Making Transformative Space:

Exploring Youth Spoken Word as a Site of Critical Pedagogy

by

Jenna Kesselring

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

Approved April 2016 by the
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Kathryn Nakagawa, Co-Chair
Wendy Cheng, Co-Chair
Charles Lee

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2016

ABSTRACT

Since the early 1980s spoken word has been on the rise as a highly influential

performance art form. Concurrently, there has been an increase in literature on spoken

word, which tends to focus on the critical performative and transformative potential of

spoken word. These on-going discussions surrounding youth spoken word often fail to

take into account the dynamic, relational, and transitional nature of power that constructs

space and subjectivity in spoken word. This ethnographic study of one youth spoken

word organization – Poetic Shift – in a southwestern urban area makes a conscious

attempt to provide a nuanced, contradictory and partial analysis of space, place, and

power in relation to youth spoken word and aspires to generate an understanding of how

spaces designated for spoken word are dialectically (re)produced and maintain or subvert

dominant relations of power through a constant stream of negotiations. This study aims to

more explicitly examine the relationship between place and spoken word in effort to

understand how one's positionality impacts, and is impacted by, their involvement in

youth spoken word.

Over the course of a 6-month period participant observation was conducted at two

high school spoken word workshops and four interviews were completed with both

teaching artists and young adult spoken word poets. Using spatial and critical pedagogy

frameworks, this study found that Poetic Shift serves as a platform for youth to engage in

the performative process of narratively constructing and reconfiguring their identities.

Poetic Shift's ideological position that attributes value and validation to the voices and

lived experiences of each youth is an explicit rejection of the dominant paradigm of

knowing that relegates some voices to a culture of silence. The point at which the present

study deviated from most other literature on spoken word is where it offers a critique of Poetic Shift as a site of critical literacy and of the unreflexive rhetoric of student empowerment. The problematic presuppositions within the call for youth voice and in the linear, overly simplistic curriculum of Poetic Shift tend to reinforce the dominant relations of power.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1

Introduction

There is an emergent movement among youth and young adults in the United States built around spoken word poetry, also known as performance poetry, hip-hip poetry, or simply "spoken word." Central to spoken word is the public orality of experience, a source for illuminating our "sense of selves, the social world, and our faculty for transgression" (Kim, 2013, p. 27). Nana Twumasi (cited in Kim, 2013), a former intern of the Bay Area-based youth spoken word organization Youth Speaks, defines spoken word as follows:

> Generally, a poem that is written first for the purpose of being heard qualifies as a spoken word piece. In a larger sense, spoken word can be defined as a literary art form, a modern variation of the continuing oral tradition. In content, it may be anything, political manifestos delivered with a fiery tongue, love stories told in pleading tones, eulogies for loved ones, a comedy told in two minutes, a personal history mapped out with words that fit together in just the right way. In form, it may be anything. (p. 28)

Youth spoken word began to develop as a field during the 1990s and has since become the focus of a range of school- and community-based organizations. Due to its relative accessibility and loose guidelines for participation, youth spoken word is offered by these various organizations through an assortment of programs that include workshops, in-school or after-school programs, open mic poetry series, and poetry slam competitions (Weinstein & West, 2012).

The roots of spoken word and hip-hop

Spoken word poetry and rap, a single aspect of hip-hop culture, have an intimate connection. Spoken word is a progenitor of rap, but both are incarnations of themes, ideas and resistance that we see in the West African oral tradition, and more recently in the Black Arts era. Spoken word and rap continue to influence and motivate each other in the present day. Thus, in tracing the genealogy of spoken word it is necessary to also examine the history of hip-hop. With a few exceptions, the discussion of this genealogy in spoken word literature does not extend beyond naming the movements, such as the Black Arts Movement or Nuyorican Arts Movement, that have informed spoken word as a practice. There is one particular spoken word scholar, Shiv Raj Desai (2010), who addresses this topic at much greater length, and writes that spoken word, in addition to hip-hip culture, are variations of African oral traditions that go back centuries. These two literacies, Desai posits, have always been about reaffirming Black identity and culture; a creative self-expression performed for the purpose of communicating histories, knowledges and stories; for articulating struggles and discovering resistance.

Hip-hop is a continuation of pre-existing art forms such as blues, spoken word, and reggae, and is a "cultural re-versioning" of long African traditions (Desai, 2010). Cheryl Keyes and other scholars have compared rappers of the West to griots of West Africa, or storytellers, poets, musician, and historians who wielded "Nommo," or the power of the word. "The concept of Nommo," Desai explains, "is vital to different black cultural practices because it demonstrates how language is utilized not only for entertainment but also to discuss social issues" (p. 128). Desai contends that spoken word poetry is also a continuation of the griot oral tradition, as it carries the political voice

presented through the power of orality. Hip-hop and spoken word then represent part of Gilroy's conception of the "Black Atlantic", in that the oral traditions of the griots have been "cross-pollinated" across the Atlantic to create different styles or "cultural re-versionings" of oral expression that articulate and examine identities and histories, and organize consciousness and political agency (p. 129). Additionally, the influences of hip-hop range from work songs, spirituals, and field hollers to blues, soul and reggae, which grew out of "cross-fertilizations" by which the African diaspora "consciously reconstructs and celebrates their history, identity and resistance" (p. 130). Desai explicitly inserts spoken word into this discussion, stating that spoken word, as a socio-political movement, also directly influenced the culture of hip-hop.

As I mentioned previously, much of the spoken word literature locates the beginnings of spoken word poetry in the Black Arts Movement, the cultural wing of the Black Power movement, which has foundations built on radical ideologies that challenged dominant ideologies, promoted self-determination and decolonization (Desai, 2010). In the Black Arts Movement is where we begin to see spoken word poetry and other arts became strongly connected to large political-cultural movement. The Black Arts Movements privileged the oral over the written word, which in turn lent itself to poetry performances in public spaces. In the process of the transgressing the boundary between the poet and the audience through public performance, poetry readings served the purpose of disseminating politics, raising consciousness, encouraging activism, and spiritual development and healing. Through the Black Arts Movement poetry became personal in that it "privileged the lived-experiences and social realities of oppressed,

3

marginalized peoples" (p. 136); poetry became a space to discuss or examine race, nationality, gender, sexuality, etc.

Hip-hop is broadly rooted in African diasporic cultural traditions, but Rose (1994, cited in Baszile, 2009) locates the inception of hip-hop at a very particular time in history, a time of heightened struggle and exacerbated social alienation. Rose explains that hip-hop as an art form was born from urban post-industrialism of the mid-to-late 1970s:

> In 1970s, cities across the country were gradually losing federal funding for social services, information service corporations were beginning to replace industrial factories, and corporate developers were buying up real estate to be converted into luxury housing, leaving working-class residents with limited affordable housing, a shrinking job market, and diminishing social services. (p. 74)

In this context of widening gaps in the social safety net, growing unemployment, and urban displacement, "hip-hop emerged as a political strategy that represents, reproduces, and resists the politics of city living" (Baszile, 2009, p. 7). As a form of resistance to the loss of space and place, Black folks had to carve out their own spaces and places of home and healing.

Over the past three decades hip-hop has spread to many regions of the world, and in so doing has taken on multiple manifestations. "As the cultural influences of hip-hop's varied forms and expressions have gradually spread through global systems of diffusion, these themes can be heard in other languages around the world, expressed with a shared emphasis on spatial location and identity formation but informed by radically varied contexts and environments" (Forman, 2002, p. 3). The "highly detailed and consciously

defined spatial awareness" is a key factor that sets hip-hop apart from other formations of youth culture and subculture (p. 3). Forman (2000) names rap artists as "alternative cartographers" as they reimagine and remap space. Rap music is imbued with spatial representation; across localities there is explicit emphasis on territoriality and there are distinctions in production style and discourse/language.

To a lesser extent, spoken word poetry has also been gaining attention over the past 30 years through the creation of poetry slams. In the early 1980s, a construction worker from Chicago, Marc Smith, wanted to bring the poetry back to the people. The poetry slam was started as a gimmick; a competitive forum where poets perform their own compositions and judges selected randomly from the audience score them from 0.0-10.0. The purpose of these competitions is to amplify in public spaces the voices of those who are silenced or unheard, to incite political dialogue and showcase resistance to the status quo. June Jordan states, "Slam poetry loudly raises issues the canon does not touch: issues of race, class and sexuality" (cited in Desai, 2010, p. 155). As spoken word became increasingly more popular it became a pedagogical tool in both in-school and out-of-school contexts, and over the past ten to fifteen years it became a topic of academic study.

Contextualizing spoken word as a practice

The United States public education system is a force of knowledge (re)production that plays an extremely significant, and arguably detrimental, role in the lives of youth. White neoliberal capitalism and our culture of positivism are the primary suspects in the assault on public education. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, as neoliberalism gained traction, public education came into the grip of a new disciplinary market

5

fundamentalism, solidifying the notion that public institutions are contested spaces. The regimes of privatization, commodification, and consumerism have stripped public education of much of its possibility for critical thought, dialogue and analysis. With a central goal to bolster economic growth, neoliberalism has produced an education system that treats youth as customers and uses memorization and high-stakes testing to filter students into a culture of standardization and conformity (Giroux, 2011). In addition to instrumentalizing and privatizing public education, neoliberal influence has "undermined conditions for dissent" and "basic social solidarities," and "closed down democratic spheres" (p. 9, 133).

Community- and school-based organizations take up spaces for spoken word that are constructed by power relations that often serve the purpose of reinforcing the dominant narrative. As Lydia R. Otero (2010) vividly demonstrates in *La Calle*, "all inhabited spaces," even those said to be "empty," are rich with cultural and political meanings and are inextricably linked to identity (p. 21). Cultural hegemony, Giroux (2011) asserts, is crucial to understanding the dialectical tensions that now exist between primary spaces of socialization (e.g. schools) and wider societal interests as dictated by the ruling elites through pedagogical practices, relations and discourse. As notions of the public sphere and the public good are threatened by hegemonic neoliberalism, it is important to create spaces that confront incursions of private power by engaging in sociopolitical dialogue and promoting the sharing of lived experience through creative forms of expression (Giroux, 2004). As many scholars maintain, there are ways to create alternative individual and collective spatial realities, minor and momentary resistances that disrupt hegemonic ideologies (Vargas, 2006; Otero, 2010; Smith, 1999).

6

The present study focuses on Poetic Shift, a youth spoken word program based in a large southwestern urban area, in effort to understand the nuanced, dialectical tensions that arise in creating a space of possibility. Through practices that aim to empower youth to negotiate identity/difference, examine power, and exercise discursive agency, there is an on-going stream of processual acts of negotiation that work to maintain and subvert dominant relations of power. While there is undoubted potential for youth spoken word to function as a space of counter-narrative, for amplifying the narratives that stand in opposition to the hegemonic powers that seek to silence them, we must not fail to analyze the way these spaces are produced and reproduced.

The constant processes of interaction that shape space for spoken word are laden with underlying values and assumptions. The curriculum that guides the conditions and practices of Poetic Shift are not neutral or innocent. Rather, the curricular components of Poetic Shift, as products and productions of a socially constructed space, highlight the axiological and epistemological significance that underscores the processual acts of negotiation. The identity negotiations that occur among the participants through these performative practices is inextricably linked to power. Through a critical examination of how power circulates within and among the practices of people in a continual process of construction and transformation of selves and their worlds, it is my primary goal to underline both the transformative potential of Poetic Shift and to complicate the notion that these spaces are always democratic and transformative by analyzing the taken-for-granted assumptions on which its pedagogy is based.

I explore the following questions:

1) How do spoken word programs for adolescents and young adults create

opportunities that allow for transformative learning?

    a. What conditions and practices are important to create the space for critical and transformative change?

2) How do spoken word programs help young adults explore and learn about their own differences and identities?

3) How are dominant relations of power reproduced and challenged in these spaces?

    a. How does the social position of the teaching artist influence the ways they exercise authority?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Considering spoken word a site of pedagogical activity is not a new phenomenon and many scholars have written on the topic. The sections below will survey the existing literature on spoken word – in some cases performance art more generally – and the four primary ways of thinking about spoken word poetry as a social, cultural and political practice: spoken word as performativity; spoken word as critical literacy; and spoken word as youth development. Finally, I will turn to hip-hop studies, which highlights another theme of counterstorytelling as a form of resistance and alternative knowledge production. I situate counterstorytelling at the end of the literature review not merely as an add-on tactic of incorporation, but because it encompasses the themes of performativity and critical literacy that I discuss in the previous sections. It is important to note that these are not mutually exclusive themes. Performativity, critical literacy, youth development, and counterstorytelling can inform one another, and it will be clear as I explore these themes that there are principles of critical pedagogy that run throughout each.

Spoken word as performance/performativity

Performativity, as defined by A.M. Smith (2010), refers to "the discursive processes by which identity is constructed and refigured (p. 206). Performative art, as an "embodied epistemology," is an act of doing and knowing that magnifies microscopic or taken-for-granted experiences. Alexander et al. (2006) set three helpful guidelines for considering performance not only as a set of critical tools and paradigm of knowing, but as a "strategic illumination and intervention in human social processes" (p. 254).

9

Performance is problematic if reduced to behavior or aesthetic entertainment that exists within a vacuum. Rather, performance as pedagogical method must recognize how historical, social, and cultural structures are represented or reified in informal and formal spaces. If performance is to be a pedagogical method, it would be problematic to overlook the structures and ways in which norms and behaviors are translated through particular practices. The performance-pedagogy link should be viewed as a complex site of possibility that dually "disrupts and transforms processes of knowing" in the classroom and broader societal contexts (Alexander et al., 2006, p. 254).

In order to address racial inequality under post-9/11 forms of democracy and neoliberalism, Denzin (2010) suggests a performative auto-ethnographic approach, such as spoken word, as a "vehicle for hope." Denzin lays out four succinct points specifying how critical democratic imagination is pedagogical when enacted through performative art. The following points are common threads among the discourse on performance art as a critical pedagogy:

First, as a form of instruction, it helps persons think critically, historically, sociologically. Second, as critical pedagogy, it exposes the pedagogies of oppression that produce and reproduce oppression and injustice (see Freire, 2001, p. 54). Third, it contributes to an ethical self-consciousness that is critical and reflexive. It gives people a language and a set of pedagogical practices that turn oppression into freedom, despair into hope, hatred into love, doubt into trust. Fourth, in turn, this self-consciousness shapes a critical racial self-awareness. This awareness contributes to utopian dreams of racial equality and racial justice. (p. 67)

Some scholars argue that spoken word and/or poetry slams – spoken word's competitive counterpart – function as what Jill Dolan refers to as "utopian performatives," or minor but profoundly hopeful moments in which ideological and cultural alternatives can be envisioned. Somers-Willett argues in *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* (2009) that poetry slams are not simply spaces where one can enact artistic renderings of their identity. Through the process of performing a poem to an audience, one goes through several processes of construction, negotiation, affirmation and re-figuration. In other words, through the performative and participatory exchange of spoken word that occurs in slam contexts the poet and the audience "engage in a critical response to…culture, creating a shared value of difference and imagining social values outside of the dominant models of power, even as that imagination comes with its debates about privilege within its own counterpublic circles" (Somers-Willett, 2014, p. 11-12).

