

**Page, Stage, Engage:  
Spoken Word as a Tool for Creating More Critical, Engaging Social Justice Education  
Programs**

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# PREFACE

## GENERAL SUMMARY

Spoken word—as both practice and culture—shares with critical pedagogy an emphasis on asking questions, cultivating dialogue and counter-narratives, critical thinking, valuing personal experience and narratives, making the invisible visible (especially with regards to power), relationship-building through honest and authentic engagement, and collectively creating the community in which we want to live. I am interested in how all of these concepts function within social justice education spaces: first-year orientation and “welcome week” programs, corporate diversity trainings, bystander intervention presentations, online “thinkpieces” and video blogs, and beyond. More specifically, this project explores how spoken word can be a creative intervention to help make social justice education programs not just more engaging, but more *critical*.

## AUDIENCE

My project is classified as a “creative” project. Because it is as much about creating a living, dynamic “toolkit” for use by educators (including myself, as my work takes me around the country to many different institutions) as it is about the research that forms that toolkit’s foundation, my audience is fairly specific. I am writing for the orientation staff, social justice educators, housing staff, faculty, and other university employees who are most involved in crafting and executing these programs.

Beyond them, however, this project has a secondary target audience: the students themselves. Particularly when it comes to the creative elements of the project; the idea is to create work (spoken word poems) that can illuminate the aforementioned issues in engaging, dynamic, critical ways. The ongoing challenge is to balance approaches: the work must be complex enough to be critical and challenging in a healthy way, while approachable and relatable enough to not fly over the heads of students who have either never thought about these issues, or who are actively resistant to them (whether because of their privilege around not *having* to think about these issues, lack of exposure or opportunities for dialogue, or the time constraints inherent in social justice education programming). My hypothesis, in a sense, is that

the interweaving of critical education philosophies and spoken word poetry is an ideal vehicle for striking that balance.

## NOTES

Because this is a relatively nontraditional project, I want to highlight a few of the guiding principles that form the foundation of the rest of this paper and the project as a whole:

- “Final Project” is somewhat of a misnomer, as I envision this work as a “living document” that can constantly evolve in order to respond to different contexts.
- My citation practices are informed by my experiences in communities that intersect with spoken word, social justice education, and critical pedagogy. I strive to be intentional in my citation—elevating the voices of practitioners wherever possible, and striving to make sure that my bibliography—and the appendix of recommended poems—reflects the diversity of the communities on which I am commenting.
- Taken together, the previous two points indicate a struggle with notions of authority; I want to recognize my expertise as a practitioner, while also rejecting the kind of “voice of God” authority that is sometimes implicit in academic writing. This project is about sharing my experiences and perspectives alongside some relevant research, not to “plant a flag” or assert my ownership of the ideas in this paper, but simply to contribute to the larger, ongoing, community conversation. As Patti Lather says in *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/In the Postmodern*, “To deconstruct authority is not to do away with it but to learn to trace its effects, to see how authority is constituted and constituting” (144).
- This project is not attempting to identify a “spoken word pedagogy” in the same way that so many scholars and educators have written about Hip Hop pedagogy; while there will undoubtedly be applications outside of social justice education spaces, the scope of this particular project is much more narrow. It is also in the tradition of Hip Hop pedagogical projects, and while that does not explicitly come up in this paper, my work is very much

informed by writers and practitioners like Ernest Morrell, Jeffrey M. Duncan-Andrade, Roberto Rivera, Tish Jones, the staff at YouthSpeaks, and many others.

- A brief style note: my use of “their” as an ungendered, singular pronoun is a political choice, reflecting the broader cultural and linguistic shift away from “his” and “hers” being our only options.
- This project’s title, “Page, Stage, Engage,” refers to spoken word’s status as a cultural practice with written, performative, and pedagogical elements. It is also an event title that I have used in my work as a touring performance artist.

## INTRODUCTION: THE “*OOH* MOMENT”

You are on stage and everyone is waiting for you to speak. The details blur; your senses are limited by the dazzling stage lights, plus the white noise of a hundred strangers applauding, shifting in their seats, or just breathing. As you begin to share the poem that you wrote only two nights ago, your voice booms into the darkness. Amplified by the microphone and modest theater sound system, it becomes something alien, larger-than-life, external.

Your lifeline in this intimidating space is the *ooh*. In spoken word culture, audience members are encouraged—sometimes explicitly ordered—to participate. These are not formal poetry readings or high art exhibitions. These are raucous, unpredictable spaces of authentic community engagement. Amidst the shouts, finger-snapping, laughter, and applause, it is the *ooh* that marks those moments in a poem that *move* the audience. This particular vocalization is born of both shock and recognition; it is about discovering something that, deep down, you already knew (but for which you did not have the words or framework). The “*ooh* moment” is when things “click,” so to speak. These moments are about the difference between understanding something and internalizing it, between liking something and being fundamentally transformed by it.

While this paper will pursue a more in-depth exploration of spoken word as both practice and culture, it is worth pausing to consider the “*ooh* moment.” It exists in other media as well—when a song’s bridge leads to a beat of space, and then back into the triumphant refrain; or when a film’s villain reveals the nefarious twist in his plans; or when a novel suddenly illuminates something it had been subtly building toward—these moments are as old as art itself. As magical as they may seem, however, these moments are products of craft; writers and performers learn, over time, how to identify, cultivate, and even subvert or problematize them.

It is a kind of power— to communicate an idea so clearly and so fully that it elicits a physical response from those aforementioned “hundred strangers.” They may not remember your name, or everything that happened at that particular event, but those “*ooh* moments” stick. Spoken word is full of

these moments. Patricia Smith's "Skinhead" pivots from a novel writing exercise to a profound exploration of the roots of hate, in the space of a chilling laugh. Dylan Garity's "Friend Zone" spends nearly two minutes using humor as an entry point before it abruptly turns into a serious statement about consent and entitlement. Even my own "Handshakes" is built around the "turn," the moment in the poem where we all step back, and the series of silly anecdotes suddenly "clicks" into place as a reflection of a larger social problem. Every time I perform it, there is an *ooh* at that moment.

My project is about the application of that power beyond the stage. I have been a spoken word poet for the past ten years, but I have also been a social justice educator for the past ten years. Increasingly, I am finding ways to do both—I travel to colleges and universities and use spoken word to open up discussions about identity, power, and privilege, as well as some of the more concrete manifestations of those ideas: consent, bystander intervention, rape culture, or microaggressions, for example. The poems (and the "*ooh* moments" contained therein) serve as jumping-off points for these deeper conversations. For example, a poem like my "Consent at 10,000 Feet" (which is included, along with the aforementioned "Handshakes," in the appendix of this paper) uses humor, vulnerability, and an affect-oriented approach to create space for empathy and critical thinking. This approach is not necessarily "better" than a slideshow, lecture, or online module, but it is different, and part of this project's goal is to provide resources for educators for whom that "different" approach might be useful.

The response to my work has been overwhelmingly positive, and I would argue that this is less about my talent and more about how so much traditional social justice education features a distinct lack of "*ooh* moments." Instead, students get endless power-point presentations. They get mandatory "diversity trainings" that teach them more about hiding their feelings than grappling with them. They get theater games that function as little more than icebreakers, as opposed to genuine attempts to engage different learning styles, build relationships, and dig into ideas. They get definitions, statistics, and rules, rather than stories, authentic engagement, and concrete applications.

Spoken word poetry itself is not the answer to these problems. As this project will illustrate, it is one potential delivery system for a deeper shift in thinking. That shift is one that educators around the

world have been grappling with for years: how can learning (especially in the context of social justice education) be a more holistic, communal, collaborative process? Rather than an expert in the front of the room “gifting” knowledge to all the students who do not possess it, how can we create learning environments that recognize the existing knowledge that students carry with them, and create space for educators and students to work together to uncover the truth(s) that they seek? More precisely, how can this kind of shift toward critical pedagogy create more “*ooh moments*?”

Spoken word elegantly demonstrates some of the principles of critical pedagogy. It is an alternative approach to communication, one that focuses on the heart as well as the mind. It is an approach that recognizes that it is not about “style vs. substance,” but rather how they support one another. It seeks to create collaborative spaces for critical thinking, recognize the assets and intelligences of everyone in the room, and make the invisible visible (particularly when talking about history and power). Finally, it is an approach that actively seeks to cultivate “*ooh moments*”: those powerful, deeply-rooted shifts in consciousness that can result from a surprising juxtaposition, a novel re-framing of an issue, or an abruptly uncovered connection to the listener’s own life and experience.

My guiding questions: how can social justice educators use spoken word as an entry point to make their programs more critical, more student-centered and, ultimately, more effective? Especially in the context of first-year orientation and/or “welcome week” programs (which are opportunities to reach every incoming student, as opposed to the ones who opt-in to activist work or social justice-oriented classes), how can we cultivate more of these soul-stirring moments— not just in a surface-level sense of being more engaging or fun, but in the deeper sense of impacting campus climate and building a more equitable university community?

I will approach these questions by first clarifying terms and providing context. From there, I will offer a critique of current trends in social justice education. That critique will be informed by my research on and personal experience with critical pedagogy as both philosophy and practice. Next, I will begin to weave in spoken word as one creative intervention that might bring some of the principles of critical pedagogy to life. I will do that by exploring spoken word on both a macro level (focusing on some of the

deeper foundational principles of spoken word as a culture, how they relate to critical pedagogy, and how both disciplines might inform social justice education programming) and a micro level (focusing on the specific techniques that spoken word artists use to make their points “stick”).

Finally, I will offer a “toolkit” that includes concrete resources for educators: specific poems of mine and potential discussion questions relating to them, generative writing prompts for the creation of new work, a list of links to poems by other artists, and a few concluding thoughts. Everything will also be presented at a live performance/community event, as well as documented online for future access.

It is my hope that this project will not only collect some of my favorite “*ooh* moments,” but will lead to the creation of more, all while exploring the deeper principles of why a particular audience might be moved or transformed by a particular turn of phrase.

One thing that I learned very early on in my career as a performance artist is the difference between an audience applauding out of politeness and an audience applauding out of gratitude. That difference is reflected in the context of social justice education: do students suffer the presentation and then move on to the next one, or is a seed planted that might change their lives? To take the metaphor one step further, can “planting seeds” be even more specific? Are we scattering wildflower seeds willy-nilly as skip through the meadow? Or are we planting crops, with intention and care, that might one day feed our families, our communities, and ourselves?

As any poet can tell you, the answers to these kinds of deep questions are in the details.

## CONTEXT AND TERMINOLOGY

The fields of spoken word and critical pedagogy are rich, dynamic sites of constantly-shifting practices, thought-currents and ideological complexity. It would be beyond the scope of this project to present a full history of either of them, or attempt to capture the entirety of their definitions. What follows are a few thoughts on how I am conceptualizing these terms, pulled from both my research and my lived experience as a practitioner.

### ***SPOKEN WORD, SLAM POETRY, AND PERFORMANCE POETRY***

#### *OVERVIEW: SPOKEN WORD*

The oral tradition has existed for millennia; from the griots (or storytellers) of countless villages, tribes, and communities around the world, to artists like Homer (*The Iliad* and *Odyssey*, after all, were meant to be heard, not read), to political speeches throughout history. Indeed, what could be called “the spoken word” is one of the oldest art forms that human beings practice.

Today, however, the term “spoken word” most commonly refers to a relatively young artistic and literary movement. With roots in the Black Arts Movement, the Beat Generation, the rise of Hip Hop culture, and other sites of orality, spoken word (as the term is commonly understood today) refers to the practice of poets creating work meant to be performed aloud, as opposed to read on the page. This work pulls from poetry, but often also pulls from theater, oratory, storytelling, jazz, Hip Hop, stand-up comedy and other forms, creating a movement that is as stylistically diverse as its practitioners. Some spoken word poets create micro-theater pieces, delivering poetic monologues from distinct characters. Others rap a cappella. Others tell stories, weaving in the playfulness with rhythm and tempo found in jazz. Whatever the style, the connecting element is orality, the translation from the page to the stage.

Even this is an imperfect definition, however, as many “page poets” regularly read or perform their work aloud, and an increasing number of “spoken word poets” are publishing their work in journals, magazines, and books. The definition is useful, however, in that it points to a difference in culture more

than in form. While an individual poet may engage with both “the page” and “the stage,” those contexts are not the same.

For this project, what is most important about spoken word is this contextual element. While it is possible to perform spoken word alone, the culture is built around authentic human engagement—performing work for an audience. This informs how the work is created. While both spoken word and page poetry value unique metaphors, startling juxtapositions, and vivid imagery, spoken word has an added urgency—the audience cannot re-read lines or dwell on ideas; they have to process the art as quickly as the poet speaks it. While this can (and sometimes does) lead to bluntness and sloganeering, when it is done well—when a poet can create work that is original, challenging, beautiful, and accessible to those “hundred strangers”—the “*ooh* moments” are never far behind.

#### *ON SLAM POETRY'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE LARGER SPOKEN WORD MOVEMENT*

The rise of spoken word as both practice and culture is significantly driven by the rise of the poetry slam as a site where spoken word happens. Invented by a Chicago construction worker named Marc Smith in 1984, a poetry slam is an Olympic-style competition (often taking place in a bar, club, or coffee shop) where poets perform their original work and receive scores from a panel of judges selected from the audience.

This may seem odd to someone who has never experienced it. It is important to note, however, that the constant refrain at poetry slams is “the points are not the point; the point is the poetry.” Poetry slams stand in contrast to formal poetry readings: they are audience-centered (playing on Americans’ love of sports and competition) and fiercely democratic. Anyone can sign up to perform, volunteer to be a judge, or simply enjoy the show—no MFAs or publishing credits required. The fundamental message of the poetry slam is that poetry is for everybody. As Smith himself states:

Slams are captivating poetry events that focus a live audience’s attention on the presentation of poetry that’s been composed, polished and rehearsed for the purpose of being performed—very often in a competitive arena, *but not always*. It’s a carnival, a pageant, an interactive classroom, a town hall meeting, a con game, a versified boxing match, and a churchlike revival that electrifies and animates the people listening to and watching it. (3)

Exploring the pros and cons of “scoring” people’s art would be another paper. One particular “pro,” however, deserves attention in the context of this project. The slam poetry movement includes—and is often driven by—voices that have traditionally been absent from MFA programs and ivory tower publications: youth poets, poets of color, and other writers holding underrepresented or misrepresented identities. This diversity is reflected both in the identities of the poets themselves and in their approach to the work. Because there are no rules regarding form or content (beyond a three-minute time limit and the prohibition of props, costumes, or music), a slam is often as funny as any stand-up comedy open mic, as emotionally powerful as any theatrical drama, and as artistically complex as any avant-garde performance art show.

As Zoe Anglesey states in *Listen Up*, “Spoken word poets, like the early Beats before them, practice their art in a democratic manner... the good, the bad, and the ugly convene happily and respectfully... On open mic nights, initiates to spoken word learn their poetics, not by studying Contemporary American Poetry, but the hard way— through audience approval, or disapproval” (xviii).

#### *ON THE RISE OF ONLINE VIDEO AND SPOKEN WORD “VIRALITY”*

From spoken word’s roots, through the rise of poetry slam culture, we arrive in the present to an entirely new boost in the popularity of spoken word: online video. In the foreword to *Viral*, an anthology of spoken word poems that have “gone viral” (become popular and frequently shared online), M. Mlekoday illuminates the power of spoken word: “In 2013—a year that saw article after article offering autopsies of some small, misshapen thing the author called poetry—the poets gathered in this anthology earned nearly 12 million views on YouTube collectively. 12 million! That’s about as many views as there are people in New York City and Los Angeles combined, by the way” (*Viral* 4).

