes, let's make this the all encompassing, all people open mic." But the fact that it's always been $5 or less, it's always been Metro accessible, we've tried to have a balance of features from D.C. as well as features from around the country. And then we always try to mix it up, like, we'll do things that are brand new that are on our heart. And we'll also do tried and true pieces to make sure that the energy is—we try to balance out the energy. And we always talk about current events and try to keep it lively…Another thing: since we're doing the event and we don't make any money off of it—like Marcus and I don't make any money off of it unless we sell books or CDs or scarves

> ourselves—so it's as close to having people get together on a corner doing poetry as you can be without blocking us out, walking, and getting arrested.

By creating an environment based on cultural values of acceptance, belonging, and support, the art form was accessible in that members felt as though they were not blocked from participating in this community.

Micah also spoke to the art form's accessibility in terms of its open organizational structure. Deploying imagery from the public urban landscape, namely the street corner, Micah characterized spoken word as it happened at Speaking 'N Tongues in public art terms. Consistent with David's description, Micah referenced the open mic's geographical accessibility in that it was reach-able via public transit, but he also referenced its economic accessibility, in that was monetarily affordable. Notably, Micah employed the political language of a "movement" to describe this artistic event's accessibility. Neeta offered a similar analysis of The Poet's Den, also focusing on the open mic's cultural and structural accessibility:

> I feel probably the role this place plays, especially right now, in our community—all it takes is standing out on the sidewalk on a weekend night when all around us, you know, there's a lot of foot traffic, there's a lot of bars, activity around that, but there's this place where anyone can come in, you know, you're not going to get turned away if you don't have any cash on you, like that's not the point. Come in for two hours. Come in for twenty minutes. Whatever. Kids can come in and hang out. It's accessible to everyone. And we really try, and we can always do a better job of it, but we really try to bring in a lot of variety as well. And engage

> with different aspects of the artistic community broadly, [and] the D.C. community broadly.

In both cases, Micah and Neeta spoke to the accessible nature of their respective open mic formats.

In addition to geographic and economic accessibility, other structural features made the art form accessible. Open mics took place frequently and were cheap, easy, "no frills" events to produce. One did not have to audition or go through a screening process in order to perform poetry for an audience. In fact, a performer didn't even need to have any prior experience to get up and perform a poem. Angela talked about how this accessibility was influential in her own experience of finding spoken word.

> There was an absolute adrenaline rush. There's an immediate gratification response in being on a stage and sharing something and having people validate you right there in that moment. That, as a stage performer, I live for it. That's been sort of part of my identity since I was a very little girl. Also, at that point I had been very separated from that. I hadn't been doing anything artistically. So it was this moment of, "Oh, wait. I can have art again? I can have art cheap? I can have art local and mediated? There's this way that I can bring that back into my life without auditioning and facing the disappointment all the time?" There's just this sort of egalitarian space that open mics invite that are not necessarily in other sectors of performance.

Like Angela, Curtis also spoke to the accessible and "egalitarian" nature of the art form, as spoken word offered him, as a performer of color, access to alternative creative spaces.

> In American theater, there's only a handful of playwrights of color or poets of color who make it to the academic banquet table, and some of them are not deserving. Some of them are. So I feel—the poetry slam exists out of pure—there's no academy. There's no television network. I mean, it is almost clean. It is devoid of any kind of, "This is what you should [do]." It's not McSweeney's journal. It's not that. It's such a democratic process and anyone can do it. Like, you could be any ethnicity, have any kind of disability, and you will have as much an equal shot. And I think that that's why I've done it.

In this way, spoken word performance poetry offered an accessible space for writers and performers who had been marginalized from other artistic spaces, either due to geographic or economic constraints, or social discrimination. Curtis pointed to the art form's *detachment* from academia and establishment journals—i.e., art world markers of success (Becker 1982)—as that which has made this cultural practice accessible to more people.

The D.C. spoken word community understood its robustness and vibrancy to rely on this democratization, and mass participation was highly valued. The accessibility and democratic properties provided a powerful outlet and platform for marginalized voices and progressive politics. When I asked Grant why spoken word culture was so politically left of center, and often far left, he said:

> We're able to analyze things in a way that really comes from a people's perspective, not from the top down. Poetry, especially slam poetry compared to page poetry, is not something that has been institutionalized in a way, like in academia. It's very grassroots, it's very from the bottom-up. You don't have to

> have any experience. You don't have to ever have performed ever in your life and you can get up and kill the best artist ever. And it's very democratic in that way. And it also gives power to people who often in this society don't have much power, because all you need is your voice and your story and your art. Whereas in page poetry, in academia and in things like that, you know, if you don't have an MFA or something, they don't care about your manuscript or whatever. I don't know, it's just so different. It's coming from a perspective where there's many more poor people, or working-class people, or just regular people doing slam poetry, than there are writing the laws of our society or sitting on high courts or things like that where, you know, you get this top-down perspective where the people in power write history and control what we learn and what we know. And so with slam poetry we're sort of reversing that and saying, "No, we're telling our own history. We're telling our own stories."

As was typical among these new school activist poets, Grant talked fluidly about art and activism; indeed, offering an implicit comparison, he spoke about exclusionary art forms and exclusionary political participation in the same sentence. For these poets and other "regular people" doing poetry, spoken word offered an accessible outlet for participants to simultaneously carry out their creative expression and activist work.

The poets' new school activism was characterized by its cultural and everyday focus. Their activism did not take place in official political institutions, but rather in easy to access cultural institutions located in the public sphere. Describing the ease and access of donating money at her monthly art charity event, Mia said, "It's right there," referring to the way in which a hat was passed around the room for donations while spoken word

was performed (the same fundraising technique was practiced at Speaking 'N Tongues). These donations would never be deducted on tax forms, nor would the giver ever receive public recognition for their gift (nor, similarly, would the non-donor receive public shame or guilt). The amount and visibility of the donation was low, which made engagement in the process easy and accessible.