Endsley (2013) adds that spoken word performances are embodiments of Freire's concept of praxis, dialectical processes of reflection and action directed toward transformation. Spoken word performances are productions and engagements of knowledge; they are public articulations of social location and personal beliefs (Endsley, 2013). Spoken word and rap music "[foster] such agency by enabling artists to reclaim their bodies from oppressive and repressive academic praxes that downcast the role of cultural identity and construction" (Biggs-El, 2012, p. 161). Biggs-El contends specifically that spoken word and rap music celebrate cultural formations and performatives of Blackness that are not considered legitimate ways of knowing in the American education system. In this way we see spoken word functioning as a site of critical literacy, as it reveals, interrogates, and challenges "legitimated social forms of

11

teaching, learning and knowing while working toward transforming social systems to liberate the human spirit" (Alexander et al. 2006, p. 253).

The concept of performativity is significant to the current study as I examine through a poststructural lens the ways by which spoken word programs are constructed as sites of critical pedagogy and resistance. Performativity is one aspect in my analysis of spatial construction, as in social practices subjectivities are simultaneously in processes of negotiation and impacted by intersecting and shifting relations of power and privilege. Through the sharing of stories, making sense of histories, and "connecting bodies with place and experience" (Smith, 1999, p. 147) individuals expose and represent their individual and collective knowledges and rearticulate their identities. In the process of examining their own and others' experiences in relation to more dominant narratives the impacts are two-fold: learners are confronted by the limitations of their own subjectivity and they are also claiming their voice in the face of powers that attempt to silence them.

Spoken word as critical literacy

"From a pedagogical perspective, Critical Literacy is a philosophy that recognizes the connections between power, knowledge, language, and ideology, and recognizes the inequalities, and injustices surrounding us in order to move toward transformative action and social justice" (Mulcahy, cited in Desai, 2010, p. 118). To put it another way, critical literacy is "more than reading or writing words; literacy learning is tied up with identities, cultural expectations and rhetorical situations…" (Smith, 2010, p. 215). Critical literacy acknowledges that knowledge is inextricably linked to social, cultural, and historical contexts, and thus knowledge is value-laden, inconsistent, and contradictory (Desai, 2010). Jocson (2006) underlines that spoken word poetry "challenges the works of 'dead

white men' and works to set apart poetry as a critical medium toward social transformation (p. 701).

Biggs-El (2012) asserts that spoken word poetry [and rap music], as forms of performance art, are the praxis of post-modern theory which "advocates for the formation of agency, the critique of cultural codes, and the productions of new cultural ideas, images, and mythical inventions . . ." (p. 162). Spoken word encompasses "indigenous knowledge" which gives justice to "historical legacies" and truths that are reconstructed and misrepresented in formal educational institutions. In this regard, Biggs-El acknowledges that not only does critical pedagogy problematize these common discursive frames, "critical pedagogy becomes public once the acknowledgement is made that any viable pedagogy and political representation needs to address the spectrum of public spheres that exist outside institutional confines that constitute the embattled terrain of racial difference" (p. 162). Through the practice of literacy and art of expression, youth are said to bear witness to an "informative, healing, and empowering agent based on lived experiences" (p. 166).

Rising from a feminist Marxist view of culture and a post-Freirian understanding of literacy, Kim (2013) attempted to capture the essence of spoken word as a contemporary social movement by framing literacy as a social urgency to youth. Based on three years of ethnographic fieldwork within community-organized spoken word sites in the Bay Area, Kim argues, "As an urban aesthetic, activist practice, and critical form of literacy, spoken word connects young people to social movement work through radical youth development and cultural interventions to youth violence made possible by community-organized spaces" (p. v). As a political art, Kim argues, spoken word creates

13

a platform for "critical reflections of violence" and for "exploring, understanding, and working out conflict in their every day lives" (p. 190). Spoken word is "literacy of an activist form," whereby literacy is defined not merely as a competency but rather "a form of sociopolitical agency with words and other tools that can be collectively mobilized towards a more socially just and deeply democratic society" (p. 192). Literacy fosters organic intellectual formation that helps shape youth consciousness and socio-historical conditions grounded in lived experience. Safe, uncensored space for youth to examine their social structures and histories gives new meaning to "the personal is political." In this regard, spoken word is a site of radical pedagogy that "connects young people to social movement work" (p. 191).

Fisher focused her work with spoken word on participatory literacy communities in out-of-school settings (2003) and in school contexts (2005). Participatory learning communities, as they are described by Fisher, are "chosen spaces" that are intended for alternative learning; they are institutions within themselves by nature of the values, customs, and practices of creative expression that (re)produce them. In studying out-of-school settings, Fisher centered on two open mic events – in Sacramento and Oakland – to uncover how open mic events function as sites for African diaspora participatory literacy (ADPL). Fisher found that the practices of ADPL communities are contributions to the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. ADPL communities are "inextricably linked to a process of education that involves personal identity, affiliation with a local community, and an awareness of global community" (Fisher, 2003, p. 386).

As this "movement of words" continues to grow some teachers are implementing spoken word into their curriculum to "hear" their students and to cultivate relationships between students as co-teachers to ensure that they are "heard" by others. Fisher (2005) observes that spoken word fosters a 'culture of listening' and valuing the oral tradition. These writing communities then come to "[depend] on relationships between peers and adults with mutual admiration and respect that helped expose these young writers to words, styles, and trajectories they could access while building their own literate identities" (Fisher, 2005, p. 128). Regarding her work on Poetry for the People (P4P), a high school spoken word program founded by June Jordan, Jocson (2006) posits that poetry is a vehicle for exposing lived experiences and it has the potential to build upon "cultural knowledge and everyday complexities of what it means to be an urban youth of color" (p. 706).

Spoken word as youth development

The literature I have reviewed thus far on spoken word as performativity and critical literacy implies that spoken word has a positive impact on youth development, however Johnson (2014) and Alvarez & Mearns (2014) focus more explicitly on this topic. Johnson (2014) qualitatively explored the impact of incorporating spoken word poetry and hip-hop into youth development programming. Johnson found that spoken word or hip-hop has multi-faceted developmental implications for youth. Youth reportedly experienced a positive increase in the following areas: feelings of empowerment, community engagement, relationships with adults, academic and technical skills, translatable "soft" skills (i.e. independence and perseverance), and self-expression and youth voice (p. 33). Spoken word and hip-hop serve as vehicles for youth to speak

15

about their feelings and beliefs, examine their experiences, educate the public, and promote social change (Johnson, 2014).

According to Alvarez and Mearns (2014), previous research has indicated that creative writers and poets have higher rates of mental illness (including bipolar disorder and other affective illnesses) and higher incidence of suicide than the general population. Bearing this in mind, Alvarez and Mearns set out to understand the psychosocial benefits of performance poetry. They discovered that performance poetry is a therapeutic device and a meaning-making process and can alter how people think about their trauma. Through performance poetry youth can benefit by connecting with and learning from others by sharing their stories, establishing common ground and creating reciprocal relationships. Having a personal connection to the content of their poems, youth are able to reflect on their life experiences using a medium that enables cathartic release and possibly resolution.

Hip-hop and spoken word as counterstorytelling

There is no shortage of literature in hip-hop studies that suggests hip-hop "can serve as a useful tool to bring student voices into the classroom, and to inform and influence curriculum, pedagogical practices, and the construction of knowledge" (Land & Stovall, 2009, p. 1). Prior to exploring the claims that locate hip-hop as a transformative element in youth culture, I want to begin by contextualizing them in a conversation about how schooling practices have served to maintain existing power relations, reproduce the status quo, and a culture informed by white European ideology (Prier, 2013). Baszile (2009) offers a poignant explanation of the way schools use "official" curricula to reinforce and reproduce the hegemony of the dominant ideologies:

16

In the curriculum of the hero or the story of the dominant culture, identity is not

only symbolic of white, male, and middle-class subjectivities, it is also singular,

categorical, non-negotiable, and supported by an ethic of individualism and the

myth of meritocracy… As a result, identity is held hostage by the white male

psyche. And this ultimately means having to make meaning of self within the

dominant onto-epistemology, which aligns difference (i.e., reason v. emotion,

White v. Black, Male v. female) with inferiority (Ani, 1994). "To be" means to be

in line with the dominant subjectivities, which for many young people requires

that they engage in an ongoing process of self-negation. (p. 12)

Schooling spaces and practices are inherently and inescapably political as they are

grounded in a Eurocentric worldview, which perpetuates an identity-difference dialectic

that reinforces the dominance of specific subjectivities. Schooling then is an arm of white

supremacy that privileges ways of knowing associated with positive definitions of white,

male and middle class, and it is largely informed by the neoliberal capitalist agenda.

Youth bear the brunt of the burden as market forces commodify almost every

aspect of their lives including schooling. Giroux calls the commodification of youth

culture the "soft war" whereas the "hard war" takes the form of the growing youth "crime

complex" which most harshly governs poor youth and youth of color through

surveillance and control (Giroux, 2011, p. 95). Market forces disproportionately assault

impoverished young people and youth of color because systemic racism is coupled with

the ever-expanding and persistent logic of punishment, surveillance and carceral control

(Giroux, 2011; Prier, 2013). The politics of disposability, the prison industrial complex,

and racist principles have become unquestioned elements of effective authoritarian

governance, as Giroux refers to it. As poverty and incarceration rates soar, particularly

among people of color, the influence that the model of the prison has over major

institutions becomes increasingly apparent. Schools have in turn become a model of a

punishing society, a pipeline to prison for youth of color (Pulido, 2009), as they students

are now subjected to zero-tolerance policies and a growing number of resources are being

allocated for control and surveillance purposes. Giroux asserts, "…it is more necessary

than ever to register youth a central theoretical, moral and political concern" (p. 99) and

this calls for establishing environments where critical pedagogy can thrive.

Hip-hop activism, as it has been informed by histories of political and cultural

struggle, can serve as a pedagogical space of resistance, of confronting, challenging and

disrupting the discourse that have marked certain subjectivities as inferior (Prier, 2013;

Tinson & McBride, 2013). Resistance, starts with centering the voices, narratives and

everyday experiences of people of color (Prier, 2013). A curriculum of hip-hop culture,

or hip-hop pedagogy, is one way that youth can negotiate their identities, subversively

reappropriate historical discourses and dominant ideologies, and "uncover subjugated

knowledge" (Akom, 2009; Baszile, 2009). Critical Race Theory refers to this process of

counter-storytelling, which Baszile (2009) defines as

> a way to both uncover the subjugated stories of the marginalized and a strategy
>
> for analyzing the dominant stories that work to maintain racial and other forms of
>
> hegemony. In this sense, counterstorytelling as strategy rests on two important
>
> assumptions. One is the assumption that those who have been marginalized and
>
> disenfranchised have a distinct voice; that is, a different onto-epistemological
>
> perspective, a different world view from the dominant one. The second

assumption is that the subjugated stories are not only about speaking/writing

one's self into existence; it is also about identifying the cultural literacy that

maintains the dominant story and thus the invisibility of the marginalized

(Gutierrez-Jones, 2001). (p. 13)

The threads of performativity and critical literacy that were discussed previously

in relation to spoken word run throughout the concept of counterstorytelling. Pulido

(2009) conducted twenty interviews with Mexican and Puerto Rican youth in the Chicago

area to explore the relationship between hip-hop music and the challenges they face in

school: lack of resources, poor quality ELL programs, and a racialized curriculum that

renders them invisible, culturally deficient, or as criminals. Pulido found that hip-hop

cultural expression represents an oppositional discourse against social and cultural

marginalization. The youth underlined that hip-hop as a viable educational discourse that

they use to critically engage in conversations about their invisibility in curricula, ascribed

identities ("ghetto") and internalized stereotypes, reasons for disengaging in school,

exclusion/othering, and criminalization. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002)

incorporated hip-hop into a senior English poetry unit to "tap into students' lives in ways

that promoted academic literacy and critical consciousness" (p. 88). Hip-hop served as a

bridge between popular culture and more canonical literary texts, between "the streets

and the world of academics" (p. 89). By placing hip-hop at the forefront of the academic

agenda, youth were able to understand their role as writers/poets/cultural creators in their

own localities.

The present study is grounded in two theoretical frameworks: poststructural

critical pedagogy and Foucauldian spatial methodology. Using a spatial methodology to

conduct an analysis of youth spoken word poetry that is centered around spatial

production and critical pedagogical activity will help stimulate reflection on "what type

of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established and unexamined ways of thinking the

accepted practices are based, in showing that things are not as obvious as people believe"

(Jackson, 2013, p. 839). Jackson argues that Foucault's power/knowledge doublet has

been particularly fundamental in her research on educational injustices:

> A spatial reading involves disentangling the complex production of subjectivity as
>
> an effect of power/knowledge relations and practices. A power/knowledge
>
> reading of the multiple effects of social, cultural, and material practices within
>
> relations of power/knowledge illustrates how educational subjects are in a
>
> continual process of constructing and transforming their selves and their worlds
>
> through their interactions with others. (p. 839)

In studying the critical pedagogical implications of a youth spoken word poetry program

from a spatial analytics, it is most productive to adopt poststructural conceptualizations of

space, place, power and resistance along with other concepts that are often subsumed

under those, including but not limited to subjectivity, discourse, and practice. The

following paragraphs will first engage with some of the conversations in the school of

critical pedagogy, then will begin to unpack concepts that are integral to this study:

space/place and power/resistance.