That number has swelled. Button Poetry, the host of those videos and publisher of that anthology, now boasts over 100 million views on its YouTube page, including the poems in that anthology as well as hundreds of others from poets across the United States (*Button Poetry’s YouTube channel*).

The result of all of this growth and attention over the past three decades is a vibrant, dynamic movement. Countless high schools and colleges around the United States have spoken word clubs.

Annual events like Louder than a Bomb, Brave New Voices, the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational, and the National Poetry Slam draw hundreds of poets and thousands of audience members. While I would hesitate to say that spoken word has crossed over into the mainstream consciousness, it is perhaps as big and popular as an “underground” artistic movement can get.

One final note on terminology: I use “spoken word,” “spoken word poetry,” “slam poetry,” and “performance poetry” more-or-less interchangeably throughout this paper, because they all involve the practice of writing poetry meant to be performed aloud. That being said, “slam poetry” refers specifically to spoken word performed at a poetry slam (as opposed to an open mic, political rally, or other event). The difference is contextual; while all slam poetry is spoken word, not all spoken word is slam poetry.

### ***CRITICAL PEDAGOGY***

Like spoken word, we can trace the origins of critical pedagogy back to myriad sources. In his primer, *Critical Pedagogy*, Joe L. Kincheloe names Du Bois, Gramsci, and Vygotsky, as well as the scholars connected to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, as important contributors to the concept (59-69). The most widely-referenced foundational text, however, is Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Freire points to the central importance of dialogue and the power of teachers and students co-learning together: “Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world... Because dialogue is an encounter among women and men who name the world, it must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others” (89).

In Antonia Darder’s *Reinventing Paulo Freire*, dialogue is framed as “a powerful and transformative political process of interaction between people” (103). Darder also clearly differentiates dialogue from conversation or debate: “Dialogue is collaborative, bringing participants’ focus on critical engagement of similar, differing, and contradictory views in order to understand the world together and forge collective social action in the interest of an emancipatory political vision” (105).

But dialogue alone does not fully capture the central project of critical pedagogy. Darder affirms Paulo Freire’s recognition of “the tremendous need for educators to infuse their teaching with a critique of

capitalism... the most totalizing system of social relations the world has ever known” (24). Critical pedagogy is not just about having conversations and affirming students’ perspectives; it is about how those conversations and perspectives might contribute to both students’ and teachers’ collective ability to dismantle systems of exploitation and oppression.

Perhaps the most powerful metaphor from Freire’s work is his critique of the “banking system” of education (as discussed in chapter two of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), wherein students are empty vessels waiting to be filled by the instructor, who has all of the information and decides how and when to “deposit” it into the students. This metaphor, however, has layers. Critical pedagogy is not just about rethinking how classrooms work; if students sat in a circle (instead of rows) and engaged in more dialogue (as opposed to passively listening to lectures), that could be a step forward, but it is not necessarily “critical.” The banking system metaphor also points to the commodification of knowledge, the framing of students as consumers, and the centrality of capitalism in the construction of an educational process that reproduces the inequity, apathy, and oppressiveness of society as a whole.

Though she uses the term “engaged pedagogy” as an extension of traditional critical pedagogical thought, bell hooks expands on this idea: “Throughout my years as student and professor, I have been most inspired by those teachers who have had the courage to transgress those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning. Such teachers approach students with the will and desire to respond to our unique beings...” (13). Framing good teaching as “transgression,” hooks gets to the heart of the matter—most education happens within spaces that are structured to encourage that “rote, assembly-line approach,” and educators must work against that while working within it.

For my own practice as a teaching artist, guest lecturer, and educator in a variety of contexts, all of these ideas are important. Critical pedagogy shares with spoken word culture a desire to make the invisible visible, to engage in dialogue about how power functions, and to affirm that “knowing” and “doing” are two sides of the same coin. Freire speaks of praxis: “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (51). We engage in dialogue in order to make sense of the world around us, but we also engage in dialogue as the first step to realizing our potential as active shapers of the world around us.

To be sure, to do all of this in the context of an English class, health class, or geometry class (not to mention a social justice education space) can be a challenge. It is worth quoting Kincheloe at length as he describes the types of knowledge that critical educators must strive to understand:

Critical pedagogy is a complex notion that asks much of the practitioners who embrace it. Teaching a critical pedagogy involves more than learning a few pedagogical techniques and the knowledge required by the curriculum, the standards, or the textbook. Critical teachers must understand not only a wide body of subject matter but also the political structure of the school. They must also possess a wide range of education in the culture: TV, radio, popular music, movies, the Internet, youth subcultures, and so on; alternative bodies of knowledge produced by marginalized or low-status groups; the ways power operates to construct identities and oppress particular groups; the modus operandi of the ways social regulation operates; the complex processes of racism, gender bias, class bias, cultural bias, heterosexism, religious intolerance, and so on; the cultural experiences of students; the often conflicting purposes of education; and much more. (3)

As Kincheloe describes it, critical pedagogy is not just a toolbox of activities or techniques; it is a more fundamental shift in how we conceptualize education. Because part of my project *is* about building a toolbox of activities or techniques, it is important to build that work off of this deeper pedagogical foundation. Here are a few guiding questions with regards to how this relates to social justice education:

- How are we actively engaging with the specific population with whom we are working, as opposed to crafting programs that are “one size fits all,” or that really only speak to the dominant identities present? Is our interaction with students “transactional” or “relational?”
- How can a slideshow or PowerPoint presentation be a supplement to the educational experience and not *the* educational experience itself? On the other side of the spectrum, if we are doing intensely participatory theater games or icebreaker activities, have we built relationships enough to make those activities do the work that they need to do?
- When we build curricula, are we describing systems of oppression (in order to fulfill a legal requirement or make it *look* like we care), or are we building our capacity to actively challenge those systems?

- Are we making connections between different forms of oppression? Are our consent workshops talking about gender and sexuality beyond binaries? Are our bystander intervention programs including space for dialogue about how race and culture impact these issues? How are we cultivating a deeper understanding of how power flows and how oppression works?
- How can we incorporate one-time social justice programs (like first-year orientation or welcome week experiences) into the fundamental structure of the institutions? Are we connecting students to activist organizations and cultivating a culture of organizing? What are the “next steps” after the program?

This project grapples with those questions. I will use spoken word as a lens, a tool, and a guiding light, but these questions transcend the basic idea of “using poetry to engage students.” The following sections will explore how social justice education programs might intersect with spoken word, not just to be more fun or interesting, but to reflect some of the principles described above.

## **THE CHALLENGE: TOWARD MORE CRITICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

For the purposes of this paper, I conceptualize “social justice education” as any space where participants engage in conversations or knowledge-sharing about identity, power, privilege, oppression, and culture in a systems context. This includes workplace “diversity trainings,” but it also includes classrooms, Public Service Announcements, conferences, and online spaces like blogs and social media. My particular focus is on first-year orientation and “welcome week” programs at colleges and universities.

Over the past five years, I have made my living traveling to colleges and universities to witness—and help craft— these programs. The vast majority of my work is one-time, guest speaker-style engagements, so while the programs that I am directly involved with are generally well-received, I often get to be a “sounding board” for hearing about why so many other programs (the kinds that are annual, institutionalized, and often mandatory) do not live up to their potential. My research supports this general uneasiness with the status quo.

In “Diversity Training Doesn’t Work. Here’s Why,” writer and educator Carmen Van Kerckhove states that “diversity trainers focus on all the wrong things,” including how to mitigate the effects of face-to-face interpersonal bigotry while ignoring the larger structural reality of racism, how to encourage colorblindness through the uncritical, surface-level “celebration” of diversity, and how to put pressure on people of color to “teach” white people how not to be racist (Van Kerckhove).

In an evaluation of 178 articles examining and reviewing diversity trainings, Bezrukova, Jehn and Spell suggest that “while diversity training can indeed be impactful in organizations, some areas where diversity training would seem to have the greatest impact and promise (e.g., an integrated approach to diversity training) have been relatively ignored. On the other hand, our review reveals that the content and effectiveness of some diversity training programs can be questionable” (221). As examples of these questionable tactics, the authors point to the “stand-alone approach” vs. an integrated, holistic approach to

training, too much focus on one element of identity vs. an intersectional approach that acknowledges the many identities that an individual holds, and too much focus on one method of instruction vs. varying methods that reach participants with different learning styles.

Writer CVT puts it more bluntly in an essay posted on *Racialicious*: “[Diversity trainings] ...are either too simple and obvious for people with any sort of awareness (or personal experience), or they’re too superficial to get anybody who really *needs* it to take it to heart. A couple hours of ‘diversity training’ is never going to help a youth worker relate to kids of other races or backgrounds and/or get over their own sub-conscious (or conscious) biases” (CVT).

Scholar Andrea Smith describes how these trainings are not just ineffective, but how they can be actively harmful to social justice efforts:

I frequently found myself participating in various workshops in which participants were asked to reflect on their gender, race, sexual, or class (and so on) privilege. These workshops had a bit of a self-help orientation to them: ‘I am so and so, and I have X privilege.’ It was never quite clear what the point of these confessions were... It did not appear that these individual confessions actually led to any political projects to dismantle the structures of domination that enabled privilege. Rather, the confessions became the political project themselves... Because of the perceived benefits of this ritual, there was generally little critique of the fact that in the end, it primarily served to reconstitute the structures of domination it was supposed to resist. (215)

In *Represent and Destroy*, Jodi Melamed takes this critique further by focusing on antiracism efforts. Speaking of the ostensibly well-meaning “race novels” of the mid-20th century, she writes: “...race novel discourse encouraged whites to internalize affective dispositions and to cultivate a race-liberal political identity. Thus, race novel discourse stabilized a field of social and moral value that made it possible for white Americans to comprehend the act of reading a novel as (and as a substitute for) an active politics of social transformation” (24). Melamed goes on to write about the culture wars and canon wars of the 1980s and 1990s, and draws similar conclusions: although reading lists were diversified, respecting others’ cultures became the norm, and explicit hate or bigotry became socially unacceptable, this “liberal multiculturalism” “instantiated conditions for misrecognition under which self-identified progressive whites could become active constituents for educational and municipal policies that exploited

and abandoned impoverished communities of people of color. Thus, the triumphs of multiculturalism brought to distraction an active politics of transformation” (93).

How do we go beyond individualized, “be-a-better-person” educational approaches and move toward cultivating “an active politics of transformation” through our programming? Is that even possible, given the time and content restrictions placed on so many of the staff and educators who do this work? I believe that it is. I believe that social justice education has the power to transcend shallow, one-time “diversity trainings,” and that while spoken word is not the answer in and of itself, it is one useful lens through which we can examine how to do that. The next section of this paper maps out some key techniques and strategies.

## KEY TECHNIQUES AND STRATEGIES

As my final project is classified as a “creative” project, much of what follows will be demonstrated live. Indeed, much of my work over the past few years has been about combining spoken word with social justice education in order to figure out what works. What follows is an exploration of some of the foundational elements of that work, based on both that personal experience and further research.

### ***WHY SPOKEN WORD?***

This project overlaps with other critical pedagogical projects, most notably Hip Hop pedagogy and social justice theater. While it would be beyond the scope of this paper to offer an overview of those two practices, both could be good “next steps” for any readers looking for more information about how the arts can intersect with critical pedagogy. My argument, however, is that spoken word can both overlap with those practices and offer something distinct, that it deserves a place in the “tool box” alongside them, for reasons both profound and surface-level. Before getting to the former, it is worth briefly noting the latter.

First, spoken word is popular. More and more cities have poetry slams and/or spoken word open mics. More and more schools have spoken word clubs. More and more spoken word videos are “going viral.” In short, spoken word is increasingly becoming something that young people consume, so its use in educational settings is increasingly becoming part of a culturally-relevant pedagogy.

Second, spoken word is accessible. All of the examples used in this paper are available, right now, for free, through online video. This makes it a useful tool for educators who may have limited access to resources.

Finally, because spoken word is such a fiercely democratic culture, featuring voices from diverse walks-of-life and approaches to the form, the collective body of work that spoken word poets have produced covers many different issues. Social justice educators looking for an engaging entry point into

conversations about mental health, critical whiteness, rape culture, or other specific issues can very likely find poems addressing them. The third appendix to this paper contains a wealth of examples.

***MACRO-LEVEL: WHAT DO SPOKEN WORD AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY BOTH DO?***

If I were to summarize how critical pedagogy has informed my work over the past few years, I would focus on the importance of educational practices that are collaborative, dialogical, relational, praxis-oriented, and critical of systems of power and oppression. In everyday practice, this means that when I enter a space, as an educator, I am attempting to do some specific things that transcend simply “teaching the material.” Four guiding principles have become important to my work; below, I list each one and discuss how it relates to both education and spoken word.

It should be noted that this aspect of my project is very specific. I do not seek to identify a “spoken word pedagogy” in the same way that so much has been written about Hip Hop pedagogy. While there will certainly be connections that educators can make to teaching other subjects, I am focusing more precisely on how spoken word can be used in social justice education—especially in first-year orientation and welcome-week programs.

***CREATE SPACE FOR AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT AND DIALOGUE***

Note that this does not necessarily mean a “safe” space, because if we are being critical of systems of power, we see that those systems are all around us, and that no space is truly safe. But this open, dialogical space can be built over time, through relationship-building exercises, honest communication, the diffusion of authority (i.e. not setting myself up or carrying myself as “the expert” who already knows everything), and structuring activities/programs that engage multiple learning styles.

In “From Slam to Def Poetry Jam: Spoken Word Poetry and its Counterpublics,” Susan Somers-Willet writes: “Through a unique combination of open participation, political exchange, and public critique, the practice of slams in the U.S. can create what scholar Nancy Fraser (1990) calls subaltern counterpublics— ‘discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses ... to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs’” (Somers-Willet 2, Fraser 67).

Even on a purely surface level, spoken word is about engagement and dialogue—a poet stands up in front of other people and talks. But as this passage demonstrates, that dialogue is doing work that most students’ dining hall or dorm room conversations probably is not doing. Whether by making grand political statements or just telling stories, spoken word poets are engaged in a multitude of critical practices: the affirmation of counternarratives, the building of community, the transmission of knowledge that is not transmitted through mass media or the traditional classroom, and beyond. These practices take center stage at poetry slams, but can still be excavated through the use of in-class performances and/or online video.

#### *COLLABORATE AND CO-LEARN/CO-TEACH WITH STUDENTS*

I rarely enter any educational space with a set-in-stone lesson plan. I have ideas, modules, and a general plan for what to do, but there is always room for flexibility and improvisation. Even the activities that I do bring with me are structured to be collaborative—list-making exercises, critical analysis exercises based on material that students choose, and other more interactive activities—and there is always room for questions, disagreements, and dialogue.

A fundamental pillar of spoken word culture is the idea that everyone has a story, every story matters, and the process of sharing our stories with each other has the power to create change. At a poetry slam or open mic, anyone can sign up to share their work. This intensely democratic practice reflects critical pedagogy’s emphasis on how learning is not a transaction from teacher to student; it is something that we do together. We all bring our experiences, values, knowledge, and stories into the space.

As bell hooks states in *Teaching to Transgress*, “Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process” (21). This same idea can be applied to the stage, the writing circle, or the orientation program. When a YouTube video of a poem is used in a program, it mirrors how poems are experienced at a slam—one at a time, with no single voice dominating. Spoken word is about the power of one individual’s voice, sure; but more than that, it is about the power of our voices, together.

