Seizing Language to Build Community:

Empowering Adolescents Through Performance Poetry

by

Susannah Nichols

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

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This thesis is dedicated to all adolescents,

with the hope that one day all their voices will be heard and celebrated.

Acknowledgements

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Most supremely, I am grateful to my parents, who have unconditionally supported my love of writing throughout my life. I thank them for instilling in me a passion for words, and providing me with countless opportunities to explore and exercise that passion.

Abstract

In this thesis, I critically examine community based writing and performance poetry groups, particularly their potential to aid in the empowerment of individuals and the building of community. I contend that a devaluation of language by our society has created a void of meaningful exchange of ideas and a cheapening of the individual voice. Such a situation has had particularly negative effects on young people. This condition has created a need for forums where their voices are respected, cultivated, and celebrated so that they may become confident and engaged speakers, writers, and citizens. The existence of youth community writing and spoken word groups has demonstrated the beneficial repercussions of this theory. However, the concept of youth spoken word groups is arising in the midst of the poetry slam movement—competitive performance poetry where tensions between honest expression and audience satisfaction threaten to undermine the positive possibilities of the spoken word movement. I believe that the current state of slam is not ideal, but has enormous potential to develop into an effective tool for community engagement and the celebration of language.

In the first chapter, I explore the problem of language devaluation and its specific effects on adolescents. I then provide evidence for the success of integrating language into the youth community in both academic and non-academic contexts. In the second chapter, I provide intimate insight into one such program: the Volume Poetry Project in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I examine the methodologies utilized by the leaders and participants of the group to both provide a safe social space for adolescent growth and develop individual voices for the production of thoughtful and innovative writing and performance. I then recognize that tensions exist between the supportive and personally empowering nature of youth spoken word groups such as Volume and the larger poetry slam movement. The third chapter delves into these tensions, and perspectives of both the Volume youth poets and adult poets who participate in poetry slams enhance my own research and opinions, and the thesis concludes with a discussion of both the future of youth writing groups and the anticipated role of performance poetry within our society.

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Introduction

Reading the poetry of Chinaka Hodge, 18, is like being thrown headfirst into an environment few in academia have entered. Her poem "3:30" is a vivid and powerful description of her rough and underprivileged neighborhood in West Oakland, California. Through explicit details of landscape and individual characters, Chinaka uses her poetry to express her experiences in a way that gives people a sharp vision of life in this neighborhood. She describes Darius, one of the main characters of the poem:

This is Darius' world

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Darius

clutches his brown paper bag

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his eyes are red

I tell myself its because he don't sleep at night

he's up counting

he knows how many stars are in his sky

he can hear the ocean lapping at the edge of the world

he can tell you how many times it hits the shore

but folks don't ask him shit like that

so he counts dubs, counts 8ths

drinks fifths or forties

on 18th and Myrtle

Darius

he's dying beneath billboards for DeBeers

wants to put diamonds in his teeth

Chinaka's poetry has not evolved in isolation. She represents a growing, national movement of adolescent expression and performance poetry, which amplifies the often-ignored voices of young people. The dissemination and public recognition of Chinaka's writing has largely been a result of Youth Speaks, a non-profit Bay-area spoken word organization that Chinaka has been a part of since 1998 (Raynor 7). Community writing programs have given numerous young people such as Chinaka an environment in which to cultivate and share their verse.

Youth Speaks, led by James Kass, was one of the first youth spoken word programs in the country. James had been involved with the growing adult spoken word movement in San Francisco, and began Youth Speaks after facilitating a workshop for his brother Jeff's creative writing class. James started the program because he recognized the beneficial impact of performance poetry on adolescents. When Youth Speaks held its first poetry slam—a competition of performance poetry that was gaining popularity within the adult spoken-word community—Jeff attended and was inspired to permanently integrate performance into his creative writing curriculum. Between Youth Speaks and the slams that Jeff Kass held at his school, the youth movement of performance poetry was born.

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The movement has burgeoned over the past six years, with numerous programs similar to Youth Speaks arising across the country. Such programs combine writing workshops with both performance of poetry and poetry slams. While slam is a type of performance poetry, the terms are not interchangeable. In my work, I use "performance poetry" as a broad term indicating any type of public reading, including slam, while "slam" has a distinctively competitive element, and has stricter guidelines than general performance.

Such a distinction is necessary because, while the impassioned reading and sharing of poetry has been linked to the art form for centuries, the concept of the competitive poetry slam is relatively modern. The basic formula of slam, an art form defined by Chicago poet-construction-worker Marc Smith in 1984, states that all poems must be three minutes or less (score deductions made for overtime), no props or costumes are permitted, and the competitor must author the poem he or she performs. Poems are to be judged on a scale of one to ten, with performance and content counting equally. Judges are to be picked from the audience on the night of the event (resulting in no uniform standard for judging). While the poet with the highest score is declared the victor, it is generally accepted that any poet who wins the approval of the audience can claim a feeling of triumph. Often, slam events combine competitive poetry with an openmike, which enables some audience members to share their work in a non-competitive setting. Poetry slams also tend to showcase a "featured artist," who exposes the audience to a different type of poetry (or provide an up-and-coming author with a captive audience).

I was intrigued by the growth of the youth poetry movement because I saw the nature of performance poetry and slam as providing a forum of expression for voices that are often troubled and stifled. In high school, my peers' struggles with issues of insecurity, popularity, depression, body image, academic and extracurricular pressures, friendships, and romantic relationships greatly saddened me. While I was not immune to the anxieties of high school, I considered myself lucky because I had many outlets—specifically journalism, sports, and drama—in which to develop my true identity and gain confidence about my individual beliefs. Those activities provided safe social spaces combined with activities intended to amplify the talents of each individual. My participation resulted in a higher ability to cope with the general issues of adolescence that my peers and I faced. Had more of them had chances to hone their voices and individual thoughts, perhaps the emotional difficulties of adolescence could have been diminished.

In developing my thesis, I sought to examine whether creative writing and performance poetry could serve as a similar outlets for today's high-school students. Their adolescent voices were not reaching their potential, and I postulated that this problem had dual roots: first, society as a whole undervalued the worth of language; and second, our society lacked communities that would support the crafting of language in the intent of giving sound to unheard voices. I saw youth spoken word programs as a possible, but not obvious, antidote to such problems. Could such programs engender a socially safe community, an environment conducive to adolescent growth and establishment of their individual selves? What could happen when students were brave enough to put their experiences down on paper and then speak their thoughts on stage?

Would their peers support them, allowing the poets to grow as individuals, or would they simply be mocked? If the students were to effectively communicate and have their ideas accepted, then would they be able to take their confidence and apply it to life outside of the socially safe space? And, of practical importance in studying performance poetry as a teaching tool, could a command of the language, resulting in good writing, arise out of such a context?

To find answers, I engaged in extensive research, using academic educational literature, poetry publications, and the Internet to discover the ways in which writing and poetry were being presented to American high-school students. As recounted in the first chapter, my findings evinced tremendous support for the power of writing, and the performance of that writing, in the development of strong adolescent selves. However, I sensed that in order to test the truth of my theories, I would have to observe the principles in action. Through the University of Michigan's Institutional Review Board's (IRB's) Department of Behavior Sciences, I gained approval to work with the Volume Poetry Project in Ann Arbor in order to closely examine the effects of writing and performing poetry on an individual's personal growth and community relations.

The Volume Poetry Project is the creation of Jeff Kass, who moved from California to Ann Arbor in 1999. Upon arriving in Michigan, Kass endeavored to promote youth performance poetry before he even had a job. Working with the Neutral Zone, a non-profit teen center in Ann Arbor, and eventually with Pioneer High School (where he now teaches), Kass aimed to inject Ann Arbor with the passion and excitement that spoken word was evoking in the Bay area. Volume started small (thirty-two poets competing in the first slam) but sent a team of six to the 1999 Youth National Slam,

where they emerged victorious. Community publicity resulted in more opportunities for the poets to perform—cultivating the skills of the involved performers, as well as providing exposure to the movement and provoking the interest of more adolescents.

At present, Volume is an extracurricular poetry class of about sixty high-school writers; some, but not all, receive academic credit from their high schools. Volume is a forum for students to write, refine, and perform their poetry, and many members use the group as a springboard to involvement in the youth poetry slam scene. Volume is based at the Neutral Zone, a non-profit teen center in Ann Arbor that offers classes not only in poetry, but also in photography, studio recording, music, and social issues. Volume's primary activities are weekly workshops to refine poetry, open-mikes at the Neutral Zone, public readings, and competition in local, regional, and national youth poetry slams. The second chapter chronicles my experiences with the dynamic youth poets of Volume: observations of their meetings, workshops sessions, and performances; interviews with some of the poets; and the contrasts between Volume, an extra-curricular class, and Kass's creative writing classes at Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor.

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My work with Volume was enlightening and inspiring, and I was consistently amazed with the strength and poise of the youth poets. However, my work with Volume was a specific, qualitative study of a single program, and cannot be considered any sort of broad representation of all youth writing programs. I sought to identify the nuances that made Volume such a wonderful and growing environment for young people, and what intricacies of the program could be feasibly implemented elsewhere.