There were no clear boundaries between the poets' political engagement and non-political activities. Their activist work was integrated into their daily lives and everyday practices. In this way, there was no single definition of what "counted" as being political. Their daily tweeting, open mic poetry performances, or "love donations" could all easily constitute social justice activism. Given this dynamic definition, this concept of politics was contingent, and this feature of new school activism was reflected in the poets' understanding of spoken word as a multifaceted tool for doing activist work. This tool allowed for various contingencies; as Angela said, the art form had numerous "tentacles" that could be used to engage audiences in different ways.

This new school activism was non-linear and non-hierarchical. There was no single political goal toward which the poets marched in a continuous or successive fashion (e.g., change Policy X, or elect Candidate Y), nor was there a single political figurehead. Unlike top-down approaches to political work, knowledges, experiences, and political agenda items in new school activist projects were validated from the community rather than from a single leader or expert. This approach to doing political work reflected the Internet environment in which this millennial generation lived and interacted: like web-based networks, new school activist networks and social change efforts were grounded in relational, non-linear, non-hierarchical logic structures.

These new school activist poets were highly attentive to the importance of process and praxis for social justice projects. For example, the poets were more concerned with the creative process rather than the artistic end product. Similarly, they were more interested in cultivating an accessible community spaces in which people could practice—i.e., "do"—art, healing, knowledge building, and social justice work. Their interest in praxis was reflected in the ways that they privileged and valued the lived experience and the subjective knowledges that emerged from these experiences. These new school activists welcomed the multiplicity of experiences, identities, and subjectivities in order to engage in a robust political public discourse. In doing so, poets leveraged difference—rather than commonality—to build political networks and coalitions.

Finally, this approach to social justice operated from an understanding that change happened when people were healthy, self-fulfilled individuals who had easy access to expressive, supportive outlets. In this way, poets were astutely aware of the political potential of radical healing (Ginwright 2010), and they realized that healthy individuals made for healthy communities. Given this perspective, the poets' new school activism emphasized the importance of healing, acceptance, personal growth, inspiration, and love; this love entailed a love for the self and for others in the community. This approach to healing and personal growth was not rooted in a modern, Western, neo-liberal, individualistic vision of self-help; rather it was an approach to social change and healing that was local and communal in scope.

Using spoken word as a medium to educate and speak truth, poets sought to change minds and move people to act. In doing so, poets presented a model for doing

activism in the new millennium, one in which art and activism were not separated, and one's identity and lived experience remained central to the activist pursuit, albeit in ways that deviated from the identity movements of the twentieth century.

Looking Ahead: The New Identity Politics

In February 2011, Angela posted a picture of herself to her Facebook page. The picture was one that she had taken with her cell phone, as she was getting ready for a performance one night. The "selfie" depicted Angela in front of a mirror, her eyes casted downward looking at her reflection in a hot pink phone that she held in her left hand; her other hand seductively yet casually perched on her right hip. She was wearing a tight, sexy black corset and black underwear, which accentuated her full, curvy figure and pronounced cleavage. Angela described how the decision process that led her to post the sexy picture in such a public way blossomed into the creation of Body Pride. In part, she had been inspired by a nude photo of plus-size super model Tara Lynn from the 2010 April issue of French *Elle*, which went viral.

> I really liked the picture. I was like, "I look really hot in this picture," but I had a tremendous amount of shame about the idea of sharing it. It felt like I'd be judged. Either people would think I was arrogant or people would think that I was unattractive or, like, I'm too big to have this on or put this out there. There were all of these "you're not good enough" [statements] that were showing up around it…I decided [one] night that I was going to post the picture. I wrote like, "Tara Lynn inspired me to post this picture and I encourage everybody else to post the picture where you feel sexy, you feel good about yourself." I woke up in the

> morning and there were 80 comments under the picture and hundreds of people that liked it. I was just, "Wait a minute!" Lots of people had starting posting pictures of themselves…[and] tagging themselves and these pictures. I was like, "Okay, there is something here. People are looking for an opportunity to feel good about themselves." Just the invitation to feel good about yourself is all that folks needed. The invitation to say, "Hey, how about you just revel in your own personal beauty for a minute?" People were all over it.

Based on this response, Angela set up a Facebook page to collect the pictures that people were tagging. She called the page Body Pride, based on the title of a poem she had written the previous summer. In addition to tagging and sharing people's pictures on the page, she posted daily affirmation, "Just little things to remind people to feel good about themselves.…Then it just started growing."

To date, Body Pride has over 30,000 Facebook followers from around the world. Angela described this homegrown social justice project as "an international movement focused on radical self-love and body empowerment."

> Basically, it's the idea that however it is that we exist on this planet in our physical, mental, and spiritual selves, that that's okay. Despite whatever attacks come against us to tell us that it is not. Despite the sort of machine that makes a lot of money off of us hating ourselves, that it's a radical notion to decide that we don't, and that there are lots of different ways in which we can participate in engaging in radical unapologetic self-love. I think that what distinguishes Body Pride from other sort of self-esteem movements is it really seeks to be broad in its perspective of body. So it is a movement that is about size and not only about

> size, about race and not only about race, about sexual identity and not only about sexual identity, and about physical ability and not only about physical ability. So it really is the idea that whatever body it is that you are in, irrelevant of color or size or ability or sexual desire or whatever it is, that your body is still beautiful. That anything that we do to our body is sustainable. Lasting, positive change can only be built on a foundation of love; you cannot sustain positive change in a body that you hate.

