

UP NEXT: THE EPISTEMIC POWER OF SPOKEN WORD POETRY

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DEDICATION

Para la Madre Tierra.
You are the greatest poet I will ever know.

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I give thanks to the great creative spirit that has moved me to come alive through artistic expression in community. I honor and thank the ancestors and the streets that speak and live through my body, my words, and my experiences. I would like to thank all of the communities and individuals who have held me and nurtured me to this point in my journey. With out your reflections I am nothing. I give a special thanks to my thesis advisor Dr. AnaLouise Keating for giving me the space to explore and consider non-oppositional theory and the writings and theories of multiple women of color(s) that were invaluable to the process of birthing this project. Thank you to Dr. Agatha Beins who accepted the invitation to be on my thesis committee and took the time to read this thesis and give me useful feedback. Thank you to Ulrike Guthrie who helped me immensely with the editing of this project and with my writing over all. Thank you to Monique Johnson who cooked countless meals for me and reminded me to be excited about my accomplishments, I am so grateful for her never ending support and her kind spirit. And finally, I thank the Rev. Dr. Cristian De La Rosa, my mother of origin, who has given her life to open doors por el pueblo. I would not be here if it were not for your example. Thank you. Tlazokamati.

ABSTRACT

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In this thesis I propose that “collective vulnerability” created through the culture of spoken word performance poetry in local communities creates and embodies relevant spiritual and libratory frameworks for connectional epistemologies. The methodological approach employed in this thesis draws from autoethnographic analysis as well as textual interpretation and analysis. Using these two particular methods allows me to reconceptualize and build on valuable theories and frameworks that explore concepts beyond intellectual and written word, by connecting them with knowledge and theory learned and created through lived experience.

PREFACE

(Singing) //Cambia todo cambia//

I have a story to tell...
It lays deep within the disorienting darkness... waiting
Calling out to death
Because through it,
It can come alive
Through it,
My story can thrive
Though it, god survives and I am born.
Sustained by the cycles of the mother I am formed
And I fear, love, laugh, and learn to be warmed by grace
Faced with the challenge to grow deep roots in this place
Here, where I stand, to simultaneously act and wait.
To negotiate both doubt and faith
To balance love and hate within the ever growing process of that which god creates

(Singing) //Cambia todo cambia//

And I am born,
endowed with the power of life through human form
I am charged with the task of making sure my sisters and brothers are warned that
There must be room for new life
New forms of existence and new heights.
Consider the breaking of the seed and its desire to be ripe in order to start all over again.

In order to start all over again,
I take to paper and pen in hopes that you will hear me
in hopes that you will see me
in hopes that you will remember
remember what it feels like
what powerful promises uncertainty brings
what new melodies creation may sing
the ways that new spirit can give wings
and the beautiful, beautiful, change in all things...

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

She stepped to the mic, her hands shaking and her body tense. The audience began to snap and call out in affirmation so as to assure her of her intention and coach her through. “You got this!” they yelled. She began...

At the most basic level, spoken word is a genre of poetry in which poets embody and perform their words, energy, emotion, and experiences in front of an audience.

Through a more critical lens, spoken word is a manifestation of the human traditions of storytelling and spiritual expression within community that gives rise to a culture that inspires epistemological change. Inherent in spoken word and its relation, slam poetry,¹ are expressions and interpretations of cadence, rhythm, tradition, collective aesthetic, as well as political intentions. Similar to its artistic and political roots found in the Harlem Renaissance, the Black arts movement, jazz, the beatniks, Hip Hop, and so forth, spoken word and slam poetry are also the outcomes of diverse genealogies that have come to highlight social, political, and spiritual realities, experiences, and cultures of marginalized bodies and identities. As such, spoken word poetry is an example of how performance is a powerful form of cultural production that allows for the creation and expression of alternative and multiple knowledges.

¹ Although there are various differences and opinions on the differentiation between spoken word and slam poetry, in this thesis I define Slam Poetry as the organized competitive and commercialized form of spoken word.

In my formation as a scholar, it was spoken word that helped me tap into a type of humanizing agency that transformed the way I viewed organizing and theorizing within community and within academia. As a self-identified scholar, activist, and artist who has dared to position spoken word at the center of my work, I have experienced constant backlash that pressures me to create in ways that fit into preconceived boxes and oppositional politics that I feel leave no room for our human complexity. As a result, in this thesis I choose to explore the decolonizing pedagogical possibilities of this art form in my experience as a woman of color(s) scholar and activist² who wishes to recognize, utilize, and reclaim the inherited power in spoken word as a cultural project for change.

In this thesis I present spoken word as more than a growing literary expression or popular performative exercise, but also as a transformative tool with the potential to decolonize hearts, minds, spirits, and, consequently, dominant culture. I suggest that the culture of spoken word poetry can make room for human complexity, compromise, growth, and exchange through the “connectionist”³ and dialogical act of community vulnerability. I propose that “collective vulnerability,”⁴ created through the culture of spoken word performance poetry in local communities, creates and embodies relevant spiritual and libratory frameworks for connectional epistemologies.

² I use the word “artist” to describe a person who uses art as a form of activism.

³ Keating borrows this term from Gloria Anzaldúa and defines it as a nonbinary, creative epistemology. She explains, “Connectionist thinking is visionary, relational, and holistic. When we view ourselves and each other from a connectionist perspective, we look beneath the surface judgments, rigid labels, and other divisive ways of thinking; we seek commonalities and move towards collective healing” (2).

⁴ The agreement of engaging in vulnerability for the intention of collective dialogical exchange.

Key to my analysis of spoken word culture as a site of vulnerability and epistemic transformation are: my personal experience performing, organizing, and supporting spoken word spaces in the last five years, particularly within local community settings that engage mostly young adults of color between the ages of fifteen and twentyfive; the concepts of interrelatedness and connectionality framed by Native American as well as Womanist perspectives; and finally Leonard Clyde Hawes' analysis of conversation in his article "Becoming Other-Wise: Conversational Performance and the Politics of Experience." The methodological approach employed in this thesis draws from autoethnographic analysis as well as textual interpretation and analysis. Using these two particular methods allows me to reconceptualize and build on valuable theories and frameworks that explore concepts beyond intellectual and written word, by connecting them with knowledge and theory learned and created through lived experience—a process that is vital to the culture of spoken word. I will use this methodology to explore my claim in three different chapters.

Chapter one starts the conversation by introducing spoken word as genre and defining it, asking: *What is spoken word? Who does spoken word, and where do they do it?* I then analyze spoken word poetry primarily as it relates to decolonization, the process of transformative consciousness that seeks to transgress and challenge dominant systems of oppression. I provide specific examples of decolonization that draw from my own experience of becoming a spoken word practitioner and organizer in local community settings. In chapter two, I explore the "open mic" culture of spoken word. Through this exploration I introduce my concept of "collective vulnerability" by drawing on Leonard

Clyde Hawes' conversational theory as well as my personal experiences of growing and sharing with other spoken word poets who have shaped my understandings. Finally, in chapter three, I identify the embodied practice of collective vulnerability through spoken word performance as a form of *womanist spiritual [art]ivism*⁵, or a form of womanist spiritual activism that intentionally incorporates and acknowledges the transformative power of imaginative creation and expression.