In my third chapter, in order to determine if writing and performing poetry could be widely utilized to create empowering communities, I placed the vibrant and supportive adolescent community of Volume in the context of the larger national slam scene. While some aspects of slam seemed to encourage growth and empowerment among youth, I wondered if the inherent competitive and dramatic aspects of slam would have debilitating effects on an adult level. In adult slams, does the poetry retain any of the raw passion and mood of deliverance of the youth performances, or has the national interest in spoken word negatively influenced the movement so the focus is more on entertaining, rather than communicating? Do the authors lose sight of their own voices and messages in an attempt to please the audience and judges? Moreover, what relationship has existed between poetry in such a social environment, and the traditional place of poetry in the classroom? By researching critical responses to the slam movement and by speaking directly with many poets currently involved in the slam scene, I seek to explicate these tensions and examine if and how they might be resolved.

I undertook this project in order to ascertain the role that writing and performing poetry can play in our growth both as a society and as individuals. It is my contention that our society is hungry for innovative voices and meaningful words, and it is my belief that community-based writing is key to the development and exposition of such voices and words.

Taking Back Language in Our Communities

There are a million people like you, kids itching with a new power engraved in spirits behind words. You are waking up ready to write up a storm, to become a storm, to stop this war. You exist times a million, like stars. You burn with fusion. Like stars.

—Sailor J. "In Defense of the Political Poem"

In a culture that is more familiar with advertising catch-phrases than carefully crafted dialogues, in a society where the highest leaders let someone else write their speeches, poetry and creative writing are typically considered to be sequestered trades practiced by academics. The written word's capacity for communicating ideas and passions has the potential to powerfully inspire and promote understanding amongst humanity. However, the possibility of writing as an influential instrument has not been fully realized; the adage "words are cheap" is accurate assessment of the way American culture treats the art of written communication. Ross Talarico, a writing professor who formerly served as Writer-in-Residence for Rochester, New York, coined the term "deliteracy" to describe "the gradual disintegration of society's dependence on language" (STW 49)¹. I argue that with this devaluation of words and writing comes an insidious breakdown of the relationship between an individual and his or her community. And when there is no contact between individuals in a community, there is no discussion of life, no sharing of ideas, and worst, no concern for this lack of interaction—in essence, a devaluation of the individual. For an America built on the conception that individual liberty and self-knowledge are invaluable, such devaluation threatens the fabric of the communities that compose our country's identity.

The immediate disputation to deliteracy is that America is threatened by more urgent dangers than the devaluation of language—including violence, political

¹ Talarico, Ross. Spreading The Word. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. Hereafter cited as STW.

corruption, a rabid drug trade, broken families, and inadequate educational opportunities. While solving these issues is nearly impossible for average citizens, engaging in thoughtful writing—and sharing that writing with others—can strengthen their own voices and opinions. They are then in a position to comment on and think carefully about these larger problems. Writing is the act of staking a claim in one's circumstances and expressing the depth of his or her individual situation. Additionally, a community of writers has the opportunity to exchange viewpoints, thereby engaging in differing perspectives. Thus, integrating active writing and language examination into community forums enhances the potential of individuals to take an effective role in their society. A renewed respect and investment in language, especially in a community context, would stimulate thoughtful dialogue and generate potential solutions to attack the root of debilitating societal ills—which may not eradicate problems on a national level, but may improve immediate surroundings, and at the very least, allow those most affected to verbalize their viewpoints. Moreover, community engagement in writing also fosters an interest in writing itself, as an art form. In order for literature and poetry to avoid becoming archaic and inaccessible to the majority of society, the population must be familiar with—and interested in—the form in which these treasured arts come.

Writing gives a voice to populations who would otherwise go unheard. Today's methods of information dispersal—television, newspapers, and the Internet—provide a sparse outlet for the expression of individual opinion². There must be other forums—forums that are safe enough to allow honest expression, yet challenging enough to make

² While it would be accurate to cite the plethora of online bulletin boards as an open forum for expression, it should be recognized that the discussion on such boards rarely focuses on individual communities, and the inherent anonymity of the Internet makes it difficult to view such forums as exhibiting the honest communication that this thesis seeks to find. Moreover, access to the Internet is still somewhat limited among members of a lower socio-economic class.

that expression meaningful. It does not matter whether the people's writing focuses on their own intimate thoughts or on the community to which they belong, because either subject could lead to self-understanding or understanding others – both are rewarding and necessary parts of a thriving community. I believe that self-recognition and evaluation will eventually result in a more meaningful communication with other individuals.

The practice of bringing writing—both the study and the creation of it—into communities is not an entirely revolutionary conception. Several canonized writers, particularly Gwendolyn Brooks, wrote with a profound awareness of to whom they were writing. Moreover, these writers used their craft to expostulate on, and spark dialogue on, issues that were important to both them and their audience. One trademark of Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry, which spans from the period of 1945 to 1975, is its engagement with and emphasis on the African-American community. She wrote not only for the members of her community, but also to express the African-American condition in a way that would provide for racial understanding in historically turbulent times. Brooks sought to achieve this understanding by presenting everyday occurrences that accurately portrayed and celebrated the Black experience in an artistic and universally touching manner. Professor and biographer Harry B. Shaw remarked that Brooks had a "propensity for being stimulated by and ascribing considerable significance to incidents and situations of everyday life" (15). By presenting words that connected to others on a personal level, she was able to provide meaningful work for her community, and she was also able to cross racial lines by making non-Black readers aware of Black experience. Biographer and literary critic D.H. Melhem recognizes that Brooks "enriches both black and white cultures by revealing essential life, its universal identities, and the challenge it

poses to a society beset with corruption and decay. ... We care about the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks because it cares about us and the existence we share" (241). Shaw further elaborates on Brooks' ability to proliferate her message throughout diverse populations: "She ha[d] no desire to 'preach' in her poetry but merely want[ed] to present pictures of Black life and thereby to teach" (34). While it would be presumptuous to say that Brooks spoke for an entire demographic, she was certainly a voice rising from that demographic—a group of people consistently silenced and marginalized.

Although Brooks' work is perhaps most beloved because it celebrates her deep connection to the Black community, it was also highly significant and respected because she speaks for an underrepresented population. Numerous accolades, tribute performances, and anthologies of appreciation indicate that a good part of Brooks' legacy rests on her devotion to make the voices of her community heard. Brooks' passionate community involvement spans from the 1960's to her death in 1990, and her work is evidence of her awareness that language is a tool to be nurtured and preserved.

University of Chicago professor and biographer George E. Kent recalls Brooks' desire to spread poetry as a tool of communication to enhance Black voices. He quotes Brooks:

"My aim, in my next future, is to write poems that will somehow successfully 'call' all black people: black people in taverns, black people in alleys, black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate. I wish to reach black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones, *not* always to teach – I shall wish often to entertain, to illumine" (211).

Notable examples of her attempt to reach the un-represented were the workshops Brooks was known to hold for the underprivileged on the South and West sides of her native Chicago. She believed that "poetry could be a vehicle for improving the lives of teenage street gang members" (Shaw 29). Brooks constantly engaged with her fellow humans, using writing as a way to bridge differences and express viewpoints. Kent described the workshop participants as "aware of each other in ways that would create a harmony among the differences" (209). This writing, fueled "by the communal quality of the experience," not only allowed the art of exposition to flourish, it also established a forum for the exchange of ideas and development of individual voices (Kent 211). Brooks may not have ever heard Talarico's term of "deliteracy," but she was certainly countering its chilling effects by understanding the necessity of finding a common experiential ground in words. The dynamic of connection within a socially safe and challenging space is the theme and tradition that Talarico would build on in the next decade.

Talarico recognized deliteracy as a national problem, but realized that its effects were particularly devastating to certain demographics that did not have a consistent arena for self-expression, both within their home communities and within larger society. This thesis will focus on one such demographic: adolescents, particularly those at the high-school level. The traditional diminishing of self-confidence among teenagers challenges their individual voices, and this condition has been exacerbated in recent years by a culture placing infinite importance on image and acceptance. In her book, *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher, Ph.D. examines the debilitating effects that a sexist society can have on young women. She recognizes that "[I]n early adolescence, studies show that girls' IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose their

³ Talarico's focus groups were at-risk high-school students and senior citizens.

resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks" (Pipher 19). Young men are subject to these problems as well. In *Raising Cain*, child psychologists Dan Kindlon, Ph.D, and Michael Thompson, Ph.D. argue that adolescent males are conditioned by society to bottle their emotions, thereby inhibiting their ability to mature: "Intimidated by the constant threat of humiliation presented by the culture of cruelty and the ensuing erosion of trust, boys strike a psychological bargain—namely, that they'd rather hide out than take any of this" (142). In the twenty-first century, these traditional anxieties for both sexes are coupled with uncommon pressures from both their peers and larger society. This phenomenon has been made excruciatingly clear by the increased rates of teen suicide and acts of youth violence that have been attributed to a feeling of rejection by peers and the larger society.