Thus, while Body Pride was about identity and the bodies we live in, it was "broad in its perspective," at once a movement about size, race, sexual identity, and physical ability, but "not only" about these things. Such a perspective laid the foundation for a new type of coalition building, one in which people organized not around a specific identity group, but rather around a more experiential approach to love and injustice. Here, people's universal experiences with discrimination, shame, stigma, and inequality—irrespective of their race, gender, class, and other identity categories—was the motivation for coming together and participating in this radical self-love social change movement. In this way, Body Pride served as a unique new school activist model that simultaneously privileged identity and transcended identity, thereby providing a vehicle for building bridges across difference while still recognizing members' shared interests. In addition to advocacy and bridge building, Body Pride mobilized people; here, people took actions that challenged dominant portrayals of beauty and self-worth, such as engaging in 30-day Radical Healing Projects or publicly posting pictures to Facebook in an act of shame resistance.

While previous responses to combating inequality through a narrow identity politics framework can come across as unnecessary or passé given the complex and multifaceted nature of modern day inequality, identity and the systems of power and discrimination organized around identity categories are still very relevant. Body Pride and other new school activist projects practiced by D.C. poets incorporated the political power of identity in their social justice work. Although the role of identity was salient in these poets' politics, it differed from previous understandings of identity politics in that poets offered a model for activism rooted in an intersectional conception of identity, which sought to bridge differences and build coalitions around love and affect.

These young adults' intersectional approach to identity politics reflected their approach to activism more broadly: non-linear, complex, and relational. Like hooks' (1995) beloved community and Ginwright's (2010) radical healing, this new school approach to identity politics is potentially powerful when human connections and coalitions are established around particular lived experiences rooted in *different* identities (see also Cohen 1997). Such a perspective can transcend potentially divisive identity politics and reconceptualize the strategic uses of identity in the service of a more robust democratic politics.

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Leading up to Martin Luther King Day in January 2013, the Chicago-based online Black Youth Project posted a blog piece entitled, "The Radical Power of Ordinariness."[56] In it, the post's young author Aaron writes: "We must not underestimate the power of our ordinariness. To honor the unexceptional people who fought and continue to fight with

[56] See http://www.blackyouthproject.com/2013/01/the-radical-power-of-ordinariness/

us, we must realize that every act of love can be transformative. We can enact robust and exceptional change, in the most mundane of ways." Aaron's quote is representative of the same millennial, new school ethos around social change that I documented in Washington, D.C., in which social change was pursued in non-social movement, everyday ways. Specifically, poets' everyday engagement with spoken word poetry, and the healing, love, and creative expression fostered by this participation, served as a model for social change.

Scholars of youth politics have drawn attention to the importance of recognizing forms of political engagement that deviate from social movement politics and other traditional forms of political participation. This entails recognizing how such everyday acts as speaking truths and self-healing can be sites of political radicalism and social change. Founder of the Black Youth Project and political scholar Cathy Cohen (2010) writes of her own work on youth politics: "Although this book is about the political lives of young black people, the boundaries of what counts as politics is always in dispute (or at least should be)" (3). In this study, I interrogated the boundaries of, as Cohen says, what counts as politics, specifically among young adults. I focused my attention on non-traditional spaces to explore contemporary youth politics, directing my analytic focus on young adult artists engaged in cultural spaces organized around artistic creativity. In doing so, I discovered the deeply political contours of artistic creativity as practiced by this group of young poets.

In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I illustrate how the key findings of this research shed light on contemporary youth politics. I explore how properties unique

to artistic and creative domains enhanced poets' ability to carry out their new school activist goals.

Chapter 6: Toward A Creative Politics: Creating Art, Creating Change

"I believe creativity in any form provides people with a necessary catalyst to change how they see themselves, to engage in their communities, to evolve."
- Adrianna, D.C. spoken word poet

The Prettier the Wine, the Harder the Punch

It was a sunny and warm summer afternoon when Derrick spoke about reconciling the Cartesian duality between truth and beauty. Admittedly, he didn't talk about it in exactly those terms. He never referenced the famous French philosopher René Descartes by name, nor did he deploy philosophical jargon like "dualism." However, as we sat on his basement couch in a house that he shared with several roommates, Derrick spoke to longstanding debates about aesthetics and knowledge, objectivity and subjectivity, mind and body, and how spoken word poetry—as it was practiced by young adults in Washington, D.C.—cut across and complicated these dualisms. Describing poets as "the voice of the aware," he explained:

> [I]t is a responsibility of artists and art to not just reflect, but from time to time encourage, the culture that they're a part of to grow. Most of our art—the majority of the 200 channels on television, if not 199 of them, are either playing to the basest part of our humanity or making us stupider. So I feel there is a certain academic nature to poetry, in particular, that allows the mind when hearing it, to expect to be challenged, as opposed to going to an art event where someone is

> making a sculpture or something, and the mind is looking for beauty. And you can hear a poem and say that line was beautiful, but innately I feel like you're going to a [poetry] reading expecting to hear something. And a lot of times if there's no music involved you don't think of a person talking to you as beautiful, but it can be. That whole thing: the prettier the wine, the harder the punch. It's just a different expectation when listening to poetry—than even listening to music—that is political in nature.

Like other poets in this study, Derrick believed that spoken word artists had a responsibility to educate the community. Most mainstream media failed in this regard and actually made people "stupider" and less critical of the information they consumed. However, Derrick went on to caution that poets must acknowledge an audience's desire to be entertained as well, and he characterized this as "find[ing] a balance" between education and entertainment or, in Cartesian terms, knowledge and aesthetics.