⁵ As I will later mention, the term "artivism" was originally introduced to academic writing by Chela Sandoval and Latorre Guisela in their text "Chicana/o Artivism: Judy Baca's Digital Work with Youth of Color." I choose to bracket the word "art" within artivism in order to bring the reader's attention to the concept of art as activism.

CHAPTER II OUR SPOKEN WORD

It wasn't like she practiced. The words seemed different rolling of her lips mimicking the movements of energy they inspired. Her words felt heavy but weightless, their weight carried by the commitment of the crowd.

I was seventeen years old when I shared poetry in community for the first time. I was so scared that you could barely hear me over the rustling sound of my unsteady and nervous hand shaking the paper from which I was reading. After I finished, I ran off stage and felt so overwhelmed by fear that I began to cry. Although I was scared of being judged or seeming foolish, I was more scared of the self I encountered having finally broken my silence. The experience of sharing my poetic testimony within community made me feel as if I was conversing intimately with others and myself for the first time. Although painful and uncertain, the experience of performing spoken word was also deeply transformative. It opened in me a desire to learn and understand who I was and how I could connect to others and the world in authentic ways.⁶

Five years after my first performance, I have made the choice to put this art at the center of my work. As a result, I have traveled across the country to perform and speak on poetry in various venues and communities, including university classrooms, conferences, bars, churches, outdoor festivals, and the like. I have written countless poems and have fallen in love with more self-proclaimed poets than I can remember.

⁶ I understand and define authenticity as a spiritually expressive form of being that is a unique manifestation of personal and inherited experiences.

Through my experiences I have found, as I will explore in this chapter, that spoken word poetry is a powerful decolonizing tool when sustainably taught in local communities that honor the diversity, authenticity, and complexity in human expression.

In the last twenty years, spoken word has experienced a rapid growth in utility and popularity. This growth is particularly true in relation to the competitive expression known as slam poetry. Established in 1990, the National Poetry Slam hosts poets from more than seventy cities around the U.S. and various countries around the world, including Canada and France. Poetry Slam Incorporated (PSI) oversees this competition, as well as the Individual World Poetry Slam (iWPS). PSI is an organization charged with creating and maintaining the official rules of the competition as well as overseeing the international coalition of poetry slams. Although many poets around the world participate in the globally organized, competitive, and highly popular art of slam poetry, countless more still participate in local or national spoken word events such as workshops, performances, ciphers, open mic events, festivals, and conferences that take place anywhere from bus stops and basements to churches, bars, and university auditoriums. There is no doubt that the accessibility of spoken word, particularly as it manifests in “open mic” settings, adds to its popularity and its growing utility. Virtually anyone with a poem and enough courage to read it or recite it out loud can find a stage and a community with which to share it. This popularity and accessibility inspires teachers, artists, and non-profit initiatives to use spoken word as a way to reach out to young people, particularly young people of color in urban communities, who often have trouble connecting with more eurocentric literary traditions. Organizations and educators such as Youth Speaks,

Young Chicago Authors, Maisha T. Fisher, ClimbingPoetree, and Shiv Raj Desai, have presented spoken word as a form of alternative education and youth development for a new generation and have produced new and diverse platforms for its growth and popularity. According to their website, Youth Speaks, a leading non-profit presenter of spoken word education, works with 45,000 teens a year in the San Francisco Bay area alone and has partnered with similar programs in forty-seven cities around the U.S. Yet it is important to note that along with the booming interest in spoken word as a market for educators, youth developers, activists, artists, liberal philanthropists, and clearly academics, spoken word has grown and crossed over into mainstream consumer culture resulting in inevitable consequences for the politics of the art. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, Sommer-Willet claims:

Indeed, poetry in performance has become so popular in youth culture that verse has penetrated mainstream commercial markets, finding its way into McDonalds advertisements, partnership for a drug-free America public service announcements, MTV News, and episodes of the Simpsons. . . . These examples suggest that America is in the midst of an explosion of verse in popular culture, one facilitated by the performance of poetry in live and recorded media, but like hip hop, one also facilitated by expressions of identity, particularly of race and class. (6)

In this statement, Sommers-Willet provides examples of the increasing popularity and commodification of poetry through spoken word performance. She further claims that,

like hip hop, the performed “authenticity” of marginality, or expressing and proving one’s identity of “other,” is celebrated and rewarded particularly in the competitive expression of slam. She suggests that through the focus on performing marginal identities, primarily those of race and class, slam becomes a powerful tool by which marginalized communities can challenge the elitist and exclusionary literary tradition, canon, and critique of poetry that academia has historically guarded and controlled. However, like hip hop and jazz, spoken word’s emphasis on the racialized or “otherized” identity within a capitalist framework has manufactured and sold ideas of “other” within a commercial context. According to Sommers-Willet, spoken word/slams’ mainstream success through media projects like the HBO special *Russel Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam*, and more recently *Brave New Voices*, has led to a form of racial voyeurism, through which “white” America observes, consumes, and mimics the racialized other. She states, “Participating in these projects allows African American artists an opportunity to reach larger mainstream audiences while simultaneously making them a spectacle for consumption by predominantly white, middle-class audiences” (14). The result is the clear objectification of the racialized other and the romanticizing of oppression as the only form of valid authenticity or “realness,” rather than the critical understanding of an economic and political system that creates and maintains painful but popular stories of growing up in poverty amongst violence, crime, drugs, etc. Consequently, the voice of oppression becomes spectaclized and commodified rather than the focus of critical conversations and the springboard to transformative action.

Moreover, I would suggest that the romanticization and objectification of the oppressed other through spoken word/slam and hip hop, as well as the increasing appropriation of these art forms by large non profits and other social institutions, serves to fuel what writer Teju Cole calls “The White Savior Industrial Complex.” I understand and define this term as the institutions and ideologies created in response to the U.S.’ “white’ imaginaries” construction of the racialized “other” as a vulnerable childlike being that has no autonomy or agency and therefore must be saved from the depths of his or her own circumstances. In a 2012 article for *The Atlantic*, Cole states, “The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege” (1). As a young racialized person raised in the U.S., I have personally felt and witnessed the negative effects of the “White Savior Industrial Complex” and its intervention in my life and the lives of my communities. These effects included the perpetuation of social justice narratives and models that name the marginalized “other,” or me, as voiceless, rather than recognizing the culture that maintains ideologies and institutions that systemically silence and or exclude the expression or production of my own narrative and agency.