Adolescence is particularly difficult because most teenagers do not have a place to express their frustrations or give sound to their voices. Today's youths are coming of age in a society that devalues language and self-expression, but more devastatingly, specifically devalues the voices of teenagers. Jeff Kass observes: "Too often the voice absent in the stories we tell ourselves today, the voice deemed unnecessary, is the voice of young people" (Kass 2). A vehicle of articulation is critical for these young individuals struggling to attain their identities in a hostile culture. Through writing, students can establish a true voice and exchange ideas with other developing true voices, potentially leading to awareness and confidence. However, the methodology in presenting writing to teens is crucial. Encouraging youths to carefully analyze their

⁴ The most glaring example of violence rooted in societal rejection could be the 1999 Columbine school shooting in which perpetrators Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris alleged that one reason for attack was retaliation to the environment that had made them outcasts. While this is clearly an extreme state of mind that few teenagers reach, it serves as an example of the disastrous effects of young people caught without ways of working through the pressures they contend with.

thoughts and feelings is no easy task. Introspective contemplation involves making oneself vulnerable—a prospect very unappealing to youths trying to maintain an image of "coolness." Talarico concurs in his assertion that in order for anyone to be compelled to write, he or she must feel an "urge to communicate" (88). For such an urge to exist in young people, they not only must be inspired, but also must have access to a safe social space that emphasizes the sharing of their personal experiences, while building commonality through such experiences.

Such environments have arisen in Talarico's workshops in Rochester, in several classrooms, and the Volume Poetry Project in Ann Arbor (to be revisited in depth in the next chapter). In each of these environments, young people are encouraged to develop their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives into a voice—explicating their thoughts for both better self-understanding and more adequate communication with others.

Talarico targeted the youth of Rochester for writing workshops and performances during his tenure as Writer-in-Residence. He saw his work as a direct response to the high rates of youth violence in Rochester: "[the program's] intent is not to necessarily make writers out of anyone, but to motivate youth, especially in more positive directions—to help them articulate their thoughts about the bewildering world around them" (12). His work was designed to encourage teenagers to write, and he did this by encouraging self-identification and sharing in ways that the adolescents would respond to. Talarico created a space where the participants could feel comfortable sharing by first getting to know them on their terms—through basketball. He enticed young people to participate in his workshops by devising a system of "writing and basketball," where students had to write poetry for an hour before being granted exclusive access to the

basketball courts at their youth center. Within the workshops, Talarico eased his students into writing with word games, and allowed extensive time to polish their work and become familiar with their own writing and ideas before he encouraged them to share and perform in public. However, identification did not come merely from throwing oneself out to a larger group; it also involved listening to and understanding others, learning about one's own self in the process.

The effect of this program reverberated throughout Rochester. Talarico described an incident when some of his writer-athletes shared their work with area middle-school students. While it was undoubtedly meaningful for the writers to share their work, Talarico's main observations were that the middle-school students both identified with previously unknown members of the community and that the middle-school students recognized poetry as a vivid and breathing entity that they might explore themselves. Talarico explains:

There was a connection being made that allowed them to see not only these ballplayers differently, but themselves. There was an elegance in the words, an inner grace that gave the whole being its due respect. It was, in my mind, a kind of magic—not just the magic of an individual pulling out of the empty air a beautiful identity. But the magic of literature—of poetry; the enlightenment through words of the human condition, the suffering, the joy. (85)

While Talarico's programs engaged teenagers specifically, the programs caught the attention of most of Rochester. Through techniques such as public readings and published anthologies of citizens' poetry, he thrust writing into the hands of the

community, creating opportunities for dialogue by giving them a forum to share their experiences and build commonality.

Talarico's programs have often been called "classes," and it is intriguing to notice the similarities of Talarico's techniques to those employed in formal classrooms. Talarico's motives of encouraging self-identification and expression were of paramount importance to Erin Gruwell, an English teacher at Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. Long Beach was a hostile environment replete with violence and racial and socio-economic strife. One student described his classes as "like a bad rerun of Cops," and another concurred that "the schools are just like the city and the city is just like prison. All of them are divided into separate sections, depending on race" (FW 6, 10)⁵. Gruwell used literature and writing to emphasize her students' individual experiences and differing opinions on the concerns of their lives. She fostered a socially safe space in her classroom primarily by valuing the potential of the students labeled as problematic by the school. A student wrote: "she told me she believed in me. I have never heard those words from anyone...especially a teacher" (FW 46). One student even remarked that the class was the first place he was able to "express my own feelings in a place where I was never judged and people heard my voice" (FW 22). Through their writing—essays, journal entries-students explored issues pertinent to their own lives (e.g. abusive relationships, struggles in school, and personal addictions) and pervasive problems in their school community (e.g. ethnic conflicts and peer pressure).

While students initially felt that "writing about [their] pain will only make it worse," they recognized that, by highlighting the individuality of each student, bonds of

⁵ Gruwell, Erin, ed. *The Freedom Writers' Diary*. New York: Doubleday Books, 1999. Hereafter cited as FW.

commonality could be formed (FW 146). During peer revisions of essays, one student was shocked to discover that "I got a story to read and edit that I could have told...I felt a sense of relief that someone else had been molested, someone else had a story to tell also" (FW 150). Another student experienced a similar connection: "when I finished reading the story, I didn't feel so alone...I actually wrote [the author] an anonymous note and simply said, 'I feel your pain—you're not alone!" (FW 152)

The class, self-dubbed "The Freedom Writers," used writing to counter intolerance and articulate the feelings and problems often suppressed among their peers. Because they were able to use writing as a way to form cohesive relationships among themselves, they were inspired to utilize their communicative skills to unite their larger community as well. Their writing, which generated numerous accolades and attention from the U.S. Secretary of Education, exemplified the principle of writing used as both a means of identification and empowerment and as an alternative to violence (FW 275).

The Freedom Writers demonstrated the ideal result of writing being integrated into the community. First, the establishment of a close, safe space generated by the student writers themselves allowed work to be engendered. And second, the students made efforts to put their writing, and experiences of effective and thoughtful communication, back in the community. Several students cited desires to become teachers or other educational figures, and the class as a whole cited their published journals as an attempt to encourage others to pick up a pen, describe the world around them, and be "catalysts to change" (FW 281). Every student in the Freedom Writers community is currently attending college, and it is plausible that the strength they gained from their writing will cause them to be actively engaged in their societies in the future.

Gruwell initiated her classroom methodologies as a specific answer to the flagrant racism and intolerance present in Long Beach. Heather Bruce and Bryan Dexter Davis, teachers in the Washington state school system employed similar tactics. They sought to diminish both the effects of violence in their town, and the depression and insecurity common to teenagers of all cities. By empowering students to speak and understand their emotions, Bruce and Davis help students find alternatives to violent behavior, similar to the Freedom Writers. However, Bruce and Davis facilitated this process by integrating performance into their curriculum. Bruce and Davis recognized that writing and performing poetry could be a cathartic exercise both for male students, who have a higher tendency to outward violence, and female students, who have a higher tendency to selfviolence and suppression of emotion (Bruce 120). Bruce explained that their motive in teaching writing is to "find words that will in turn help them to identify, clarify, express, and channel thoughts and feelings rather than act either inwardly or outwardly violent" (120). They capitalized on the growing popularity of the slam movement, discussed in the introduction, as a way of bringing poetry into the everyday lives of the students, and illustrated how performance poetry can be utilized as a tool of expression.

After careful revision (resulting in a constant relationship with the issues the students choose to explore), the students perform their works for the class after intense "coaching" sessions with teachers and peers. In these sessions, students become comfortable and confident in sharing their ideas. Davis explains, "stammers [sic] learn how to stand straight and still, make eye contact, and show pride as they recite their poetic works to a peer audience. We teach our students to accept constructive criticism gracefully. Poets are applauded for their efforts during rehearsal sessions. Our students

treat each other with dignity" (125). The exercise of writing has aided students in developing their individual voices and clarifying their thoughts, while performing has allowed them to share their thoughts and acknowledge the thoughts of others, giving validation to their collective experiences.

Talarico's workshops, Gruwell's Freedom Writers', and Bruce's and Davis's student slammers all have a desire to encourage the sharing of individual experience in order to build a sense of community. These examples accompanied me to the classroom of Jeff Kass at Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Pioneer, a four-year high school with 2,671 students, is not a hostile or violent environment, but its teenagers are no more immune to the struggles of adolescents than any other group of teenagers. Many students are able to give voice to these daily toils within Kass's class. The principles of safety, support, and expression evident in the previously discussed learning environments were elucidated in Kass's creative writing classrooms.