Yet, this task for the spoken word artist was not an either/or phenomenon, a situation where poets must find equal parts "truth" and "beauty" in their art. Rather, as documented throughout this dissertation, poets' conceptions of truth and knowledge cut across traditional Cartesian dualities that place objectivity and truth in contrast to subjectivity and aesthetics: the mind versus the emotional body. For these young artists, truth was necessarily subjective, of both the mind and the body. Poets' artistic work constituted "truth" by contributing to knowledges missing from dominant discourses, relying on an embodied performance, subjective lived experience, and an emotionally charged aesthetic mode of communication to do so.

By asserting that people "expect to be challenged" *and* "look for beauty" when attending a spoken word performance, Derrick highlighted the political nature of how truth and beauty, and objectivity and subjectivity, coalesced in this art form. The creative, beautiful, and emotional features of this particular type of poetry comprised its political components. It was precisely the aesthetic beauty of the art form—the "prettiness of the wine"—that packed poets' political messages with so much power or "punch."

In this chapter, I explore the implications of this study. One important theme emerging from this research concerns the unique role that the creative arts can play in social change work. I introduce the theoretical concept of *creative politics* as a way to situate the untraditional—and, non-social movement—ways the young urban adults in Washington, D.C. politically and civically engaged, using their artistic participation in a spoken word poetry community as a vehicle for doing social justice work and effecting social change. Poets engaged in creative politics when they drew upon the creative arts to speak truths, individually and collectively heal, and do new school activism.

The concept of creative politics illustrates the possibilities and limitations of everyday politics in artistic fields. In various ways, art made moral messages and lived experiences—i.e., the truths—relatable and universal across a diverse constituency, and thereby helped to humanize social problems. In this humanizing space, community members were able to open up to new ideas and new ways of acting. While this creative engagement served as a model for social change, larger social structures also constrained this form of activism, making it difficult for poets to conduct their creative political work in a sustainable way. I conclude the chapter by highlighting a series of tensions that run

throughout this study as a way to illustrate the implications of this research on a larger set of scholarly debates around contemporary young adults and social change.

Creative Politics

Creative politics is an approach to effecting social change that leverages the power of the creative arts in the pursuit of political goals. This includes drawing upon the artistic properties of beauty, emotion, and subjectivity, as well as artistic devices such as figurative language, metaphor, word play, internal rhyme, and performance, in social justice initiatives.

For the young people in this study, creative politics was central to, and a reflection of, their new school activism. Like the art they practiced and the digital social media environment in which they lived, the poets' creative approach to politics was non-linear, relational, non-hierarchical, and complex. The boundaries between their creative art and their politics were not clearly demarcated, and the knowledges and social experiences expressed were self-authored and collectively (rather than authoritatively or expertly) validated. While authority was diffused and there were no clear movement leaders, even in instances where an individual took the initiative or lead, as was the case with Angela's Body Pride or Marcus' and Micah's roles at Speaking 'N Tongues, ownership over the project was dispersed and communalized. Artistic creativity brought the group together; it shaped how group members shared information, articulated political messages, formed networks, identified allies, and mobilized others to act.

Despite being pragmatic and rooted in praxis, the poets' practice of creative politics was also visionary in nature, in that poets were committed to imagining a

different future and alternative reality, one that took a serious, holistic, and integrative approach to social justice and artistic creativity. Cody articulated this visionary creative politics in his radical re-imagining of the U.S. education system, which he described as "wacked out." He told me that his "biggest vision" was "to open a school for the creative arts," where the entire curriculum would "all be based on some creative type of way."

> The educational system here stifles out the creative parts. I mean a lot of cuts, when you see cuts in education, what goes first? The creative writing program, arts programs, the music program, those kinds of things. Those are the first ones to go. When those, I believe, like building the creative side—especially from a young age. I mean, why do you think these kids, when they start out, they build? They give them paper and Crayola colors. You know, make clay [and] do stuff: do arts and crafts. You develop that creative side of your brain and things open up because that's what happened with me. I was so bored with school. I was like, "Why am I here? This is stupid." And it's like, once I started opening my creative side more, it was like a chakra of creativity opened, and all my other ones kind of opened together, and it helped me even more. Especially when people think differently. People react differently to things. So it's like, if you're trying to always set things one way, the purpose with this creative thing, I think will be, to build your own way of understanding the world that you live in.

Cody reflected upon one of his own student's experiences of failing in the traditional system, yet flourishing once Cody introduced him to poetry: "I've helped that kid realize a new way of doing something, in their own way that they understood, and they still got to that same answer."

As Cody suggested, a commitment to fostering creativity and being deliberate about integrating art into schools and other institutions can make for better and more equitable outcomes. The role of praxis and process—or being "hands-on" (Boyte 2004)—is central, since learning to "build" creative works can help to develop a more holistic, empathetic, and creative self. Ginwright (2010) corroborates Cody's assertions around the value of creating and building, particularly for young people, in the pursuit of social justice, arguing that, "Often social justice researchers, educators, and practitioners focus almost entirely on youth resistance without conceptualizing the critical importance of creating" (18).

Yet too often our institutions stifle artistic creativity; given the poets' creative politics and new school activist approaches, this creative suppression can stifle political projects as well. Social spaces that lack creativity and a commitment to cultivating creative intelligence are disconcerting because, as Cody said, creativity is a mechanism for understanding the world we live in. Specifically, by nurturing our creative selves, we gain access to seeing our surroundings in multiple ways and are able to tap into various interpretations of our environment. This can help us to better understand those who think differently than us or who have had different social experiences. From a social change perspective, this visionary ability to imagine alternatives is politically powerful, as it creates an environment conducive to building bridges across difference.

A creative political vision reflects how the artistic characteristics of spoken word, in various ways, shaped the poets' social change work. Specifically, by leveraging the power of art, poets made their social justice messages relatable, humanized social

problems, and harnessed the empathy and emotion generated through art to engage others in actions aimed at social justice.