### *FOCUS ON MAKING POWER VISIBLE*

Critical pedagogy is not just about form; it is also about substance. If my task is to work with a group of white students around issues of privilege, for example, that work must transcend the simple acknowledgement and confession of privilege. As a group, we must make connections to history, to systems, and to how power flows through institutions, communities, and individuals. We must also strive to make connections between racism, sexism, homophobia, economic inequality, and other axes of oppression. Finally, we must also strive to share concrete action steps so that the conversation is not simply intellectual and abstract.

While not every spoken word poem explicitly makes these connections, spoken word is fertile ground for this kind of critical thinking. Because poems tend to operate on multiple levels (literal, metaphorical, political) at once, they give facilitators and participants room to cultivate dialogue. A poem about mental health, for instance, can simultaneously be about one individual's personal struggle *and* the larger system through which they move that may create barriers to access to care, social stigma, and misrepresentations in the media. When a group of young men can hear a poem and then have conversations about media and the advertising world's goal to make money off of our insecurities, this does the critical work of questioning traditional notions of masculinity while *also* questioning the lengths to which corporations will go for profit in a capitalist economy.

To be sure, using a classroom space to question capitalist exploitation is not always safe, and students are not always ready for that conversation. But this is another one of spoken word's advantages as an educational tool: it can be an entry point that allows these deeper discussions to develop organically. An educator can share a poem, and then decide—based on the students themselves and other contextual factors—how this critique of systemic power relations manifests.

### *PROVIDE RESOURCES, IDEAS, AND SPACE FOR "NEXT STEPS" AND/OR ACTION*

Related to the last point, I consider my work one intervention in a lifetime of learning. Whether the program is 45 minutes long or an entire semester, we never have time to cover everything we could potentially cover. A program, therefore, must be intentional about providing resources for students who

want to dig deeper. This could be in the form of a handout of campus activist organizations and how to find them, or a reading list, or even a collaborative discussion and list-making exercise around the question “what now?” Because those “next steps” will look different for different students, my job is not to dictate what comes next; it is to create space for the student to figure out what comes next in the context of their particular journey.

The rules of the poetry slam state that a poem must be no longer than three minutes. This ensures that a slam poem (and while not all spoken word poems follow this rule, many do), by nature of its extreme brevity, can never completely address every angle or idea within a particular issue. This is not a weakness; it is a strength. These poems demand “next steps.” They are entry points, and the physical act of listening to a poem, in a specific location, with other people, creates space for further thought and action.

All of the above points can manifest in different, sometimes messy, sometimes even contradictory, ways in a particular program or educational space. Additionally, educators may face a multitude of barriers: time, class sizes, administrative support (or lack thereof), among others. But especially in the context of first-year orientation programs, these points may be the difference between a transformative experience and yet another “in-one-ear-and-out-the-other” mandatory presentation.

### ***MICRO-LEVEL: SPECIFIC TIPS, TOOLS, AND TACTICS***

In this section, I will go further into detail regarding some of the tools that spoken word poets use, and how those tools relate to cultivating criticality in social justice education programs. As a starting point, I did a content analysis of the top 30 most-viewed poems on Button Poetry’s YouTube Channel (the analysis was done in December of 2015). The 30 videos feature 33 poets (29 different individual poets, since some appear more than once; three of the videos also feature duos/collaborations), and account for 50,873,574 views, more than half of the Button channel’s total views. The oldest is from March of 2013, and the newest is from June of 2015. Full disclosure: one of the videos, “Ten Responses to the Phrase ‘Man Up’” is my own poem.

I chose to do a content analysis of the most-viewed poems, as opposed to a stratified sample, to get a sense of why certain poems connect with a mass audience; my hope was to identify particular techniques present in multiple poems, and begin to pull out a few lessons. This sample was especially useful because although poets in spoken word culture are free to write about whatever they want (love poems, nature poems, lyrical experiments), all but one of the top 30 poems analyzed here attempts to tackle some kind of political or social issue. Under that umbrella, 26 of the 30 poems attempt to present a counter-narrative (an alternate perspective on an accepted truth, or a new lens on a familiar issue), and 24 of the 30 poems deal with issues of identity (self-perception, privilege, interpersonal/institutional inequities based on identity) Because these are all ideas commonly tackled in first-year orientation programs and other social justice education spaces, these videos are an ideal starting point.

#### *BREVITY AND DYNAMICS*

While spoken word poets have complete freedom to experiment with styles, approaches, and formal elements, poetry slam culture (and its three-minute time limit) has given rise to a few widely-shared tactics. While these tactics may impact the viral success of a particular poetry video, they also may be of use to educators and program designers. For example, spoken word poems tend to be relatively brief. The longest poem in this analysis is four minutes and 18 seconds long, and most of the others are significantly shorter, hovering around three minutes. This also happens to be about the length of the average pop song—just enough to enter a listener’s consciousness, plant a seed, and create a memory without wearing out its welcome.

Author Carmine Gallo, in his analysis of the popularity of TED Talks (a lecture series wherein passionate experts share information with a mass audience; TED stands for “technology, entertainment, design”), points to the importance of TED’s time limit: “No TED speaker is allowed to speak for more than 18 minutes... TED Curator Chris Anderson has said 18 minutes is long enough to be serious and short enough to hold people’s attention. He’s right. When you give people too much information it results in what scientists call ‘cognitive backlog’: the more information you ask someone to retain, the more likely they are to forget everything!” (Gallo).

Auditory neuroscientist Seth S. Horowitz expands on this idea in the *New York Times*:

“...listening, really listening, is hard when potential distractions are leaping into your ears every fifty-thousandth of a second—and pathways in your brain are just waiting to interrupt your focus to warn you of any potential dangers” (Horowitz).

This is not just about brevity; it is about structure and *dynamics*: the shifts in tempo, tone, and volume within a given piece. One of the skills that spoken word artists develop is the ability to create, within a three-minute poem, “anti-distractions” that shock the listener back into the poem if their mind had wandered. This is done through the use of structural repetition (like the numbering system in Patrick Roche’s “21”), visual/auditory motifs (like Neil Hilborn’s physical/verbal tics in “OCD”), a dynamic narrative arc that builds tension and releases it at strategic moments (like my own poem “Ten Responses to the Phrase ‘Man Up’”), and other strategies.

The lesson here for social justice educators is less about what to do than what not to do. Two-hour PowerPoint presentations or lectures may be full of valuable information, but how useful is that information when the audience is daydreaming? As educators, we must challenge ourselves to stop saying in a hundred words what can be said in ten. We must challenge ourselves to make our material dynamic and engaging to different learning styles. Above all, we must challenge ourselves to see time limits (whether imposed by the explicit length of a class or the unspoken attention spans of students) not as restrictions, but as opportunities; we can make our material more powerful by “cutting the fat,” as poets say when referring to the revision process, and getting to the point.

### *HOOKS AND APPROACHES*

This is a more subjective point, but I would argue that what separates the top 30 most-viewed poems from the hundreds of others on the channel is their use of “conceptual hooks.” I define this term as the organizing principle of the poem. In other words, it is the novel approach that makes one love poem different from the millions of other love poems that have been written. A strong organizing principle—especially when that organizing principle connects to a current trend or captures the zeitgeist—makes an enormous difference in how a poem is received.

For example, Denice Frohman’s “Dear Straight People” isn’t just a poem about LGBTQ rights; it is a poem in the form of an open letter to straight people. Rachel Rostad’s “To JK Rowling, from Cho Chang” isn’t just a poem about racial stereotypes in media; it is both another open letter poem and a persona piece from the perspective of a fictional character. These approaches (and nearly all of the top 30 poems utilize some kind of conceptual hook) make these poems more memorable, more “shareable” on social media, and—potentially—more useful as educational tools. A student may not remember a PowerPoint presentation about microaggressions, but a poem like Alex Dang’s “What Kind of Asian Are You?” may be more “sticky.” These poems tap into the “*ooh* moment” by crafting simple rhetorical entry points into complex subjects.

James Poniewozik, writing about online political ads for *Time*, inadvertently captures some of what’s driving the current viral poetry boom: “Web video is like a pop single: an attention-getting hook is important... the medium rewards authentic, *vérité* captured moments. (It also rewards shock and humor, which could favor outrageous ads.) A universal, direct message is key” (74).

It is also worth noting that none of the top 30 poems deals with any kind of specific, current-events-oriented issue; their “hooks” engage with issues in different ways. For example, there is a poem about police violence, but not a poem specifically about the Trayvon Martin case. There are multiple poems about rape culture, but none directly addressing a specific, high-profile case of sexual assault. Contrast this with the mainstream news media, which is built around covering the specific events that are happening *right now*. This “zoomed out” approach (which combines concrete, down-to-earth poetic details with more generalized commentary on issues) may create more space for students to engage; they do not have to feel like they know the ins-and-outs of a particular news story. Rather, they can explore how their own experience lines up with an issue. They can engage on an affective level.

#### *THE POETS THEMSELVES: IDENTITY MATTERS*

Twenty-eight of the thirty-three poets in this content analysis read as “young adults.” The gender split is about even (17 poets who appeared to identify as male, 15 who appeared to identify as female, and one gender-nonconforming poet). Even though the spoken word movement as a whole is very diverse,

white and white-reading poets are overrepresented in Button’s top 30— 24 of 33 poets. Again, there is some subjectivity in how all of this is tracked; I tried to focus on perceived, “walking down the street” identities.

While it would be beyond the scope of this paper to present research on why these identity concerns might impact how an audience views a piece, I can draw from my own experience and say that “the messenger matters.” Through online video, social justice educators can share the stories of poets—in those poets’ own words—to students who may have more in common with those poets (in terms of age, race, sexual orientation, and other identities) than with the educators themselves. This also creates room for the cultivation of empathy and a deeper engagement with the issues.

#### *THE POWER OF NARRATIVE AND AFFECT*

While only eight of the 30 poems in my analysis were purely narrative, every poem had narrative elements— in the form of anecdotes, framing devices, metaphors, and visual imagery used to make a point. About half of the poems used humor, and most of those used humor to set up a “turn,” or a moment in which the poem goes from funny to serious. These strategies—and the use of narrative in general— impact how these poems are received.

For example, it is one thing to hear about another case of police shooting and killing an African-American man on the nightly news. It is something else to hear Javon Johnson talk about the fear, anxiety, and necessity of having a conversation about police with his young nephew in the poem “cuz he’s black.” Clearly, that affective element communicates something that the facts alone cannot; this is what we point to when we point to the power of art and narrative. I would argue, however, that the difference is something more than just emotional vs. intellectual approaches, that these poems are not merely providing an emotional spark to these issues, but are also offering frames, analyses, and additional context that are all-too-often absent from the mass media.

Knowing the basic statistics relating to the gender wage gap is one thing, but hearing Lily Myers discuss the emotional and psychological process of learning how to make herself “smaller” in the poem “Shrinking Women” is a different kind of experience. While more people may be learning about trans

identities through Caitlyn Jenner or Laverne Cox, Ethan Smith's "A Letter to the Girl I Used to Be" can explore these issues without the baggage of mega-celebrity and media distractions. Sabrina Benaim's "Explaining My Depression to My Mother" deals with a topic that only comes up in the mainstream media if there is a specific tragedy, or a new drug on the market, even though millions of people deal with it every day.

Discussing the power and importance of narrative to Indigenous communities, scholar Dian Million writes:

These narratives may bear the marks of their production in chaos, but they cannot be ignored, since they too represent discursive strategy. These Indigenous concepts of how the world works, and how it came to be, can never be summarily dismissed. They work differently. Story has always been practical, strategic, and restorative. Story *is* Indigenous theory. If these knowledges are couched in narratives, then narratives are always more than telling stories. Narratives seek inclusion; they seek the nooks and crannies of experiences filling cracks and restoring order. Narratives lay boundaries. Narratives give orphans homes. Narratives both make links and are the links that have been made. Narratives are our desire to link one paradigmatic will to knowledge to discursive and material projects that have consequences. Narratives serve the same function as any theory, in that they are practical vision. Not least, Indigenous narratives are also emotionally empowered. They are informed with the affective content of our experience. The felt experience of Indigenous experience in these Americas is in our narratives and that has made them almost unrecognizable to a Western scholarship that imagines itself objective. (35)

While this project is not focusing specifically on Indigenous narratives, this passage illustrates much of what makes storytelling so vital to educational work. Narrative as "discursive strategy," as a form of grassroots theorizing, as recognition of the importance of affect—these all impact how students learn. The aforementioned poems are not solely appeals to emotion, but emotion forms their central core.

In his study of political ad campaigns, Ted Brader concludes: "This study confirms what some observers long held on faith: emotions can be central to whether and how campaign ads work. Although the goal of campaign organizations is to "get their message out," the art of electioneering lies as much in how that message is delivered" (403).

Discussing one of the reasons why Minnesota was the first state to reject a same-sex marriage ban after thirty others had approved similar legislation, Minnesotans United trainer Alison Froehle pointed to the importance of emotional narrative: "In the past, our side of the fight has focused on rights and equality and that this is discrimination. But that frame of mind does not move voters. So what we're doing on this

campaign is, we're having conversations from the heart. We're taking it from an abstract frame of mind and into the personal, reminding people that this is going to hurt real people" (quoted in Ringham and Aslanian).

In the same way that political ads that appeal to voters' values—or fears—through the use of sound, imagery, and narrative are often more effective than ads that simply state facts, spoken word poems that tell stories, tug on heartstrings, or use concrete images as metaphors for larger ideas are almost always more effective than someone standing up on a stage shouting statistics at the crowd.

The lesson here, for social justice educators and people who create social justice-oriented materials for mass consumption, is that “being right” is not enough. We need to tell stories. We need to present concrete examples that back up philosophical talking points. Social justice education must avoid intellectualizing issues, and instead embrace the human element that makes those issues matter.

#### *ASKING QUESTIONS AND PRESENTING PERSPECTIVES VS. LECTURING*

When stating facts, social justice educators need to state those facts in an engaging way. Sometimes, however, “stating the facts” is not the best way to educate. Even when those facts are stated in ways that appeal to emotion, engage different learning styles, and are elegant and compact—education involves deeper processes than information-sharing. As renowned critical educator Paulo Freire stated so powerfully in *We Make the Road by Walking*: “The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves” (quoted in Bell, Gaventa, and Peters 181).

Scientific research backs up this ethical claim. In “The Neuroscience of Leadership,” David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz discuss the neuroscience behind persuasion: “Try to change another person’s behavior, even with the best possible justification, and he or she will experience discomfort. The brain sends out powerful messages that something is wrong, and the capacity for higher thought is decreased. Change itself thus amplifies stress and discomfort...” (5).

Spoken word poems that attempt to preach at an audience rarely go viral. Of course, what qualifies as “preachy” or not is subjective, but in a general sense, the most popular poems center around

stories, experiences, and questions. One of the most powerful functions of art is that it gives human beings a space to ask questions and grapple with ideas. Poets are not expected to have all the answers in the same way that lecturers, professors, or workshop facilitators sometimes are.

This may be healthy for the individual artist, but it can also have an impact on how an audience receives information. Rock and Schwartz continue: “When people solve a problem themselves, the brain releases a rush of neurotransmitters like adrenaline. This phenomenon provides a scientific basis for some of the practices of leadership coaching. Rather than lecturing and providing solutions, effective coaches ask pertinent questions and support their clients in working out solutions on their own” (6).