Kass's classes, which combined writing and performing, were safe spaces for students to grow in. One way this dynamic was achieved was through Kass's encouragement of students to speak out and express their viewpoints. However, his methods did not cater only to the naturally outspoken. For instance, each student wrote daily reflections to be shared the next day at the start of class. These reflections elucidated not only what happened in class (for example, "I'd like to write stories as opposed to poems") but also, and more often, what happened outside class, in their lives. These reflections were relevant because they revealed significant tensions in the students' personal lives and inspired students to write about the raised topics. After a heated

⁶ All information regarding this classroom came from my observations of Kass's creative writing class on 15 Nov and 16 Nov 2001. Further information can be found in Works Consulted.

classroom debate on gender relationships, some examples of reflections were: "so many hot girls are dumb," and "guys are jackasses and use girls." Replies came the next day: "guys write about dumb girls, and girls write about being used—the answer is right there," "if hot girls are so dumb, why aren't any of them going out with me?" and "my girlfriend is hot and smart, so lay off". No topic was off-limits, and these reflections were simply read, not discussed or analyzed. While Kass actively commented on and drew comparisons between the reflections (one reflection even stated, "Kass gives his opinion a lot"), he refrained from passing judgment on any of the content. Class reflections were raw forms of self-expression, and served as a vehicle for the students to share opinions on controversial issues. Many students were motivated to further articulate their thoughts through writing.

While the daily reflections were anonymous, students personally shared their thoughts with one another through group and individual workshop sessions. One day, I observed three girls perform a jointly written poem, and on another day I observed several small group workshops. In each setting, I was most surprised by peers' willingness to offer commentary and constructive criticism to the writers. For example, the group poem was an intense and honest look at high-school romances, and explored topics of sex, abandonment, unequal emotional investment, and rejection. Their peers did not begrudge the raw content of the poem in the context of the workshop (though it might have provoked written reflections for the next day's class), but rather helped the authors identify their central claim, and suggested images to improve the articulation of that claim. A second example of class connection was evinced after a girl shared a poem in a small workshop of about ten students. The poem detailed her experiences in theater and

the ways in which she had grown due to her performances. After she read, another girl praised the poem's elaboration of the author's experience: "I understand theater better, but I also understand a part of your life better because of that poem—I hear your voice in it." In just a few days, the students' poems encompassed friendships, family, romantic relationships, college, self-confidence, other extra-curricular activities, and the manipulative advertising they observed in society. Students learned to refine their writing both to articulately express their thoughts, and to reach one another.

Because of the positive environment of Kass's classrooms, many students have been inspired to continue writing outside of the classroom and have consequently become involved in Kass's extracurricular Volume Poetry Project, held at the Neutral Zone teen center in Ann Arbor. Volume, one of the most recognized youth spoken word groups in the country and my major focus group for this thesis, is comprised of high-school students from Pioneer and a myriad of other schools in Southeast Michigan. Volume focuses on all areas of poetry—workshop, performance, and publication. Students bring poems to the group for constructive criticism to aid in their revisions; organize public readings at both the Neutral Zone and other community venues; and edit and publish No Comment, a seasonal magazine featuring youth poetry from Ann Arbor and around the country. In their weekly Thursday night meetings, one can sense that each student—the group boasts over seventy members—is there because he or she wants to be. The students, of diverse racial backgrounds, different school group affiliations (e.g. theater, sports, music), and varied life experiences, did not all have a propensity for writing or poetry before they joined Volume. Volume holds the themes of sharing personal experience through writing, and building commonality with others in the process, at the

heart its existence. Volume personifies these principles, a living response to the questions provoked by my research of other writing communities.

I selected Volume because it was a direct way to observe methodologies of teaching writing to adolescents and creating safe spaces for the learning to occur in. I desired to discover the exact ways students discovered their individual voices, and how one could become initiated into such a community of supportive friends. Moreover, I sought to discover the effects of writing and performance poetry beyond the immediate gratification of creation—how did teenagers really grow and change as a result of their involvement in such programs, and what were the ramifications of such an involvement on the other facets of the students' lives? How can such experiences shape their attitudes toward writing, performing, and community, as they become full-fledged adults?

Volume

Tonight is all about letting everyone have a voice.

—Jeff Kass, at the inception of a Volume poetry reading at Borders' Books and Music, 11/28/01

When I came to the Neutral Zone for my first meeting with the Volume Poetry Project, I observed that the very name of the teen center suggested a safe haven. My motivation in participating in Volume was to discover the intricacies that allow for a manifestation of the ideal of a safe space that can allow for growth through writing. I climbed the stairs to Volume's meeting place, on the upper floor of the center, and entered a long warehouse-like room, with pipes snaking around the ceiling, and wooden shelves and pool tables lining brick walls. Soft lighting and numerous couches, which were haphazardly pulled into a large circle for the group's meeting, completed the welcoming atmosphere of the room. The room would prove to be a safe space, but not just because of the physical comforts. The space provided a place where the teens felt a sense of ownership, respected one another, and had their need for such a locale satiated.

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As the students—the group had slightly more females than males, and while the majority of students were white, there was a noticeable presence of minorities—waited for Jeff Kass to arrive and begin the meeting, their friendliness created an ambience of familiarity and intelligence. Jon, a high-school senior who had been involved with Volume for about a year, described this setting as a "catalyst for communication." Communication was certainly evident as students amicably bantered about upcoming school events, dramatically lamented the state of their college applications, and intensely

¹ All references to and conclusions drawn about Volume were gleaned from my observations of the group in November and December of 2001. Further information can be found in Works Consulted.

² All quotations from students (Jon, Molly, Evelyn, and Laura) are taken from my personal interviews. Further information can be found in Works Consulted.

discussed their schoolwork or politics. While some students were friends outside the Volume context, many had met and were conversing solely because of their love for poetry and expression. "We might not have the same interests, or philosophies, or outlook . . . but everyone enjoys expressing themselves," said Jon. They were there for definite purposes—to create art and spread the word about writing—but they were also there because it was a wonderful place to be. The physical comforts of the room would prove an accurate exterior for a community that strives to create a forum where students can grow as writers and performers.

The participants felt that they belonged at Volume not only because it was a space they felt comfortable in, but also because it was a place they had helped create. Their ownership of Volume became evident once the formal leader arrived. Kass barreled into the room and was barely visible behind a stack of cardboard boxes he was struggling with. The boxes were teeming with candy, which the group had been selling at their individual schools as a fundraiser. Their earnings would go to publication of No Comment, travel expenses for Volume members to perform in slams in other states, and publicity for all of Volume's functions. The students expertly handled the logistics of money and candy as Kass informally called the meeting to order. The group discussed their upcoming events—a reading at Borders' Books and Music the following week to promote the release of No Comment; the monthly open-mike Volume held at Neutral Zone; and "Poetry Night in Ann Arbor," a celebration of youth and adult performance poetry with an anticipated attendance of at least four hundred. Every time a logistical task arose Kass called for a volunteer and was always obliged. Such responsibility was a demonstration of the sense of ownership that Kass instilled in the Volume poets—he

aimed to give them leadership roles in the conception, management, and execution of Volume events. When the students were confident that their presence was needed and valued in an environment, they were more likely to feel comfortable in that environment.

While the aspects of student ownership in Volume added to the general safety of the environment, the level of safety that would compel students to be able to write down and share their thoughts could not be achieved by completing some managerial tasks. An undercurrent of respect and encouragement allowed for a vibrant growing process to occur; the expression of that respect was clear when the formal workshop began.

Because of the numerous upcoming events, all the students were eager to get feedback on their work, so Kass created an order list—between eight and ten students could get their poetry critiqued in a given workshop.

As the students read and discussed their poetry, the most central common theme discussed with regards to each poem was the creation of an individual voice. "Voice," though no student could concisely define it, was the mechanism by which a poet transmitted his or herself through the poem. It was essentially the encapsulation of identity exercised in the writing and performance of poetry, and the establishment and celebration of voice was of paramount importance to these students.

The group commended one of the first girls who read for the significant improvements she had made in developing her own voice and making it prominent in both her writing, and in the expression of that writing. The process by which a poet could get to that level was demonstrated a few moments later, as another girl shared a poem about dependency in romantic relationships. She read in a highly dramatic and performance-based style, as if she were competing in a slam. Her peers noticed this

technique, and while they didn't critique the content of her poem, they affirmed that the voice tone and gestures she employed were not right for her:

"It doesn't sound like your voice." one mentioned.

"I agree," claimed another. "It's hard to do, but you have to keep trying to get at your own style, because you're a pretty cool person." In Volume, the voice was directly equivalent to the self, and the worth of a poem was proportional to the display of a genuine voice. You couldn't be a good writer unless you were sharing your true self.

"Absolutely," Kass agreed, "And to find that, I think you should practice as many times as you can. Just stand in front of the mirror and recite it over and over and over." Within the fluid commentary, Kass cited technical methods of achieving the more abstract concepts the students referred to. Kass's leadership style was subtle—he sat against one wall between two students, and his instructions were guiding rather than authoritative.