Understanding critical pedagogy

In *On Critical Pedagogy* Giroux (2011) establishes a solid foundation for

conceptualizing critical pedagogy, for understanding its importance as a theoretical and

political practice and explicating its aims as they are situated in a broader social and

political context. Growing out of the works of Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire and Cornelius Castoriadis, Giroux makes a point to demonstrate that

> education is fundamental to democracy and that no democratic society can survive without a formative culture shaped by pedagogical practices capable of creating the conditions for producing citizens who are critical, self-reflective, knowledgeable and willing to make moral judgments and act in a socially responsible way. (p. 3)

Giroux rejects the mainstream assumption that critical pedagogy is a set of a priori methods and instead suggests that critical pedagogy is focused on the ways in which "knowledge, power, desire and experience are produced under specific basic conditions of learning and illuminates the role that pedagogy plays as part of a struggle over assigned meanings, modes of expression, directions of desire…" (p. 4). Giroux's guiding principal is rooted in critique, or a mode of analysis that interrogates the symbolic and institutional manifestations of domination. Juxtaposing his language of critique, Giroux presents a language of hope/possibility, which imagines how experience, knowledge and power might be mobilized to foster justice, equality and freedom.

In this same vein, Kellner and Kim (2009, p. 615) offer another useful working definition of critical pedagogy as the simultaneous facilitation of individual development that aims to "provide human agency with critical, self-directing power" and social transformation to create a more egalitarian and just society. Critical education espouses a social change agenda that extends beyond conventional formal education, which bolster hegemonic ideologies and systems of oppression. Sites for critical education and learning may take many forms from schooling to social movements (English & Mayo, 2013).

Giroux (2011) asserts that young people must be implicated in the process of creating a more equitable and democratic future. Schools must be considered sites of struggle and resistance where pedagogy can take on the task of regenerating a sense of political agency and a critical subversion of dominant knowledge production and institutional relations of power. Giroux suggests:

> Refusing to decouple politics from pedagogy means, in part, that teaching in classrooms or in any other public sphere should not simply honor the experiences students bring to such sites, including the classrooms, but should also connect their experiences to specific problems that emanate from the material contexts of their everyday life. Pedagogy…is not merely about deconstructing texts but about situating politics itself within broader set of relations…to create modes of individual and social agency that enable rather than shut down democratic values, practices, and social relations. (p. 144)

However, there are theoretical and practical "skepticisms" raised in in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* (1992) that stem from the dissonance associated with how androcentric critical pedagogy has conceptualized empowerment and freedom from oppression. While Luke and Gore (1992) acknowledge this volume as a "political move" (p. 1) to incorporate feminist voices into the discourse of critical pedagogy, they are quick to assert that they "cannot arrive at finite certainties about feminine subjectivity, identity or location" (p. 5). Espousing poststructuralist and postmodernist theoretical tenets the authors attempt to reconstruct, or re-envision, pedagogies. Specifically, the contributing authors examine how the assumed discursive meanings in critical pedagogy

correspond with the embodied relations and they openly declare as a "point of struggle" the use of "voice", "power", and "democratic freedom" in emancipatory discourses (p. 4).

There are problematic presuppositions within the empowerment rhetoric that the authors highlight throughout the text: power as property and unreflexive othering. There is undoubtedly a significant relationship between pedagogy and empowerment in that the primary task on the pedagogical agenda often involves a teacher who empowers students to develop a language of critique that enables them to become politically active, to act against their own and others' oppressions, and to critically examine the institutional discourses that shape their experiences and subjectivities. More often than not in an "empowerment" situation the teacher is assumed to be the potent and emancipated agent of change. This arrangement immediately sets up a distinction between "us" and them" whereby the focus is typically solely on "them", the Other. The danger here lies in the probability of overlooking one's (the teacher's) reflexivity (Luke & Gore, 1992).

Moreover, another thread of scrutiny has to do with the calls for student voice in liberatory education. The authors in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* tend to agree that demands for student voice are highly problematic because "calls for 'authentic student voice' contain realist and essentialist epistemological positions regarding subjectivity…" (p. 75). Additionally, Orner (1992) suggests that we must also consider the contexts in which student voices are called on. Speakings and silences occur in extremely complex environments where relations of power shift through time and space. This shifting is inevitable given the multiple subjectivities, philosophical and political positions, and embodied experiences that are present in the room (p. 81). Orner presents a very important point about student silence:

23

There are times when it is not safe for students to speak: when one student's

socially constructed body language threatens another; when the teacher is not

perceived as an ally. It is not adequate to write off student silence in these

instances as simply a case of internalized oppression. Nor can we simply label

these silences resistance or false consciousness. There may be compelling

conscious and unconscious reasons for not speaking – or for speaking, perhaps

more loudly, with silence. (p. 81)

Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy advocates an epistemology grounded in

difference. Luke (1992) acknowledges that it is "unquestionably important to give

students the analytic tools with which to understand the forces that shape their

experience, the first step of which is encouraging students to articulate their experience

and sense of self" (p. 37). Teachers must re-position themselves as learners and be

conscientious of the fluctuating power imbalances that inevitably exist in educational

settings. Emancipatory discourse must pay attention to "the politics of the local (of

struggles, identities)" as they are "tied to dedicated engagement with and teaching of the

politics of global structures and justifying narratives of oppression" (p. 49). Orner and

Ellsworth recommend similar approaches to overcoming the "repressive fiction of unity"

and dismissing the distinctive qualities of difference: take multiple perspectives that can

accept alternative viewpoints which can clarify oppression without excusing it, and

convey an understanding that one's knowledge of others and "right/truth" will always be

partial and potentially oppressive (p. 85, 115).

Space and place

The way we consider space is crucial in analyzing its production, its political elements, and its contribution to social change. According to Kohn (2003), space is often mistakenly conceptualized in a dichotomous manner. Kohn (2003, p. 15) explains the need for us to consider space as neither purely physical nor purely abstract: "We need a mediating position that acknowledges that space is a product of social practices but one that has particular properties precisely because of its embodiment in specific types of places." The political possibilities of space exist in the convergence of order and chaos, where attempts to reinforce dominance and "authorize privilege" are confronted with attempts to "appropriate or subvert" those traditions (p. 23). Space is intrinsically dynamic, as is time and discourse.

Considering how space is located between physicality and ideology, how does one analyze it? One way of answering this question is to consider the integration of spatial theory into theories of cultural practice (Frink et al, 2010). Central to this integration is the idea that social spaces are social productions shaped by cultural practices. In other words, "space [is] constructed from shared experiences within that space" (p. 69). An essential element of culture is its fluidity and equally important are the cultural agents that create (and transform) cultural practices. "Gestures, practices, and social roles become embodied as they are performed in particular spaces" (Kohn, 2003, p. 17). Certain spaces are designated for particular activities in which the range of acceptable behaviors is constrained and the "mediated meaning" of space is appropriated by the needs and goals of its participants (Frink et al, 2010; Kohn, 2003). Levinson (2002) attests to the notion of "mediated meaning" as well in his discussion of inferential

25

schemata. Levinson argues that there are allowable contributions to specific activity types and that the inferential schemata that correspond to specific activity types are "tied to the structural properties of the activity in question" (p. 197).

Schademan, Ares and González (2010) offer the concept of hybridity as a useful lens for viewing creative acts of agency for social change. Hybrid space situates lived experience as a valid source of knowledge and politicizes cultural practice by attending to contexts of power and oppression, particularly for people from non-dominant locations. The negotiation of difference (e.g., the practice of rule changing, rule breaking, and rule creation) in "contested spaces where oppositional beliefs meet, and through the 'politics of cultural production (Bhabha, 1991, p. 29), 'a space of translation: a place of hybridity' (p. 37) opens up and results in something new" (cited in Schademan et al, 2010, p. 59).

Power and resistance

A fundamental aspect to understanding how the micro-dynamics of power operate is to conceptualize power as something that is exercised rather than possessed. This non-fatalistic Foucauldian view of power as existing in action as opposed to property problematizes the empowerment rhetoric. Power is not something that can be given or shared through the process of empowerment. However, empowerment *could* include "the exercise of power in an attempt (that might not be successful) to help others exercise power" (Gore, p. 59).

It seems that the point at which poststructural pedagogy and Girouxian/Freirian pedagogy might converge is within a Girouxian theory of resistance. This theory of resistance is rooted in a conceptualization of power as dynamic, relational and transitional. Building on Giroux's model of resistance, Solorzano and Delgado-Bernal

26

(cited in Desai, 2010) capture the ever-shifting and multi-dimensional nature of resistance:

> Resistance theories are different than social and cultural reproduction theories because the concept of resistance emphasizes that individuals are not simply acted on by structures. In contrast, resistance theories demonstrate how individuals negotiate and struggle with structures and create meanings of their own from these interactions (p. 315)

This notion of resistance acknowledges that humans are active agents that work dialectally within, and against, structures of domination and oppression. Gilmore (2008) also succinctly deconstructs the binary between structure and agency, arguing that the two have a symbiotic relationship:

> Structures are both the residue of agency and animated by agential capacities, while modes in which ordinary people organize to relieve the pressures that kill them and their kin are, or become, structural – especially insofar as they draw from, or operate through, relationships that can be called structural as well (familial, religious, cultural, etc). (p. 40)

Needless to say, resistance is a topic that can be talked about at much greater length. The idea I want to underline here is that there is a sense of hope and optimism that runs through Foucault's view on power (Jackson, 2013) that aligns well with the "language of possibility" that Giroux embraces throughout his work on critical pedagogy. A transformational and transitional view of power and knowledge intentionally moves away from the notion that power is fatalistic and top-down, which minimizes any degree of agency and self-determination within the subject. In *Body Counts* Yen Le Espiritu

(2014) captures feeling of hope or resiliency: "[I]t is possible to acknowledge that subjects are constructed and that oppression is damaging, and *still* recognize the ability of 'social beings to weave alternative, and sometimes brilliantly creative, forms of coherence across the damages'" (p. 13).

As I have shown, the existing literature on spoken word and hip-hop focuses on three primary themes: performative identity, critical literacy, youth development and counterstorytelling. All of the work that has been done in these fields has been vital in my conceptualization of spoken word as a pedagogical practice. However, as Johnson (2010) states, "[T]here exists no dialogue that critically questions the way in which these highly politicized performance communities are produced and reproduced, maintained and negotiated, or empowered and subverted" (p. 13). Spaces in which spoken word poetry is taken up as a form of social and political activity often claim to be "safe," democratic, and transformative spaces. It is my primary goal in the present study to deconstruct the dichotomy of safe-unsafe through an examination of how power circulates among and within the practices of people in a continual process of construction and transformation of selves and their worlds.

Additionally, the present study is different in that it attempts to link spoken word to place. Here, place is conceptualized not solely as a geographical location (as in how spoken word is a story of the specific region), but also as positionality/social location (as in what aspects of one's identity influence their poetry and performance and why). I question the unique linkages between place and identity in the lives of the teaching artists and youth poets that effect "how they conceptualize themselves, each other, and the world" (Otero, 2010, p. 21)?

Chapter 3

Methods

The methods discussed below were employed with an understanding that the knowledge and information generated from this research is comprised of co-constructed meaning between the research participants and myself. It was my intent to have the subjectivities of participants inform the analysis and interpretation processes. Yet, I am aware that the research practices were laden with underlying assumptions, values and motivations that I carry and that the research presented here is ultimately partial and representative of my own vision. I agree with Smith (1999) when she asserts that research "is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (p. 5).

Research sites

Poetic Shift is a youth spoken word organization based in a southwestern metropolitan area, whose mission is to "empower young and emerging adults to find, develop and publicly present their voices as agents of societal change" (Poetic Shift, 2016). Poetic Shift provides youth a creative pathway for fulfilling their emotional, oral and cultural literacy education through a curriculum that merges literary arts, youth development, and social justice. With the intention of creating "safe" learning spaces for young people, Poetic Shift promotes an ethic of reciprocity and an appreciation for the lives of others. Poetic Shift is committed to making the voices of young people heard by utilizing critical, youth-centered pedagogy to create a platform by which youth can gain knowledge, practice and confidence in their written and oral language, to empower youth to "engage in a process that moves them from student to teacher" (Poetic Shift, 2016).

29

Among the many programs that make up the organization, Poetic Shift offers middle and high school residencies. Poetic Shift residency programs are comprised of creative writing and performance workshops that are facilitated by teaching artists, or "poet-mentors", in partnership with schools (and/or community centers or group homes). The curriculum is designed to "help youth bring their own personal narratives into dialogue with issues and themes discussed in their community" (Poetic Shift, 2016). More specifically, the curriculum is purposefully built into three phases; the first phase being introduction and acclimation, the second phase is exploration of self, and the third phase turns to broader social and political issues (personal communication, 10/29/15). At least in the case of the present study, the Poetic Shift program spanned six out of nine months of the school year, or October to April, and the program took place immediately after school in a classroom (typically an English classroom) on campus.

Students in each of the after-school programs were recruited through an event Poetic Shift refers to as "Rush Day." Rush Day is a school-wide assembly at each of the partner schools that serves the purpose of introducing students to the power of spoken word poetry through "showcase-style" performances that "feature talented spoken word artists from the City B Area (Poetic Shift, 2016). Following the rush assembly any and all students are provided the option to sign up for an after-school residency at their respective school. Oftentimes the student interest list starts off about thirty people deep and narrows as the program progresses throughout the school year.

The Poetic Shift residency programs at two high schools in a large southwestern urban school district will be the primary sites for the present study. City A is located to the east of the state capital City B and, with   a population of 462,376, is the second

largest city in the greater metropolitan area. In City A whites make up 75 percent of the population, Hispanic people represent approximately 28 percent, and African Americans are approximately 4 percent. People who identify as Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, or two or more races represent under 4 percent of City A's population. Thirty four percent of the City A's population has obtained an Associate's Degree or higher and the median income is $48,136 (City of City A, 2016).

The particular school district, Desert Public Schools[1], in which the present research was conducted, has a total student population of 116,554. Roughly 74 percent of students identify as white, 28 percent as Hispanic or Latinx[2], and less than 3.5 percent of African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander and people who identify as two or more races. Southwest High School, with a 2013-14 enrollment of 3,619 students, has race/ethnicity enrollment proportions reflect those of the district: 70 percent white, 21 percent Latinx or Hispanic, and less than 3 percent African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Asian/Pacific Islander. Thirty one percent of the students at Southwest High School are on the free or reduced lunch program. City High School, on the other hand, had a 2013-14 enrollment of 3,330 students, of which there was a much lower percentage of white students. Only 33 percent of students identified as white, whereas 58 percent identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 4 percent as African American, and less than 2 percent American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander. City High School is a school-wide Title I program and about 65 percent of the students are on free or reduced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

---

[1] District and school names have been changed to protect the identities of the students and to avoid any conflict of interest.
[2] Gender neutral/gender non-conforming term for Latin@

Access

For more reasons than one, a close friend of mine, Jamie[3], played an integral role

in this research. Jamie is a southwest-based spoken word teaching artist and performer

who is well established and deeply involved in spoken word and other arts communities

locally and nationally. I came to know Jamie under spontaneous and fortunate

circumstances at a poetry slam in downtown City B in February 2015, and over time

Jamie has become a major source of support for me and has been willingly instrumental

in helping me forge connections in the City B spoken word community. My introduction

to Poetic Shift occurred when I attended a fundraising event for Poetic Shift's Brave New

Voices team at a local downtown coffee shop. The Brave New Voices team was

comprised of six youth poets from the Poetic Shift program and was coached by a dear

friend of mine. Jamie offered to put me in contact with the director of Poetic Shift as well

as some of the young adult poets that had aged out of the program.