Spoken word, as a community, is built around the idea that when we share our stories, individual audience members will interface with those stories in different ways. Hilborn’s “OCD” touches on issues of mental health, but it never makes a specific, didactic point about the issue. Even more overtly political poems, like Dylan Garity’s “Friend Zone,” are careful to aim the lens back at the speaker, to explore an individual’s grappling with an issue rather than point fingers at rhetorical boogeymen. Taking a final look at Button Poetry’s top 30 most-viewed videos, this is another important element—very few of them (perhaps none of them, depending on the listener’s perspective) are lecturing the listener.

Lecturing is not necessarily bad. Freire himself states, in *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, that the point of dialogical education is not dialogue as just another technique; it’s something deeper. “...we have to recognize that not all kinds of lecturing is banking education. You can still be very critical while lecturing” (40). Of course, social justice educators do sometimes have to make specific points, or share relevant information, or even lecture. But keeping this broader, more holistic definition of “teaching” in mind can lead to more impactful learning moments.

While the next section of this paper is presented as a conclusion, much of the substance regarding how all of these techniques are used, along with a multitude of specific examples, are included in the appendices.

## CONCLUSION: ON PLANTING SEEDS

*Whether poison berries, wildflowers, or crops—  
everyone plants seeds, whether they know it or not.  
So I'm just trying to look out at my garden,  
and be more intentional about the life I want to harvest...*

--from "A Frank and Honest Conversation About Race," from the album  
"Post-Post-Race," by Guante and Katrah-Quey

It is my hope that this project can be a starting point and/or a useful resource for social justice educators. The work of integrating the arts and arts approaches into educational spaces, in order for those spaces to be more critical, is ongoing work, and changes in context, access to resources, and personal pedagogical styles will undoubtedly impact how that work happens in any given scenario.

One potential obstacle in this field is the tension that sometimes arises between "good" work and "transformative" work. As both artists and educators know, our work is almost always positive, in a general sense. The idea that a poem or a song reaches one individual and means something to them, or that an educator reaches just one student and alters the trajectory of that life—these are narratives that we hold on to, because they (rightly) validate what we do outside of traditional metrics of validation. The tension, then, comes from knowing that the challenge is not just to do "good" or "positive" work; the challenge is to do everything we can to change the system, so that our "good" or "positive" work is no longer so absolutely necessary.

In the context of this project, this tension is explored in two poems: "Starfish" and "Quicksand."

In "Starfish," the speaker is an educator who grows disillusioned while seeing that all of their good work is not fundamentally changing the structure of the institution. This disillusionment is challenged by an interpersonal interaction—by a real relationship built from that work. The poem attempts to walk a fine line—to affirm that our face-to-face, everyday struggle is vital and important, while also affirming that we need to recognize and work to challenge the larger structures in place that make that struggle necessary. The poem presents no answers.

Similarly, “Quicksand” grapples with how we respond to injustice in a multitude of ways—many of which are positive—while still failing to really get at the root of that injustice. Our analysis, creative expression, attempts to cultivate empathy, awareness-raising, and other responses are all important, and may be part of a larger solution, but none of them are the same as taking direct action. Again, this is not set up as an “answer,” because “taking direct action” is not always something that we are able to do. This poem also presents no answers. Like “Starfish,” it grapples with an idea. It asks critical questions.

This is why art matters. Especially in a social justice education context, art creates dialogue precisely because it does not have all of the answers. Poets can simply speak their truth, without it being presented as the only truth. A free-writing exercise can allow students to say whatever it is that they need to say—whether they share it with anyone or not—in order to get to the next level of their understanding. As the previous chapters in this paper illustrate, this combination of critical thinking, the validation of individuals’ stories and experiences, and personal expression geared toward interpersonal dialogue are all vital components of authentic community-building and sustainable learning.

To revisit a metaphor from the beginning of this paper (which is also a structural trick that many spoken word poems use), we are always planting seeds. Especially when it comes to first-year orientation programs and welcome week programs, we may have a very limited time with students to talk about some very big, important topics. So we plant seeds, and hope that their experience on campus will provide water and sunshine that might help those seeds sprout.

But we can also think critically about this seed-planting metaphor. A mandatory lecture can plant a seed. A PowerPoint presentation can plant a seed. An online module built from true-or-false questions can plant a seed. But again, there is a difference between scattering wildflower seeds absent-mindedly and planting crops. As educators, we owe it to our students to be as intentional as possible while designing programs and exploring how those programs fit within the context of the institution. We need to be thinking about the soil. We need to know when to rotate the crops, or when to commit additional resources to a particular harvest. It is work.

Making social justice education programs more critical—perhaps through the use of artistic materials and/or arts approaches—is part of that work. Wildflowers are beautiful, but crops are revolutionary. Intentionality must be cultivated, through creative collaboration, ongoing dialogue, and resource-sharing. This project is my addition to that larger conversation.

## APPENDIX ONE: Poem Transcripts

What follows is a selection of poems from my own arsenal that might be useful as models for the ideas discussed in this paper. While all of these poems are available in video form online, this is not meant to be a specific, ready-made program for “grab-and-go” use by social justice educators; that would be counter to the deeper goals of this project. Rather, my hope is that this framework illuminates some of the power and potential in integrating spoken word into programs that have other elements as well.

While the poems cover a range of specific issues, a deeper theme unites them. When I have had the opportunity to present a series of poems in a social justice education setting, the overarching metaphor that I use is “zooming in.” These poems are about the relationship between the personal, the interpersonal, and the institutional, as well as about the power that we have as individuals and in community with one another to shape that relationship.

For example, the poem “Action” is about bystander intervention in the context of sexual assault. Beyond that, however, it is a poem about redefining the concept of “allyship,” affirming that being an ally isn’t just something you feel or believe on a personal level—it is something you do, intentionally and proactively, on an interpersonal level. Similarly, “Handshakes” may be about socialization and toxic masculinity, but on a deeper level, it is about how our interpersonal interactions become embedded in larger institutions and systems of harm. “How to Explain White Supremacy to a White Supremacist” is all about pushing ourselves to think more critically about racism; while many of us may already be able to identify individual attitudes or interpersonal actions that are racist, we are not always as adept at seeing the racialized flow of power through history and into present-day institutions.

How explicit an educator makes these deeper themes depends on the students, the relationships that have been built, and the goals of a particular program. Through the lens of my own work, I have found that these deeper connections to questions of power give the individual poems more depth, while also potentially drawing in listeners who may be resistant to topics like feminism or racial justice. Most importantly, framing the poems in a power context opens the door to dialogue about solutions, activism,

and student power. We are not simply rattling off a laundry list of problems or “things to be aware of;” we are attempting to see the world so that we can change the world. My hope is that these poems can be entry points for that work.

## SMALLTALK

When my girlfriend's parents ask me what I do for a living...

I pull a straight razor out of my back pocket. And I don't tell them that I'm a poet; I sure as hell don't tell them that I'm a rapper. I just pull a straight razor out of my back pocket.

And sure: I could lie. I could say that I'm a pilot, or a teacher, or a handsome man, or the *change that I want to see in the world*, or a pipe-smoking grad student. I could go on and on about all the locked doors I can open, or the exotic locales that have crawled up my nose, or the blinding glossiness of my résumé paper. But I don't. I just pull a straight razor out of my back pocket.

Sure: maybe this is overly dramatic. But I've never been very good at small talk. I'm always too busy wondering where interesting scars come from; too busy asking myself how many poorly aimed arrows, casual brushes of skin, drownings, and split seconds of eye contact, over the past ten thousand years, have constructed this moment; too busy imagining the soundtrack to my life dominated by smiling, adult contemporary alterna-rockers, and saying no.

Give me Hip Hop, dressed in leather, knuckles cracking. Give me whatever the opposite of novocain is; let it pulse beneath my skin and make every cut and lick and bruise unbearably magnificent.

Because we could talk about the weather; that's easy. We could deaden our colors and round our jagged corners so that we may fit more precisely into our own carry-on luggage. I could chuckle softly and rattle off a string of pop culture references, and we'd all have a good laugh; but I don't. I pull a straight razor out of my back pocket.

And just as her father begins to say: *sooo, you're a barber?*  
I slice my little finger off.

They jump back, instantly, like characters in a poorly edited student film, their lines caught between their teeth, their eyes staring directly into the camera. Levitating with pain, I pick my discarded digit up from off the Olive Garden floor, and with the black sharpie I always keep in my other back pocket, I write my name on it, and I say:

Give me ten dollars and I will let you keep this.

Not the finger. The moment. Give me ten dollars as tribute to the truth that we once stood here, that I did something worth remembering; that you, on this day, witnessed something larger than traffic, or storm clouds, or time passing.

For the price of a fancy breakfast, press your fingertips to the wet cement of my tombstone. Stand in the background of my iconography. It's only ten dollars; tell my bones they've done a good job keeping me upright; tell yourself that this day did not blur by, that this journal entry would be more than an absent-minded doodle. For ten dollars, I will carve my initials into your brainstem. What do I do for a living?

...I am a poet. An MC. An artist. I am a turtle without a shell, and I have the scars to prove it. I am pulling myself from the magician's hat night after night, and I have the scars to prove it. I am leaving fragments of my body in every dusty corner of this country and I have the scars to prove it.

Give me ten dollars, and I will show you everything.

## CARTPUSHERS (THE FIST THAT LIVES IN YOUR NECK)

It's not rocket science. It's a ten foot piece of rope with a hook at the end; we got three of 'em hanging in the equipment shed—one of 'em is thicker, but a little shorter; one of them looks thin as shoelaces but it's a half-foot longer. If you got first pick, take that one—looks flimsy, but trust me: you'll break before it does. Try to keep up.

See, these are the days before robots, and this is a city where people leave their empty apartments, leave their empty SUVs and finally, leave their empty shopping carts. Here. For us. You can hook seven together with that rope and push 'em back in. When it's busy, grab ten. When it's hell, stack thirty up and we'll push 'em in together.

Just be careful. Because these people: they'll look right through you when they back out of those spots. When they take that corner at thirty miles per hour. When they forget that they forgot to use a blinker and cuss you out for walking through a crosswalk.

See, to that guy, we're just background noise, uncredited extras in the eighty-year long made-for-TV romantic comedy that he calls life. We are neurons flickering stupidly, infantry stomping through the dreams he won't remember upon awakening.

So make sure you wear comfortable shoes. Boots in the winter. Sneakers in the summer. Add pads as you grow older. Grow older. Learn to control a convoy of carts without that rope; just balance, coordination and will. Learn to control the fist that lives in your neck.

When these people just leave their carts sitting in the middle of a parking space, swallow. When they look right through you, swallow. When it's fifteen below and a straightjacket would be warmer than these flimsy company coats and you're working a double shift because you've heard rumors of layoffs, and the dapper manager saunters up and says *how's it goin' chief?* ...swallow.

Understand: they will never understand this. The beauty of a parking lot at twilight, how the sky burns blue. The sweetness of every second when the big hand is on the eleven. The smile of the person who actually looks at you. We betray ourselves for seven dollars an hour. Our native language is white noise.

Cartpushers, cashiers, janitors, servers, bartenders: we are an army fighting a war we don't believe in, in a country whose name we can't pronounce, but we're fighting. And we're tired. But we're fighting.

And we're losing. But we're fighting.

You get two fifteens and a half hour for lunch. Those breaks aren't for your body, though. They're to keep you from going crazy. See, with an eight-hour shift broken up into quarters, that's just four two-hour shifts.

After punching in, chatting with the MOD and putting your gloves on, you can glance at your watch and say *Wow. I'm almost halfway to being halfway done with half of half of half my shift.* It makes the time fly right by.

You'll be fine, kid. Just remember: smile. You're representing the company. Remember: say hello to people when they come in.

And remember: when they look right through you, you're still there.

## HANDSHAKES

The weirdest thing about having your hand crushed is that the pair of eyes across from yours never stops smiling. As knuckles are compressed, as the skin is all but torn off the top of your hand, he always has this stupid grin on his face. Even as the vein bulges from his neck he smiles, until you grudgingly mumble, *that's quite a handshake*, and he releases you.

As a young man, I was taught that one's masculinity is tied directly to one's handshake, that when meeting another man for the first time, no sin was more unforgivable than placing a limp fish in his hand, the dead husk of a greeting. Your grip must be firm, like the way you hold your briefcase as you walk to work, or the way you hold the handle while standing up on the bus.

Some men, however, prefer a grip like a battle-axe mid swing, like ripping the head off an antelope by tugging on the antlers. Some men treat every handshake like a gladiator's death-match, a test of strength, a test of will.

And when I meet these men, as I often do, their tectonic plate handshakes never fail to illuminate my myriad inadequacies. Frozen there with purple fingertips, I am reminded that I cannot stand the taste of beer, that cars confuse and frighten me, that when faced with a barbeque and a pair of tongs, I will overcook the meat every time. These men attempt to squeeze the testosterone from my body.

Maybe I'm just insecure. But studying his smirk more closely, I think maybe that would make two of us. Because as he wrings the color from my fingers I find myself wanting to ask him:

Do you ever feel trapped? In the mornings, when you're watching SportsCenter and happily downing that protein shake made from raw eggs, liquefied steak and Axe Body Spray, do you ever crush the glass between your fingers?

Do you ever get tired of the voice in your head, you know, the one that sounds like Dennis Leary, telling you to constantly reaffirm that you're a "real man" by catcalling women, eating enormous hamburgers, and squeezing everything really, really hard?

I find myself wanting to ask him: Do you hold your wife's arm like this when you're angry with her?

Is there a teddy bear, somewhere in your history, being ripped away from a pair of hands that just aren't strong enough? Do you remember the first time your father wouldn't let you hold his hand when crossing the street? Do you remember the way he looked at you? Do you remember being handed your first-born son and not knowing how to hold him? Do you remember squeezing his shoulders like this the first time he disappointed you?

Do you remember what it was you were trying to hold on to?

And I know: there is so much space between us, as men, that sometimes we feel compelled to cram as much contact as we physically can into every touch. I know.

We've become so comfortable with crushing, so hypnotized by our own strength, we forget: how incredible it can feel to let go.

## TEN RESPONSES TO THE PHRASE “MAN UP”

1. Fuck you.

2. If you want to question my masculinity, like a schoolyard circle of curses, like a swordfight with lightsaber erections, save your breath.

Because contrary to what you may believe, not every problem can be solved by “growing a pair.” You cannot arm-wrestle your way out of chemical depression. The CEO of the company that just laid you off does not care how much you bench. And I promise, there is no lite beer in the universe full-bodied enough to make you love yourself.

3. Man up? Oh, that’s that new superhero, right? Mild-mannered supplement salesman Mark Manstrong says the magic words *Man Up*, and then transforms into The Five O’Clock Shadow, the massively-muscled, deep-voiced, leather-duster-wearing super-man who defends the world from, I don’t know, feelings.

4. Of course. Why fight to remove our chains, when we can simply compare their lengths? Why step outside the box when the box has these badass flame decals on it? We men are cigarettes: dangerous, and poisonous, and stupid.

5. You ever notice how nobody ever says “woman up?” They just imply it. Because women, and the women’s movement, figured out a long time ago that being explicitly ordered around by commercials, magazines and music is dehumanizing. When will men figure that out?

6. The phrase “Man Up” suggests that competence and perseverance are uniquely masculine traits. That women—not to mention any man who doesn’t eat steak, drive a big pickup truck and have lots of sex with women—are nothing more than background characters, comic relief, props.