In later interviews, I asked Evelyn, a sophomore, and Molly, a senior, about developing an individual voice—apparently the most important facet of poetry. Both affirmed Kass's instruction that finding a poetic voice was gained through continual practice. Evelyn also noted that voice development was achieved by writing within a community setting: repeatedly sharing one's words with an audience, and furthermore, continually observing others, can help one clarify his or her voice. "It's a combination of writing, performing, and living," Evelyn explained.

She cited a common obstacle to the achievement of this voice—in Volume's community of poets, beginning poets had a tendency to copy other people's voices and styles in lieu of finding their own voices. Respect was high among Volume members,

and the adage "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" certainly rang true. Molly agreed, and remembered her initial forays into poetry, when she was in awe of some of her more experienced friends. "My thoughts were always, 'I want to be just like...'. I was imitative at first." The problem of imitation was difficult to tackle, but Kass claimed that emphasizing the quality of individualism could impel some students to strike out and find their own poetic ground. He aimed to emphasize, "there's no one style that's correct—true performance is bringing out the best of what you are." This supreme valuation of individuality as the main constitute of a successful performance exemplified the ways that performance poetry could empower young adults. Furthermore, both Molly and Evelyn confirmed that growing into one's individuality takes some time. Molly recognized that through practice and performance "you become more comfortable." Evelyn elaborated that finding a voice for performance requires more work than establishing a voice in writing. "It's harder than just finding your writing voice. Writing is more in your head - performing involves your whole body, so it's a little harder to acquire." Both young women understood the importance of self-knowledge and selfconfidence in establishing a personal voice, and confirmed that an original voice is the best way to affirm that one's true thoughts will be communicated to his or her audience.

The emphasis that Volume placed on performance also contributed to the importance of crafting an individual voice. For poets who would likely be sharing their writing with an audience, having a distinctive voice was crucial; otherwise, their words, and therefore their ideas, would not be distinctive. Self-knowledge and self-confidence

³ Unless depicted in the context of a workshop or otherwise noted, all of Kass's quotations are from a personal interview. Further information can be found in Works Consulted.

were the best ways to ensure that the poets communicated their true thoughts to the audience.

The final reason that Volume was a safe space for creation was a more intangible concept that could not be quantified in observation. It only became clear in my later interviews with the students and with Kass that Volume arose not as just something fun to do, but out of necessity for a safe space. While the improvement of their writing was of vital importance, it was no accident that students came to the Neutral Zone instead of simply honing their skills in English classes. Kass observed that the eagerness to share work results from the teenagers' need to have a forum where they can express themselves: "the kids clearly recognize—even if they can't articulate it—that they need it." Jon further postulated that Volume members are aware of the danger of vulnerability and are thus sensitive and encouraging when others take a step to revealing themselves: "As teenagers, we all still understand how hard it is to open up." Personal attacks and discrimination are not present in any of the workshops—the focus is on constructive criticism—however, this standard did not need to come via a mandate from Kass; respect for others was such an inherent philosophy to this group that he rarely mentioned it. Kass also remarked that the lack of restrictions on topic or language allowed teenagers to freely communicate their thoughts: "knowing that if they wanted to, no one would stop them, is so important." While Kass may ask his students to refrain from using profanity at public readings, it is understood that no censorship of any kind exists in Volume workshops. To modify a voice in any way would be to, at least partially, falsify it.

The level of respect toward the development the individual voice is dominant when examining the result of Volume's safe environment: the poetry. The students take

the first, and perhaps most obvious, step in the creation process by consistently putting forth their best efforts. And because a fundamental philosophy of Volume is the advancement of quality writing, standards are high. No one brings a poem to Volume unless they believe it is worth the time of their peers. Laura, a senior, wryly observes that because no one, including herself, has a desire to look stupid in front of writers they respect so greatly, she feels "compelled to have a perfect piece" before sharing with her peers. The respect that the young poets have for each other, and for the process of writing, inspires them to put forth their best effort, and as a result, their truest voice, with each poem they author. In Volume, there is not simply a desire to express one's thoughts—mutual respect engenders a motivation to effectively and artfully communicate those thoughts. However, it is also recognized and respected, as seen with the two aforementioned girls in the workshop, that each person is at a different place in their poetic and performative journeys. An effort to express and communicate is the only requisite to being accepted into this circle of authors.

Turning to the content of their produced work, Kass cites the exploration of one's identity as being atop the list of poetic subjects: "Everybody has to talk about who they are," he explains, "and for a lot of kids, just writing that piece can . . .help them understand who they really are. And it's very powerful for them to say that to people. And it's powerful for adults to hear it." This type of poem is not only useful for students in expressing the feelings of a process inherent to adolescence, but such a self-examination also aids students in the ever-important development of their individual voice.

Kass notes the "who I am" poem can place a poet within their personal life, most popularly in poems of love and heartbreak, or place the poet in the larger society: in recent months, many poems have explored the tensions and uncertainties about the future resulting from the 9/11 attacks. Kass also mentions that female poets in particular write a great deal about pressures that arise when their selves come into conflict with larger society, which urges them to conform physically and psychologically to superficial standards.

The thread linking the wide range of subjects is genuine passion: raw enough to strike the listener yet refined enough to impress the listener. The appropriate measure of passion seems to be the way that observers gauge if the poem is an authentic exposition of the character of an individual. Passion then becomes a sort of currency that signifies the self, and must be displayed in both the written word and in the performance of a given poem. Whether it comes in the form of intimate revelation of detail in imagery, clenched hands and narrowed eyes during performance, or a personal topic manner, some indication that a poem comes from the heart of the poet is crucial in developing a quality piece of writing.

Poems that address topics central to the personal lives of the poets often show passion in details which illuminate why a particular situation has such importance to the individual. These poems, such as Emily Brent's "Lust at First Sight," are often particularly effective among other adolescents. Although Brent's poem is about a specific incident—a summer romance between a college boy and a high-school girl—it also describes a teenage rite-of-passage, and therefore is particularly compelling to her peers. Brent's principal challenge, then, with this type of poem is crafting it in such a

way that the emotion conveyed in the work can be representative of something which many teenagers may have experienced. She must balance her levels of passion so as not to veer into the realms of either cliché or self-indulgence. She describes their first encounter: "we got to know each other/ over Dansani water and 'the only new rock alternative 89-x'/ conversation not quite flowing freely/ punctuated by awkward silent pauses, / shy glances and nervous simultaneous smiles" (ll. 3-7). As Brent reads her poem in workshop, I notice a few of the other girls present glancing at each other and smiling knowingly, as if they've been in such a situation before. Brent's poem, in describing the incidents of the couple's short time together, comes dangerously close to trite and overly sentimental. For older, more academic scholars, her closing lines might provoke eye-rolling and murmurs of "teen angst:" "the taste of your tongue-licking kiss and summertime strawberries/ lingers on my lips/ while September carries you/ to a notso-far away place/ where college boy and high-school girl never existed" (ll. 47-51). However, Brent is not writing to those scholars—she has a target audience, and among peers who might read her poem or attend an event where she performs it, her work endures. The chords of familiarity and emotion that she strikes in her reader, coupled with vivid details and subtle tension, resonate with that audience.

As poets become familiar with whom they are, and as they give ink and voice to the description of their personal experiences, it is natural that they will contemplate how they fit into the larger world. While young authors may be criticized for their venture into the political realm on the grounds that they are ignorant about the complexity of the issues, Volume sharply refutes such criticism. The production of poems commenting on world issues is a concrete way that young people can make their voices heard regarding

topics that they cannot usually comment on. As discussed in the first chapter, the attention to young voices is minimal, if it exists at all. Because of this negligence of young voices, their authoring of political poetry is crucial. Sailor J, a Volume poet who has vociferously spoken and written about issues of teen sexuality, ardently defends the political poem as the teen's principal way to have their opinions noticed. She writes:

You are fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old. Sometimes it's hard to justify the depth and the weight of your anger. You don't have the years to back you up, your culture is a big believer in chronology. But you have the words. Your culture is a big believer in talking. Even if it doesn't listen. Doesn't think twice. Doesn't teach you to speak. You found these words somewhere, on fire in your gut or rushing river-like at the back of your mind or on the fringe of your dreams last night. You are not just anyone; you were blessed with the courage to believe in your own voice (5).

Sailor J's words have been taken to heart by many young poets, who use their words to express their frustration with the state of society.

Political poems, such as John Vorheis's "Witness" are meant to be shared, not just with a target audience, like Brent's poem, but with everyone. Because of that, they are specifically crafted with the intent of conveying passion through performance. Voice takes on a different dimension when the motive is not just to connect and provide empathy, but to compel others to seriously consider their philosophical points of view. Vorheis's poem does not comment on a specific issue, it is a fervent cry against the degeneration of humanity, in the tradition of the political poem that Sailor J discusses.

Vorheis's fervor for his subject is manifested in the driving rhythm he employs with his voice and body when he delivers the poem, while he demonstrates poetic skill in his crafted rhyme and innovative imagery. The art of performance poetry isn't just saying something, or even saying something well—it's saying something that can captivate an audience with a meaningful message. The urgency of Vorheis's voice is mirrored by the lyrical intensification of his verse:

40 centuries in and this shit's still insoluble revolving around the same point like space station modules humanity be a brain cell growing malignant nodules reform efforts fail from mountains to molecules.