Upon having a discussion with the director of Poetic Shift about the study, I was

invited to conduct research at two separate school sites in the Desert Public School

District. Gaining access to each of the schools involved a multi-step process. First, it was

required that I obtain approval from the administrative department at the individual

school level then obtain approval at the district level. In addition to acquiring sign-off

from administration, I was required to go through a fingerprint clearance process, submit

a criminal history form and a brief description of my intent as a researcher. These steps

were all completed prior to or at the Desert Public Schools office. Entering the school

campuses posed no difficulty. I was prohibited to enter the school campuses during

---

[3] The name of each participant has been changed for the sake of anonymity.

school hours and it was only required that I sign-in at the front office as a volunteer for the after-school poetry club.

Data sources

The data were collected using three primary data-collection components: participant observation, in-depth interviews including a cognitive mapping exercise, and content analysis of student poetry. This study undertook a mixed methods approach in an effort to offer different perspectives into how space and place are inextricably linked. The participant observation component honed in on several aspects of the youth spoken word program and was the most encompassing in answering the research questions: conditions and practices that are important and necessary to create a critical and transformational space; how spoken word helps young people explore their differences and identities; and how dominant relations of power are reproduced and challenged in these spaces. Semi-structured interviews and student poetry were vital for incorporating the participants' voices into this research, for a study on spoken word would be awfully empty should it ignore the very voices that spoken word aims to celebrate. As the researcher, it was my intention to have the in-depth interviews and student poetry to dually inform the direction of the research and my interpretation of the data. The interviews and student poetry were used to supplement the participant observation and more directly focused on the relationship between place and spoken word, identity negotiation and power. In drawing attention to the numerous and varied stories and perspectives shared within these pages, I have no misguided hope that I could fully represent the experiences of the youth in Poetic Shift or even my own experience, but as Endsley (2009) so beautifully wrote, "I dare to hope that through the transgression of combining portions of all of these formats this

research will invite multiple readings, and more importantly, multiple resistances of this interpretation will be welcomed" (p. 42).

Participant observation. Creswell (1998) defines participant observation as an ethnographic research method that studies "meanings of behavior, language, and interactions of the culture-sharing group" (p. 58). In applying this method, the researcher "examines what people do (behavior), what they say (language) and what they make and use (artifacts)" (Desai, 2010, p. 199). In this case, the study focused on the varied interactions of students and the facilitators in the classroom as well as the curricular content as a form of critical pedagogy. The final product, according to Creswell, is to capture the views of the participants and of the observer, providing an overview of complexities that produce the space.

In *Catching Hell in the City of Angels* Vargas (2006) makes a meaningful distinction between participant observation and what he calls "observant participation." In his research, Vargas commits to observant participation as a moral and political position grounded in the fact that not only is neutrality impossible, objectivity works in favor of the status quo. I agree with Vargas' position and made my best efforts to engage in the research as an observant participant. However, due to time constraints and conditions in place by the Institutional Review Board in working with vulnerable subjects such as children, I was limited in the degree to which I could participate at each site. I participated to the extent that I was present and responsive in the classroom, despite that I could not extensively engage with the youth. Regardless, like Vargas, I did not "pretend to be impartial;" in fact, I acknowledge and will take account for the fact that that I do not

34

"have a detached view toward the society and the many persons and institutions" with whom I interacted in the study (p. 18).

The observational data were collected over a period of six months, from October 2015 to March 2016. Southwest High School and City High School were observed on Tuesdays and Thursdays, respectively, every week, and each workshop ran from 3pm to approximately 4:15pm. During each site visit detailed jottings were taken and later elaborated on in more extensive ethnographic field notes. All field notes were taken within twenty-four hours of each observational site visit. At the first workshop of the year the youth were made aware of my role as researcher from Arizona State University and informed that the youth spoken word organization of which they are a part was my object of study. Navigating my own transparency as a researcher had to be thoughtful, as I wanted the youth to both be aware of the purpose of my presence but not so affected by a researcher's presence that they would be reticent or self-conscious in their participation.

Interviews. Interviews were integral data source for this study. Between December 2015 and January 2016 four semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview participants included two teaching artists/poet mentors (Diego and Jamie), one former student who has aged out of the youth spoken word poetry program (Sarah), and one young adult teaching artist who was formerly a student in Poetic Shift (Juan). The interview participants were acquired through convenience sampling. That is, due to my role with Poetic Shift, I had the privilege of knowing several teaching artists and former students of the program. The shortest interview lasted approximately one hour and twenty minutes and the longest interview lasted approximately two hours. Each interview was comprised of two overlapping parts: guided conversation and a cognitive mapping

35

exercise (see next sub-section). The interviews were loosely structured around a set of

questions that aimed to uncover how one's experience in the world influenced their

involvement in youth spoken word. However, the questions had some variation

depending on whether the participant was a teaching artist or a young person who had

been involved in a youth spoken word program. Participants were free to choose the

location/environment in which the interview was conducted. Given the absolute

permission of each participant, the interviews were audio recorded for later transcription.

Although some of the participants made it known that they were willing to have their

name attached to the information I have changed all names in the interest of protecting

any personal information that may have been disclosed.

For the teaching artists interview questions revolved around their pedagogical

goals, curriculum, space making, and their authority as it is influenced by their social

location. Some of the conversation guiding questions for poet mentors included:

- What does spoken word do for you?

- Why did you choose to become a poet mentor?

- What do you feel your role is as a teaching artist?

- How does your race and gender influence how you interact with the
  student poets?

- Are there certain rules that you try to uphold to guide interaction?

- What are some of the challenges you experience in your position as a poet
  mentor with yourself and the student poets?

The former students were questioned about their motivations to write poetry,

teacher-student dynamics in the context of   the workshops, and perceived changes as

a result of their involvement with a youth spoken word program. For the former students, questions included the following:

- I want you to reflect on how you became the writer you are today. Tell me about your writing history.

- What do you feel spoken word can/does give you that other forms of expression do not?

- What did you like about the spoken word program? What did you dislike?

- Tell me about time when you felt unsafe and why you felt this way.

- Did the spoken word program change anything about you or your life? If so, what?

Cognitive mapping. As mentioned above, cognitive mapping is a qualitative exercise that was incorporated into the interview process for this study. The process of cognitive mapping, according to Gallego (2014), "[provides] the individual subject with a sense of his/her situatedness in the larger network of social relations" (p. 22). The cognitive mapping exercise in this study is an adaptation of the cognitive mapping method used by Wendy Cheng (2013) in *The Changs Next Door to the Diazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California*. In her text, Cheng generates an understanding of regional racial formation, or the "place-specific process of racial formation" (p. 10), of West San Gabriel Valley by incorporating cognitive mapping to uncover how people thought of race and place in their everyday lives. Specifically, Cheng asked participants to "draw maps of their regular pathways within the West SGV and how they imagined it cohered as a region" (p. 213), for it is the "people's daily paths, and who they encounter

on them – shaped by family histories, regional and global economics, and localized

knowledge – inform their racial and even political consciousness" (p. 3).

After providing each participant, teaching artists and young adults alike, with a

brief explanation of cognitive mapping, participants agreed to complete a cognitive map

as a part of their interview. The prompt for the cognitive map was broad and simple; each

participant was asked to draw where they come from. It was then explained that the

purpose of asking this question was to understand how the participants conceived of their

"place" in the world, and whether that meant geographical region or social location was

left up to the participant. After drawing their cognitive map, depending particularly upon

what was drawn on their map, each participant was asked some variation of the question:

"How do you carry this with you to spoken word poetry?" or "Why is this important in

your writing and teaching style?"

Student poetry. Finally, a smaller but no less important data source utilized in

this study is student poetry. A small sample of student poetry was audio recorded during

a public, on-site event at the end of fall semester 2015. At the event every student at both

sites were given the opportunity to perform a poem, through an open mic platform at City

High School and a slam competition at Southwest High School, which was intended for

students to showcase the pieces they had been working on over the course of the

semester. My aim in using these student artifacts as a data source was to center the

students' voices in a way that highlights the different subject matters that they deem

important in their lives. Or, in other words, student poetry reveals what aspects of their

identities students are exploring and the realities and meanings that are being negotiated

through this process. The glaring disadvantage of this method is the inferential analysis

on which it relies. Weinstein and West (2012) write of another limitation of these performances:

> Sometimes young poets focus on personal subject matter in their poetry not because they have decided they are ready to take on that subject matter in their personal lives but because they have observed that such moves get enthusiastic audience reactions, including better scores from slam judges and, perhaps most powerfully, accolades from peers and mentors for fulfilling the desirable expectations of having 'spoken the truth.' (p. 294)

Thus, it is important to acknowledge that poems are subject to the moment and its conditions in the same way that fluctuating identities rely on varying spatial dynamics. The student poetry presented here may only represent a minor aspect of one's identity, laying momentary claim to a specific subject matter that might take a lifetime to grapple with (Weinstein & West, 2012).

Participants

As mentioned above, Poetic Shift recruited students for the program through a rush event. During the first few weeks of the program each of the two workshops were much greater in size than the subsequent weeks. For example, at the City High School the number of students in attendance at the workshop started at about 34 and at the end of the program was down to 9 students, more or less. There were eight cisgender young women and one cisgender Latino young man. Of the eight there were five white (or passing as white) young women, one Latina young woman, one Black young woman and one young woman who appeared to be of mixed race. Aside from the aspects of their identities that

the students chose to share in their poems, the class and sexual identities of the students remained undetermined.

Similarly, Southwest High School started with about 8 students in the program and fell to about 3 consistently. Whereas there was a larger percentage of white youth in the program at City High School (62 percent white), the reverse is true of the program at Southwest High School (with 60 percent students of color). Interestingly enough, the proportion of white youth to youth of color in each program represented the opposite of the larger school percentages. The initial class of eight was made up of three Black young men, two white young men, one Black young woman, one white young woman, and one mixed race young woman. All of the students in this class were cisgender and their class and sexual identities were undetermined.

Data Analysis

In dealing with qualitative data the processes of analysis and interpretation are on-going involving continual reflection and memo writing. Analytic memo writing was used as a way to reflect on observations, themes and patterns from fieldwork. In total, 112 pages of field notes and 80 pages of interview transcription were collected. Each of the data sources were analyzed in three phases based on the research question topics: conditions and practices that are important and necessary to create a critical and transformational space; how spoken word helps young people explore their differences and identities; and how dominant relations of power are reproduced and challenged in these spaces. For each of the three phases field notes were analyzed line-by-line using a basic descriptive coding method. The patterns and themes that were gathered are detailed in the chapter four.

Chapter 4

Results

Chapter four aims to build upon, and find its place within, the on-going discussions surrounding youth spoken word and its function as a site for critical literacy, performative autoethnography, youth development, and counterstorytelling. A conscientious and intentionally nuanced analysis of space, place, and power in relation to youth spoken word seeks to generate a partial understanding of how spaces where spoken word poetry is taken up as a form of social and political activity are produced and reproduced by a constant stream of negotiations. Through an examination of how power circulates within and among the practices of people in a continual process of construction and transformation of selves and their worlds, it is my primary goal to complicate the notion that these spaces are always safe, democratic, and transformative.

Before going any further, it is necessary to unpack the concept of "transformative," as transformative learning is endemic to critical pedagogy. The *International Encyclopedia of Adult Education* defines transformative learning as "a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better validated" (Cranton, 2005, p. 630; cited in Brookfield, 2012, p. 142). For the purpose of this discussion, it must be argued that transformation is a dialectical process between the self, as a social and political construction, and hegemony, or the dominant ideologies that are systematically imposed on self. Brookfield (2012) notes that [from a critical theory standpoint] there are two interwoven strands of analysis that occur within transformative learning. The first strand of analysis is concerned with how power is exercised on a

41

micro-level through social interaction as well as on a broader level through political

systems. The second analytical component is about understanding how dominant

ideology is inscribed within us and is perpetuated through manipulative and duplicitous

processes that foster or constrain specific human action. Critical pedagogy, then,

inextricably ties learning to "[challenging] dominant ideology, [uncovering] power, and
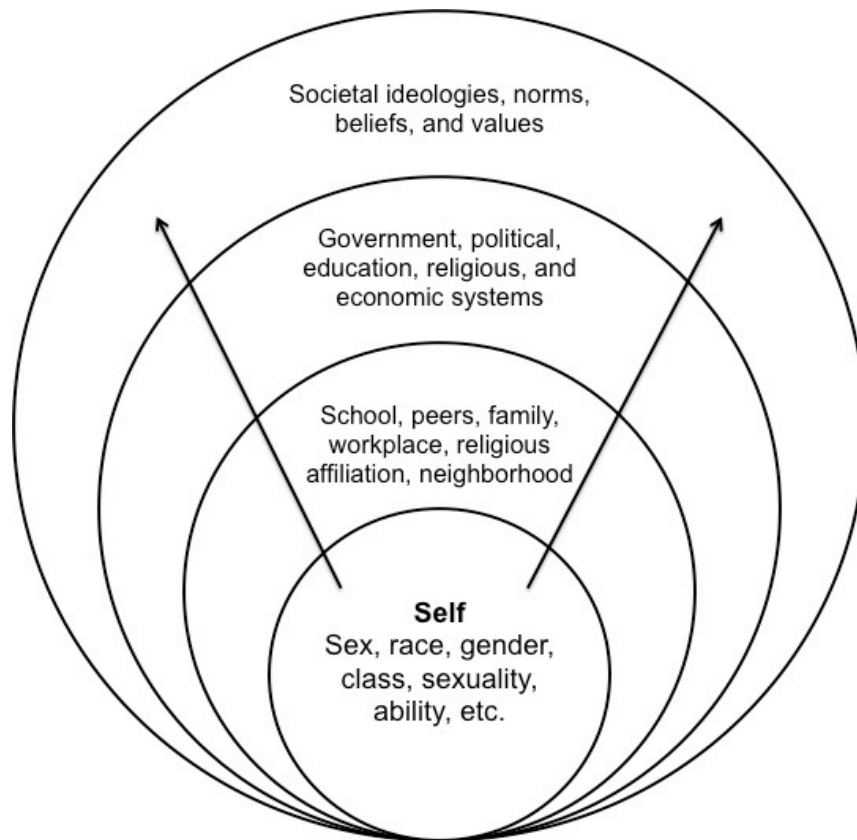
[contesting] hegemony" (p. 131).