More than anything, though, it suggests that to be yourself—whether you, wear skinny jeans, rock a little eyeliner, drink some other brand of light beer, or write poetry—will cost you.

7. How many boys have to kill themselves before this country acknowledges the problem? How many women have to be assaulted? How many trans people have to be murdered? We teach boys how to wear the skin of a man, but we also teach them how to raise that skin like a flag and draw blood for it.

8. Boy babies get blue socks. Girl babies get pink socks. What about purple? What about orange, yellow, chartreuse, cerulean, black, tie-dyed, buffalo plaid, rainbow?

9. I want to be free to express myself. *Man up*. I want to have meaningful, emotional relationships with my brothers. *Man up*. I want to be weak sometimes. *Man up*. I want to be strong in a way that isn’t about physical power or dominance. *Man up*. I want to talk to my son about something other than sports. *Man up*. I want to ask for help. *Man up*. I want to be who I am. *Man up*.

10. No.

## ACTION

There is a conversation that never happened. Not even a deleted scene; more like a storyboard lost, an idea cut from the first draft. You are co-starring, slouched on the futon while we watch the game, telling me about your new girlfriend. Or more specifically, all the things you're going to do to your new girlfriend. Action.

And part of me still remembers my lines, even though I never said them. The conversation I just couldn't start, for fear of awkwardness, or hurting our friendship, or simply because the commercials were over. That one tiny gesture that might not have changed anything but might have. I remember, how I never muted the TV, never put my drink down and never said:

*Man—the way you talk about her, the way you treat her... Your hands are getting too big for your heart. I can smell the future you on your breath. She isn't safe with you.*

And now it's two weeks later and we're standing in my kitchen, that same silence between us. She didn't want to press charges, so you're a convict with sledgehammer hands and no boulders to break them on. And I am thinking about how we used to play football together. Numbers 55 and 56, both inside linebackers. I am remembering the dozens of conversations that never happened, the words oversleeping in the bed of my lungs. I am the least important person in this story.

And part of me wants to believe that you wouldn't have listened anyway, that some evil spirit whispered itself into your skull. Part of me wants to believe that we didn't grow up three blocks from each other, that our eyes aren't the same color. Part of me is always repeating those lines, always shooting that scene, always reminding myself that despite this guilt, I'm not a bad guy.

You tell me that she never said no. That you're sorry. That you're not a bad guy.

Rape culture is silence. It is being able to see the future and not doing anything about it. It is believing the fairy tale platitude that there are good people and bad people and that as long as you're not one of the bad people, your job is done, your conscience is clear.

It is all of us swimming through the same polluted water of beer commercials policing masculinity, and stand-up comedians making rape jokes to sound edgy, and media talking heads blaming the victim, and music turning women into disposable sex objects, and language encouraging us to think of sex as violence—bang, hit, smash.

It is telling our daughters to dress sensibly and not walk alone at night, and telling our sons...

It is a conversation that never happened. And this is not an excuse for you—it is a reminder for me.

That while her silence will always mean *no*; my silence, this silence between us, will always mean *yes*.

## CONSENT AT 10,000 FEET

You ever have sex in a haunted house? Like you know, you sneak in together, and you're both laughing, and you got it all planned out because you both worked there last year and know the layout of the building, and then like a werewolf jumps out and it's like aaahhh but then you find that one spare room and it's like... aahhh... you know: it's different, it's outside the box, but there's nothing wrong with it.

You ever go to your roommate's fringe festival show and end up hooking up with one of the supporting cast members, but they're like, a method actor in the middle of a series of performances so they never break character? And, it's cool but their character is this, like alternate universe steampunk Mercutio and their blunderbuss keeps getting in the way and you both laugh about it, and it's like, memorable, something beyond the norm, but there's nothing wrong with it.

You ever have sex inside an enormous bowl of fettucine alfredo that is suspended by chains between two sequoia trees because you're dating this super avant garde performance artist and wanted to draw attention to their new vanity publishing press but they only got like a hundred Twitter followers? Yeah, it's squishy, and definitely an experience that is not easily replicated, but there is nothing wrong with it.

There is nothing wrong with any of these scenarios, because in all of them, both partners are 100%, flamboyantly beyond any shadow of a doubt, *down* with what's happening; and the communication of that, verbal and nonverbal, is clear and constant. This is consent. And wrong... would be the absence of that. In any context. For any reason.

It would be silence. It would be "I don't know if this is what I want right now." Because maybe that's not a no, but it's definitely not a yes. It would be just about everyone agreeing that rape is bad, but only when it's called rape; how the amount of men who will admit to getting someone drunk, or otherwise manipulating, coercing, or forcing them into a sexual act is so much larger than the amount who will admit to raping someone.

How wrong is it, to continue to talk about sexual assault like it's always that stranger lurking in the bushes, or always that cartoon caricature of a predatory fratboy and never... the boyfriend. Or the girlfriend. Or the best friend. Or the "ally." Or that really sweet guy from class.

This is for that really sweet guy from class, who might be asking: what about the grey areas? What if we're just both really drunk? What if she sends mixed messages? What if I'm trying to do the right thing but I read those signals wrong?

Have you ever had sex while skydiving? Like where you talk about consent the same way you talk about wearing a parachute—no grey areas, no assumptions like, "I'm pretty sure I'm wearing a parachute." No questions like "I asked her to check my parachute and she didn't say anything, but it was okay last time so I'm sure it's good this time too."

Have you ever had sex in a burning building, when smoke and cinder wrapped itself around your neck, but coming was more important to you than going? Have you ever had sex on a liferaft in the middle of the ocean, surrounded by sharks? I'm not saying the water can't be cloudy. I'm just saying: we are under no obligation to swim through it. Have you ever not had sex? Just watched a movie, maybe made out, maybe made plans to get up again later, and then maybe days or weeks later, when you're both there, and both ready, and both smiling, and both completely alive in your own bodies, and both listening to each other, fully, and maybe it isn't love, maybe it's just sex, and that's perfectly okay, but love is so much bigger than "let's spend our lives together;" it is also "let's spend this moment together" as two (or more) people, present, electric, the opposite of grey, the embodiment of human: hands, eyes, lips, everything.

## HOW TO EXPLAIN WHITE SUPREMACY TO A WHITE SUPREMACIST

Sometimes, you are a lit match dropped into a boiling ocean. Sometimes, you are a stray dog proud of the sunrise after a long night of barking at the moon. Sometimes, you scream at the television, shadow box mushroom clouds, your hand-to-hand hatred outclassed, outdated. You, post-apocalyptic litterbug. You, venomous spider in the basement of a burning building. You, whose anger is so vast, and so empty, all teeth, and no mouth, just that white rattle.

Remember: white supremacy is not a shark; it's the water. It is how we talk about *racism* as white hoods and confederate flags, knowing that you own those things, and *we* don't... as if we didn't own this history too, this system— *we* tread water.

And *you*, chum... in a bucket. How many skinheads do you think are in the room when they set immigration law? Or decide curriculum for public schools? Or push policies like redlining, mandatory minimum sentencing, benign neglect, gentrification, broken windows policing, voter, ID, stop and frisk, three strikes, the drug war? Remember: the eye of the hurricane is the least destructive part.

You: meanest glare in the chatroom, all poker face and no cards? Was it your politically incorrect YouTube comment that made the median net worth of black families in this country nine percent the median net worth of white families?

Which individual Donald Trump bigot bogeyman are we supposed to be angry at, about the millions of people impacted by discrimination in housing, and banking, and education, and employment, and the criminal justice system, each year? Remember: sharks kill about one person each year; thousands drown.

So, when there is a new name hashtagged each week, when police create more black stars than hollywood; how long do we keep pointing out the bad apples, ignoring the fact that the orchard was planted on a mass grave? ...and that *we* planted it there?

Because of course, this isn't really a poem for white supremacists. I don't know any white supremacists...

But I know a lot of people in this room. And I know myself. And I know how white supremacy is upheld, whether through our action, our inaction, or just through paying our tuition and taxes. How it isn't just the broken treaty; it also the treaty. How a gavel can speak as loudly as a grenade. How a white fratboy in blackface on Halloween and his friend, who knows it's wrong but doesn't say anything, begin to blur together. The real racists, today, are so often not even racist. Those teeth, sharper when smiling, sharper still when smiling... and meaning it.

A burning cross is so dramatic. Just say: *I don't see race*. Just say: *we all have an equal chance if we work hard*. Just say: *all lives matter*. Just say nothing, surround yourself with others who say nothing and convince yourself that silence is the only song, this muted, underwater melody, this pulsing quiet.

And when a chorus blooms in Baltimore, when trumpets sound in Ferguson, when every one of our cities breaks... into song, will we hear it? Will we choose to listen? Or will we just continue treading water, watching for that great, white, shark... not realizing, that we're drowning.

## THE INVISIBLE BACKPACKER OF PRIVILEGE

*A pocketful of props, a quick pound and a handshake/ A free mixtape, a highway through a landscape/ as far from the Bronx as heaven is/ Moment of uncertainty, moment of clarity, moment of hesitance/ A bio with a spark a truth/, a couple sharpies, Party Music and The Carter Two/ LabcabinCalifornia, Illmatic and Headshots/ A couple handbills left in the back of a reststop/ A rhymebook, a sticker with my name on it/ stickin' through the rain washin' all the other flyers down;/ hoodie up, fitted to the side, bottled water, last minute to decide/ setlists, rep this: livin' for the rhyme/ but moreso for what that rhyme represents:/ forty-five minutes of our lives to connect/ Broken hearts over breakbeats, live and direct/ from the belly of the beast, strivin' to get free...*

The Invisible Backpacker of Privilege, or confessions of a white rapper:

1. KRS-ONE says there are nine elements of Hip Hop, a solar system of art, and fashion, and innovation orbiting an inferno. Some promoters will book me over a black rapper because they don't want to attract the wrong element.
  2. It is easier for me to get a buzz going because most bloggers, radio DJs, publicists, music journalists, videographers and booking agents are white. And I don't even really identify as Caucasian; I'm mixed. But that usually doesn't fit on the flyer.
  3. Listeners, who are often white, and identify with me because of it, actively seek out meaning in my music, rather than just looking for a good beat to dance to. And I will readily admit: I am very talented. But is that talent the reason you bought my album, the reason you came to my show, the reason you want this interview? I will never know.
  4. I can code-switch on a dime. We developed warp technology years ago and will leave this solar system as soon as we find a more fashionable one.
  5. My music can be perceived as rebellious because it's Hip Hop, but safe because of my skin. Fans and listeners get to engage with an oppositional culture without ever leaving their racialized comfort zones. Tarzan is the king of the jungle. Tom Cruise is the last samurai. Michael J. Fox goes back in time and invents rock and roll in 1955.
  6. The thing about stealing is that it's addictive. A little here. A little more. And we all know it's not wrong to steal to feed your starving family... and white kids in America are hungry. Whose food are they eating? Whose food are you eating? Whose food am I eating?
  7. Maybe white people don't belong in Hip Hop. But white people don't really belong in America, when you think about it. So these questions remain: what is the difference between acknowledging your privilege and doing something about that acknowledgment? How do we move forward? How do we define progress? Who is we? Who should be we? Who deserves to belong in the category *we*?
  8. When I say one small step for man, you say one giant leap for mankind. Just remember whose planet you're standing on.
  9. The code of the white rapper is this: know the history, build community, put people on. And if they ever make you a monument, scratch your name out. Break it. Spit on it. Burn it.
- We are not tourists, but we are also not the native inhabitants of this land. Aliens. Invaders. Put your hands up. Put your fucking hands up.

## THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Jackie's been here for twenty-five years and he tells me: you get used to it. He says your nose learns to seal itself when you dive headfirst into an ocean of dust; your eyes develop nictitating membranes to keep the chemical sprays out; and your hands... they will grow their own gloves, invisible and tough and permanent.

I've been a janitor for three weeks and I thought I was made of stronger materials.

We play chess in the breakroom. Jackie asks me what my favorite piece is. I say the pawn because, you know, he's the underdog; the odds are against him. Jackie identifies with the pawns too, but he finds nobility in their sacrifice, he sees beauty in their simplicity, in the fact that they're always moving forward.

Jackie shambles from room to room, moving half as fast as me but somehow getting twice as much done. The night shift will mess with your head like that. Jackie smiles, the saddest face I've ever seen.

Sometimes I see that face and imagine we are the servants entombed alive with the pharaoh, polishing someone else's gold while our oxygen runs out, dutifully preparing a grand feast for a god who will never be hungry.

But Jackie tells me that there is honor in this. A good day's work. An honest living. That there is poetry in this.

But what kind of poetry lives in a can of orange naturalizer, the liquid breath of dragons? The mist dissolves every word creeping up my throat, overwhelms every idea.

They got me wiping my reflection from the glass, scrubbing the shadows off the walls. They got me so scared of my alarm clock that I can't fall asleep any more, even when my muscles drain out from under my fingernails, my thoughts stream out of my ears, and I am left with nothing but two eyes that refuse to close for fear of what they might see. Is there really honor in this? Or is that abstract notion the carrot they dangle in front of us pawns to move us across the board?

Jackie tells me you can't think about it like that. He says that without us, the people who live and work in this building couldn't function, that we keep the gears turning, and that it might not be glamorous, but it's necessary.

And of course: he's right. And maybe I am just a working class kid who somehow hustled my way into college and got delusions of grandeur. Maybe now I'm "too good" to go into the family business: a hundred generations of janitors and farmers and infantry and factory workers and pawns.

So I suck it up... and last for two more months. And on my final day, before a very uncertain future, I make a point to shake Jackie's hand, and I say:

I've been thinking, man. I think the reason pawns can't move backwards is because if they could, they'd kill their own kings in a heartbeat. Instead, we are forced to keep moving, believing we can get to the other side and become royalty ourselves, but most likely dying on the way there, sacrificed for a cause we don't even understand. I wish you... I wish you the best, man. I wish you horses and castles.

Jackie smiles, the saddest face I've ever seen, and disappears into his work.

## STARFISH

I am standing in a school, or a submarine. Everything is grey and the walls can almost kiss each other. Children avalanche around my legs, flowing into one another, their faces erased by their sheer numbers. It is too dark here. And my job, these days, is to turn all the lights on and pretend to be brave.

We smell like unused paintbrushes; the air is still, hanging just over this river of hands and shoes and teeth. I see a teacher in a window, a smiley face painted onto a crash-test dummy. I forget where I am going.

These children will grow up to be scarecrows. These children will snarl, once, at the world and be put down. They will grow into the poems written about them, live in the spaces between the letters, and shiver when the books open.

And my job, these days, is to melt the winter with a flashlight.

I work in after-school program purgatory, moving from school to school, siphoning tears and collecting poems. I keep the poems in a shiny leather briefcase. I dump the tears out in the parking lot. And my job, these days, is to identify bodies. My job, these days, is to be the Disney World full-body suit Sisyphus.

My job, these days, is to dream of starfish: tens of thousands smothered by the air on the beach, being pulled apart alive by the seagulls. I toss a few back into the ocean and people tell me that I'm making a difference. But there is no honor in triage, only necessity.

And these children need something more, something bigger than one more plucky white woman to pry them open and extract their genius, or one more straight-A Teach for America mirage trying to "save" them, or one more Positive Male Role Model teaching them how to write poetry. And my job these days is to be one more positive male role model teaching them how to write poetry, and it's killing me.

A teacher once told me that this is the curse of direct service—we make a difference, just not enough of one. We are the bricks in a haunted house, doing an admirable job keeping the ceiling from collapsing, but not able to remove the evil from the air.