. . .

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Bleak outlooks dismissed as doomsday prophecy

Wish I could come correct without being accused of apostasy

Truth and philosophies clash

Resolved by the true MC Sokrates

Unheard, unheeded warnings ring false,

I, the last observer, tell tales bitter as sea salt. (ll.12-15, 22-27)

As his words and lines build upon themselves, it seems that the poem carries itself, and Vorheis's voice is simply the vehicle. His talent draws listeners in and impels them to listen to his message. Vorheis's poem may not be stylistically flawless, and his opinions could easily be criticized for their perspective on society, but he has articulately given voice to his opinions, a stage many adolescents never get to. Although writing tends to

be an introspective action, the shared emphasis that Volume places on writing and performing results in the proliferation of confidence in young adults.

As Vorheis's poem makes clear, once the ideas of the self begin churning, it becomes necessary to share that work not only with the Volume poets, but also with the outside world. This new audience provides a new challenge for adolescents - they've cultivated their voices within the safe space of Volume, amongst supportive friends. However, the sharing of personal thoughts with an unknown audience—whether it be the poignant sensuality of Brent or the impassioned vehemence of Vorhies—is not an easy task. Exposing oneself invites vulnerability, which is especially distressing for adolescents. And while some students are drawn to performance because of their natural inclinations for being on stage, many others are shy. Molly initially thought that there would be "no way in the world" she could compete in performance poetry or slam due to her shyness. Now, at seventeen, she is an articulate performer full of conviction, with numerous slam victories under her belt. Volume has not cloistered the students and hidden them from criticism, rather, it has given them the self-confidence necessary to put out their opinions and accept the glorification and criticisms alike that they might face from a new audience. The very act of performance instills confidence in teens, even ones who might not have a natural propensity to performing. Laura echoed Molly's thoughts, remembering that she was "so nervous" about her first foray into performance, but now feels that "performing on stage is addicting." Both young women recognize that they are increasingly comfortable in expressing themselves because of their experiences with performance poetry.

The experience of performance poetry has general benefits for all adolescents, but also positively impacts young men and women in distinct ways. Kass elucidated that the experience could give young women a first opportunity to express themselves, whereas for young men, the art allowed them to showcase a side of themselves that would otherwise remain unexposed. Because of a society that typically encourages males to speak over females, the forum of performance poetry is often exhilarating for girls. Kass elaborates, "For females, it's a very big step to just say 'I'm going to say what's on my mind in front of a lot of people." For girls in this situation, the process of community writing is valuable because it allows them to build their voice in a safe and relatively secluded space before taking it to a larger audience. The group can instill in them confidence to perform—and audience reception of that performance can greatly enhance that growing confidence and encourage them to continue expressing themselves in the future. Kass noted that the potential of performance poetry as a tool of empowerment has not been fully realized, primarily because many youth spoken word programs other than Volume do not have a high percentage of female members. However, the young women of Volume certainly provided tangible evidence of the art's potential for youth empowerment.

Kass candidly recognized that most young men do not have any problem with the simple act of speaking their mind. However, the process of community writing allows them to explicate their opinions in a meaningful and artful way and then share those thoughts with a receptive audience. This action of evocative expression is a way of letting males tap into their thoughtful, emotional side that society often encourages them to repress, as cited from Kindlon and Thompson in the first chapter. Thus, performance

allows their opinions to be taken more seriously, and perhaps validated by an audience, and also allows them to grow into more mature individuals.

Evidence of the poets' burgeoning confidence was evident when I observed the Volume-sponsored reading at Borders' Books and Music the week after my first visit to the workshop at the Neutral Zone. The reading was open to anyone published in *No Comment*, but many of those poets were also Volume participants. These writers were not all naturally outspoken or aggressive; many had spoken in soft tones or displayed quiet demeanors when I'd met them at the Neutral Zone. But speaking in front of a swelling crowd of over 150 audience members, these students spoke in clear tones, projected their voices, and looked at the audience with eyes full of enthusiastic fervor. They had a message—and they knew how to deliver it.

The Volume poets stressed that performing instilled confidence in them, but they also emphasized that there was a dual benefit to being active in a spoken-word community: performances were valuable because they provided poets the opportunity to listen to others. By being open and receptive to the words of their peers, students were exposed to different styles, themes, and subject matter. Every student I spoke to cited listening to the poetry of others as just as valuable as writing and sharing works of their own. Evelyn even claimed, "watching is more fun than performing," because of the lessons able to be gleaned from others work. The beauty was not simply in noticing the difference, but in finding threads of commonality in disparate experiences. Kass cited the dynamic connection and understanding that could occur between the performer and the audience as "the heart of the success of spoken-word around the country." He saw the essence of the movement as "people taking that opportunity [to express themselves], and

other people in the audience responding to it because they feel similar things, and they can relate to it."

The exposure to different styles, ideas, and perspectives appears to result in a heightened awareness and sensitivity about other people and their lives and problems. This sense of understanding is quite special in high school, when individual thoughts and emotions are at the mercy of an image-driven environment. Laura claims Volume has been a very "eye-opening" experience for her. "I've seen so many deeper sides of people. And you learn not to make assumptions about people, [especially assumptions] about their writing ability." During workshops, people shared poems about sexual orientation, racial discrimination, socio-economic status, and different sectors of high school life. Through verse, Volume poets were able to understand and empathize with these different struggles. Jon recognized that his general perceptions were broadened because of his involvement: "you tend to think about issues that are a little deeper," he explained.

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Ramifications of Volume were evident in students' roles as writers as well as their increased sensitivity to social issues. The constant communication with other writers allowed teens to acquire exposure to different methods of expressing a common theme, and this helped writers bring their own work to a new level. Jon describes the experience of learning from his peers: "[Other poets] are writing outside your experience, but about things that are still important to you." Such exposure can provoke ideas and memories in other writers, which can cause thoughts to "explode in a wave of creativity!" explained Jon, enthusiastically.

The high value students place on their writing followed them into the classroom. Jon noted marked improvement in his essay writing since devoting more time to his poetry. "You learn to relish moments . . . and learn to express how you feel in a beautiful way," he told me. "It's helped my creativity in general." Beyond writing, students also gain an increased interest in their English classes because of their hands-on experience with poetry. "Yeah, I definitely thought I hated poetry," said Laura, smiling, and cited an increased appreciation for the craft.

Sitting in the Volume circle, amidst the supportive comments, kind laughter, and enthusiastic acceptance of new ideas, the evidence of the benefits of writing and performance poetry are tangible. It almost seems too good to be true, and in fact, it might be. It's easy to wish that the world could come together in the way Volume does; however, such an idealistic notion seems hardly plausible. As performance poetry—now coming most frequently in the form of competitive slam—gains national popularity, can the same benefits of the Volume community be gained in the larger, national sphere of spoken-word? And have the development of voice and the growth of Volume poets been inextricably dependent on their particular safe space, and not the art form itself? Answers to these questions depend on examinations of the disparities between the youth performance poetry community and the adult poetry slam scene, in addition to an analysis of the intrinsic effects of the competition of slam on the established benefits of performance poetry.

The Larger Community: Where Performance Poetry Fits In

Volume is an unquestionably beautiful and beneficial organization, but it is not an anomaly. Within five years, the movement of spoken word, especially on the youth level, has blossomed. Adolescent poets not only have access to writing communities like Volume and Youth Speaks, but poetry is also consistently portrayed in their everyday lives. HBO features spoken-word programs such as Def Poetry Jam, national slam teams market CDs of their performances, and mainstream magazines such as *Teen People* regularly devote space to showcase the poetry of young people. Poetry slams in particular have ignited a massive following: over fifty cities boast formal slam teams, and slams take place in nearly every metropolitan area and on numerous college campuses, including the University of Michigan.

With a cursory glance to the growing national interest in slam, it would seem that such attention is precisely what growing poets and other spoken word aficionados would hope for—since a growing movement would conceivably lead to better expression and increased communication by the poets in their works, and more connection among community members. While in many regards the growth of performance poetry is extremely positive, the increasing popularity of slam creates a potential threat to the core themes previously discussed. Performance poetry stresses the truthful expression of private emotions, and media exposure tests these soulful principles that are so revered in contexts such as Volume. There are three primary conflicts associated with placing Volume and the youth performance poetry scene within the larger adult spoken-word and slam scene. First, in an increasingly competitive environment, do poets become more focused on pleasing the audience and entertaining rather than expression and

communication? Second, does the inherent competitive nature of slam present a challenge to the encouraging nature we observed in Volume? And third, with slam becoming a lucrative endeavor, is money becoming the primary motivation rather than expression?