Figure 1. *Poetic Shift curriculum model*

Poetic Shift's curriculum has been devised around the claim that through the

examination of personal experiences one can understand wider societal issues. Diego

spoke directly to this idea in several workshops:

All of our workshops are designed around this: the self radiating outward. Use

your own writing to go beyond yourself. If you want to go on and use your voice

to create social change, which is what this program is ultimately founded in, I

would challenge you to investigate broader themes of social justice by using

personal experience to tackle that. Our mission is to create these spaces for you to

find your voice and use it to be constructive, driven citizens of the world. (field

notes, 12/3/2015)

Hopefully through the following discussion it will become clear that this model is overly

simplistic and slips into an "unproblematized focus on the self" (Brookfield, 2012, p.

131). Should a distinction be made between (inter)personal transformation and structural

transformation, it is worth noting that transformation can occur on the level of self

(micro) in the absence of transformation on the macro level, but not the inverse. For in

order for systematic change to occur one must be critically aware of the dialectic between

self and structure, their implication in the maintenance of the hegemonic order.

This is not to say, however, that spoken word is devoid of all transformative

potential. Youngblood-Jackson (2013) offers a very insightful point that adequately

represents the place from which this critique is written:

A critique does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It

consists in seeing on just what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of

established and unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based, in

showing that things are not as obvious as people believe . . . (p. 839)

Spoken word programs, such as Poetic Shift, may serve as disruptions to the status quo or

sites of critique or hope. By nature of the empathic capacities and evocative tendencies of

43

expressive performance, spoken word as an art form can stir the imagination and enable us to conceive of different realities. Lawrence (2012) refers to this as an "extrarational" process of "meaning-making expressed through symbol, image, and emotional expression" (p. 472). The three parts to the discussion below are concerned with: the conditions and practices that determine how space is created for spoken word to be transformative; the way spoken word is used to negotiate identity and difference; and how power as it is exercised through the teaching artist and the spoken word curriculum sustains dominant relations of power.

Constructing space

Space always matters, and what we make of it in thought and practice determines, and is

determined by, how we mix our creativity with the external world to change it and

ourselves in the process. – Ruth Wilson Gilmore

In a discussion on subjectivity and re/production of power, as Gilmore insightfully posited, *space always matters*. The ideological positioning of Poetic Shift is one that emphasizes a space that brings underrepresented young voices from the margins to the center. Lawrence argues that to create these spaces "we first need to deconstruct our notions of how knowledge is created by valuing and introducing extrarational forms of expression into our pedagogy" (p. 482). A reconceptualization of knowledge formation implicitly requires us to interrogate the "subjective aspects of spatial thinking and practice that are related to the re/production of power" (Allen, 1999, p. 250). This section examines the "rules" (or expectations) for practice and specific curricular components of Poetic Shift, as products and productions of a socially constructed space, to interpret some of the axiological and epistemological significance that underscores the processual

44

acts of negotiation.

The entirety of Poetic Shift's programming is intentionally built upon a foundation of three "rules," which serve to function as principles to guide workshop conduct and interaction. For the first week, and several weeks thereafter, Diego dedicated the initial moments of workshop prescribing the three rules:

> After roll call Diego stepped to the white board, at the front of the classroom, announcing in a tone deeper and louder than the chatter of the youth, "We have three rules in this program." Scribbling in his half-legible handwriting across the whiteboard as the youth focus in, Diego makes a list: "First, be brave. Courage is no measure of fear; courage is looking fear in the eye and moving ahead despite the existence of that fear. If writing is scary, if speaking is scary, then you are brave to do those things. Beautiful art comes from taking risks. Second, respect each other. If you share, we will honor your voice with respect and love. Respect demands listening. This doesn't mean we can't disagree, but you have to show love to get love. The third rule is your voice *matters*. This program is about *you* and *your* stories. When you get up and speak, you're the teacher." (field notes, 10/6/2015)

The liberal multicultural call for student voice accompanied by a language of diversity has messy and conflicting implications for spatial practice and the broader program. It would not suffice to say that this approach is either good or bad, so I will attempt to sort through some of the practical spatial benefits here and, in the third section, discursive limitations.

Bravery, as the first condition for socio-spatial practice, is rooted in an acknowledgement that space is an on-going series of negotiations that can be simultaneously socially and psychologically liberating and risky. The act of performance in and of itself, regardless of the "quality" of the poem, is an instance of speaking the truth, being honest about one's subjectivity no matter how momentary or conditional it may be (Weinstein & West, 2012). The value of "speaking the truth" through spoken word poetry is akin to "ripping oneself open" in front of an audience.

> Diego showed the class a video of Matthew Cuban Hernandez performing his poem "Challenger". When the video ended, Diego states with expectation in his message, "I got tears in my eyes; I felt that through the TV. [Matthew Cuban] gets free in his own way; he rips himself open on stage. That is what I hope you all will do. I'm not saying to be just like Matthew, but when you speak, speak with passion and conviction like it's the last time you'll have to tell your story. (field notes, 1/28/2016)

The notion of brave space promotes an exchange between a willingness to share personal subject matter and a willingness to learn about others' personal stories. Spoken word differentiates itself from other forms of poetry through its use of concrete detail, and in this concrete detail there lies a heightened sense of vulnerability. Diego told the youth:

> Abstract language is subjective and relative to your experience or an individual moment. Timeless pieces come from concrete detail. If it's about suicide, show us the wounds. It is deep, absolutely, but imagine how heavy it will be when it's received. (field notes, 12/10/2015)

It is no wonder then that Weinstein and West (2012) attest that "the space of performance

creates a forum for negotiating tensions between safety and risk" (p. 289).

The second rule of socio-spatial practice – to be respectful – is meant to function as a mitigation of the risk associated with performance or dialogue in the workshops. By bolstering an environment of listening and "showing love" Diego attempts to facilitate a sense of "community" among the youth, and to encourage cooperation and empathetic relationships. Respect in the workshops often times looked like demonstrating a presence of mind and participation through active listening. In announcing the unofficial rules of slam at the end-of-semester poetry slam competition, Diego captures what it means to participate or not: "You are here as part of a community, not just part of a slam. If you don't participate you are looked at as a hater" (field note, 12/15/2015.) Diego then explained that while a poem is being performed, participation happens in the form of nonverbal communication such as finger snapping, which is a common, less disruptive method of showing appreciation for the poet and/or their words. Respect is exhibited in a verbal manner prior to and after a poet performs, and this interaction was routine whenever one of the youth shared a piece:

> Diego, standing in the middle of the floor, issues an enthusiastic call and response tactic for gauging the readiness for audience participation: "Can I get a 'Yeah yeah!'? Can I get a 'Yeah yeah yeah!'?" The youth respond accordingly to each call. Diego invites Anais to the "stage." As Anais is adjusting the microphone, Diego yells out, "Don't be nice, poet! Put the bun in the oven and turn up!" Diego's behavior causes amusement around the classroom. Diego explains, "Alright…so…I'm saying this because in our [slam] culture people will yell and cheer to urge on the poet."…When Anais stepped off the stage Diego entered

47

again and requests a round of applause from the audience. As a show of respect for the bravery or message of the poet rather than the subjective quality of the poem, Diego remarks, "Clap for the poet, not the score." (field notes, 12/10/2015)

Perhaps the most substantial principle guiding the socio-spatial practices in Poetic Shift is the third one – "your voice matters." The ideological position that claims to attribute value and validation to the voice of each youth is an explicit rejection of the hegemonic ideology that relegates some voices to a culture of silence. I agree with Jamie, who deems spoken word as a political performative: "I definitely see it as a political act to tell your story, especially when your word and your experience in the world *does* undermine a foundational reality that is a huge part of what most people believe is true." Storytelling and counter-storytelling, according to Desai (2010), are "crucial aspects of spoken word poetry" as they upend master (i.e. white, European, cisgender male) narratives by privileging voices that are absent from or misrepresented by the notion of a universal truth. Thus, in the spirit of intentionally re-centering certain narratives, Poetic Shift aims to decolonize knowledge even if they do not claim to explicitly engage in this particular project.

Artistic expressions – particularly forms that are rooted in Black culture – are considered by the dominant ideology to be devoid of creative intellectual and critical merit. For youth of color spoken word is "another way to exist and resist in the midst of cultural misrepresentations" (Endsley, 2013, p. 113) of their "coloredness." Spoken word is a way for youth of color to insist upon their humanity when capitalistic systems of white supremacy wage domesticated war against black and brown bodies and mark them for social death. For black and brown youth, spoken word has the potential to serve as a

(re)affirmation of subjugated identities, acting as moments of resistance or negotiation of their subjectivity. Although not all of the youth in Poetic Shift speak from a place of racial oppression, they may speak from other dominated subjectivities given the creative license to tell their truth. When we "honor and encourage what our students have to say and all the experiences that their thoughts have been rooted into" then we embrace their "whole being" (Reyes, 2006, p. 164).

Moreover, in the process of intending to demystify poetry as an art form and social practice, Poetic Shift reconfigures power. Arguably, there is a certain breakdown of hierarchies that occurs when the youth are shown that "anyone can be a poet." To clarify what this means, Frost (2014) offers an interesting point:

Spoken word breaks down hierarchical distinctions within the community, both on the level of the individual performance (there is often direct interaction between the audience and the performer), and on the structural level (it is very easy for an audience member to become a performer, for example). This means that the newest community members are relatively close in status to the most established community members…The other way that spoken word communities stand out is that their borders are much less controlled than the borders of other artistic communities, because spoken word aesthetics are so loosely defined in terms of style and level of refinement. (p. 14-15)

In a direct effort to show that poetry exists outside of the canon of dead white men, Poetic Shift predominantly emphasized voices of color through model poems. Model poems were distributed and read aloud toward the beginning of each workshop and were supposed to serve a dual purpose: a teaching device and writing prompt. For example, the

49

reading or viewing of the model poems was often preceded by a specific request for participation:

> Diego announced that he would be starting workshop with a video. As he searches for "Just Another Routine Check" by Dahlak Brathwaite on YouTube, Diego tells the youth: "Think about the content (the message), creativity (how the message is delivered), and the performance. Think about what you noticed, what you liked, and what you were curious about." (field notes, 2/16/2016)

The spoken word artists represented in the model poems included Willie Perdomo, Patricia Smith, Dahlak Brathwaite, Terisa Siagatonu, Myrlin Hepworth (an Arizona-based poet), and numerous poems from young spoken word artists who participated in Youth Speaks' Brave New Voices competition. Juan spoke of the way he connected to one spoken word artist in particular:

> I was kind of an urban hood kid, ya know? When I saw the performance of the guy B. Yung, who was like me – he carried himself similar to myself – he was so smart in the way he conveyed his message, the way he wrote, the way he spoke. He still had that urban demeanor, but the words and verbiage he used were at such a high level, and that inspired me to keep going to poetry club.

Seeing B. Yung perform allowed Juan to imagine different possibilities for himself and how young adults of color "like him" could be successful.

> I admired that to such an extent that it just shifted my entire mentality from the urban kid shooting to be a rapper…to now I'm like "Dang, this shit is powerful." I could actually use this voice beyond just writing music to be famous.
>
> Another of Poetic Shift's curricular components that sought to demystify [spoken

word] poetry was the emphasis placed upon the concrete over the abstract. Not only is spoken word an embodiment of one's story through their performance, its content is typically grounded in actual sensory experience. "Show don't tell" was the phrase that captured the importance of the poet's sensory experience and it authoritatively implies that the poetic can exist within the visceral. Asking the youth to recall information directly from their senses requires them to make meaning of the reality of living in their bodies.

Place and identity

Social subjects ground their actions and their identities in the spaces and places in which they work and play, inhabiting these geographies at various levels of scale and personal identity. – Murray Forman

The identities that are embodied through spoken word performance have everything to do with where one comes from. The connection between subjectivity, place and spoken word cannot be overstated. "Stories are ultimately the invention and negotiation of identities" (Baszile, 2009, p. 13). Jamie reiterates this point that identities are narratively constructed: "I don't think there is any way, if you're going to write stories or poetry or anything that captures your personal narrative, for [your identity and subjectivity] to not be present, whether or not you're conscious about it." This section hones in on the relationship between spoken word poetry and social location. In other words, I am concerned with the way youth make meaning of their identities and differences through spoken word poetry.

Let us first situate this particular discussion in a standpoint that acknowledges the inextricable and inevitable link between power relations and identity construction.

51

Baszile (2009) contends, "[I]dentity is held hostage by the white male psyche. And this ultimately means having to make meaning of self within the dominant onto-epistemology, which aligns difference…with inferiority" (p. 12). Official (or hidden) school curricula are such that they serve the interests of the hegemonic ideologies while reinforcing the inferiority of Othered subjectivities. Poetic Shift exists in part as an ephemeral disruption to this order by providing youth a platform to negotiate their differences and identities through performance. Spoken word then becomes a discursive act of unbinding the ties that symbolically force their bodies into binaries of colonization (Diversi & Moreira, 2010). Jamie elaborated specifically on how they[4] use spoken word to expose a different lived reality as a genderqueer person who lives between the socially-constructed binary:

> Our world is saturated with heteronormative narrative; we are not hearing diverse voices…So breaking that and saying that what the world tells you you need to be is not necessarily true, that it is one reality you can subscribe to but not the only reality (and definitely not a more true reality), is really important.

The remaining paragraphs of this section aim to draw attention to the ways in which two young adults in particular use spoken word to inhabit a space of in-betweenness and to write themselves into existence as a form of resistance. Utilizing the cognitive maps to draw "where they come from" these young adults, Sara and Juan, reflect on the impact of spoken word on their lives and understanding of their lived realities.

---

[4] They/their are the preferred pronouns for Jamie as they identify as a non-binary genderqueer individual

BAD BAD TREATMENT
self care nonexistent / unsaving bad things.

Spinning (non-conformity) (social)

BDD

survival -anxiety - depression
-out of body - trauma/family/sexual
-too much = schizophrenia.

bunch of things I am made of?