And my job, these days, is to be a hack exorcist. My job, these days, is to be a superhero in a coma, a stripmall Santa Claus. My job, these days, is to blindly feel my way through the jagged corners of these schools and not bleed too much.

And suddenly I remember where I'm going: the guidance counselor, who is concerned that one of my students may be unstable because she wrote a poem about death, not knowing that death and suffering are pretty much all that 15 year-olds write about.

On my way to the office, an impossibly small boy from one of my sessions cannonballs through the crowd, hits me in the shoulder and says... *thank you*. His name is Brian. He says thank you, and means it, and I'm stuck.

Somewhere between *you're welcome* and *I'm sorry*. I'm stuck staring at banners: Attitude is Everything, No Child Left Behind, I Love My School. I'm stuck. And my job, these days, is not to "make a difference;" it is to fight, with everything I have, for a world in which I don't have to.

My job, these days, is to try to find a way to be both brick and builder, to teach starfish to fly.

## QUICKSAND

Upon stumbling, by chance, upon a man, waist-deep in quicksand, I need a second to process. After all, this is fiction made flesh; it's like going to the zoo and seeing a mermaid. So my first response, naturally, is to tell him:

“Hey, um, I'm pretty sure that I read somewhere that quicksand isn't actually dangerous, that this idea of a patch of sandy water sucking a person down into oblivion is just a tall tale, a trope to build tension in early 1960s westerns. In real life, yeah, I mean, you *can* get caught in quicksand, but it's not really *that* hard to get out. So are you *sure* you're sinking in quicksand?”

He sinks.

My words don't seem to have any effect. So being an open-minded, progressive individual, I reevaluate. Maybe quicksand is real. So what now? My second response upon stumbling, by chance, upon a man, chest deep in quicksand is, before I actually *do* anything, to make sure that I have the *whole* picture. I mean, what was this guy doing out here in the jungle all alone? Did he step into that quicksand on purpose? Was he asking for it? Does he have a criminal record? Maybe I should wait until all the facts come in.

He sinks.

And again, being an open-minded, progressive individual, I decide to give him the benefit of the doubt, at least for now. I want to help

So my third response upon stumbling, by chance, upon a man, neck deep in quicksand is to, obviously, recite a poem. To throw some spirit energy his way. To describe, out loud, just how heavy my heart is. I take a piece of paper out of my backpack, and with a pen, I write “quicksand is bad and I am an ally to people who fall in it.” I pin that piece of paper to my chest. I take out my phone and I tweet “when are we going to wake up? #quicksand.”

He sinks.

And being an open-minded, progressive individual, I decide that this isn't enough, that we, as a society, need to address the root causes of people sinking in quicksand. So my fourth response upon stumbling, by chance, upon a man, forehead-deep in quicksand, is to take a moment and really acknowledge and think about my privilege as someone who is not sinking in quicksand. I vow to take a class, to challenge my friends when they make quicksand-related jokes, to be more mindful of how I navigate the world.

He sinks.

And being an open-minded, progressive individual, I decide that the time for words has passed; now is the time for action. So my fifth response upon stumbling, by chance, upon a man, disappeared into quicksand, is... is...

We can't allow ourselves to forget what happened here. I know we need to *do* something, to put up a sign, to educate people, to build a bridge over this patch of quicksand. I just don't have any wood. I just have this backpack full of paper and pens and rope; what can one person do?

I imagine my lungs filling with mud. Black earth. Brown water. The hike back to my hotel will be full of reflection. I say a prayer under my breath. It is the least I can do.

## LEVEL UP: MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A LEARNER

**1. (Pre-School)** My grandmother was a teacher. And she would often grade papers while watching me. So before I was old enough for any kind of school, I *wanted* to read. I wanted to draw. I wanted to write stories. Not for any abstract love of knowledge, or to develop a particular skill, but just... to be close to her.

*This* is my first memory of education—that warmth. Autumn outside the window, lots of blank paper and markers on the carpet. A smile. This is also my first memory of privilege, which is such a dirty word to so many people, but it's not that complicated, right? It's just this. *Some* kind of head start, nothing sinister. Reading the strategy guide before you play the game. Leveling up just for completing the tutorial.

**2. (K-12)** Shop class. In a big garage adjacent to my high school. Open air, if a bit dirty. We're trying to *build* something, but more than that, we're just trying to not chop our own fingers off. There isn't a lot of room here for "visioning new possibilities." I need some metal, teacher gives me some metal. I need some wood, teacher gives me some wood. I need blueprints, teacher gives me blueprints. I assume we'll cover the *drawing* of blueprints in a later class.

It's just a couple of hours every week and the weeks fly. Fingers learn to follow directions, to create from jagged, raw bits of nothing, something. To go from point A on the paper to point B in your hands, to point C in your report card. We're building birdhouses. Wood, little metal hinges, nothing too serious, just enough to understand the relationship between hammer and nail,.. between heat and metal, between destruction and creation.

When I am done, I submit my work for grading. I get an F. I look down. The assignment was to build a birdhouse... I'm standing there with a broadsword in my hand, sharp as god's fingernails, smoke-grey blade, smooth wooden handle, competently crafted. I don't know what happened.

**3. (Graduation)** When you trust the process, *revelations* can feel like mistakes. When you buy into this system, you may thrive, you may be the one for whom the system was built, but still, your *greatest* victories will be framed as failures. So when a critical analysis paper happens to rhyme, or when a speech happens to be improvised, or when a birdhouse happens to be a broadsword, you make the *corrections*. You wonder how much of your own blood goes into that red ink, how much of yourself you lose while you win this... game. You graduate. You speak at graduation and encourage everyone to think outside the box. And then you go to a college you cannot afford. Level up.

### **4. (Undergrad)**

There must be some kind of way out of here, said the joker to the thief; all along the ivory tower, jokers and thieves, jokers and thieves. Mostly thieves. In this game we play, a thief character knows how to set traps. A thief has access to spaces other players don't have access to. A thief is stealthy; they always know how to cover their tracks.

For example, when you hear them say: "our department is committed to gender equity," or "our office values diversity," or "hey girl, I'm really into, like, intersectionality or whatever!" When they're just words, pilfered, separated from meaning, from action, from the sustained allocation of resources toward that action, it is easy to commit to them, and easier still to break those commitments. Relationships, however, are not so easily broken. The fundamental structure of an institution, is not so easily broken.

I, *alone*, was easily broken. Between the crushing debt, the crushing class-based culture shock, the crushing reality of witnessing, day after day, the most brilliant people I know being condescended to, the best writers I know rejected, the hardest working people I know repeatedly stepped on by the very

institution that *should* be their greatest ally, practitioners forced to drink at townie bars, social justice framed only as a neverending powerpoint presentation and not as practice, as process, professors never saying in ten words what they can say in a million words; administrators, so often not *really* saying anything at all—the knowledge of how to fly, without the knowledge of how to land, the campus bubble like a plastic bag over our heads. I never made it out. But we made it out.

In community, *we* learned to swallow the knowledge that was given to us, but also to pay careful attention to its container, to how it was prepared, to everything going on in the room and in the community around that knowledge. We remembered, that they weren't the only ones with knowledge. That we had our own already. That theirs could move mountains, but that ours could move people.

They say to be educated, is to be uncomfortable. Funny how so many of the most educated people in our society are also so comfortable. That might be the most important thing I learned in college. Level up.

**5. (Grad School)** Don't get me wrong: there *were* good things too, once I learned where, how, to look. As a student activist, I learned the abstract skills of navigating personalities, collaborating effectively, framing a message, but also the concrete skills of writing a press release, designing a flyer, facilitating a meeting. I learned that no matter how precise your critique, or how much knowledge you have access to, or how unimpeachably *right* you are... it's about the work. It's about what we build. Level up.

As an apprentice educator, I learned the importance of speaking out. And the importance of shutting the hell up. The importance of listening—not just for the sake of listening but because, we all legitimately have something to contribute. The knowledge is in the room. The experience is in the room. Level up.

As an artist, I learned how to make a room, move. I learned how to hustle. I learned that the impulse to create something beautiful, and the impulse to create something meaningful, and the impulse to create something popular are *not* mutually exclusive. I learned that becoming a good artist is about learning... and that becoming a great artist is about unlearning. Level up.

See I never really had a single mentor. Everything learned through relationships, in community with dozens, hundreds of people, *all* leaders, *all* followers, all geniuses at the one thing they happened to be geniuses at; this knowledge: not a match struck in darkness, but the act of waiting, quietly, intentionally, for my eyes to adjust.

**6. (Beyond)** I'm not a teacher, at least not in the same way my grandmother was. I'm more likely to be named teaching artist, guest presenter, artist in residence, force of disruption. I have no answers; I ask questions. I facilitate the creation of lists. I ask more questions. I make mistakes. I continue asking questions. I share my own knowledge too, because I do have *some*, and we're in this together. But I leave room for questions, for more questioning. My favorite question... is "what now?" The system is messed up—what now? What we're doing isn't working—what now? I have privilege—what now? I'm angry, and sad, and frustrated and overwhelmed—ok. What now?

I like this question, because I don't know what the answer is, but I know that there is one. *This* is the work. The *application* of everything we've learned and experienced, the transmutation of knowing into doing into knowing into doing, of birdhouses into broadswords.

...Spoken-word poems often end with that kind of callback to the primary motif, the central organizing principle of the piece. Doing this creates the illusion of completeness, kind of the macro version of a rhyme. But leadership is not a buzzword. Identity is not a mathematical equation. Education is not so tidy. It continues. It expands. It leaves us unsatisfied, uncomfortable.

## CHERRY SPOON BRIDGE TO NOWHERE

1.

So, I'm an MC, and my stage name is *Guante*, and my last name is *Tran Myhre*, so at the end of every show, there's always one person who kind of awkwardly approaches me, like: *so... what are you?* And it's not an easy question to answer; it is a complicated and emotional topic. I'm mixed, both by blood and by history, but... if you saw a picture of me in a magazine, what would you see? A white guy. So there's always a kind of tension between my abstract heart and the more concrete reality of privilege, between internal and external identities.

And maybe that's why I feel so at home here, in the Twin Cities, a community inextricably bound to that tension. Where the arts and literary and musical scenes are all so diverse and vibrant and beautiful. But if you saw a picture of them in a magazine, what would you see? White people. This is not a question of diversity; it is a question of who... edits this metaphorical magazine. Who funds it? Who profits from it?

Have you ever been in a magazine? Who decided that your story mattered, that your voice deserved an audience? Have you ever hung in a gallery? Have you ever bared your soul to the abyss only to have it chuckle back at you? When asked "what are you?" Have you ever answered honestly?

2.

In a Facebook Q&A, The Ordway's Artistic Director James Rocco responded to 46 questions regarding the decision to produce *Miss Saigon* despite community outcry and protest of the musical's racist elements, by saying: *Miss Saigon is a complicated and emotional topic. ...and nothing else.*

It is one thing to chuckle at their callousness or cluelessness. It is something else to refuse to acknowledge, that this is how just about every arts and media institution in the Twin Cities operates, every day. When they say *our programs are open to everyone; it's not our fault when only white people show up*. When they say *we'd like to hire more people of color, but they're just not applying*. When they say *stop making good the enemy of perfect*, and never question who gets to define "good" in the first place.

When every insufferable list of the things that make our community so great, share the same two dozen bullet points: Craig Finn, skiing, hotdish, Joe Mauer, Target, the Coen Brothers, MN NICE, 3M, sculptures made of butter, the Mall of America, the fact that the Oregon trail video game was invented here and, to quote the *City Pages*, "everyone has a cabin on the lake."

To my fellow artists: remember: art is a weapon, not the war. Remember, your job is not to make people who look like you chuckle; it is to make people who look like you uncomfortable. Remember... Cece McDonald, Terrance Franklin, Fong Lee, the biggest achievement gap in the country, the foreclosure crisis, teen suicides...

I don't mean to dwell on the negative. But I dwell here. No cabin on the lake. No helicopter on the stage. A cherry-spoon bridge to nowhere.

3.

It's a hundred degrees outside, sirens in the distance, Big Quarters in the headphones; where are you? The neighbors are chain-linked, landing punches like mallets on meat; where are you? It's a literary reading, except the entire audience is people of color; where are you?

I do not doubt that somewhere in Minneapolis, a skinny white guy with an ironic handlebar mustache and aviator sunglasses is riding a fixed-gear bicycle to his favorite coffee shop. Or that at this very moment in

St. Paul, a rich soccer mom is power-walking her golden retriever past Café Latte. But I've never met them. I've never been to a Twins game, never seen a play at the Guthrie, or gone to Rock the Garden. I'm sure they're all very nice. But the Twin Cities that I know keep me busy.

A kid gets slammed into a locker for wearing a rainbow button; where are you? A group of men pray together in the back room of a mom and pop restaurant; where are you? The students learn the footwork first, internalize the rhythm, save that spinning on your head shit for later; where are you?

Go to Tibet or Central America or India to "find yourself," if you really think that's where you're hiding. As though there weren't a million stories in every crack in the concrete here, as if the Southside weren't "exotic" enough.

The things we make invisible do not disappear; we only cloud our own perception— Minnesota nice, Minnesota passive-aggressive, Minnesota gentrifier, closet homophobe, white supremacist, bystander; open your eyes and watch Garrison Keilor possessed, irises burning blue and red, pop-locking down university avenue, his spine a light rail, his voice an empty wind, howling like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A Hmong teenager is shot eight times by a police officer and dies; where are you? That same police officer is awarded the medal of valor; where are you? A planted gun, an all-white jury, not guilty; where are you?

I can't listen to the Current any more. It sounds too much like history being re-written, basslines diluted, polyrhythms unified. There are days, I forget the dirt underneath the endless white of winter. There are days, I forget that race and culture are not just about blood; they are also about *blood*. There are days it is easier to believe the lie, to buy into this politely whitewashed, liberal utopia on a stick. But remember: the things we make invisible do not disappear. And the things we choose to see are not everything that's here.

A cipher blooms in the lunchroom; all of the kids love Hip Hop, and none of them has ever heard of Atmosphere; where are you? A group of activists march for gay rights, but it's not pride week, and they're not talking about marriage; where are you? The difference between Keith Ellison and Michele Bachmann is a single step further up Central Avenue, where are you?

Frogtown, where are you? Northside, where are you? Philips, Eastside, Little Earth, Midway, Cedar-Riverside, Uptown, Downtown, Northeast, suburbs, where are you?

Where are you?

We—all of us—are right here.