To give a recent and relevant example of this form of intervention: in December of 2012, I traveled to Chicago with the intention of participating in various familiar spoken word communities of which I had once been a part, and that were primarily targeted towards youth and/or community development. I found that many of the performance spaces that had been run by people of color in communities that were primarily Black and Latino had been shut down due to lack of resources, gentrification,

and in one case, government intervention. In contrast, I found that the spoken word spaces run by large non-profit structures that presented themselves as solutions for young “at-risk urban youth,”-- those run primarily by white-identified staff and leadership, and those that received formal government and/or privatized corporate funding--were thriving. Although I found the idea of free, open, and nicely funded artistic spaces for youth exciting, I also found that the culture of many of these spaces felt like a mix of performance, disconnect, and domineering action, language, and attitudes that failed to be culturally relevant to the community these initiatives claimed to be serving. Even more alarming, rather than being encouraged to write poems that affirm their own agency or the unique interpretations of their diverse lived experiences, the at-risk urban youth were rewarded by white leaders for producing oversimplified poems that romanticized and racialized hardships and affirmed the necessary intervention of mostly white-identified educated middle-class nonprofit workers, who at best appeared to offer superficial short-term resources for the youth and their community while assuming the security of their role as ‘savior’ and taking away a great experience to add to their résumé or CV.

Spoken word, as constructed in mainstream consumer markets and sold as a “relevant” new tool for non-profit initiatives, can and is used to perpetuate violent structures that exist in a “white savior” neoliberal context. I would further suggest that the continuing capitalist appropriation and commercialization of the art monopolizes its expression and consequently homogenizes its utility, increasingly leaving the art form less diverse and ineffectively repetitive. The tired clichés, overused motifs, privileged heteronormative and androcentric themes, cadences, and rap lyric references that have

little depth, purpose, or meaning, appear to be learned from the constantly recycled and repackaged representations of the art through mass media and/or from the desire to gain commercial appeal. The power that comes from diverse authenticity, originality, connection, relevance, and creativity in spoken word and slam is increasingly getting lost amid the desire for fame, acceptance, money, and respect.

However, despite the commercialization of the art and the violent political implications that accompany it, like other mediums of creative expression, spoken word poetry can and does serve to transform dominant ideologies and culture through its use as a communal dialogical tool that opens the way for decolonization. In his dissertation entitled *Emancipate Yourself from Mental slavery/None but Ourselves can Free our Minds: Spoken Word as a site/sight of Resistance, Reflection and Rediscovery*, Shiv Raj Desai states, “In essence, our voice is important because our lived experiences provide a vital source of knowledge that can inform the dominant discourse of our realities and empower us to change those realities” (52). According to Desai, the process of decolonization takes place in spoken word as one becomes increasingly aware of self and the oppressive structures that limit one’s lived reality. This process enables us to recognize and share the value in our own lived experience and in the lived experiences of others. Desai states: “From my earliest experience with spoken word venues, I considered them my classrooms and each poet that performed was my teacher providing me with lessons on history, philosophy, cultural studies, and how to deal with life” (12). Desai further explains how, in these non-conventional classrooms, spoken word is a form of poetry that utilizes the strengths of communities of color: oral tradition, call and

response, home language, story telling, and resistance, making it a relevant and empowering tool for decolonization.

I became aware of spoken word as a decolonizing tool in my own initial interactions with the art while I was a young activist in Chicago. The first time I witnessed a spoken word performance was during my freshman year in college. A friend sat me down and told me to watch a Youtube video featuring Yellow Rage, an Asian American spoken word duo, featured on the popular HBO special *Russel Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam*. I watched as Yellow Rage courageously and powerfully confronted dominant U.S. culture's understanding of their Asian female identities. Their tone, words, and bodily gestures powerfully communicated their anger at the idea of others being "experts" on the way they should perform their identity, by doing so they invited the audience to consider a perspective and a voice that is often unheard by dominant culture. In those few minutes, Yellow Rage showed me how "Spoken word poetry allows the poet to 'shine' for a moment, teach the audience, and promote stories of people who are normally silenced" (Desai 19). At this point in my experience as a young woman of color who had already been witness to and victim of multiple forms of cultural and structural violence, spoken word became a powerful means of being heard.

At the time I saw the video, I was deeply involved in an anti-racism student movement on my campus that was quickly spreading to other schools in the city. We were mobilizing around issues of racial profiling and systemic marginalization within a historically white institution that silenced the narratives of students of color. Amid that deep involvement, I was also painfully exhausted from being disconnected on multiple

levels from my community, my cultural identity, and my lived experiences. Inspired by Yellow Rage's spoken word video, I helped organize an event where students gathered and shared stories and/or poems about their experiences as students of color on a university campus. White-identified students also participated in this event, with stories and poems that told of their consciousness of multiple forms of racism and complicity within the campus community, themselves, and dominant culture as a whole. The event proved to be a powerful tool; it built community, ignited critical dialogue, and helped us learn how to be allies and walk in solidarity with each other. The event felt and looked radically different than one at which the usual "experts," "specialists," or "leaders" sit on a panel and tell us what they feel we should know about our experience. By privileging our own voices, we learned from our own stories and the stories of those around us. Moreover, poems as stories and personal testimonies became a way to protect us from tension and hostility in order to empower our narratives and voices to make room for honest dialogue and sharing. Our artful testimonies were vulnerable forms of expression, not argument; therefore our multiple truths were less oppositional and more easily received and understood. After that event, I began to feel less stressed, less alone, and more at home in my own body as a student of color in a university setting.

My second encounter with spoken word happened in a community youth space located in the heart of Humboldt Park, a distinguished historical Puerto Rican neighborhood in Chicago. Batey Urbano was located on Paseo Boricua and is a branch initiative of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center dedicated to working with community youth through the arts. I became connected to this space partly through my political work

as an undergraduate student activist/organizer, but more by my longing to connect to community that could understand and accept me as a seventeen-year-old Latina who had grown up unconventionally influenced, formed, and partially raised by hood culture. The first night reading my poetry out loud at one of Batey's poetry nights, I felt as if I had participated in one of the most important conversations of my life. I listened as youth and young adults from the community spoke passionately about manifestations of colonization through cycles of poverty and violence in their families, gentrification in their neighborhood, sexuality, culture, love, hip hop, and basic everyday occurrences that reminded us of the simple beauty of being human and alive. It was as if my experience, my body, my personal expression, and my very existence finally had permission to speak, grow, and engage.

As a result of that initial experience, I spent the rest of my time as an undergraduate performing poetry and helping to organize poetry open mics. Batey was a space that introduced poetry and hip hop nights through fliers that announced "Poetry with Purpose" and urged us to "Speak your history; don't let anyone else speak it for you." At the Batey, I watched as youth, mostly Black and Latino, poetically made connections between their own lived experiences and socio-historical realities while crafting clever and witty war cries for changes within dominant cultures and institutions. Batey was a space where we were not defined as other, marginalized, or in need of saving. It was a space in which we named our own diverse identities and experiences while taking pride in our agency to create and inspire change in ourselves and in others.

Moreover, it was a space in which everyone was encouraged to participate and share whatever they had on their heart in whatever way they felt comfortable.