Art: Relatable and Humanizing

As far back as Aristotle's (2007) *Poetics* in 350 B.C.E, art has been credited for having a unique ability to communicate truth and knowledge. While Aristotle conceived of truth and knowledge as universal, the poets in this study illustrated art's powerful ability to communicate a more subjective understanding of truth. Yet, this attention to subjectivity and truth was, paradoxically, universalizing, in that poets drew upon various artistic strategies to connect with their audiences in order to make their personal truths more universally relatable and humanizing.

First, poets leveraged the artistic format of the short storytelling structure in order to effectively convey their truth. The narrative arc endemic to storytelling allowed audiences to latch on and relate to the messages being advocated. Specifically, poets leveraged a *short* narrative structure, which they found to be a particularly unique and effective feature of spoken word. Unlike longer literary forms such as the novel, poets found the brevity of spoken word to be more "digestible," as Ty and Marcus both told me, meaning that audiences could more easily consume the poets' ideas. Neeta described the short narrative format as "a unique way to have a conversation" and, specifically referencing her poem about the Sri Lankan Civil War, she told me:

> I was very used to giving the speech, you know? Or giving the little brief overview. But at some point I was like, "Ok, I need to write a poem about this." Because there is this amazing avenue available to talk about whatever it is you

> want to talk about, in a way that's three minutes or less, that you are going to hopefully grab the audience's attention from the get-go, so that no matter what it is you're talking about—even if it's completely foreign to a lot of the people in the room—you've already drawn them in. You've already gotten their attention in a way that goes beyond, "Here, let me tell you this thing about something that's really important, on top of a million other things in this world that are really important that you should know about and care about"…There have been so many times where I've done that Sri Lanka poem and someone will come up to me after and it's like, they didn't know anything about it and now they want to do something. They want to get involved or [ask], "Where can I get more information?" And to me, that's so powerful. I didn't know you could do that in three minutes. I didn't know you could get that reaction from someone about a subject matter that they may not know a lot about or essentially your message is that this is urgent, this is critical—I didn't know you could do that short of giving a 30-minute talk with a PowerPoint presentation at a conference where the audience is already people who are there because on some level they care about something. You'll walk into a room of people who are at a bar for entertainment on a Tuesday night, and do a 3-minute poem, and get that same—not just the same reaction, but one that's moved by more than just the facts, you know?

Contrasting the 3-minute spoken word poem to the 30-minute PowerPoint presentation—both mediums for sharing information—Neeta underscored the advantage of using performance poetry to convey her political message. The short storytelling format was better at grabbing and sustaining an audience's attention, and the spoken word medium

had the potential to reach a broader audience than a more limited and already receptive group of conference goers. Importantly, Neeta also highlighted the art form's ability to move people by using "more than just the facts;" here, Neeta pointed to art's emotive and subjective power, thus calling forth both the role of storytelling (Polletta 2009) and emotions (Eyerman 2006) in movements for social change.

In addition to leveraging a short storytelling structure to effectively convey political messages, poets also utilized this artistic feature to humanize and make others care about social problems. While spoken word's artistic and political power lied, in part, in its ability to tell a story that was "very specific to a situation" (as Meghan told me), the art form was also able to tap into something more universal—"the human experience" (as Hannah told me). As documented in previous chapters, poets used the spoken word performance to "key" (Goffman 1974, cited in Bauman 1977) universal experiences via particular, and often their own, personal stories. This included using spoken word to connect personal troubles to public issues, forge healing links between the self and others, or build bridges and political networks across different individual experiences and identities.

Other aesthetic properties helped poets connect their subjective truths to universal truths in the pursuit of social change. Specifically, the "language of poetry," as Josh described it, was useful for providing this bridge. Referring specifically to the frequent use of metaphor in spoken word, Josh told me that "poetry is imagery, and imagery—it just connects something we never experienced to something that we have experienced…It's humanizing, it's—you know, you can't ignore something if someone's

made you care about it…It's an amazing awareness raising tool. Because you're raising more than awareness. You're raising pathos."

Artistic devices are effective at getting people to see how social problems and injustice relate to their own lives. In this way, art is humanizing in that it allows people to see how seemingly abstract social problem affect their life. Both Neeta and Josh drew attention to art's emotive power, referencing the concept of *pathos*, which is an appeal to the audience's emotions. While pathos is used in political rhetoric all the time, artistic modes of communication can be especially effective at evoking emotions in order to get people to care about a social issue.

The artistic element of performance, in particular, can be leveraged to evoke emotion and relate messages to a universal audience. The oral and embodied aspects of spoken word are performative features that call attention to the presence of an audience, and the social interaction between performer and listening public. Performative tools can, as Josh told me, "bring something new" to the communicative act that is at the heart of this social interaction. Specifically, Josh underscored elements such as tempo, rhyme, and playing with physical space as techniques that help poets engage audiences and communicate messages. Kim highlighted spoken word's ability to "entertain," and pointed to performative features such as cadence, volume, and eye contact as ways to engage an audience. Cody talked about voice and body, vibration, sound, tempo, and silence. And Hannah spoke of intonation, diction, and style.

The ephemeral and improvisational quality of performance allowed speakers to craft their art and message to the situation at hand. Poets sometimes referred to this as being able to "manipulate" how audiences interpreted their messages. This ephemerality

and ability to improvise—or, manipulation—can be especially useful from a political perspective, as it gives performers a unique type of control and flexibility when framing their messages. Political communications professionals have long held similar interests in identifying innovative techniques for framing and controlling political messages. The creative arts can offer its own toolkit of effective political communication techniques, leveraging such things as storytelling, figurative language, and performance to evoke emotions and relate to an audience.