## A PRAGMATIST'S GUIDE TO FAITH

This is the art of drawing breath,  
 of making visible what has been invisible.  
 This is a pragmatist's guide to faith.  
 This is singing when you don't know how to pray.  
 Welcome to this space; know that you are not welcome here.  
 We are all trespassers; we are not welcome here.  
 This universe would like nothing more than for you to not exist,  
 and the proof is in the history you live; tell me this:  
 what are the odds that this planet would appear  
 in just the right place, with the right atmosphere and geology?  
 What are the odds that life would suddenly spark  
 in the darkness, from the carcass of this planet to a colony?  
 What are the odds that this anomaly would spread?  
 What are the odds it would survive and stay ahead  
 of volcanic eruptions, meteorites and earthquakes;  
 the first drum, first beat, first rhythm, first break,  
 first time the notes broke to form a system?  
 You could hear the first melody, the first multi-celled organism.  
 What are the odds this first environment to harbor life  
 would meet another; maybe fight or maybe harmonize?  
 But either way it would evolve. So what are the odds it would evolve to walk and not crawl?  
 To fly but not fall? To survive every single mass extinction? What are the odds of your existence?  
 How many generations did it take to make you?  
 How many plagues, wars and massacres conspired  
 to uproot your family tree and salt the earth around it?  
 How many ancestors carried your fire?  
 How many farmers made it through the famine?  
 How many runaway slaves got away?  
 How many soldiers conscripted deserted?  
 How many times did that chain almost break?  
 How did your great-great-grandparents meet?  
 What was the song playing when you were conceived?  
 Is it inconceivable: the happenstance inherent in this life you have inherited?  
 Some see the elegant complexity of bodies,  
 or the natural beauty of the planet and they say it's godly.  
*There's got to be divine intelligence behind it all  
 because the odds that you would make it on your own are so small.*  
 But me? I see millennia trying to murder you.  
 I see a thousand generations of pain and fear.  
 I see struggle inscribed into your skeleton. And I see you still here.  
 Ancestor armor. Star-crossed survivor.  
 An unwelcome guest in a hostile environment.  
 Defiance is your birthright, fire from the first time  
 you drew breath, a smile on your face.  
 Welcome to this space; know that you are not welcome here.  
 We are all trespassers; we are not welcome here.  
 So if our drawing breath is blasphemy, sin or treason,  
 let's keep drawing breath until there's nothing left to breathe in.  
 We are the codes that our ancestors still speak in.

## APPENDIX TWO: Questions and Writing Prompts

### SMALLTALK

1. Key Words: Identity, Agency, Affirmation of Self, Mental Health
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. On one level, this is a poem about what it means to value “artist” as one element of one’s identity. What identities do you hold? What elements of your personality, interests, and experiences do you hold up as important parts of who you are?
  - b. Are there any parts of your identity that have been misunderstood or misrepresented, or that you have felt that you had to defend?
  - c. The poem is also about striving to have a *deeper* conversation than we usually get to have. What are some potential obstacles to that? How might we overcome them?
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a. Describe one element of your identity that is important to you, but do it in the form of a scene—where are you, what is happening, and what is making you think about that particular element of your identity?
  - b. In the poem, the repetition of “ten dollars” refers to how artists give people pieces of themselves, night after night, often for just the price of a CD, book, or event ticket. Write about something in your life that is valuable in a way that transcends money.
  - c. Explore the idea of stereotypes and/or affirming your own identity with the prompt: “You think that I’m \_\_\_\_\_, but really I’m \_\_\_\_\_.”
4. Additional Notes:
  - a. I like to start with a poem that is not explicitly “political” or social justice-oriented. A poem like this is an entry point, a way to “seed” some points for future dialogue.
  - b. “Smalltalk” deals with issues like identity (and how our internal identities may not always match the identities that the world places upon us, and the power of affirming one’s own identity), the importance of vulnerability and sharing our stories, and even some mental health issues. While this never becomes explicit in the text, this poem is also about anxiety and introversion in the context of spaces that value confidence and conformity. All of that being said, a listener who is not ready to have those conversations can still engage with this poem as a more general piece about agency and “being yourself.”
  - c. I have also found that it is important to open a program with something big, dynamic and memorable. Regardless of how people interpret the substance of “Smalltalk,” and/or whether or not they enjoy it, it is—if nothing else—something different, potentially shocking, and (ideally) attention-grabbing.

### CARTPUSHERS (THE FIST THAT LIVES IN YOUR NECK)

1. Key Words: Identity, Class, Solidarity, Empathy
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a) Spoken word is about how everyone has a story, and every story has value. Even if you’ve never held that specific job, how could you relate to what the speaker was going through? Have you ever felt invisible? Underappreciated? Exploited?
  - b) How can we support each other when we have those feelings? How can community be a resource?
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a) Write about an “untold story” from your life, or from history in general, that you wish more people knew about.

- b) Think about a time in your life when you were not the center of attention, but you still had something to say. You might also think about “peripheral” figures in famous scenes, photographs, etc. and explore what they’re thinking.

### **HANDSHAKES**

1. Key Words: Gender, Masculinity, Socialization, Identity
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. What messages do we receive as children about gender? What are we taught about being a “real man” or “real woman?” How might these messages be harmful?
  - b. Why do these messages exist? Who might benefit from their existence?
  - c. How are the so-called “little things” connected to the larger realities of oppression, discrimination, and harm? Can we connect this question to the idea of “microaggressions?”
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a. Write about an experience in your life that was “small,” but had a big impact on your development, how you think about the world, or even just how you felt that day.
  - b. This poem isn’t saying that gender isn’t real or that it doesn’t matter; it’s saying that forcing people into very specific, narrow “gender boxes” has consequences. Think of a few of the “rules” related to those boxes, and write using the prompt “they tell me that I’m supposed to \_\_\_\_\_.”
4. Additional Notes:
  - a. This is a poem that attempts to make something that is often invisible visible. Gender roles are often regarded as natural and universal, when they are in fact the products of massive amounts of information—from media, family, institutions, and society.
  - b. This is also a poem about insecurity and vulnerability, something that can be useful to “frontload” in a discussion or series of poems in order to diffuse authority and create space for participants to engage.

### **TEN RESPONSES TO THE PHRASE “MAN UP”**

1. Key Words: Gender, Masculinity, Socialization, Identity
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. The previous poem, “Handshakes,” covers a lot of the same ground as this one, and its questions about gender and socialization could be used for this poem as well.
  - b. Are there other phrases that are not necessarily meant to be oppressive or harmful but that can inadvertently contribute to a larger culture of oppression or harm?
  - c. The final line of this poem points toward resistance. But if that “no” is less a final step and more a first one, what other ways can we build a culture in which people can be free to express their gender (and other identities) however they choose?
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a. Write a list poem that begins with “Ten Responses to the Phrase \_\_\_\_\_.” Other examples include “go back to where you come from,” “where are you *really* from,” “I don’t see race,” “you’re being oversensitive,” or any other phrase that you feel could use a response.
  - b. Advertisements are often crafted to play on our (often gendered) insecurities. Write a thirty-second TV commercial that satirizes this idea.
4. Additional Notes:
  - a. This is a poem that may require a content warning; see next point.
  - b. “Handshakes” covers a lot of the same material; choosing one poem over the other may depend on the age/experience of participants, and the facilitator’s freedom around issues like cursing and “deeper” themes. As this poem alludes to suicide, rape culture, and violence against trans people, it may not be as effective an introduction as “Handshakes.”

**ACTION**

1. Key Words: Bystander Intervention, Sexual Assault, Violence Prevention, Allyship
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. This poem gives multiple examples of attitudes, actions, and cultural elements that contribute to rape culture. How would you define rape culture? Can you think of other manifestations of that culture?
  - b. Sexual assault and gender violence involve more than perpetrators and victims. All of us, in community with one another, can take proactive steps to disrupt violence before it happens. What might these “proactive steps” look like in real life?
  - c. What are some obstacles to taking those steps, and how might we work collaboratively to overcome them?
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a. Take some time to reflect on how both action and inaction are choices that we make. Whether in the context of rape culture, or racism, or any other form of oppression, we have all had opportunities to create healthy disruptions, and we have all, at one time or another, missed one of those opportunities. Write about a situation that comes to mind for you—what you did, what you could have done, or how you might handle it differently today.
4. Additional Notes:
  - a. This is a poem that may require a content warning.
  - b. While this is a poem about sexual assault prevention, it is also a poem about critically engaging with the concept of allyship. Participants may be able to make connections to how this scene plays out in relation to other issues.

**CONSENT AT 10,000 FEET**

1. Key Words: Consent, Sexual Assault, Violence Prevention
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. This poem is presenting a counter-narrative. Try to identify what that narrative is, as well as what narrative it is countering. In other words, what is the argument being made, and what is the argument being rejected?
  - b. How do we build a culture of consent? What actions can we take, and what does that look like in real life?
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a. Develop the text and/or design for a poster campaign about the issue of consent. What kinds of phrases and images might be most effective?
  - b. Develop the script for a YouTube PSA about consent.
4. Additional Notes:
  - a. This is a poem that may require a content warning.

**HOW TO EXPLAIN WHITE SUPREMACY TO A WHITE SUPREMACIST**

1. Key Words: Whiteness, Systems Thinking
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. This poem is presenting a counter-narrative. Try to identify what that narrative is, as well as what narrative it is countering. In other words, what is the argument being made, and what is the argument being rejected?
  - b. When we only see racism as the acts of individual racists, and not as a set of power relations based in history, systems, and culture, what are we missing? Who benefits from our not seeing this larger picture?

3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a. What might this poem look/sound like if it were about sexism, homophobia, economic inequality, etc.? Use the basic structure of the poem to address another issue; for example, “How to Explain Poverty to a Billionaire.”
  - b. Write about something you believed when you were younger that you no longer believe. What gave you this new perspective?
4. Additional Notes:
  - a. Though the substance of this poem is relatively straightforward, its title can be scary for some listeners. Proper framing/introduction may be required.

### **THE INVISIBLE BACKPACKER OF PRIVILEGE**

1. Key Words: Privilege, Whiteness, Cultural Appropriation, Allyship
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. This poem is attempting to use Hip Hop as one lens through which we can see how whiteness impacts access to power. How does white privilege play out in other realms—education, business, social relations, etc.?
  - b. This is also a poem about allyship, and how being an ally is more than just believing the right things; it’s about action. What are the specific actions proposed in this poem? Outside of the Hip Hop context, what are other “ally actions?”
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a. Describe what it feels like to have an unfair disadvantage. This can be from real-life experience, or it can be an imagined scenario like running a race with your shoelaces tied together. Use concrete imagery and details to communicate that feeling.
  - b. Can you connect this scene/vignette to the ideas explored in this poem?

### **THE FAMILY BUSINESS**

1. Key Words: Class, Exploitation, Ambivalence, Critical Thinking
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. How do you think about “work?” What is the point of having a job?
  - b. What are the viewpoints of the two characters in this poem? Does one resonate with you more than the other? What good points do both characters make?
  - c. Does this poem have a central message, or is it more of a central question? How do you interpret that message or question?
  - d. Is there hope in this poem? If so, where is it coming from?
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a. Write about the first job you ever had—challenges, triumphs, uncertainties, etc. Can you capture what it felt like?
  - b. Through the metaphor of a chess game, this poem explores ideas like exploitation, expendability, invisibility, and more. Drawing from your own experience, what other images or metaphors might capture some of those ideas?

### **STARFISH**

1. Key Words: Systems Thinking, Roles, Education
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. Have you ever felt tension while doing some kind of direct service work (volunteering, tutoring, etc.) and not seeing the larger institution actually change? What examples can you draw from in your own life?
  - b. If this poem is attempting to present a “both/and” framework (we need to do the work on a day-to-day level while never losing sight of the bigger picture), how do you see yourself plugging into that?

- c. While this poem is from the perspective of an individual trying to figure out how they can make a difference, how does it change when we begin to think in more collective, community-oriented terms?
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
    - a. Consider “the parable of the starfish,” or google it if you’ve never heard it before. This poem is presenting a counter-narrative to that parable, but what might this counter-narrative look like in the starfish story itself? What other possibilities are there, beyond tossing them back into the sea, one by one?

### **QUICKSAND**

1. Key Words: Allyship, Activism, Uncertainty
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. What is the “thesis statement” of this poem? Does it resonate with you?
  - b. Many of the actions described in this poem aren’t necessarily “bad” things. Social media, for example, can be a very powerful form of communication and information-spreading, especially in a social justice context. But do you ever feel tension around doing “good” things while knowing that they are not enough? How do you process that tension?
  - c. If the rope at the end of this poem is supposed to represent the idea of taking action, what might that action look like? Especially when it comes to issues like police brutality, what can we do?
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a. Describe a scene/situation—whether from experience or imagination—that requires action. What is your thought process in this scene? How does it end?
  - b. Think about what obstacles we face when action is required. If these obstacles were people, what would they be like? What would they say? How would you move past them?
4. Additional Notes:
  - a. When performing this piece, I try to be careful to affirm that the poem is not saying that all of these actions are bad, or useless; rather, that they all exist on a continuum. The key is not finding some “answer” that will solve all of the problems related to a particular issue; it is to think critically about that continuum.

### **LEVEL UP (MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A LEARNER)**

1. Key Words: Education, Power, Critical Thinking
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. Thinking back on your own life, what have been the best parts of education, whether in or out of school?
  - b. What have been the worst?
  - c. What are the most important things that school teaches us outside of the actual substance of the lessons themselves?
  - d. What would the ideal schooling experience look like? What are the obstacles to that ideal? How might we overcome them?
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a. Write your own autobiography as a learner. Think back to your memories with learning, education and schools. Are there particular moments or people that stick out to you?
4. Additional Notes:
  - a. This poem sprouted from a writing prompt that I was assigned in a class taught by Sonja Kufinec and Maria Asp. I want to give them credit and thank them for the idea.

### **CHERRY SPOON BRIDGE TO NOWHERE**

1. Key Words: Community, Stereotypes, Gentrification, Iconography
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. Is your community misunderstood in some way? What stereotypes are associated with your (campus, hometown, current city, etc.)?
  - b. Why would a community like the Twin Cities be “framed” a certain way, giving rise to stereotypes like the ones described in this poem? Where does that frame come from?
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a. Write the “real story” of a particular place that is often misunderstood.
  - b. A classic writing prompt is the “I am from” poem. The idea is that each line starts with that phrase, but rather than completing it with a specific neighborhood or city, you describe what that location means to you. Through sights, sounds, smells, etc., you bring it to life for a reader who may never get there.
4. Additional Notes:
  - a. This poem is about the Twin Cities; whether or not it may be useful in other communities might depend on some initial framing and context.

### **A PRAGMATIST’S GUIDE TO FAITH**

1. Key Words: Hope, Activism, Legacy
2. Potential Discussion Questions:
  - a. Even though the systems of oppression that we fight against are big, intimidating, and embedded in history, our resistance to those systems is similarly powerful. What gives you hope? Where do you draw strength from?
  - b. Share some everyday acts of resistance—what are things we can embed into our daily practice to contribute to the struggle for justice, equity, and peace?
3. Generative Writing Prompts:
  - a. Trace back your own history, in the spirit of this poem, as far back as you can. You may or may not know your family history, and even if you do, that knowledge probably has its limits—so use your imagination.
  - b. Use the prompt “A Pragmatist’s Guide to \_\_\_\_\_” to explore some other concept, idea, or issue. Especially with issues that are so often intellectualized or made abstract, how do you make them “real?”

## APPENDIX THREE: Additional Poem Videos

What follows is a list of links to spoken word videos that may be useful in social justice education spaces. List-making, however, is inherently political. Therefore, it is necessary to begin this appendix with a few caveats and framing notes.

First, this is not a list of the “best” poems. This is a list of poems that offer something that might be useful to facilitators and educators. Those are very different criteria. Many of my favorite poems, or poems that I think represent the best of what spoken word culture has to offer, are *not* on this list. Instead, I have tried to focus on poems that tackle specific issues, poems that encourage critical thinking and questioning, and poems that combine clarity of content with a compelling story, image or hook. Some of them might be useful as introductions to issues; others may be useful as entry points into deeper discussions about issues that have already been introduced. I have also tried to focus on poems that have high-quality audio and video.

Second, I organized these poems into categories for ease of use, but it is important to note that categorization is imperfect. Poems may address multiple subjects, and even a poem about a specific issue may be relevant to discussions about other issues too. Cultivating a critical, intersectional lens is necessary to really unlock the potential in these videos and in the conversations that may follow them.