At Batey Urbano, spoken word poetry was used to create sustainable spaces of healing and decolonization within the context of the immediate community. In these spaces, it was safe for one to begin exploring who they were by witnessing their own reflection in others. Participants did not have to defend or justify their right to be, why they felt angry, or why they felt pain. One could simply be understood and honored as a valued person in community. Moreover, community members grew and were transformed by engaging with their own narratives and agency as well as the agency and narrative of others. The growth and transformation experienced at Batey and in the previously mentioned academic event that engaged conversations on race within a historically white academic institution, challenged systems of oppression that encourage alienation and disconnection from lived experiences and realities.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the replication of dominant narratives represented in mass media outlets is encouraged and rewarded even within the guise of social justice and activism. Spoken word poetry as a new “hip” “urban” tool for community engagement can function as a radical form of assimilation and historical erasure. This function becomes more prevalent when we oversimplify and replicate representations of dominant narratives within a consumer-based system. Our diverse and complex voices/narratives get lost when we are busy attempting to replicate voices and narratives that are already constructed and fed to us for mass consumption. As a result, we often exist in a hollow silence that teaches us to remain alienated from our own

beings. Through spoken word poetry I have learned that reflections of our diverse realities and experiences must be self-produced in order to authentically claim an identity and the free will to choose who we are becoming as a new people. Degrading ourselves to stereotypes produced by corporations and ideologies that are driven by economic gain is a voluntary progression towards alienation and dehumanization. Choosing to assimilate and to abandon our history and the beautiful complexity of our home cultures is to surrender the consciousness of our reality and our condition. Through spoken word I understood that we must move forward in the voicing of the truth of our experiences. We must eradicate the need to define ourselves as relevant to dominant ethnocentric ideologies and constructs, and engage in decolonizing mediums that allow us to name new relevant forms of identity and storytelling. One way of doing this is through spoken word open mic, to which we turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

CONVERSATIONS ON THE OPEN MIC

They heard her and respected her existence, witnessing her courage, humbly listening to her story. She slowly began to take up the space they gave her, feeling more confident with each syllable. She was so aware of herself. She was apart of them.

We saw in chapter one that the accessibility of spoken word allows it to cross differences and build decolonizing communities. I suggest that at the heart of the decolonizing function of spoken word is the spoken word open mic that serves as an open table for poetic conversation. According to Leonard Clyde Hawes in his article “Becoming Other-Wise: Conversational Performance and the Politics of Experience,” conversations are both dialogical (nonlinear, nonoppositional) and dialectic (oppositional) and often encompass contradictions as well as tensions that, while never resolved, do contribute to sociopolitical cultural formations and ideologies that facilitate the creation of consciousness and experience. According to Hawes, as we engage in conventional conversation we are engaging in three activities: “reflexing (i.e., theorizing one’s practices retrospectively), indexing (i.e., identifying how one interprets utterances of one’s interlocutor), and implicating (i.e., locating one’s identity in the matrices of desire, experiences, will, resistance, and resolve)” (42). In the spoken word open mic we witness, reflexing, indexing, and implicating constitute a powerful intentional exercise of self-actualization within community achieved by engaging with self through intentional expression and communicating with others.

In spoken word, communal conversation is a form of community self-actualization on the mic. Through this self-actualization, we are individually reminded of our relational differences and are able to expand our relational consciousness of the world. In this chapter I suggest that unpacking the conversational function of the spoken word ‘open mic’ shows us ways that performance poetry can and does foster a conversational learning environment that teaches us connectional ways of understanding and being through collective vulnerability.

In the ritualized culture of the spoken word open mic, a community gathers and individuals from that community take turns to playfully, powerfully, and honestly share their embodied expressions using their words, bodies, lived experiences, and emotions. Through this turn-taking, community members listen, engage, and respond to each other’s embodied narratives and emotions. Moreover, the (literal and figurative) mic functions as a community equalizer that gives all community members the opportunity to share and be heard. However, poets willing to share within a spoken word open mic setting must trust in the communal intention of what I call “collective vulnerability”—that is, the agreement to engage in emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical openness that is respectful and humanizing, with the goal of collective dialogical exchange and creation. The practice of collective vulnerability allows us to hear different voices and also to better understand and explore our own knowledge production. The grounding value of this agreement is that we become aware of our connectedness through the action of intimate self-expression and communication or what Hawes defines as conversation. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and open on multiple levels through the

conversational nature of performance and poetic story telling helps us expose and witness the complexities of the human experience that exists in a both/and connectional reality.

Both the performer and the listeners within the open mic space must engage in critical mindfulness⁷ in order to open a path for collective dialogue. Critical mindfulness as a spirit of intention is a form of consciousness that is necessary in order to accept the vulnerability of others and ourselves as we envelop ourselves in each other's stories, vulnerability, and home culture(s). Critical mindfulness is about sharpening differentiations by reflexing, indexing, and implicating, all the while being aware of relational existing—the understanding that we are connectional beings that are neither isolated nor completely independent of each other's narratives. Within the context of spoken word, it is a mindfulness that is connectional in nature and in action, one that allows us to create knowledge of ourselves within and through the “eventness” of conversational performance.⁸

The invitation to engage in the poetic form of collective dialogue is usually initiated and facilitated by a master of ceremonies who, before or during the show,

⁷ I use the word “critical” not for its typical use of “criticizing” but as a term to denote consideration with engaging depth and persistence.

⁸ In her book, *Opening Acts Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies*, Judith Hamera explains how performance has the power to tap into our own embodied process of creating culture and knowledge. She states: “Performance is both an event and a heuristic tool that illuminates the presentational and representational elements of culture. Its inherent “eventness” (“in motion”) makes it especially effective for engaging and describing the embodied processes that produce and consume culture. As event or as heuristic, performance makes things and does things, in addition to describing how they are made or done” (5). Hamera describes performance as an event and a tool that enacts agency (intention) as it creates and expresses culture. In other words, performance is a medium in which we come to understand expression around and within us, through the ongoing “eventness” of creation. Thus performance becomes not only a self-reflective as well as an outwardly expressive practice in communication with oneself and the world, but also a medium by which to transform dominant frameworks.

collects the names of people willing to share. The MC is the person who initiates the act of collective vulnerability. Ze does this in a variety of ways as ze announces the beginning of the show and opens the space for sharing. The MC might introduce the intention of collective vulnerability by offering the invitation to perform and or explaining the conditions of the space. Ze will often explain the conditions of the space by using the phrase “respect the mic,” explaining and claiming that the open mic is a “safe space” for anyone who wants to share; remind the audience to be friendly to first timers; and might even explain the consequences of not respecting others in the space. However, although it is the MC who articulates what is meant by collective vulnerability, that vulnerability can only be maintained by the community. This the community does through critical mindfulness and by not only acknowledging the transformative power of poetic conversation as an intimate act, but also by welcoming it, engaging in it, and embracing those willing to participate.

Such welcoming, engaging, embracing, and affirming in spoken word open mic spaces happens in a variety of ways. Snapping one’s fingers is a commonly accepted way of signifying agreement, affirmation, and/or solidarity with the words, ideas, and emotions of the poet. Snapping is also sometimes used to affirm the obviously frightened, anxious, or forgetful poet. I have frequently heard poets preface their performances by sharing that they have not performed in a while and are a little rusty, and that therefore the audience should feel free to “snap them through” if they lose their place in the poem. These instructions are a signifier of the community’s responsibility and commitment to engage in critical mindfulness through understanding and listening to the poet as a human

with whom they can, will, and should engage on various levels. In addition to snapping, community members may use common call and response expressions familiar to the spiritual traditions of African American and other communities of color. Expressions and responses such as clapping, nodding of heads, verbally or audibly agreeing, or briefly commenting as one feels called or moved, are welcomed in most spoken word spaces. These responses often serve to welcome the poet and set the tone for the type of themes, energy, and presentation preferred by the immediate community.