The Art of Loving and the Politics of Love

In a context organized by creative politics, "love" can take on special political significance. Love, and a closely related emotion "passion," defined the poets' relationships to their creative political work. Poets characterized their dual commitments to art and social justice as a "calling" or "obligation." Similarly, Micah talked about "instilling a passion" in the younger generation, referring to how love and passion can make social justice work more sustainable.

Creative artistic practices also offer useful vehicles for engaging in the self-expression and exploration that fosters love for the self and others. As a result, a politicized community, however loosely conceived, organized around love and nurtured through artistic expression, can take shape. Such beloved artistic communities provide a template for imagining new political communities.

In these ways, creative modes of expression can play a unique part in cultivating political foundations grounded in love. Jennifer Nash (2013) offers a way to think about the political role of love and emotion in social justice projects. Highlighting second-wave

black feminism's "love-politics," she draws attention to the ways in which love served as "a significant call for ordering the self and transcending the self," as well as a foundation upon which to "produc[e] new forms of political communities" (Nash 2013:3). Nash grounds black feminism in a larger intellectual tradition of affect theory, which spotlights the importance of the "lived affective experience…problematizes the boundaries between private and public, and draws intimate connections between the subjective and the social, between the emotional and the political" (4).

The young adult artists in this study practiced a similar form of love-politics, organizing their activism around loving the self and transcending love for the self to loving others, resulting in a type of beloved community that was well positioned for establishing political coalitions organized around emotions and affect rather than a homogenous identity or issue area. However, the love-politics practiced by these millennial poets departed from Nash's characterization in two important ways.

First, the poets' love-politics complicate Nash's claims around "nonidentitarianism." Nash argues that one of the strengths of black feminism's love-politics is its nonidentitarian feature, in that it transcends or circumvents identity and organizes political communities around different dimensions. Although the poets also transcended subjective identities, often by leveraging artistic devices, to politically organize around affect and experience, their love-politics was *not* nonidentitarian. Rather, identity remained central to their politics and their art. Creative politics offered poets a means by which to acknowledge, retain, and embrace their complex and often socially marginal identities, without having their politics collapse into a reductionist or narrow understanding of identity politics.

Second, although Nash draws upon black feminist creatives in order to delineate her theory of love-politics—namely authors/poets/activists Alice Walker, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde—she does not acknowledge or consider how the creative arts may have factored into these black feminist creatives' political interpretations of love. As second-wave Chicana feminist and poet Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) argues, creative artistic acts, which are necessarily a reflection of an artist's identity, are forms of political activism:

> A woman-of-color who writes poetry or paints or dances or makes movies knows there is no escape from race or gender when she is writing or painting. She can't take off her color and sex and leave them at the door of her study or studio. Nor can she leave behind her history. Art is about identity, among other things, and her creativity is political…For many of us the acts of writing, painting, performing and filming are acts of deliberate and desperate determination to subvert the status quo. Creative acts are forms of political activism employing definite aesthetic strategies for resisting dominant cultural norms and are not merely aesthetic exercises. (xxiv)

Given this perspective, one reasonable question for Nash and others to ponder is: how might artistic practices shape a political activist vision rooted in love? This study suggests that the artistic practices employed by the black feminist creatives cited by Nash (2013) may have shaped and fostered these women's ability to recognize the political power of empathy and love in their theories of social justice. Indeed, as shown throughout this research, art is well positioned to facilitate empathy and love in its ability to universalize and humanize individual idiosyncratic experiences.

Thus, artistic creativity can facilitate social justice and change in several ways. First, artistic narratives offer opportunities to create the self (Zussman 2012) and articulate alternative knowledges that have been marginalized from dominant discourses. Second, art's empathetic qualities help to build bridges across difference and make people care about social issues. Third, artistic creativity offers an expressive and healing platform that can pave the way for radical healing (Ginwright 2010). Fourth, art can cultivate creative thinking; this cultivation fosters the ability to see the world in new ways and understand different perspectives. Similarly, artistic creativity is well positioned to cultivate the radical imagination needed to imagine alternative social and political arrangements (Ginwright 2010; Kelley 2002; Mills 2000), a necessarily first step in any social change project. Finally, art can inspire people to move and think in new ways that depart from the status quo.

Creative Constraints

While creative politics captures the ways that art can uniquely facilitate social justice and change, there are constraints on such everyday political acts in the public sphere. Specifically, larger social structures are often arranged so as to discourage creative artistic pursuits. In this way, artistic creativity—traditionally conceived of as an individualistic and perhaps exceptional human trait—has a politics associated with it in that it is a field of social struggle, where scarce resources, various forms of capital, and power are at stake (Bourdieu 1984). In this study, both poetry venues and individual artists experienced these constraints.

First, although venues served similar functions as other free spaces (Polletta 1999), many D.C. poetry venues faced continuous financial challenges staying open, as well as staffing difficulties. Moreover, the demand for good available poetry venues exceeded the supply, and poets consistently faced difficulty trying to locate and maintain relationships with venues for their poetry events and, by extension, their political efforts.

Poets also faced overwhelming challenges in their creative pursuits. Many (but not all) of the poets were "amateur" artists attempting to transition to living off their poetry, or at least supplementing their income through poetry. Yet, like other creative work, performance poetry was a form of precarious labor (Mears 2011) and, in many ways, the work shared characteristics with other forms of second shift labor (Hochschild 1989). Securing adequately compensated—or compensated at all—poetry-related work was an ongoing struggle; this included adequate compensation for performing in shows, facilitating poetry workshops, and coaching youth poetry teams, among others. As such, poets' artistic work served as a form of un- or under-paid labor that was frequently exploited and monetarily devalued, lacked benefits, and was often not even recognized as labor in the first place. As such, many poets performed and taught poetry as a "second shift" job.