Finally, this list is not exhaustive or definitive; it is alive, and my hope is that it will continue to grow and evolve over time. It is meant to be an imperfect starting point for further research. I encourage educators to watch and re-watch poems that they are considering for use, be intentional about what “work” you want those poems to do for your particular audience, and continue adding to this list from your own research, from other resources, and from student recommendations.

### On Feminism, Masculinity, and Gender

- Melissa Lozada-Oliva: Like Totally Whatever: [https://youtu.be/me4\\_QwmaNoQ](https://youtu.be/me4_QwmaNoQ)
- Donte Collins: Genderlect: <https://youtu.be/WWqQ8MqTgTE>
- Blythe Baird: Pocket-Sized Feminism: <https://youtu.be/vT74LH0W8ig>
- Lily Myers: Shrinking Women: <https://youtu.be/zQucWXWxp3k>
- FreeQuency: The Princess Poem: <https://youtu.be/QtGsF4yhZf8>
- Carlos Andrés Gómez: How to Fight: <https://youtu.be/cKMhp7hpYIs>
- Blythe Baird: Girl Code 101: <https://youtu.be/B-8v54uji3k>

- Olivia Gatwood: Manic Pixie Dream Girl: [https://youtu.be/KJjJfE\\_QNMY](https://youtu.be/KJjJfE_QNMY)
- Eric Mata: Anatomy of a Hit: <https://youtu.be/RGGNbmJPIjk>
- Dominique Christina: The Period Poem: <https://youtu.be/4vu2BsePvoI>
- Guante: Handshakes: <https://youtu.be/t70qMV8wr88>
- Guante: Ten Responses to the Phrase “Man Up:” <http://youtu.be/QFoBaTkPgco>

### **On Rape Culture, Consent, and Healthy Sexuality**

- Sierra DeMulder: Paper Dolls: <https://youtu.be/3k4ebSEeCwI>
- Dylan Garity: Friend Zone: [https://youtu.be/\\_xHp5iTtWRc](https://youtu.be/_xHp5iTtWRc)
- Alysha Wise: The Interview: <https://youtu.be/Wz0vh3TkVv0>
- Ollie Schminkey: Two Twin Beds: <https://youtu.be/ZBkOKWfvuyg>
- Kevin Kantor: People You May Know: <https://youtu.be/LoyfunmYIpU>
- Carrie Rudzinski: In America: <https://youtu.be/3Sy-SCKGjTg>
- Desireé Dallagiacomo and FreeQuency: American Rape Culture: [https://youtu.be/dM9EB1\\_5sEk](https://youtu.be/dM9EB1_5sEk)
- Terisa Siagatonu and Rudy Francisco: Sons: <https://youtu.be/JNPaosr11U>
- Guante: Action: <https://youtu.be/0cKlnqzt9GQ>
- Guante: Consent at 10,000 Feet: <https://youtu.be/VzR5Wjnk2hk>

### **On Anti-Blackness, African-American History, and #BlackLivesMatter**

- Clint Smith III: History Reconsidered: [https://youtu.be/V0QCKP7\\_\\_7k](https://youtu.be/V0QCKP7__7k)
- Marvin Hodges, Em Allison, and Saidu Tejan-Thomas: Da Rules: <https://youtu.be/xpvutGPY7zU>
- Anthony McPherson: All Lives Matter: 1800s Edition: <https://youtu.be/eGR0ihYux6w>
- Crystal Valentine: Black Privilege: <https://youtu.be/7rYL83kHQ8Y>
- Steven Willis: Ebonics 101: <https://youtu.be/CB8pBiUavtg>
- Janae Johnson: Black Girl Magic: <https://youtu.be/0ZnsxJCdXUY>
- Javon Johnson: cuz he’s black: [https://youtu.be/u9Wf8y\\_5Yn4](https://youtu.be/u9Wf8y_5Yn4)
- Aja Monet: Word Warriors #SayHerName: [https://youtu.be/aL\\_yzeM7wY0](https://youtu.be/aL_yzeM7wY0)
- Joseph Capehart: The Hill: <https://youtu.be/g5Cke62N7kY>
- Danez Smith: Dinosaurs in the Hood: <https://youtu.be/nJwiOTeKDOQ>
- Guante: Quicksand: [https://youtu.be/0R\\_RmGKg6c0](https://youtu.be/0R_RmGKg6c0)

### **On Whiteness, White Privilege, and White Supremacy**

- Patricia Smith: Skinhead: <http://youtu.be/8uT84IUgLRo>
- Jared Paul: 5 Times My Skin Color Did Not Kill Me: <https://youtu.be/TTR6NVxuOaI>
- Raven McGill: Meanwhile, in Post-Racist America: <https://youtu.be/nuFCiCYOcmA>
- Danez Smith: Dear White America: <https://youtu.be/LSp4v294xog>
- Andrea Gibson: A Letter to White Queers, A Letter to Myself: <https://youtu.be/gpBUenMIe8U>
- Marshall Gillson: For My White Coworkers: <https://youtu.be/P7yZT13GIG0>
- Aamer Rahman: Reverse Racism: [https://youtu.be/dw\\_mRaIHb-M](https://youtu.be/dw_mRaIHb-M)
- Guante: How to Explain White Supremacy to a White Supremacist: <https://youtu.be/RDSEHfxXLhI>
- Guante: The Invisible Backpacker of Privilege: <https://youtu.be/o7qcj-XsOCE>
- Guante: Cherry Spoon Bridge to Nowhere: <http://youtu.be/r460M-Lg4vw>

### **On Race, Racism, Xenophobia, and Racial Justice**

- Suheir Hammad: First Writing Since: <https://youtu.be/0fhWX2F6G7Y>
- Kevin Yang: Sam I Am: [http://youtu.be/O331zUy\\_tB8](http://youtu.be/O331zUy_tB8)
- Adriana Ramirez: Wild Stallion (Hair): <https://youtu.be/Fuy2WMGwoXI>
- Joseph Capehart: Color Blind: [https://youtu.be/Y6jR8\\_t8J4o](https://youtu.be/Y6jR8_t8J4o)
- Mary McDonough: Native Tongue: <https://youtu.be/31Wyjn4SBhU>
- Hieu Minh Nguyen: Buffet Etiquette: <https://youtu.be/v5FQ42D2xQM>

- Franny Choi: All Look Same: [https://youtu.be/Y1-oP3oez\\_k](https://youtu.be/Y1-oP3oez_k)
- Ed Bok Lee: American Woods: <https://youtu.be/LUSUtLcssak>
- Alex Dang: What Kind of Asian Are You? [https://youtu.be/VoP0ox\\_Jw\\_w](https://youtu.be/VoP0ox_Jw_w)
- Tatiana Ormaza and Juliana Hu Pegues: Under the Table: <https://youtu.be/9fNBF8evxt4>
- Pages Matam, Elizabeth Acevedo, and G. Yamazawa: Unforgettable: <https://youtu.be/Xvah3E1fP20>
- Melissa Lozada-Oliva: My Spanish: [https://youtu.be/fE-c4Bj\\_RT0](https://youtu.be/fE-c4Bj_RT0)
- Bao Phi: Refuge Requiem: <https://youtu.be/FzFfbw1xkFQ>

### **On Homophobia, Transphobia and the Struggle for LGBTQ Liberation**

- Lauren Zuniga: World's Tallest Hill: <https://youtu.be/dswhhPtpdck>
- Cam Awkward-Rich: Obligatory: <https://youtu.be/qnABUZdfr08>
- Tish Jones: March for Me: <https://youtu.be/9VqVhjaZxsg>
- Ethan Smith: A Letter to the Girl I Used to Be: <https://youtu.be/Lkn06Y8prDU>
- Denice Frohman: Dear Straight People: <https://youtu.be/5frn8TAlew0>
- Hieu Minh Nguyen: Stubborn Inheritance: <https://youtu.be/WA7ydzSR6E>
- Niko Martell: Guns: <https://youtu.be/IxyRX5-g9HY>
- Janani of Dark Matter: trans/national: <https://youtu.be/TXFKSzNakuk>
- Floyd VB: I Have a Body: <https://youtu.be/hhZtG0z1G5I>
- Joanna Hoffman: Pride: <https://youtu.be/q39aGkDUBpA>

### **Intersectionality and/or Poems that Fit in Multiple Categories**

- Hieu Minh Nguyen: Southbound: <https://youtu.be/yvI98SZRxHU>
- Kai Davis: Ain't I a Woman: [https://youtu.be/Z0F\\_6GMOa-8](https://youtu.be/Z0F_6GMOa-8)
- Carvens Lissaint and Cynthia Ceez Keteku: Switch: <https://youtu.be/r4iH-mqd-bY>
- Keno Evol: More Recent Memories: <https://youtu.be/aYNxLdKvFXY>
- Franny Choi: Pork Fried Rice: <https://youtu.be/GS56hTj4XT4>
- Josh Healey: Queer Intifada: <https://youtu.be/5JQ86WgrSI4>
- Jamila Woods: Pigeon Man: <https://youtu.be/iu3z-wJ5rXY>
- Chrysanthemum Tran: Cognates: <https://youtu.be/cjIijPxOLrI>
- Amaris Diaz: Dear Privilege: <https://youtu.be/S41XGUtxkEQ>
- Darius Simpson and Scout Bostley: Lost Voices: <https://youtu.be/lpPASWlnZIA>
- Danez Smith: Genesis: [https://youtu.be/CEJ\\_ahg7x48](https://youtu.be/CEJ_ahg7x48)
- Andrea Gibson: A Letter to White Queers, A Letter to Myself: <https://youtu.be/gpBUenMIe8U>

### **On Mental Health, Body Image, etc.**

- Homeless Ryan K.: For Joseph: <http://youtu.be/11SIFhg-bag>
- Adrienne Novy: Flotation Device: <https://youtu.be/S0IYNCg4Fv0>
- Sabrina Benaim: Explaining My Depression to My Mother: <https://youtu.be/aqu4ezLQEUA>
- Blythe Baird: When the Fat Girl Gets Skinny: [https://youtu.be/16Tb\\_bZZDv0](https://youtu.be/16Tb_bZZDv0)
- Neil Hilborn: The Future: <https://youtu.be/6xUEg2WxGqQ>
- Sonya Renee: The Body is Not an Apology: <https://youtu.be/JrbUTI95o3U>
- Kevin Yang: How to Love Your Introvert: [https://youtu.be/Bfh\\_mRA5B6A](https://youtu.be/Bfh_mRA5B6A)
- Robbie Q. Telfer: Clowns: <https://youtu.be/8VdxyvaA0NM>
- Arati Warrior: Alive: <https://youtu.be/VwhattMikvM>
- Kait Rokowski: A Good Day: <https://youtu.be/TjjaIwVxfTw>
- Guante: Smalltalk: <http://youtu.be/A6LB8Hzzid0>

### Education and Educational Institutions

- Alok Vaid-Menon of Dark Matter: Breakup Letter to Stanford University: <https://youtu.be/hS4GukQ-2K0>
- Carvens Lissaint: Put the Financial Aid in the Bag: <https://youtu.be/iMGRpzf2RL8>
- Dylan Garity: Rigged Game: <https://youtu.be/bo3KFUzyMUI>
- Terisa Siagatonu: Ethnic Studies: <https://youtu.be/7uBv1f6FmkY>
- Tish Jones: Tracks: [https://youtu.be/ls65K\\_FPJGY](https://youtu.be/ls65K_FPJGY)
- Alok Vaid-Menon of Dark Matter: Gender Studies: <https://youtu.be/tLo-3VS3ZOE>
- Clint Smith: Aristotle: <https://youtu.be/U6lifKTbFTw>
- Kevin Burke: Day Two: <https://youtu.be/dmNMeUWHfHE>
- Guante: Starfish: <https://youtu.be/WOt3Pp0LU2o>
- Guante: Level Up (My Autobiography as a Learner): <http://youtu.be/mwWywJMF99w>

### Even More Poems:

I tried to keep the above lists to 10-15 poems each, but here are a few more:

- Marge Piercy: The Low Road (as read by Staceyann Chinn): <https://youtu.be/UNjiPNd9iwU>
- Jamaal May: Sky Now Black with Birds: <https://youtu.be/q0Aogn7bAW0>
- Marc Bamuthi Joseph: For Pop: <https://youtu.be/WGR-Un-5PCI>
- Lauren Zuniga: To the Oklahoma Lawmakers: [https://youtu.be/leE4\\_k9zxEI](https://youtu.be/leE4_k9zxEI)
- Thressa Johnson: This Body: <https://youtu.be/0JPu-HrBodI>
- Robbie Q. Telfer: Clowns: <https://youtu.be/8VdxyvaA0NM>
- Andrea Gibson: Letter to a Playground Bully: <https://youtu.be/vptC-9Nx52c>
- B.Dolan: Who Killed Russell Jones? <https://youtu.be/97W1sLRsrtE>
- Khary Jackson: Carolina: <https://youtu.be/vqehzhdPcDA>
- Equilibrium Supershow featuring multiple artists:  
[https://youtu.be/DV31vnDd8?list=PLCAr\\_LPj-52YU5LEliI8Tvrk3gITYajHR](https://youtu.be/DV31vnDd8?list=PLCAr_LPj-52YU5LEliI8Tvrk3gITYajHR)
- Guante: The Family Business: <http://youtu.be/S2fIn8n9KEo>
- Guante: Cartpushers: <https://youtu.be/icDh0VrQxV8>
- Guante: A Pragmatist's Guide to Faith: [https://youtu.be/E\\_cXJPYoj7Q](https://youtu.be/E_cXJPYoj7Q)
- Guante: A Visit From the PC Police: <https://youtu.be/Ux6zP1-2h6Y>

*Note: all links are available here: [http://www.guante.info/p/spoken-word-videos-i-like\\_3.html](http://www.guante.info/p/spoken-word-videos-i-like_3.html)*

## APPENDIX FOUR: Questions About Questions

When using spoken word to facilitate dialogue around issues, I have to fight my instinct to simply ask “what did that poem mean to you?” That might be a good question for some students, but it is often helpful to ask questions with a little more specificity, or questions that might help facilitate a deeper engagement with the work. Here are a few questions related to how we ask questions:

How can we allow students to both engage with the poem and pull from their *own* experiences?  
How can questions be framed in such a way that everyone in the room can use their own particular expertise to engage?

How might we create room for dialogue by breaking a poem down into component parts: content/substance, form/craft, delivery/performance, and context? How can each one of these potentially separate conversations illuminate the “whole” of the poem (and of the issue being addressed)?

In my research, I did not find many poems about capitalism or class identity. How might those topics be integrated into discussions about these poems? How might a poem about deconstructing masculinity, or disrupting anti-Blackness, be linked to capitalist exploitation and neoliberalism?

How might we, as facilitators, engage with and value students’ “gut reactions,” while also creating space for dialogue that goes beyond liking or not liking a particular poem? Is there room for a “both/and” framework in our discussions?

How might a particular poem look when it is “mapped out” on the board, both in terms of its structure as a piece of writing and the geography of the issues that it is grappling with? How might we make room for students to engage with the poem impressionistically, as opposed to having a perfectly-constructed “sound-bite” response?

Instead of asking leading questions, how can we ask questions that lead to more questions?

How can we craft writing exercises that contain room for people who do not consider themselves writers? How can we strike a balance between a writing prompt that is wide open, and a prompt that is just about filling in the blanks?

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