To address the issue of focusing more on entertainment rather than communication, I talked with both the Volume poets and past and present members of the Boston adult slam team. In both instances I discovered a discouraging fact—when the purpose is pleasing the audience, some amount of genuine emotional investment is eroded. This concern was first made evident in my talks with some of the Volume poets. While communication with the audience is always the goal of shared writing, it appeared that true communication, according to the youth poets, came from the sincerity of the author and their willingness to share themselves—something that teenagers needed and thus acted upon more than adults. "We're more personally invested in what we write," claimed Jon. Molly recognized that as the stakes of poetry become higher, poets have a tendency to cater more to the audience than to their own voice. She cited this as a poetic path she was trying to avoid at all costs: "my biggest fear is writing only for the audience, instead of straight from the heart. Of course, you never want to be too abstract ... you want to relate, but not write just for them." Molly touched on an interesting conflict - the objective of performance poetry is to reach the audience, but poetry is about the individual performer, and must contain individual passion to be sincere. A good slammer, then, needs to strike a balance between reaching their audience with an appropriate message and topic, yet not writing directly to them.

This balance is not an easy feat, but one that adult slammers are aware of and strive to achieve. Adam Rubinstein, a student at Hampshire College who regularly slams in the Boston area, recognizes that slam poetry can become contrived and insincere as a result of the forum in which it is performed. "Some people on the scene have honed their slam pieces to a science, and that really bothers me, because it stunts growth, if it doesn't halt it entirely" (para. 7)¹. Kass's opinion that a principal problem with adult slam is the focus on strategy and the methodologies teams will develop to win a slam concurs with Rubinstein's thoughts. The more a performance is manipulated, the less genuine art will be able to be produced. Poets want to give the audience something to enjoy, but in the process, they may derail their own creative journeys, which would seem to defeat a main purpose of writing poetry—to understand oneself better.

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The desire to conform to certain standards may exist because of the competition. Poems that capture the audience attention are more likely to generate higher scores. As the movement grows, standards evolve, and eventually, poets who expect to win will have to follow certain protocols. It is plausible that despite the possibility of beneficial results from performance poetry, those boons are emasculated by the very nature of slam as a competitive entity. I discussed whether competition could undermine the beneficial effects of performance poetry with many of the Volume poets. Many of them participate in slams on the youth scene, and a few of the older members participate in adult slams as well. However, the youth poets stressed the fact that even within their slam settings, competition is minimal. It was the general consensus that if one performed well and improved upon his or her last performance, he or she would go home happy. Laura also

¹ All quotations from Rubinstein, Hicks, and Hyman are taken from my e-mail correspondence with them. Further information can be found in Works Consulted.

cited that the competitive spirit remained low because the poets wanted it that way, and this ownership instituted a type of reverse peer pressure that compelled students to keep any aggressive tendencies in check. She deprecatingly observes, "In Volume, it's not cool to be competitive." Since the focus is on communicative expression, and not on winning, it matters not to many youth poets whether or not they are slam champions.

On the adult level, responses varied with regard to the level of competition. Boston University student and Boston slam team member Rachel Hyman, who has earned the title of "Champion of Champions" in the area, claims that, "the slam community is really supportive. The competitive spirit stays healthy in the scene. Everyone seems to be trying sincerely to get better, or they just don't come back after a while. There's some trash talking, but mostly in good fun" (para. 5). Conversely, Rubinstein called the northeast environment "pretty competitive." He elaborated, "I've noticed in the past two years that, whereas people used to congratulate one another, and the winner would always run to the loser of a given round, give a hug or some token of affection for the work, it doesn't happen that much anymore...if at all" (para. 5). The two opinions are not necessarily contradictory—if a poet wants an extremely supportive environment, what Rubinstein describes may not be satisfactory, but for poets who simply enjoy performing and learning, the healthy competition that Hyman describes may be acceptable. However, former Boston slam team member Gary Hicks contributes that "there is no one slam environment. It varies from venue to venue" (para. 3). Unlike Volume, where the same core group of people share work on a regular basis, the slam community of a large city like Boston means that new audience members and new poets

are consistently entering the scene. The membership of the community of Volume is not exclusive, but it seems less fluid than the larger adult scene.

It is important to note that despite the larger and more widespread population of the adult slam scene that sometimes perpetuates distance among members, a form of union still exists among these poets. Many of the Boston poets agreed that they enjoyed the company of most other slammers, and had forged valuable friendships through slam. When asked if there was a supportive community in adult slamming, Kass answered with a vehement affirmative, emphasizing that ultimately slam is "an activity that gives a lot of people a voice, and . . . allows everybody to hear them. And everyone, at heart, knows that." The core of the movement—expression and exchange of ideas—may be influenced by arguments and disagreements inherent in any organization, but has not been lost.

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The competition inherent in slam, which now involves lucrative prizes for the victors, is a primary conflict that may influence these friendships and support networks. Adult poets have motivation in winning slams – victories can equal cash prizes, recognition for aspiring writers, and possibly contracts for future performances. The motives are clearly different on the two levels, and this is recognized not only by the youth poets, but also by leaders on the adult level. Marc Smith, the father of slam, recognizes that "the idealism and cooperative forces of the slam are in constant conflict with the competitive and self-serving appetites of its ambitious nature" (screen 2). The potential negative energy that is a natural component of competitive activity is exacerbated by the growing media attention. When slam becomes a career, and not just a hobby or an extracurricular activity, the nature of the environment changes, as do the

poets involved. Slam poet Jeffrey McDaniel cynically comments that many adult slam poets are simply jumping on a bandwagon of popularity: "In a flawed analogy, the media compared slammers to the Beat poets...The Beats flourished in a far more conservative era and were more intellectual, more anti-establishment, whereas slammers, despite their countercultural poses, are often eager to be a\$\$imilated into mainstream culture through MTV, commercials, movies, even...billboards" (35). Similarly, adult slammer Alix Olson looks at the popularization of slam as threatening to its nurturing environment—particularly for females. She "worries that slam's main attraction, its democratic 'you-go-girl' attitude, will become 'you-go- (your corporation here)!'" (Gehman screen 4)

This awareness of potential corruption is certainly not intended to signify that every adult slam poet is a money-grubbing sellout, but rather indicates that increased marketing of the personal value of slam has a potential to marginalize and destruct the beneficial nature of slam. Even Rubinstein, who criticized other slam poets for modifying their poetry to what the audience wanted, recognizes that the competition of slam has made him think about the "marketability" of his work. "For me, [the competition has] made me think about what will stick in someone's head because of either its originality or its profundity. How will that translate into the short run into a score, and ultimately into a couple of bucks for a chapbook or to go toward gas…"(para. 8). As spoken word becomes a market, its members want to share in the fruits of its success—a natural inclination.

Such a proclivity toward tangible success is not something contemplated by many Volume poets. This indifference toward poetic accolades is especially believable since most of the youth poets do not have aspirations of careers as slam poets. Evelyn

recognized that "most of us will probably do *something* with it, because we're all too passionate not to stay at least somewhat involved," but suggested that the capacity of involvement would more likely be as teachers, mentors or coaches of upcoming young poets, rather than performers. Molly concurred, citing her ideal role in the movement as her future profession: serving as a poetry teacher for youths in juvenile detention centers. She expressed a sincere desire to help troubled youths "find their voices in writing, and teach them to excel in that, rather than turning to violence." The altruism displayed by the Volume poets was telling to the theory that writing and performing poetry can have socially beneficial repercussions, but did not necessarily give any indication that the larger slam scene was intrinsically altruistic.

Even Volume—a seemingly quintessential safe space—is not immune to pressures and conflicts of being a part of a rapidly growing artistic movement. I was not the first person to recognize the beauty and originality of Volume's environment.

Because Ann Arbor played host to last year's National Youth Poetry Slam, where Ann Arbor's youth team won the national championship, much national attention has been focused on these special teenagers. Last year, Rebecca Onion, a staff writer from the teen magazine *YM*, covered Volume for a story. *YM*, targeted at high-school girls, usually focuses on beauty tips, how to attract boys, and the most popular mainstream music—in short, exactly what most Volume poets write in opposition to. In fact, some of Volume's most prominent poets refused to be featured in the magazine based on the principle of supporting a culture that did not normally support their voices. However, most Volume poets I spoke to about this publicity responded with a wry smile—realizing the irony, but at the same time, not completely repulsed by the idea. Molly, one of the article's

highlighted poets, admitted that it was a bit of an "internal conflict" to participate in the feature, but recognized that the article spread the word about performance poetry to impressionable, younger girls, who probably would not be exposed to spoken word programs otherwise. Chinaka Hodge had a similar internal conflict when *Teen People* wanted to feature her work. She explained the conflict in an interview with "My Road," an online forum showcasing the accomplishments of young people:

It was kind of a battle of morals for me because I don't always agree with the magazines that put women in menial roles, that feature women who are half dressed just to get people to buy the magazine, and that don't really talk about women as being powerful or being relevant to society. It was a battle for me to go out there and be able to market myself as a talented and thriving woman in contrast to women in *Teen People* who I don't necessarily think of as being good representatives (screen 1).