Further, spoken word poets did not benefit from the advantages associated with being part of an art establishment. Given spoken word's location within the structure of the larger art world (Becker 1982), poets lacked access to traditional credentialing mechanisms (e.g., there is no academic degree or specialization available for spoken word poetry) and other professional art networks (such as publishing houses or a philanthropic audience) that could have helped to support their creative politics. Since

"the people" determined the value of artists and poems (such is the case at slams where random members of the audience judged the poetry), there was no culturally and institutionally recognized body that governed or valued the aesthetics of the art form.

These structural realities generated a tension between spoken word's accessible nature and poets' interest in having the art form legitimized and taken seriously. Poets wanted to be recognized with the same status (and compensation) as page poets, yet they also perceived their location outside the establishment to enable their creative politics and ability to engage in social critique. Angela highlighted this tension, pointing to the power involved in having a space for marginalized voices, while cautioning that this marginality kept the art form relegated to "that other thing." Here, the establishment could more easily dismiss the credibility and influence of spoken word's creative politics.

In these various ways, larger social and economic structures were arranged so as to discourage or make difficult creative artistic pursuits. Given that artistic creativity was one way that the young adults in this study politically and civically engaged, such constraints curb democratic practices and possibilities. This research demonstrates how an art-centered analysis offers a redefinition of political action and social activism, and at the same time illustrates the challenges to such alternative forms of political participation and social change.

Study Implications

This tension between the creative arts and larger social structures is one of several tensions that run throughout this study. I highlight some of these tensions as a way to

illustrate how this research engages a larger set of scholarly debates, particularly as they relate to contemporary young adults, social change, and creative politics.

One tension that emerges from this study concerns youth politics and, more specifically, where to locate contemporary young adults' political and civic engagement. Dominant portrayals of this generation suggest that millennials are politically apathetic and disengaged. However, this research illustrates some of the unique ways that young people politically and civically engage in the public sphere. The creative artistic practice of spoken word poetry served as a form of communicative action in many of the ways Habermas envisioned, in that poets discussed politics in the public sphere in order to identify common concerns and solutions. Yet, these political discussions departed from Habermas's model, in which he theorized public debates to be rooted in rational-critical discourse, meaning that judgments were based on reason, unswayed by participants' subjective interests, identities, or status. On the contrary, the poets' critical discourse around political matters and the common good necessarily drew upon subjectivity, emotionality, and performativity—rather than rationality—to assert political claims and judgments. As such, these politicized communicative acts relied on artistic criteria beyond or in addition to "reason."

This study also sheds insight on contemporary forms of communicative action, particularly those practiced by a unique group of public sphere participants: young adults. This research points to ways that present-day young people integrate political engagement in their everyday lives. Unlike the political and civic activity of older people or previous generations of youth, millennials may mark an action as "political" even if the activity does not articulate a clear political agenda, serve as part of a larger political

strategy, or resemble traditional forms of activism. For example, millennials' social change work can be found in such places as their creative artistic practices, carried out through everyday forms of conversation, manifested in self- and collective healing, and executed through social media.

The features of youth politics that are highlighted in this study also have implications for social movement scholars, particularly when comparing new school activism to more traditional forms of "old school" activism. New school activist projects emphasized broad action strategies, such as "doing something," "inspiring," or encouraging others to "think differently" about a variety of social justice issues. The need for a set and specific political agenda or homogeneous message was de-emphasized, and the target of the action was less important than the action itself. As such, political goals were more amorphous, organized around lofty and ambitious aims such as promoting universal values around social justice, equality, and love.

Given the nature of these new school activist goals, political work may take on a more enduring and integrated commitment in the lives of those who practice this form of politics. These new school activist goals are not achieved in a clear-cut way. That is, unlike common old school goals with clearly marked endpoints, such as passing a particular law or electing a specific candidate, new school goals are ongoing; for example, there is no obvious benchmark that indicates when "love" has been achieved. Moreover, given that new school activist networks are built across and integrated into a myriad of everyday sites and activities, these networks are woven through various forms of human connections, including professional relationships and personal friendships, as well as political stances. By creating allies and building networks based on friendship,

professional commitments, lived experience, emotions, artistic kinship, and political views, this approach to politics is highly integrated into the everyday lives of its practitioners. While social movements of the mid-twentieth century may have taken on similar characteristics, scholarly attention has not been directed to this feature of social change projects.

While there are no clear answers, this study raises an important set of questions around contemporary youth politics. For example, if an emphasis on nonspecific action and no set agenda is a feature of new school activism, what will grow out of this approach to political engagement? Given the everyday, ongoing feature of contemporary youth politics, is millennials' social change work less politically recognizable, particularly from traditional public sphere or social movements frameworks? What are the implications of having new school emotional commitments to social justice causes? How long will—or can—such commitments last?

These questions pertaining to political practices among contemporary young adults highlight a second tension that runs throughout this study: the role of identity and biography in social change projects. This tension speaks to larger scholarly and activist debates around identity politics. While the contemporary context characterized by social heterogeneity has provided new political opportunities, such as the ability to integrate and value a wide range of subjective and experiential knowledges, increased heterogeneity has also presented political challenges. One challenge involves the political power of marginalization versus incorporation. As many groups have done before, poets strategically leveraged their marginalized identities as a source of political solidarity, epistemology, and community building. However, there is a downside of too much

emphasis placed on skills of de-centering, since this strategy is often accompanied by a lack of structure, power, and legitimacy. Just as the poets struggled to maintain their marginalized status while appealing to a larger art world, contemporary approaches to identity politics might need to engage in a dynamic process of de-centering and centering, simultaneously deconstructing existing systems while constructing new structures and communities in which to conduct social change work.