HOME

xicenx/latinx

P.O.C / W.O.C — "Activist?" (too grand of title.)

poet/writer lack of time. obligation

me

BDD
Queer — femme identity
not queer enough
relationships — politics erasure
— gender dysphoria
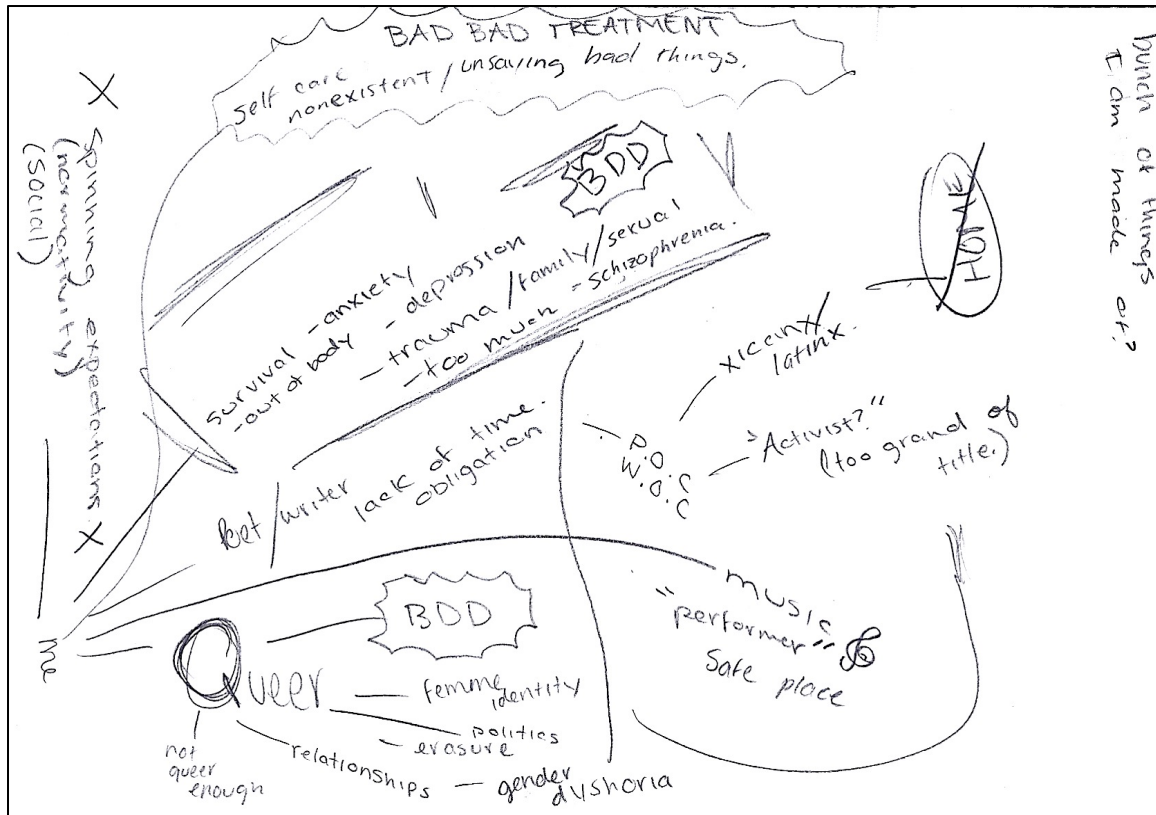
music
"performer" safe place

Figure 2. Cognitive map by Sarah

"I just basically put everything that influences my writing and everything that I, myself, think of when I start writing," Sarah told me of their[5] cognitive map as we sat across from each other outside a busy coffee shop on a chilly afternoon. Sarah is 19 year-old young woman who identifies as a queer person of color. Often times Sarah does not mention their age, however, because they feel like people generally are very dismissive of youth subjectivity:

I have been in a situation where if I don't mention my age, my opinion is more noticed or more validated. If I mention my age people are just like "You're still a kid." And that's not how it works.

---

[5] They/their are the preferred pronouns for Sarah as they identify as a non-binary queer individual

Sarah identifies as Xicanx or Latinx[6], as they are from a self-described "white-washed" Mexican American family, and are often assumed to be a feminist. Sarah begrudgingly identifies as a feminist for pragmatic reasons, but does not agree with the discursive exclusion of trans* folks from dominant (white) feminisms. As a result of opening up about their queer identity in high school, Sarah expresses feeling less alienated and unwanted or more capable of dealing with that feeling:

> When I started being more open about my queerness, I became more able to function in a world where I can do things and not be panicking or freaking out 24/7…When it's been years of constantly trying to figure out how to move in a space where you feel not wanted 100 percent of the time to now feeling like I can move in a space even if I'm not wanted 98 percent of the time, the 2 percent is a big difference.

Sarah reflects on their experience beginning the youth spoken word poetry program at their high school in southwestern urban area. It was a "joke" at first between them and their partner that eventually led to Sarah competing twice in Brave New Voices national poetry slam competition. Spoken word helps Sarah cope with their struggle with disembodiment:

> Usually anything that is public viewing of myself just one-on-one or any crowd was completely traumatizing. I didn't want to [compete in the slam], but somehow knowing that I had something memorized and competing with that kept me focused to not disembody completely or freak out.

---

[6] Gender neutral/gender non-conforming terms for Chican@ and Latin@

Although spoken word poetry is not Sarah's go-to form of artistic expression –

music takes that place – it still serves a significant purpose in their life.

> *Jenna*: How does your identity as a poet/writer relate to your other identities and
>
> lived experiences (i.e. Latinx, queer, "activist," struggle with depression)? What
>
> does spoken word do for you?
>
> *Sarah*: A lot of it comes down to obligation. I wrote it down there somewhere [on
>
> the cognitive map] - a lack of time and obligation. I was always taught, like even
>
> in classes it's the most basic lesson we're taught, that history repeats itself. What
>
> always bothered me was that people who wrote the history books were primarily
>
> white. A lot of contributions from people of color end up in the hands of white
>
> people.

History is "mostly about power." History tells the story of people who are regarded as

"fully human" (Smith, 1999, p. 33). Spoken word poetry for Sarah, then, means

writing/speaking their story into existence, as a representation of their humanity. Sarah

reflects on what it means to navigate the world in a brown body, to never feel safe, of

"not having the privilege to think I'm going to live to the next day:"

> It's the idea that we (people of color) never really know our amount of time here.
>
> Some people are guaranteed safety. I mean you're not always 100 percent safe,
>
> but some people have the privilege of safety, when people of color don't have that
>
> privilege. And so, the obligation of writing is like me writing my own story before
>
> someone else writes it for me.

Sarah added that they do not have a single poem that is not somehow rooted in their own

self-hatred. Writing poetry, for Sarah, is a reconciliation of this learned self-hatred

through an act of self-care. We cannot forget what Audre Lorde (1984) made brilliantly

clear:

> …Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the
>
> quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward
>
> survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more
>
> tangible action. (p. 37)

As a queer person of color, Sarah belongs to a group that is marked by a death sentence,

as Sara Ahmed (2014) refers to it. Spoken word is Sarah's measure toward self-

preservation, an act of "political warfare" in and of itself (Lorde, 1984). This on-going

negotiation of difference and identity is "a refusal not to exist until [they] do not exist"
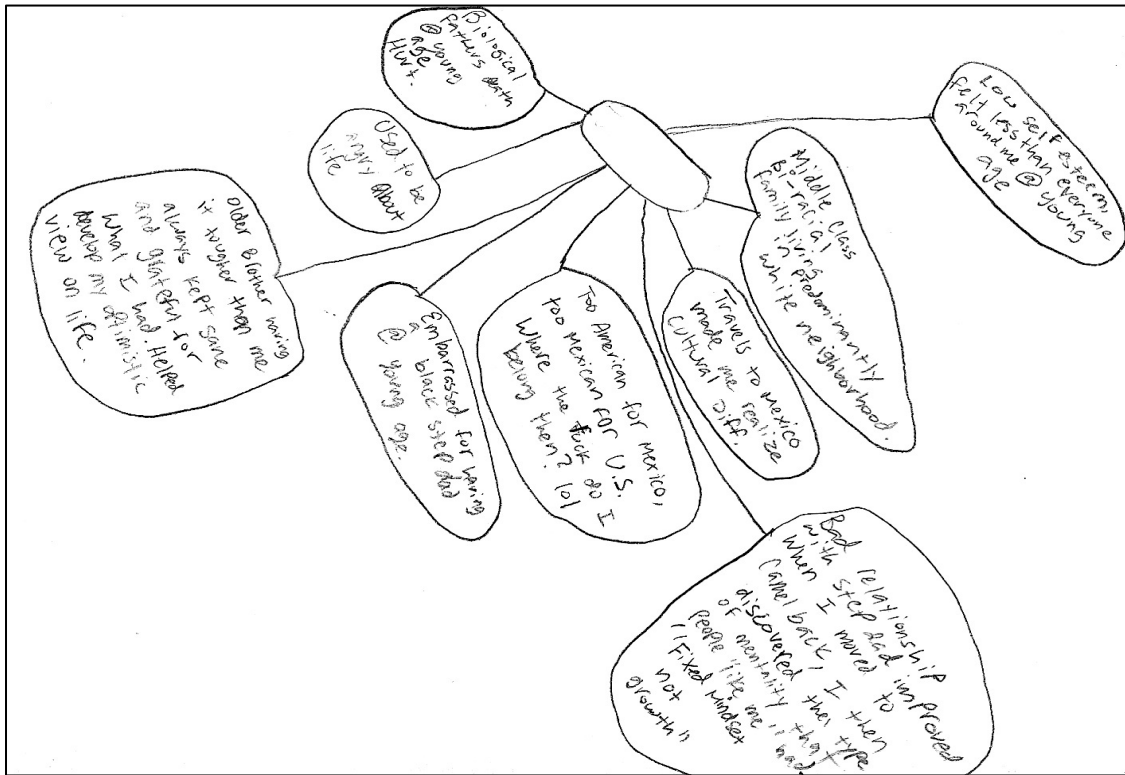
(Ahmed, 2014).

Figure 3. Cognitive map by Juan

Long before Juan begins to describe his cognitive map, he offered these words to me in astonishment:

> Once [I started writing poetry at the poetry club] things just started falling into place for me in regards to what I just…my mind just expanded in so many ways. It made me a much more creative person and gave me a greater appreciation for what's around me…I saw the world from a different lens.

For Juan spoken word poetry was a way of exploring and understanding his 'betweener' identity. The term betweenness comes from nepantla, a Nahuatl word that indicates a state of in-betweenness (Diversi & Moreira, 2010). Diversi and Moreira explain, "Nepantla is a *place* where the fixed binary thinking and taken-for-granted hegemonic ways of knowing and producing knowledge are challenged, and where resistance and transformative change can be organized and taken into action" (p. 25).

Juan is a member of a biracial family. Among his half-African American, half-Mexican stepsiblings Juan is the only child who identifies fully as Mexican American; his mother is from Sina Loa and his late father was from Nayarit, Mexico. As a child Juan spent time traveling between Arizona and Mexico to visit his maternal and paternal families. Even as a young person, Juan took notice of the difference in living standards between Arizona and his parents' places of origin. Juan and his immediate family lived in a middle class white neighborhood in north City B. Between his family and his peers at school, Juan struggled to fit in:

> In this white school up north I felt less than everybody, mainly because everybody hung out with people that were like them. In other words, people who acted like

them, sounded like them, resonated to their characters, had shared experiences and could relate to them. I couldn't relate with nobody.

Juan battled with low self-esteem and anger issues, and he felt embarrassed about having to explain why he had a Black stepfather. Juan also felt "too American for Mexico and too Mexican for the United States." He grappled with his identity growing up and struggled to find a place of belonging.

I guess I have always felt alone because of my own identity in its entirety. It's very complex. I can relate to a lot of people, but not that many people could relate entirely to me. It's very challenging to live like that.

The trajectory of Juan's life changed when he transferred to a school in a much poorer neighborhood in west City B, comprised predominantly of African American and Latinx students. Not only was this the time that Juan began attending the spoken word poetry club due to the pressures of the club president who had heard Juan freestyling at lunch one day, this was when Juan started seeing his betweenness in a different light.

When I moved to the [new high school] I saw that the majority of everybody around me looked like me and was acting like me. I just came from the whitest side of Arizona…I was like 'I did this because I wanted a sense of belonging. I am dressing this way because I wanted to belong up north. I wanted to portray a certain image.' When I moved to the new high school I was like 'Why am I wearing this? Why am I acting this way?'…I felt guilty for acting like I didn't have the privilege I had.

Spoken word was an outlet for Juan to situate himself in the socially constructed space and flesh out his experiences of living between two cultures. Spoken word was the only

58

place where Juan could bring all of his identities and feel a whole, cohesive belonging.

> Poetry really helped me sort it all out, filter out what I am not and help me
>
> identify who I am, who I want to be, whom I admire, and why I admire them.
>
> Poetry is definitely one of the only remedies for me. It's like a friend of mine I
>
> could write anything to and that is why it played such an integral role in staying
>
> sane.

Relations of power

[Youth spoken word's] successes have also bred challenges, and critical reflection is

needed if the field is to respond to these challenges while maintaining its core values and

objectives. – Susan Weinstein and Anna West

The critical perspective that is taken up to address rhetorical and relational

limitations and assumptions in this section has been informed by Dhamoon's (2009)

critique of liberal multiculturalism and Luke and Gore's (1992) poststructural

"skepticisms" of critical pedagogy. Let us first recall the curricular model of Poetic Shift

(Figure 1) to contextualize some of the problematic assumptions that I seek to parse

through below. Poetic Shift's curriculum is grounded in an examination of self through

spoken word poetry for the purpose of using one's voice to analyze systemic injustice and

to become an agent of social change. The various rules and curricular components that

were discussed above emphasize notions of diversity, inclusion, and "respect for

difference," which, as Robin Kelley (2016) posits, certainly "comes at a cost." This

normative liberal multicultural approach tends to mask issues of power and domination

(Dhamoon, 2009). Plus, the call for youth voice that is inherent in the pedagogy of Poetic

Shift makes significant presuppositions about the subject positions of both teaching

artists and youth poets. It is argued herein that the transformative, critical pedagogical potential of Poetic Shift is hindered by the rhetoric of empowerment and diversity.