For Chinaka and Molly, their exposure allowed them to share the beauty of themselves and the movement with a larger audience and potentially change perceptions about poetry and womanhood. However, the dichotomous reactions to this exposure reflected the conflict between a desire to spread the word about the beauty of the movement, and the inclination to keep it cloistered enough to preserve its true identity.

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Further, the tension between the increased publicity of the spoken word movement and the safe, supportive space of their poetic community is felt, if not frequently discussed, amongst the Volume poets. Evidence of this arose during my talks with the Volume poets, who not only seemed skeptical about building a career in

performance poetry, but also simply staying involved with the art form for the rest of their lives. Jon expressed hesitation when I asked about his future involvement: "I'll definitely be writing for the rest of my life," he told me. He also showed interest in continuing with performance poetry in college, "...but beyond that?" He shrugged. "The attitude just seems very different. Not quite as supportive." When I asked what he meant, he said that many adult slammers seemed to have "ego problems." Molly, speaking as a poet who has competed with both teens and adults, said that she perceived the adult slam scene as having "lost the fun" of the youth scene. With a smile, said that she was "not looking forward" to leaving the youth scene.

With so much discussion about the atmosphere surrounding adult poetry slams, it is important that we also examine several more themes that might potentially contrast the youth and adult performance poetry scenes: first, the actual poetry that is produced, and second, whether the communities of writing still provide the members with opportunities for self-identification and empowerment. Although the adult slam scene may be imperfect, it may also still have beneficial repercussions on the poets involved and on the state of poetry in our communities.

The subject matter of poetry on the adult scene does not necessarily change—if we revisit the themes cited as most popular in Volume (identity, love, and society), they are not much different than the most popular topics on the adult scene. However, the reception of those themes is a bit different on the adult level. Rubinstein and Hyman explicate the popular opinion that a vast majority of the poetry seems self-indulgent and even self-pitying. Rubinstein categorizes the major themes of slam as "'Oh my pain.' 'Oh my race's pain.' 'Oh the pain of my sex.' 'Oh the pain of my sexual orientation.'

Sex, politics, occasionally love. Drugs, renewal, regeneration" (para. 9). Hyman agrees: "The main facets of slam are first person narrative, which isn't bad in its own right... [But] there's a lot of oh-my-pain poetry, mostly about abuse and angst.... There's a lot of 'look how I'm marginalized' poetry" (para. 4). Hicks is a bit more candid, citing the scene's prominent themes as "sex-and war-and sex-and love-and sex-and politics—and sex—and revolution—and sex—and victim artistry, real and imagined and sex" (para. 6). I found it particularly intriguing that while identity and relationships still seemed to be the main subject of writing, the classification had transformed from a positive "who I am" to a negative "oh-my-pain." Self-identification was still certainly realized through slam, but this was no longer a necessarily positive thing. Hyman elaborates: "They [the poets] certainly let you know who they are... slam poets seem to use slam as their means to categorize themselves. Whether this is a good idea, I don't know, it usually lets them write some pretty unpoetic poetry" (para. 9). This change suggested that while such personal exploration and articulation of experience was valued among adolescents, by the time poets matured into adulthood, these poems no longer had the paramount value they did on the youth level. For teenagers, performance poetry had become a way to bridle the intense emotion and experience of adolescence, but the same motive is not always needed for adults. While the reasoning of whether or not adults need a forum for identification as urgently as adolescents do is a topic better saved for a psychology thesis, it is evident that many poets on the adult scene are not as driven to explore the personal problems of each poet.

The frustration with intensely personal poems on the adult scene is two-fold.

First, the scene is hungry for new words and new ideas—the expression of new thoughts

is ultimately what will drive the vision of the movement forward. Kass argues that innovation is constantly necessary not only to keep the scene interesting, but also to keep it true to its definition. The "mono-thematic" nature of many of the poems may result in "a short shelf-life for the art, if there isn't space for people to do things that are completely different, if there isn't room for all voices to be heard." A movement that is based on the principal of giving sound to all voices cannot have restrictive standards that compel poets to write on the same topics in the same styles. Such a tendency would render the movement boring, but more importantly, static. Rubinstein expresses a desire for the slam movement to recognize its potential as a tool for communication: "People need to stop being angry, start thinking, and proposing solutions [to their pain] ... the mic is a tool, not an invitation to masturbate in front of a large crowd" (para. 7). His loaded words might seem a slap in the face to younger poets, but it need not be-as the Volume poets recognized that each member was at a different place in their poetic growth, so the adult movement as a whole may be in a different place than the youth movement. A smaller, inherently safer community like Volume may be suited to not only politically charged, but also intensely personal poems, whereas the adult scene has different members, and thus different priorities.

Moreover, the Volume community is unique because it allows the writers extended periods of time to share their writing with each other and get to know one another as people and as poets. For adults, who may forge friendships outside the slam arena (particularly on teams) but for the most part, have only three minutes a performance to share themselves with the community, legitimate identification may not be possible. Rubinstein argues:

I don't think readings in any way are a legitimate tool for self-identification. A poem, in its best state, should speak less about you and more about all of us; it's about something we all feel . . . and that's as far as it can really go. More poems can pile on top of it, thus beginning to hint at you, but you really need more time to etch yourself out of the air for the audience before you, if that's your intention (para. 10).

People are complex, and their voices take time to evolve, as we saw with the Volume poets. And it should be noted that, although the poetry produced by the Volume poets was also effective, particularly in the examples cited in the second chapter, because it resonated with the other poets. While they were in the process of discovering themselves, they were also fulfilling Rubinstein's claim that poetry should be "about all of us." The contrast then is simply that what the "us" cares about on the youth level is different than the priorities on the adult scene.

Slam poetry arose in opposition to the academic perceptions of what constituted good poetry. Slam was intended to be different, fresher, and more innovative, a forum that showcased raw and genuine poetry. However, many sub-communities within this movement have proved to have at least some component of stifling rigors, despite Slam's anti-establishment roots. While the slam scene is not simply a large extension of Volume (not that such an expansion would be an ideal situation), it does provide a forum of poetry and the cultivation of language that currently exists in few other places nationwide. While definite comparisons and contrasts can be drawn between Volume and the adult scene, to do so would be to compromise the motivations and effects of each community. What fundamentally determines the success of a community writing

program is the writers themselves, and the way they craft and celebrate words to express their individual voices. The membership of Volume differs from the membership of the adult scene, and thus their priorities and motivations will be different. Slam poets have more of an objective of engaging their audience and (at least potentially) engendering social change, and the expression of personal experience and self-development may be less valuable. However, as the movement still takes pride in language, poetry, and the exchange of ideas, it remains a forum that may ripen to serve as a vehicle for artful communication.

Concluding Remarks

In our correspondence, Adam Rubinstein shared a story with me about a time he and some other slam poets were visiting with Shane Koyczan, the individual 2000 National Poetry Slam champion. Koyczan asked if the others wanted to hear some of his poetry that he didn't perform, and Rubinstein describes the response of the other poets. "Amid the rawkus [sic] of people questioning his even having material that he wasn't slamming with, I realized that even he, too, was constricted by the tenets of the competition" (para. 11). The anecdote is telling to the fact the slam movement is still in its development. A concept that arose in opposition to the regulations and politics of academic poetry circles has developed regulations and politics of its own, which are not insurmountable, but must be handled if the movement is to reach its true potential.

The contemporary trends of performance poetry and slam are the latest forms that the oral tradition of sharing poetry has taken. Currently, poetry slams are, while imperfect, a valuable method of increasing the value of language in our communities, as well as fostering increased dialogue between the community members. I have contended that our society must learn to revalue language in order to increase the intelligent exchange of ideas and stimulate the growth of individual voices. The place and population of where this revaluation has been most successful is among adolescents.

The safety and support of Volume and other youth writing communities have afforded many young people a tool for shaping their individual beliefs and crafting their voices. This alone is a compelling argument for the encouragement of such innovative programs within the lives of as many adolescents as possible. The survival of poetry, of

creative and argumentative writing, and of the value of the English language is greatly increased when people are wrestling with and celebrating the language at a young age.

Programs such as Volume also speak positively to the future of performance poetry in America. Despite hesitation by some of the current youth poets, there is a high likelihood that they may become the new scene. And if so, it is feasible that they can bring the lessons they learned within Volume and other similar communities to the adult scene. Many current adult slammers had no access to communities like Volume when they were young, and thus did not have the opportunity to grow up with the art form. Upcoming youth poets will bring a new and more complex perspective of performance poetry, hopefully injecting the adult scene with the respect and passion they cultivated on youth levels.

Reducing the national problem of deliteracy through the implementation of youth community writing groups will not be an easy task. It requires the commitment of motivated and passionate leaders within policy and academic circles, as well as in the fields of teaching and poetic coaching. However, the benefits to be gained from such programs—the increased confidence of adolescents, the articulation of their thoughts, and the increased visibility of language and poetry within communities—are undeniably compelling. By instilling youth with a respect and reverence for the written and spoken word, the future of our language will be brightened, and the possibilities of increased dialogue and idea exchange in our communities will be heightened.

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