It is common for poets to anticipate or attempt to encourage a type of lively engagement in the audience; poets often initiate this type of engagement by instructing the audience to repeat a word or a line at certain points over the course of a poem. Audiences are often willing to participate, knowing that audience engagement will often lead to a clever, fun, and witty exercise in word play and emotional significance. In this type of performance the audience is directly engaged in communicating the author's creative expression and vulnerability. Audience engagement in the spoken word open mic is a playful exercise that requires the audience and performer to be open to surprise and to the construction or reconstruction of self. Maria Lugones refers to such playfulness in a description of a game in her text *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*. She states:

Our activity has no rules, though it is certainly intentional activity and we both understand what we are doing. The playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in this case uncertainty is an

openness to surprise. This is a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the “world” to be neatly packaged, ruly. (95)

Although an MC might stipulate how many poems each poet can present or might specify hours for sign up, the spoken word open mic model, like Lugones’ game, has very little structure: it creates itself by extending the invitation to participate in dialogical and playful conversation. Playfulness within the spoken word open mic is a form of vulnerability that derives not from the western ideas of competition but rather the welcoming and openness of fluid being that Lugones calls “world traveling.” I suggest that the open mic is dependent on the poetic stories offered that allow the audience to travel into the performers’ worlds through deep emotion and expression.

Yet each particular spoken word space constructs its own culture of vulnerability, playfulness, and dialogue on any given day. The level of audience engagement and facilitation of the space always depends on the intention of the community and the willingness of individuals present to engage in conversational vulnerability and playfulness. In one case, while performing at the infamous Green Mill in Chicago, the alleged birthplace of Slam poetry, I noticed that the MC opened the space by playfully instructing the audience in the various appropriate responses and their meanings. These responses included a “feminist hiss” intended to call out poets on sexist language and ideas whenever an individual feels it necessary. This form of engagement proved to be political but also playful and accessible, encouraging the audience to participate with the poets and the MC by giving them tools to engage in the spontaneity and surprise.

In other spaces, such as an open mic I facilitated with undergraduate students at the end of an introduction to a Women's Studies course, the spirit, or organic intention of the collective, was inclined towards more deeply personal and painful sharing. Consequently, forms of vulnerability in that space manifested in tears and physical contact such as hugs or meaningful and comforting pats on backs and hands. In addition to overt physical and emotional responses such as laughter, tears, and head nods, community members also responded spontaneously within the space of vulnerability by sharing their own poetry. Although they may not have planned to do so initially, many students became willing to share on similar themes after witnessing others courageously perform poems that dealt with topics like rape, low self-esteem, abortion, and sexual identity.

Writers or poets at open mics may search through their material and decide to share particular pieces that respond, relate, and/or help create the themes and energy of the space. Many jump at the opportunity to share poems that affirm others' words by offering a different vantage point, such as the example of the undergraduate students who were willing to share poems that were unique in experience but similar in theme, topic, or emotion. Other poets feel passionate about using their participation to challenge generalization or disrespectful language used by peers or dominant culture. An example of this is the aforementioned "feminist hiss" that was used at the Green Mill, and my own decision to perform poems that addressed the male-dominated performances that included sexist language, jokes about stalking, and an exaggerated emphasis on women's aesthetic

appearance.⁹ Such challenging or offering of contrasting viewpoints is done not to argue a side but to offer multiple perspectives to the community and further understand the complexity of our collective experience and our ability to be critically mindful. Marvin Carlson writes in his book *Performance: a Critical Introduction*:

Strine, Long, and Hopkins argue that performance has become ... developed in an atmosphere of “sophisticated disagreement” by participants who “do not expect to defeat or silence opposing positions, but rather through continuing dialogue to attain a sharper articulation of all positions and therefore a fuller understanding of the conceptual richness of performance”. (1)

Here, Carlson references Mary Strine, Beverly Long, and Mary Hopkins who conceptualize performance as a dialogical event, rather than as an event that functions within the oppositional western dialectic tradition. In short, performance is a conversational act where both teaching and learning happen simultaneously through sharing perspectives, experiences, and stories. Within the challenging, playing, complimenting, affirming, and contrasting, performers and audience members collectively tap into the diverse wealth of experience that makes up the larger human narrative.

Audience affirmation, playful engagement, and poetic response embody the three activities found in the act of conversation: reflexing, indexing, and implicating. Yet in open mic, conversations are conveyed through more than just words and ideas; they are

⁹ See appendix for poem entitled “In the Grey.”

conveyed through embodied energies of empathy, joy, celebration, defeat, brokenness, fear, etc, that become shared experiences that are bigger than the self. Hawes states, “Coming to discourse as a conversed and conversing subject, then, is coming to pragmatic, ethical, aesthetic, political, erotic, and spiritual consciousness at one and the same time” (34). According to Hawes, we come into pragmatic consciousness of the ethical, aesthetic, political, erotic, and spiritual aspects of our human experience by looking retrospectively, by recognizing the perspective of those outside the concept of self, and finally, by recognizing how we relate to the greater world around us.

Forms of communal discourse like the spoken word open mic are an essential pedagogical practice/ritual that should be introduced in the way that we understand, listen, and speak to each other in every space, but particularly as communities and individuals work toward social justice and healing. The desire to share one’s story and its reward of healing self and others is an integral part of the culture of spoken word and the primary lesson of interconnectivity that the art provides us. Moreover, the ability to simultaneously find and honor individual and collective commonalities and differences offers us a sustainable form of communication that helps us better relate to and stand in solidarity with one another. Hawes asserts that differentiations are realized by the process of collective living and understood as the comprehension of the ‘I-experience’ as well as the ‘we-experience.’ He suggests that this comprehension is the mark of a change/expansion of consciousness, or what Shiv Raj Desai would name part of the decolonizing process through becoming aware of one’s self in relation to others.

In this chapter I have suggested that the framework and culture of the spoken word open mic assumes a community agreement of mindfulness or “collective vulnerability.” This form of vulnerability implies that a dialogue will occur in which the local community (both performer and audience) will engage with a single narrative that is understood as both the story of the performer as well as a story that holds the potential to connect to each individual audience member. Looking at the cultural aspects of the spoken word open mic as seen through the analysis of my own experience and interpretation of performance theory, I begin to frame this art not only as a site for self-transformation but also as a site for learning and teaching communicative transformation through the lens of interconnectedness. During open and raw sharing, the local open mic community is challenged, inspired, called out, affirmed, and invited to respond in multiple and organic ways within the space of collective vulnerability.

CHAPTER IV

SPOKEN WORD AS SPIRITUAL [ART]IVISM

What she was saying mattered. What she was saying didn't matter. She pulled strength from their attentive silence that hugged her and assured her that she was love.