This study also engages scholarly debates around identity politics in that it raises questions around the role of biography, lived experience, and narrative in social change projects. One question concerns narrative types. More specifically, what role can artistic narratives play in social change? Do artistic narratives cut across Zussman's four ideal types? The spoken word narratives practiced in Washington, D.C. were both therapeutic and self-inventive. My analysis of speaking truths and spoken word therapy narratives illustrates how an orientation toward a social movements framework might obscure the ability to see certain types of narratives as contributing to narrative freedom; in both cases, these narratives served as a model for social change outside of a social movements framework.

Larger debates around identity politics are also evoked by this study in that it suggests that present-day young people may be especially tolerant or open to the idea of integrating experiential knowledge and subjectivity in political approaches and decision-making. Having come of age in an increasingly diverse and socially integrated context, as well as having increased access to global perspectives through such technologies as the Internet, contemporary young adults may be exposed to a wider range of perspectives than previous generations. Rather than interpreting subjective and lived experiences as

"biasing" more "rational" approaches to political discourse, young people today may find value and actually seek out such multiple perspectives. While Habermas pointed to the increasing democratization of the bourgeois public sphere as the impetus for its demise, arguing that increased access diluted and depoliticized rational-critical discourse, today's young adults may seek to increase access and create space in public sphere discourse in order to accommodate for many perspectives. Young people see this integration and accommodation as a necessary and desired feature of, rather than a threat to, democratic politics.

In this study, I examined the relationship between art and politics through the prism of spoken word performance poetry, an art form practiced predominantly by young urban adults. I found that contemporary young adults in Washington, D.C. carried out civic and political work aimed at social justice through their participation in a spoken word community. First, through speaking truths, poets used spoken word to draw upon their identities and lived experiences as a political and moral source of knowledge that guided and legitimated their social change messages. Second, poets healed themselves and others by writing and performing their truths in the form of spoken word therapy narratives, thereby placing their community in a position to do sustainable social justice work. Third, using new school activist approaches, poets leveraged spoken word to advocate for social justice causes, build political networks, and mobilize others into political action. Artistic elements were central to the poets social justice work. Poets leveraged artistic creativity to harness the political power of emotions, love, and subjectivity in order to build coalitions across social differences. By doing so, poets honored their subjective truths and identities, and at the same time transcended these

subjectivities in order to communicate more universal ideas about social justice and change. A universal belief in the power of love guided the poets' creative politics.

This study of creative politics provides a model for doing politics and for doing art. This analysis of artistic creativity explores the ways that we may misrecognize political activity by focusing on narrow definition of political communities, political discourses, and perhaps even social movements. But it also highlights the ways that we may misrecognize art by overlooking its political dimensions. This study of contemporary young adults and their creative political practices illustrates some of the unique ways that art and politics come together in the new millennium. Creative politics in the case of spoken word in Washington, D.C. entailed building a politicized community around poetry, so as to facilitate social change processes organized around speaking truths, healing, and new school activism.

Millennials, Art, and Social Change: Beyond Hip-Hop

This study contributes to a more complete picture of the artistic cultural movements that have served to shape this generation's worldview and approach to politics. Given what has been written about contemporary young urban adults, one might think the only meaningful artistic movement informing millennials' political lives is hip-hop. Previous studies centered on youth, art, and cultural politics have extensively explored the influence of hip-hop on the political and everyday lives of young urban adults in the post-civil rights era (Chang 2005; Clay 2012; Harrison 2009; Jeffries 2011; Kitwana 2002; Perry 2004; Pough 2004; Rose 1994). Yet, less focus has been given to

other meaningful and mobilizing artistic expressions embraced by this generation. Spoken word performance poetry is one of these art forms.

Although hip-hop was extremely informative and influential on the poets' artistic and political expressions (e.g., Marcus, Nicho, Blake, and Micah were all rappers as well as poets, and hip-hop served as a gateway to their spoken word careers), it did not single-handedly shape the poets' creative politics. While these young artists drew upon and engaged hip-hop culture, they also critiqued it, mocked it, and at times, poked fun at the assumption that, because they were young adults of color, they must be aspiring rappers or "thugs." Being perceived as serious artists was important to these young adults and, because of hip-hop's reputation for being a heavily commercialized and even co-opted art form, poets sometimes distanced themselves from hip-hop and what it often represented: excessive capitalistic consumption, sexism, and substandard artistry. In fact, the predominance of hip-hop was, at times a burden for these young poets, as they sought to find their own artistic voice and craft their unique artistic persona without being pigeonholed or stereotyped given their race, age, and urban status. In a similar way that idealized images of 1960s activism has constrained the ability to recognize alternative models of activism among present-day youth (Clay 2012), a constant focus on hip-hop as *the seminal* artistic cultural movement for the post-civil rights generation might constrain our ability to acknowledge other rich artistic expressions practiced among young urban adults.

While the millennial poets in this study were a hip-hop generation, their cultural and political affiliations were more extensive and multi-dimensional that this label suggests. Asante (2008) makes a similar observation, and argues that present-day urban

youth constitute a post-hip-hop generation. “Post-hip-hop is an assertion of agency that encapsulates this generation’s broad range of abilities, ideals, and ideas, as well as incorporates recent social advances and movements (i.e., the women’s movement, the antiwar movement, gay rights, antiglobalization) that hip-hop has either failed or refused to prioritize” (Asante, Jr. 2008:7). Asante cites spoken word venues, among other everyday cultural urban spaces and practices, where a post-hip-hop ethos is evident. Consistent with this post-hip-hop cultural politics, D.C. poets demonstrated a commitment to the goals of numerous social movements, like the erasure of sexism, racism, and homophobia, yet they drew upon a unique set of tactics to accomplish this political work. As I have shown throughout this dissertation, these social change tactics incorporated artistic creativity, as well as strategic uses of identity, to work for social justice.

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