As it exists within a society that is built upon a competitive, individualist ethic, Poetic Shift's central focus on the self is limiting and problematic without critical dialogue that discursively and dialectically locates the self within this ethic. The meritocratic ethos is a dominant spirit grounded in the belief that prosperity and success are achieved through hard work regardless of social circumstances. Such a collective thought is the sum of knowledge and beliefs of those who are governed, Besley (2009) asserts, but this mentality is not "examined by those who inhabit it" (p. 41). Especially with the rise of neoliberalism, hegemony has an increasingly complex and symbiotic relationship with the culturally and historically constructed self. The "roll back" of state welfare has had important implications for the individual, as the individual has become responsibilized to their own welfare, success, and security. The dominant neoliberal discourse, a manifestation of governmentality, is bolstered by structural and systemic discrimination embodied in "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal" (hooks, cited in Vargas, 2006, p.107) public policies. Centering the self exclusively, at the expense of examining power and contesting dominant ideologies, will likely lead to a disregard for the ways the self is implicated in dehumanizing, colonizing and marginalizing certain bodies, thus perpetuating dominant relations of power.

Dhamoon (2009) argues that "[liberal multiculturalism] does not and cannot provide a robust analytic framework for addressing issues of power that are central to the study of identity/difference or to the lived experiences of this politics" (p. 6). The transformative power in youth voice and examination of lived experiences through

60

spoken word is severely stunted if youth cannot first and foremost understand and articulate the ways in which dominant relations of power determine the actual lived experiences under investigation. Jamie emphasizes, "If we are going to 'change the world,' first we have to be able to articulate what's wrong with it." A call for youth voice, in the absence of an analysis of power, at best is limited in its ability to create substantive change in and of itself, and at worst reinforces the dominant ideology in harmful ways. Take, for example, the poem performed by Adrienne, a white young woman from City High School, in which she promotes the colorblind individualist ethic whilst simultaneously denying her own white privilege:

> I was labeled as privileged
>
> the girl who grew up scared of her own streets was labeled as rich
>
> now I get good grades,
>
> but my peers who lack effort blame my success on my race
>
> I know that trials and tribulations are free
>
> they have no color
>
> but they insist that a trait I cannot control makes me different than them
>
> everyone has a chance, not just Caucasians
>
> poverty occurs everywhere
>
> I have suffered it, you probably have
>
> we are all humans, there is not a difference in our chances
>
> (field note, 2/18/2016)

Yet another example lies in a poem told by Rodney, one of the Black young men from Southwest High School. Through the process of talking about his personal experiences

with racism, Rodney attributes horribly violent stereotypes to certain Black men who he calls "real n****s."

> You a real n****, huh? That's sad.
>
> A real n**** is an irresponsible scum of the earth.
>
> A real n**** is a dark-skinned, idiotic dumbass.
>
> (field note, 2/16/2016)

In attempt to performatively construct his identity with a certain meaning of Blackness, Rodney endorsed problematic meanings of Othered Blackness that align with the dominant ideology. Vargas (2006) writes, "The different forms of blackness…cannot be understood outside of the structural conditions from which they emerge" (p. 35). Due to the absence of an understanding of larger structural conditions, Rodney issues a symbolic assault against Black bodies in such a way that perpetuates a stereotype of Blackness as deficient, lazy, and criminal. Thus, in the process of writing themselves into the world, both Rodney and Adrienne overlook the larger implications of their words. In the words of Tisdell (1998), Rodney and Adrienne fail "to recognize that the self (or the author) constructs knowledge in relation to others, and both the self and others are situated and positioned within social structures where they are multiply and simultaneously privileged and oppressed (The Construction of Knowledge section, para. 1).

Dhamoon (2009) points out that an overly simplistic analytic focus on identity/difference rather than a critical examination of the production, organization, and regulation of difference "obscures issues of power" in a number of ways (p. 7). First, it uses a language of diversity to evade analyses of white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism. Secondly, the liberal multicultural discourse may "expand the bound of

tolerance" but still conforms to superior liberal values (p. 7). In fact, Kelley (2016) writes that "…contemporary calls for cultural competence and tolerance reflect neoliberal logic by emphasizing individual responsibility and suffering, shifting race from the public sphere to the psyche." Luke (1992) asserts that liberatory discourses tend to idealize experience as the window to "real" knowledge despite the cultural meanings (e.g. racism, sexism, classism) that structure those experiences.

Moreover, the rhetoric of student empowerment in critical pedagogy must be brought under scrutiny. The common themes of critical pedagogy – critical selfhood, critical agency and personal voice – are often underscored by unexamined power dynamics that "legitimate and perpetuate unjust relations" (Orner, 1992, p. 77). Within Poetic Shift the primary task on the pedagogical agenda involves a teaching artist who "empowers" youth to develop a voice of critique through spoken word poetry that enables them to become politically active, to act against their own and others' oppressions, and to critically examine the institutional discourses that shape their experiences and subjectivities. There are problematic presuppositions within the empowerment rhetoric – power as property and unreflexive othering – which tend to ignore assumptions that situate the teaching artist as the potent and emancipated agent of change (Gore, 1992). The notion of empowerment supposes that power is a possession that can be transferred from one person to another. Conceiving of power as property rather than practice also disregards context, or the on-going series of interactions and negotiations that produce a space. The danger in "emancipatory authority" lies in the likelihood that the teaching artist will not adequately recognize their own "shifting identities, unconscious processes, pleasures and desires" as well as those of the youth

63

(Orner, 1992, p. 79). Ellsworth (1992) contends that assumed emancipatory authority is "essentially paternalistic" and problematically unreflexive. Is the teaching artist politically or ethically justified in assuming positions of authority whereby they assume the power to empower students to name their identity and location and "claim to know what the politically correct end points for liberation are for others" (Luke, 1992, p. 48)?

Teaching artists must acknowledge how their positionality affects their teaching, their authority, classroom dynamics, and the knowledge they produce. Transformative learning spaces, such as Poetic Shift, are extremely complex environments where relations of power shift through time and space. This shifting is inevitable given the multiple subjectivities, philosophical and political positions, and embodied experiences that are present in the room (Tisdell, 1998). Even in spaces of possibility, whiteness (as well as other privileged positionalities) has ways of imposing itself and influencing the interactions within space that often go unnoticed or unacknowledged. Whiteness not only provides a context for meaning making, it determines which bodies feel most at ease taking up space. Diego and Jamie offer significant insight into the relationship between positionality and facilitation and authority in youth spoken word workshops. By reflecting on where they come from and how they came to be teaching artists, they demonstrate how one's experiential knowledge, background, and identities heavily influence how they exercise power in workshops.
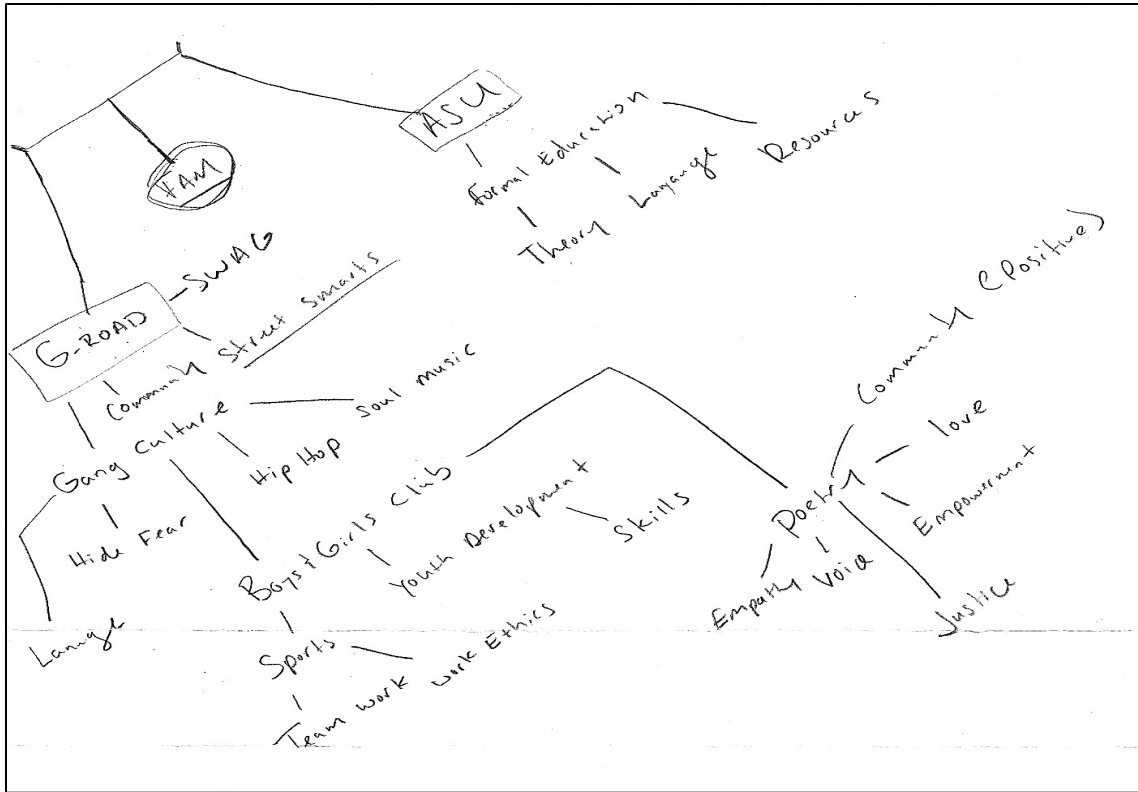
Figure 4. Cognitive map by Diego

As he often does when asked about his ethnic background, Diego deeply

pondered how to draw a map of his response to the question "where do you come from?".

Diego expressed having difficulty answering this question because it will never be a one-

word answer, as he sees himself inhabiting an intersection between conflicting biological,

cultural and political identities.

> Biologically I am European blood. Part of that is of Spanish descent, part of it is
>
> Puerto Rican – my grandmother's mother is Afro Caribbean…I identify as white,
>
> but culturally I was born and raised in an African American community…I know
>
> that the minute I open my mouth, if you were to close your eyes or hear me on the

phone, you would probably identify me with some type of African American urban ethnic background.

Diego feels as though he perceives himself differently than society perceives him. Yet, he acknowledges that as a person who presents as white he has the privilege of navigating through the world in a more secure way.

Those that know my story that come from Latino backgrounds are like 'No, you're Latino. Don't not be proud of your heritage.' And I'm like, 'Yeah, but when I'm driving home at night the police don't see a half-Puerto Rican guy…Because of the social structures and privilege that comes with being white I have to responsibly say that I am white because that's what the majority of people are going to see me as.

Diego grew up in a low income, predominantly African American neighborhood in City B, Arizona. Diego believes that much of who he is today, his subjectivity and positionality, was shaped by the place he was raised. Gesturing toward the side of the map that represents his neighborhood ("G-Road"), Diego stated:

What it really boils down to, for me, is so much of who I am is here, my community. It's community, street smarts, gang culture, how I hide fear, language, hip-hop…'Cause I was raised (and I hate saying this because people are like 'Yeah right.') in the streets. I really was. The formative years, my adolescence came from the neighborhood I grew up in, which has really shaped my lens on life, my passion. It shaped the essence of who I am.

66

Diego arrived at spoken word through his involvement with youth development

programs, such as Youth Community Club[7] (YCC). In a serendipitous way, YCC was

seminal to Diego's transformation, educational achievement, and career success with

Poetic Shift. Diego reflects positively on his experience in youth development and

imagines how his life might look different if he had been "empowered" at a much

younger age.

> I started working at YCC when I was 25, so between 25 and 29 I developed a
>
> ridiculous passion for working with kids, particularly with the kids in my
>
> community…In hindsight I appreciate everything I went through as an adolescent,
>
> even though it was really rough – there was gang culture, I dropped out of high
>
> school, there was a lot of fear, a lot of identity issues, a lot of what makes me who
>
> I am today especially as a poet, a lot negativity. I just felt like, how much
>
> different would my life be if I grew up in this environment and was empowering
>
> me with these tools that I finally found at the age of 29?

Diego makes an interesting distinction between formal education (state university) and

informal education ("street smarts"). Diego describes his "code switching" abilities that

he has acquired by nature of having the privilege to fluidly occupy both spaces.

> What's really interesting is I can enter both of these spaces and move very fluidly.
>
> I can go into this culture in most cases, whether with youth or a poetry event or
>
> national level with intellectual people of color who come from these spaces. I can
>
> enter [informal] space and be deemed authentic because I really raised there, but I
>
> can move in the formal environment easier than a person of color.

---

[7] Name of club changed for anonymity purposes.

Diego concludes that his "code switching" ability plays an integral role in his facilitation with Poetic Shift. He claims that his facilitation is the "perfect blend" of his experience in the formal and the informal. He says, "[The informal] gave me the voice to be able to articulate [the formal] in a different way." Diego feels that he can be successful in a room full of white youth or a room full of youth of color because he can authentically represent both cultures. Although Diego does grapple with his positionality as a white heterosexual male who cannot adequately represent "different lenses…no matter how much information [he] has," as a teaching artist he still operates within a framework that often fails to interrogate the empowerment rhetoric of the emancipatory educational tradition.
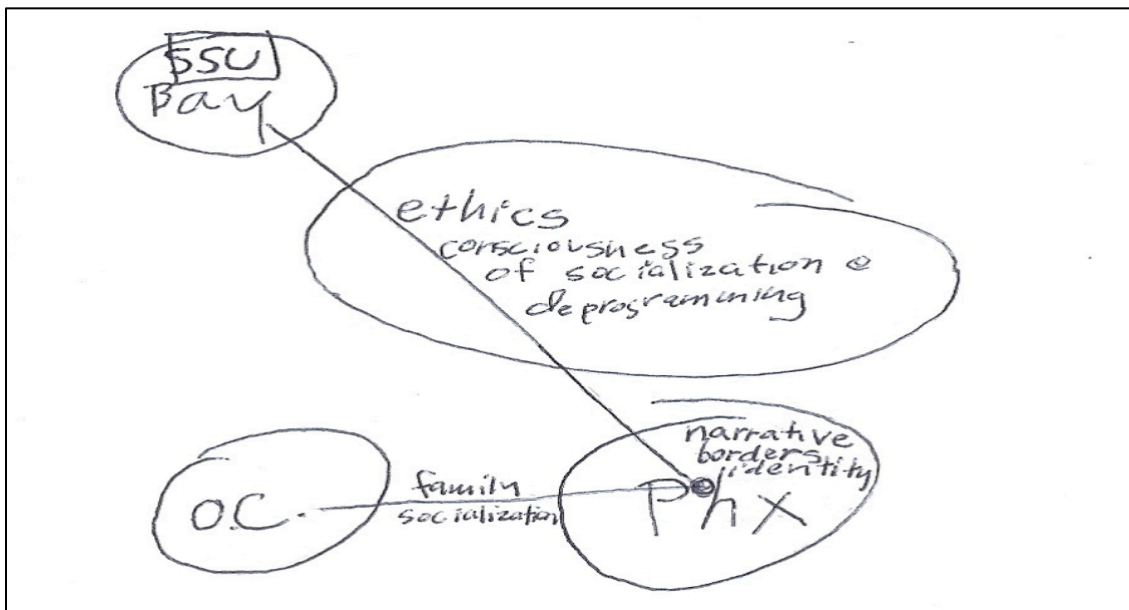

Figure 5. Cognitive map by Jamie

Jamie brings to youth spoken word programs a more radical and critical queer perspective. As a self-identified white, queer, non-binary, able-bodied person, Jamie specifically aims to create work that "shifts people's consciousness around specific social justice issues – often around queerness in particular." Jamie's work with youth spoken

word has been informed by their experiences growing up in a conservative family and the radical values that they adopted in a Bay Area college.