I spent many years engaging in spoken word without using the language of spirit or mentally acknowledging anything spiritual about it. If anything, I thought spoken word served as a space where I could subversively deconstruct the spiritual tradition in which I had been raised. One day a fellow poet described one of our usual spoken word spots as a combination of a show, a party, and church all in one. The idea of spoken word facilitating a type of spiritually nurturing place seemed both undeniable and contradictory in my mind. Yet as I considered this idea, I began to accept that there was a spirit that accompanied the vulnerability in spoken word spaces that moved us to tears, laughter, brokenness, and joy. However, I understood this spirit to be one of embodied action and emotion rather than rational or theological understanding. It was a spirit that invited us to see that our complexities are always reflected in the diversity that extends outside of the western concept of self. Consequently, I began to consider how spoken word served as a decolonizing form of spiritual activism that challenges violent limitations of dominant western scientific rationality and provides us with connectional frameworks that holistically engage our narratives with one another and the world. Drawing from Womanist theory, in this chapter I intentionally explore the ways that collective

vulnerability within the spoken word open mic inspires epistemological transformation by functioning as a communal form of what I call ‘Womanist spiritual [art]ivism.’¹⁰

Womanist spiritual [art]ivism derives directly from the theoretical framework and praxis of womanist spiritual activism. Although the term “spiritual activism” was originally introduced to Women’s Studies by Gloria Anzaldúa, I encountered the term “womanist spiritual activism” in a summer course taught by AnaLouise Keating, who defines Womanist spiritual activism as a multicultural perspective that bridges the relationship between activism and spirituality as understood through the radical possibilities of interconnectivity. In her book *The Womanist Idea*, womanist scholar Layli Maparyan draws on Anzaldúa to explain that “[s]piritual activism is a set of practices designed to change ‘hearts and minds’ in ways that promote optimal well-being in individuals, communities, humanity as a whole, all living kind, and ultimately Planet Earth” (117). As an action-oriented inclination to change self and the world in a simultaneous and reciprocal manner, spiritual activism marks a radical shift in the ways that we conceptualize our selves in connection with each other and the world. Although general, all-encompassing, and possibly a bit vague, it is important to note that like spoken word poetry, womanist spiritual activism includes multiple definitions and forms. It is open-ended, ongoing, and is not grounded in binary or oppositional limitations. As

¹⁰ Although I believe that radical forms of epistemological healing are possible within the context of spoken word, I am aware that spoken word and dialogue can and does take place in non-healing forms. As described in chapter one, the commercialization and appropriation of this art form present particular challenges. For this reason, I am careful to focus on the spoken word open mic that intentionally invokes collective vulnerability. However, I do acknowledge that like any space in which people come together, any spoken word open mic has the potential to invoke collective vulnerability.

such, womanist spiritual activism is embodied and manifested in particular ways by each individual.

Likewise, Womanist spiritual [art]ivism is a multicultural perspective that bridges the relationship between spirituality and activism, a term used by many community artists but originally introduced to academic text by Chela Sandoval and Latorre Guisela in their article “Chicana/o Artivism: Judy Baca’s Digital Work with Youth of Color.” Womanist spiritual [art]ivist perspective and praxis is embodied in the work of activists who creatively help communities conceptualize the epistemological shift that is needed to heal the fragmented parts of ourselves and of our world through art. As a liberatory practice, art challenges and transforms the dominating-cultural epistemology grounded in positivist and oppositional thinking that leaves no room for the creative, playful, and transformative function of the spirit. Womanist spiritual [art]ivism recognizes the spiritual and transcending nature of creativity and art as an embodied liberatory practice that is needed to continue building bridges of understanding and healing through communicative expression within our local and global communities.

The embodied vulnerability present in the nature of creativity and art allows us to enter a space of possibilities for communication and healing where we can recognize the interconnection between our diverse lived experiences. As mentioned above, at the beginning of my journey with spoken word, I was greatly influenced by the political culture of Café Batey Urbano, a spoken word space that taught mostly Black and Puerto Rican youth in Humboldt Park to speak and learn openly in the complexity of their own

cultures and lived experiences¹¹. I arrived at Batey having recently endured various levels of violence in my transition to academia as a young woman of color. In the historically white space of academia I was forced to protect myself emotionally, spiritually, and mentally from a culture in which I was labeled and targeted as “other” and made to feel simple and easily silenced. In response, I developed a radically oppositional framework that translated my positioning as marginalized and oppressed “other” as just and right, and consequently all those who carried an easily identified form of privilege, i.e. “white” and or “male,” as unjust and wrong. I was good and “they” were bad. I was the colonized and “they” were the colonizer. Many, particularly in the activist community in which I found myself, accepted this oppositional perspective as an authentic and appropriate response to the political wounds of my experience as a marginalized body. I recognize now that at that point in my process, being oppositional gave me identity, agency, and the ability to express emotion.

As I continued to name my experiences and myself at Batey and on stages around the city, poetry began to question my strategies of survival and unravel contradictions within me. The poetry of more seasoned artists challenged me to explore and complicate how I understood my emotions and experiences. Slowly, I began to face new questions: Who are “they”? Who are the “colonizers”? Was it my white friend, Micah, who was part of the anti-racist planning committee? My roommate and good friend Anna who housed me when I found myself homeless during college? The Latino men in my community that I was supposed to be fighting to liberate? My brother? My father? Surely the colonizers

¹¹ See appendix for poem entitled “The place of my beginnings: For the sacred space known as Batey”

were the Spanish, French, and Portuguese who raped, enslaved, and killed my indigenous ancestors. But does my personal historical narrative mean that the colonizer is also the European blood that runs through my Mestiza veins? In her introduction to *Teaching Transformation: Transcultural Classroom Dialogues*, AnaLouise Keating states:

We have been indoctrinated into a dualistic worldview and an over reliance on empirical-rational thought, which creates a restrictive framework... When we view the world through this binary lens, we assume that the various others we encounter are too different—too other, as it were—to have anything (of importance) in common. Where is the room for complexity, compromise, growth, and exchange? (3)

According to Keating, harmful differentiations that sustain oppositional and restrictive frameworks arise when we use identifying categories and labels without engaging self-reflection, learning and teaching histories, and using these categories in new ways to work towards social movement and change. Through spoken word I began to understand that on all levels and for all people there is a need to embrace individual and collective narratives within a both/and reality.

Performance poetry as a non-oppositional spiritual activist strategy allows us to reconceptualize difference and contradiction, as well as make room for what womanist scholar Vanessa Sheared calls polyrhythmic understandings. According to Sheared, the ontological theory of polyrhythmic realities recognizes that not only are there individual realities, but that they all intersect. That is to say that our diverse experiences, emotions,

and perspectives are alive, continuous, and connected, all at the same time. Like the multiple rhythms and tonalities of a song, each poem offered at an open mic weaves together with others to create a “show” or a collective embodiment of vulnerability and polyrhythmic complexity. Understanding those polyrhythmic realities allows us to recognize the ways we exist in connection with each other and the potential we have for deep understandings that extend beyond the positivist or dichotomous perspective of right or wrong. On the open mic the community recognizes poetry as testimonies that are, as a fellow poet recently said, offered as art not argument and embody more than just a mental concept but a story that honors emotional vulnerability, embodied narrative, and spirit.

Unlike the Cartesian mind/body binary that serves as a foundational truth in western logic and science, the primary epistemological assumption of the spoken word open mic framework is that connectedness within the complexities of our mindbodyspirit is essential to the process of validating knowledge. I suggest that we understand this epistemological assumption of connectivity as well as the resulting desire to be vulnerable and share at the spoken word open mic as a “knowing” passed down through multiple indigenous home cultures. I borrow the concept of “knowing” from Cherokee writer Marilou Awiakta in her text *Selu: Seeking the Corn Mother’s Wisdom*. Awiakta affirms that we come to know or understand things within the totality of our being (spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, etc) as we deepen insight within each other’s embodied and lived experiences. I expand this idea of “knowing” by drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of “conocimiento” and “la facultad.” These concepts, similar to Awiakta’s “knowing,” affirm a type of intuitive and connectional consciousness that

extends beyond rational/mental understanding and often already exists in the nature of our being and human traditions such as music, dance, and prayer that are found in our indigenous home cultures. It is a knowing that calls us to go further and deeper into our own abilities to decolonize self.

Similarly, in her text “Poetry is Not a Luxury” Audre Lorde names intuitive knowing or *conocimiento* as the creative poetic spirit that comes from our non-western traditions. She states, “The white father told us: I think therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel therefore I can be free” (38). Shiv Raj Desai uses this text in his dissertation to highlight the importance of getting in touch with alternative ways of knowing in order to understand and liberate one’s human complexity. In particular, Desai emphasizes the “hidden power” that comes from being in touch with our “ancient-noneuropean consciousness” (70). He suggests that “the Black mother within each of us—the poet” gives us the necessary tools for dealing with the colonizing of our “white father’s” way of being, or what I understand as linear positivist epistemologies.

However, unlike Desai who insists on the importance of *breaking* away from the narrative of the colonizer “to be free” and liberated as colonized subjects, I believe the image of the Black mother and white father offers an alternative way to understand spoken word performance poetry as a polyrhythmic action that reconciles and connects in order to navigate difference and seeming contradictions outside of an oppositional framework. Recognizing our positioning as children of the “Black mother” and “white father” invites us to reframe the dichotomous idea of the colonized and colonizer by

considering the relational dynamics within a polyrhythmic ontological framework. Rather than just break away from or resist the ‘colonizers’ narrative,’ or dominant oppressive ideologies—which seems impossible to do when the ‘colonizers’ narrative many times and in many ways cannot be differentiated from the narrative of the colonized—Lorde’s metaphor of the “white father” who exists, and “Black mother” who maintains the power to be free, positions us as the children of multiple essential epistemological and ontological perspectives.

We are all children of encounter, mixture, and rebirth in blood, spirit, and epistemological understandings; the work of naming and reconciling that encounter through spoken word poetry often complicates one’s positioning and identity, opening room for more diverse and nuanced understanding of their lives as a manifested process that is in constant formation within the narrative of the world. A poet’s performance and words are theory in the flesh, constantly becoming and shifting within the bounds of colonized, colonizer, and beyond. According to Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, “theory in the flesh” suggests that our complex human stories and wounds live within our bodies as physical testament of our survival and commitment to life and that of our ancestors. Moreover, the concept of theory in the flesh also includes the idea of theory-making that stems from our lived realities and experiences of complex pain, joy, sadness, etc. From our embodied narratives we make theory. Consequently performing spoken word is about offering one’s body as a starting point for dialogue, and one’s stories and/or testimonies as invitations to begin bridging worlds and experiences as well as creating new understandings. Through theorizing in the flesh, we (children of the “Black

mother” and the “white father”) are able create our own epistemological grounding by attempting “to bridge the contradictions in our experience...by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words” (23). I recognize Anzaldúa and Moraga’s theory in the flesh as a form of womanist spiritual activism that is present in the everyday lives of people of color(s) or those who recognize the necessity in prioritizing the restoration of mindbodyspirit balance and do so by deeply engaging in their embodied experience, contradictions, and spiritual understandings.

Spoken word performance poetry embodies and reconciles both the “white father” (western dominant ways of thinking, i.e. rationality) and the “Black mother” (the expression of indigenous cosmologies, i.e. spirituality). It is a site of both resistance and reconciliation, attributes that simultaneously serve to heal the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritually polyrhythmic experiences of the self and the community. The spoken word open mic is a ritual that allows children of the “Black mother” and “white father” to enter into conversation with one another and embody new contextual libratory frameworks for healing. Moreover, by playfully¹² naming that encounter through spoken word performance in community we are participating in an act of cultural reconciliation

¹² As stated by Maria Lugones: “Playfulness is, in part, an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self important, not taking norms as sacred, and finding ambiguity and double edges as a source of wisdom and delight. So, positively, the playful attitude involves openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, openness to self construction or reconstruction and to construction and reconstruction of the “worlds” we inhabit playfully, and thus openness to risk the ground that constructs us as oppressors or oppressed or as collaborating or colluding with oppression” (96). Playfulness as a creative form of embodied vulnerability in performance creates a sacred liminal space that allows binaries and oppositions to be deconstructed and reconstructed. It allows us to imaginatively dismantle the very ground we stand on in order to open way to physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual connection and healing through collective vulnerability.

through theory in the flesh, which I understand as a both/and connectionist or polyrhythmic act that simultaneously allows us to recognize and honor our differences, commonalities, and contradictions to build bridges of understanding. Vulnerably theorizing through the flesh using the dialogical act of spoken word performance is a womanist spiritual [art]ivist tool for cultural production and epistemological transformation. Within our context in the West, theorizing in the flesh as a form of womanist spiritual [art]ivism becomes an act of courage and intention that invites others to vulnerably step into alternative ways of knowing, understanding, and connecting to the 'Black mother' that lives persecuted and often silenced within our cultural reality and within ourselves.

The term womanist spiritual [art]ivism highlights the holistic decolonizing power of art as a libratory spiritual practice that can be integrated in the ways the conceptualize activism and the power we have as human creators. The idea of spirit is something I have come to understand as an open-ended reality that accompanies us through our living and allows us to engage in a different form of 'knowing.' This 'knowing' makes it easier to vulnerably connect to the living energy in others and the natural world. The connection between spirit and art is a powerful realization that we hold the sacred ability to create, to feel, to choose, and to be connected in ways that embody and transcend the physical and the rational western-centric experience. I maintain that the epistemological power in spoken word is found in its ability to remind us that regardless of our experience and positionality, we are indeed connected. This reminder is one that grounds us in a spiritual consciousness of critical mindfulness and collective vulnerability. This grounding has the

power to shape our knowledge formation process and consequently our everyday actions.

This is the decolonizing power of spiritual [art]vism and spoken word poetry.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Smiles, laughter, and verbal confirmations created the space. Bodies transformed into vessels for cadences that spoke of multiple truths. The community became one intention. The cypher was open. The conversation had begun.

In this thesis I explored how the radical possibilities of collective vulnerability found in the ethos of spoken word performance poetry embody radical possibilities for epistemological transformation. In chapter one I briefly introduce spoken word as I have come to understand it while setting up the structure of my thesis. In chapter two I introduced spoken word as a decolonizing practice by drawing from my own experiences as a spoken word practitioner. In addition, I offered a critical look at the ways capitalist cultural appropriation present particular challenges for the decolonizing potential of spoken word and I suggested the importance of teaching this art in sustainable and community oriented ways. In chapter three I explored how during the spoken word open mic we witness and experience our relational difference by sharing our testimonial narratives through collective vulnerability found in the conversational function of the open mic. I suggested that collective vulnerability as found in the spoken word open mic teaches communities to listen, consider, and understand the importance of connectional understandings. In Chapter four I introduced the term “womanist spritual [art]ivism” to describe the transformative potential of collective vulnerability found in the artistic expression of performance poetry. I explained how spoken word as a form of womanist

spiritual [art]ivism inspires epistemological shifts necessary to heal the wounds and violence created through oppositional frameworks found in dominant culture. I used Audre Lordes' metaphor of the "Black mother and "white father" found in her text "Poetry is not a Luxury" as an invitation to consider the ways in which performance poetry allows us to step out of an oppositional framework.

In closing, my investment in spoken word as a transformative art form stems from my own experience engaging in the art, but more specifically the ways I have felt transformation in and through community. I believe that the ritualized practice of performance poetry functions as a cultural project continuously created and maintained by those who are eager to creatively express the ancient indigenous principles of relationality. The principles of relationality are embodied in the Mayan concept of In Lak Ech, translated in English as "you are my other me." Similar to the womanist activist perspective, In Lak Ech suggests we are different embodiments of the same spirit and that our diversity reflects the complexities of creation. As Tewa Indian scholar Gregory Cajete suggests, "We are the earth becoming conscious of itself"; consequently, across difference, we long to heal our fragmentations by seeing ourselves in others and in the world. We can trace the roots of community vulnerability, creative expression, and spiritual connection to the slaves' call and response in the fields of the U.S. and elsewhere, and to Afro Caribbean and Latin American expressions like bomba, capoeira, salsa, etc. These expressions are deeply political, spiritual, personal, and communal. Spoken word follows in these traditions, finding ways to negotiate and step outside of rigid binaries and fragmenting of dominant ideologies. I believe that spoken word is a

contextualized form of epistemological healing in our era of mass alienation and destruction of humanity and the earth. In the spoken word open mic we are collectively able to sit in the complexities of our humanness and admire its creative and healing spirit through poetic performance. Spoken word invites us to be authors of the stories that tell of our becoming. The act of naming and performing our own diverse narratives challenges the canonical perspective of reality and expands the possibilities of sustainable connection and reconciliation within our selves and our world.

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APPENDIX A

POEMS

THE PLACE OF MY BEGINNINGS

MARCH 2011

FOR THE SACRED SPACE KNOWN AS BATEY

My ignorance kept me scared.
Without knowing I feared new feelings and a full heart,
loud laughter and wet lips.

I feared my beauty and my smile,
my wounds and my past.
I wrote silent words...
they spoke of a door
that I was too scared to walk through
too scared to look at for too long.

I did not speak.
I did not recognize the vibrations of my voice,
the pulsing rhythms of my breath,
stories disclosed by my accent that lives somewhere between tenochtitlan, the land of mi
pueblo lenca, Tejas, Chocolate city D.C., here where I stand.

Like maya you conjured spaces of life with sounds and stories
crafted truth that looked like deep smiles and tears
for 9 years...
crafting life into vision,
truth into sound,
love into movement,
and deep inspiration into image

My voice
My voice
My voice

suddenly became the source of the eternal
the center of power and the creator of sacred space

....this is sacred space.

and for that I will always thank you.

IN THE GREY
SEPTEMBER 2011

I love you.

And I could probably think of a hundred theoretical justifications to make that shit seem less romantic

and I could probably ignore the tears and the butterflies with heartless semantics

But I can't shake this stubborn desire to want to trade the I for us....

The Intimacy for lust....

The skepticism for trust....

And I just,

I just don't understand it...

But I could systematically plan my life

And I could intellectually prove the evils of being your wife.

I could make you out as the oppressor to make shit a little more black and white.

But the truth is I'm in the grey....

The truth is I become a little bit more dependent on the idea of you each day.

And the more that I feel the more I want to run away

And I'm wonderin how much more of this internal hypocrisy I can take

Because it's more likely that your not the enemy.

And it's more probably that you're just as a part of me as the brown on my skin

And I figure that much because the truth is your the most beautiful reflection of this life that I'm living in.

And you seem to be the most effective means of lighting my spirit whenever the flame is getting dim

And the chances of me becoming a whole human being without letting you make me smile seem very slim.

So I'm in the grey

But I'm in the grey because I hate your ass so damn well and if you were to ever step me about the pain you caused?

BOY!

Off the dome I would have 152 stories to tell!

#1 starting with you still blaming me that humanity fell and this bullshit idea that my sexuality could ever condemn me to hell

Not to mention the 5000 years of oppression and that point in time where any woman who decided to undermine the patriarchal domination was killed on basis of being a witch.

Fast forward to story #139 where you privilege me with the option of being a Hoe.

Or a bitch.

Never allowing me to conceive that the option of learning about my own divinity even exists.

Fast forward to story #151.

You played me.

I wasn't able to live my life around you.

So you found a woman who could.

I wasn't willing to show you my weakness and become emotionally dependent on you so you found a woman who would.

And after all that I disrespected myself and came crawling back to you like you told me I should.

And you left me feeling worthless.

Story #152.

You make every single day, from the moment I wake up, an internal struggle.

Every couple of hours, in some way shape or form I compare myself to another in hope that one day I will be more aesthetically and intellectually pleasing to you.

So I wake up and I curse my body in the mirror

and I paint my face

and I burn my hair

and eat very little

so that I might be worth talking to.

This is the burden that you create for me.

It's the same burden that my foremothers have carried for centuries.

But today

Today I am blessed to be able to say ///Tlazokamati Tonanztin///

In my native tongue I am able to confess that I am the daughter of the divine

and as a reflection of her she reminds me that we are one and the ability to give life and love

are all mine.

So I could sit here and continue to prove that the oppression you have continued to create is the worst of all time.

But I wont.

Because although I will never allow you to forget that this oppression is real.

I also choose to give birth to a process where these wounds can heal.

You see even the great energies are dependent on each other.

The Existence of the sun is vital to the Existence of the mother.

And I believe

I believe if we are ever to be truly free we must first choose to liberate the humanity in one another.

So if you get anything from this long ass poem I hope you understand that the freedom of our humanity is at stake.

And although we may not always be conscious of this and seem like walking contradictions,

I LOVE YOU?

should be all that we have to say.

And until you realize this

we will both continue to live

confused

and alone

in the grey.