> I grew up in Orange County, which was really conservative. To think of my family and me having to go through that experience of doing all that emotional labor in order to shift their consciousness makes me understand very importantly slam as a site of resistance, of shift social consciousness…A lot of my radical ideology comes out of the Bay Area, because I studied women and gender studies and I studied liberal arts.

Soon after their spontaneous introduction to spoken word poetry in the City B area, they found a way to use spoken word as a vehicle to reconcile their passion for theory with their concern about the inaccessibility of academia.

> I kind of wanted to be a theorist more than anything else. I wanted to study poststructural analysis of spaces and the intersections of epistemology and method in qualitative sociological research. I kept thinking after seeing [slam for the first time] that if I could write as a theorist in the realm of the poetic that I could be accessible in a different way than if I didn't have this skill.

Jamie describes their place in the spoken word community as one that "centers on transgressing borders and entering social justice topics through personal narratives." With unwavering certainty Jamie acknowledges the immense impact that their queer identity and feminist praxis have on their approach to transformative teaching in youth spoken word programs.

> A lot of my feminist praxis in doing research has kind of come with me into even how I approach doing poetry…What I hope, and what a lot of my experience has

69

been, is the kinds of poems I do, especially around identity and queerness, is I'm

hoping that I'm producing a language and a framework for other people to latch

onto…

Through their feminist ethics Jamie brings a critical reflexivity to both their own poetry

and how they teach poetic narrative.

So if you're doing stories about other people's experiences and you're not having

those experiences, you are basically colonizing that community in a way by

taking their stories and using them for personal gain. [You are] taking that story

and not letting it be told by the voices that have the most to gain, or the most to

lose, from that story being told…I think that is definitely the way of approaching

it, being conscious of your privilege when you do those stories that maybe aren't

yours.

Jamie does not endorse an empowerment discourse in speaking about their

teaching role in youth spoken word programs. On the contrary, Jamie derives great

enjoyment from working with youth in large part because they "are imagining different

realities for themselves." Jamie facilitates an array of workshops that center on identity

and stories, but intentionally aims to destabilize the notion that identities are fixed and to

uncover the limitations of one's subjectivity.

Maybe sometimes we'll map who we are and we'll talk about the differences

between what you perceive versus how other people might see you. Sometimes

we'll talk about things that might be invisible on your graph. For example, white

people almost never write that they are white, men almost never write that they

are men, but women write that they are women and people of color will often put

70

their specific identification as an element of who they are and who they think

people see them as. Sometimes, for example, we'll talk about how the meaning of

Blackness shifts. This is a conversation I have had on more than one occasion

with Black students, especially young people who are dealing with the Black

Lives Matter movement.

In the process of creating this space, not only does Jamie call into question the ways those identities are constructed in relation to others; they bring their own subjectivity to bear in so doing.

I think my identity and the ways in which it has made me aware of my invisible

identities influences things and the workshops I produce. A lot of workshops I

produce are made to highlight those identities and root them in experience…So I

think my identity of a queer person also informs my idea of how to practice

allyship in those spaces of teaching…I still have to be careful because I don't

want to project my experience onto the person, which is really easy to do, to make

those assumptions.

To encourage and support youth in writing their story in the form of spoken word poetry, Jamie makes an effort to de-stigmatize poetry and "mess" with what youth believe poetry to be. Jamie seeks to create a safer space in which youth feel free to do what is productive on an individual basis, "even if it does not follow the workshop exactly."

Authority. As Diego and Jamie demonstrate in their discussions of their cognitive maps, the place from which a teaching artist comes – their identities, subjectivities, and backgrounds – cannot be separated from the ways they choose to facilitate and negotiate relations of power in workshops. Perhaps, the most significant oversight on Diego's part

71

was his failure to relinquish and actively challenge the assumption of his own expertise on a practical level. Youth became the "subjects in the 'center' of knowledge production while being kept at the peripheries of sociological meaning-making…" (Diversi & Moreira, 2010, p. 21). Outside of providing a platform for youth to write and speak their stories through a performative process, Poetic Shift's practically and theoretically linear curriculum not only assumes the self as a fixed and unified existence, but also fails to recognize the shifting co-constructedness of knowledge and power. Diego actually repeatedly justified the linearity of the curriculum to the youth:

> The first semester is about creative exploration through learning, writing workshops and generating ideas and content. The next four weeks will be focused on memorization and performance (how you say what you have to say). The remainder will focus specifically on revision and molding ideas and poems into final products for the Slam. (field notes, 1/19/2016)

> Lessons are structured in such a way that each week they become deeper and turn more inward; they start out broad and become more subjective. (field notes, 11/17/2016)

> The curriculum was designed similar to how high school teachers design one, with an end goal to publicly present work. (field notes, 2/2/2016)

While Diego surely has some "rhyme to his reason" as he puts it, this structure risks falling into a "banking method of education," which Freire argued maintains and reproduces the social order -- students become passive receptacles into which knowledge is deposited and the mono-directional format does not warrant substantial dialogue between and among students and teachers (Akom, 2009).

Please don't take this the wrong way, but this part of the semester is contingent on

you treating this like a real class/homework assignment. If you don't do it it's

cool, I'm not going to school you. I'm only here once per week and each week we

get closer to the performance. If you don't do what you are supposed to do to

prepare for it…(change of subject). (field notes, 1/28/2016)

There was little to no room created for youth guided exploration and workshopping.

More often than not, what did not pertain to the workshop curriculum was treated as an

interruption and essentially ignored and redirected back to the curriculum.

Andrew and D'Andre are working on a group poem together. As Diego was

leading the workshop D'Andre was copying a poem from Andrew's cell phone

into a notebook. After Diego finished addressing the class, having noticed that

D'Andre had been scrawling a poem, Diego asked D'Andre if he was working on

a group poem with Andrew. D'Andre indicated that he was. Diego did not exhibit

further interest. (field notes, 12/1/2015)

For the second consecutive week Jae announces to her peers and Diego that she is

proud of the poem she has been working on. "Oh yeah? Nice!" is all the attention

that Diego showed toward Jae's excitement. He did not ask her to share it. (field

notes, 1/26/2016)

Jae excitedly tells Diego that she and Samantha wrote a group poem together.

Samantha pulls up the poem on her phone then she and Jae draw a diagram on the

board (world hate = sexism + class systems + other "isms") to demonstrate how

they conceived of their poem. Rodney joins in on the dialogue, giving ideas for

the group poem as Diego is still trying to speak to the youth about their lack of participation. Diego cuts off the dialogue, "This is good energy, but we need to stay on the task at hand." (field notes, 2/2/2016)

Having been a part of workshops guided by several different teaching artists, Sarah made astute observations about how the microphysics of power that were exercised by the teaching artist are correlated with workshop structure and unreflexive othering of the youth. Sarah noted that youth are regularly overlooked as producers of knowledge and expertise. Sarah spoke specifically of their on-going experience with feeling pressured to take the revision suggestions of one teaching artist:

> I got really frustrated because he never really reached out. I think it also had to do with the fact that I'm very stubborn toward whatever he said…If he ever said to me, 'Oh you should do this with your poem.' I would be like, 'But I don't want to. I want it like this.' He would get into this weird 'why aren't you listening?' sort of mentality without actually telling me that. I think that is why he really liked [another student] because she was willing to hear what he had to say and actually do it.

Sarah added that oftentimes their refusal to take suggestion was associated with a lack of effort or participation.

> [He] was saying how you're not really going to win if you don't put in effort and that it's not about writing it once and leaving it. It's not that I'm writing once and leaving it, that's just how my head works…You're telling me that I don't really deserve [to win the poetry slam] because I'm not doing it to the standards that you like.

74

Not surprisingly, Sarah's experience is representative of the uneven power dynamics that shaped the revision phase of Poetic Shift. The voice of the teaching artist was assertive and over-bearing, seemingly detracting from the youth voice that was called forward in the first place. In one revision workshop, Jae shares a poem that spoke to an experience she had where a boy she liked told her: "You are mine." Jae captures her anger at that statement in an emphatic clap back: "I am a woman, not an object to be possessed. I belong to me. I am mine." In an effort to expose the way Diego's subjectivity obtrudes upon Jae's in the process of revision I have quoted below an abridged depiction of feedback Jae received from Diego in regards to her poem:

> *Diego*: Okay, so problematic language. When you say "significant other" [in the poem] that implies that you're already together…It appears you really like this person, right? [Jae: Yeah.] So you go from really liking this person to being like 'F you, man.' I don't think you have to be like 'F you' to get your point across. Here's the thing about this guy (I'm assuming this is a real story): most guys, especially a teenager, don't really know how to navigate what it is to be a man, how to be respectful of feminism.
>
> *Jae:* I don't know. It sort of went like that; I just totally stormed out of the house, like I don't care about you anymore because you literally told me I'm your property. That's what my mom raised me as – for anyone tells me that I'm theirs I'm not.
>
> *Diego*: I know it's not technically your responsibility to educate a man on his downfalls, but…'F you' is divisive and continues to separate…Not to say you

75

have to be gentle with men's feelings. You have a choice to make with the

delivery of this poem. (field notes, 3/1/2016)

The excerpt does not capture the hesitation and caution with which Jae responds to Diego in defense of their "delivery." Jae was uneasy and, through the course of the mostly one-sided conversation, she was relegated inadvertently to a subordinate position. In demanding that Jae has a "choice to make with the delivery," Diego implied that the choice Jae had made was not the correct or preferred one. Needless to say, the interaction between Diego and Jae was not an isolated incident. In the remainder of this chapter I turn to student resistance, as it is important to recognize that 1) power and resistance are a dynamic, relational and transitional dialetic; and 2) students are active agents that work within and against power.

Resistance. The transactions between students and teachers are often a "dialectic of resistance and acceptance" (Alpert, 1991, p. 350). Resistance in the classroom is largely dependent upon the teaching approach. Making a notable distinction between recitation and responsive style classroom discourse, Alpert describes that resistance is dominant in classrooms where subject-matter knowledge is emphasized by the teacher as opposed to the teacher incorporating students' personal knowledge in instruction. In other words, resistance is likely to occur when "the teacher determines that certain concerns, interests, and views of students are less worth discussing than topics she sees as suitable for her academic agenda" (p. 360). As I discussed above, there are certain assumptions about who is allowed to be a constructor of knowledge that are inherent in the facilitation style and when youth are not given space to make meaning of things they will resist.

76

Reluctant participation, such as silence, mumbling, and forced dialogue, were the most prominent modes of resistance in Poetic Shift workshops. Choosing not to participate was a direct reaction to the instructional and curricular policies of the teaching artist (Alpert, 1999).

> *Sarah*: Anytime I went to a workshop I would just sit there and listen, because I was like 'I don't understand how [he's] formatting it. Or if it's really structured and linear I cannot focus on that. With Jamie, it was mostly a prompt, [them] talking about [their] own thing then saying 'do whatever you want.'

There are moments when Diego's attempts to stimulate discussion where met by silence or short, mumbled answers.

> Prior to reading a poem aloud, Diego told the class to "think about what the author shows instead of tells." After finishing the reading Diego, in response to the silence in the room, says, "I can tell by the dead silence that you're all like 'that poem was whack and I didn't get it' or like 'it was so impactful.'" Silence still. Diego asked the class to recall what concrete detail is. When again nobody responded, Diego exclaimed sarcastically, "Don't everybody go at once!" (field notes, 11/19/2015)

> Where there is an explicit call for student voice what significance does silence have? Orner (1992) writes, and I agree,

> It is not adequate to write off student silence in these instances as simply a case of internalized oppression. Nor can we simply label these silences resistance or false consciousness. There may be compelling conscious and unconscious reasons for not speaking – or for speaking, perhaps more loudly, with silence. (p. 81)

77

Jamie recalls one incident in particular that altered the way Jamie perceives silence and participation. Jamie disclosed that the incident was one of the "clearest failings" they ever had as a teaching artist.

> He usually just sat silently. He was not disruptive and he did seem engaged, but you could not really tell if he was or not. So he took his paper and went to the other room then came back. He had had somebody write something because he couldn't write…After that we always tried to produce workshops that had writing elements, but could also work as though exercises so that people who could not write could still participate in the workshops.

Jamie highlighted that reflexivity can be reflected in how the teaching artist responds when they encounter situations with students that make aspects of their own identity and subjectivity visible to them. In this case, Jamie made the assumption that all of the youth in their workshop were able to read and write. Jamie and their fellow teaching artist made purposeful changes to their facilitation method to accommodate for their oversight.

Additionally, Ellsworth (1992) speaks to the significance of safety and silence: "What they/we say, to whom, in what context, depending on the energy they/we have for the struggle on a particular day, is the result of conscious and unconscious assessments of the power relations and safety of the situation" (p. 105). Jamie emphasizes that some people, depending on what bodies they inhabit and the spaces they occupy, are faced with choice between speaking and safety. In situations where a person's physical and emotional wellbeing are at risk, silence may be the preferable choice.

> I think people need to really take into account their safety. You telling your story when you know that it is dangerous and is going to prevent you from being happy

isn't necessarily the right choice. But I do think that the more people who are able to find the space and the drive to do it, the better off the world we live in is.

Over the course of the 16-week Poetic Shift program there was a drastic decline in attendance and in students choosing to participate in "assignments" that required work outside of the workshops. Diego expressed some frustration over this reality, as he found it difficult, due to the linear structure of the program, to proceed through the program on a weekly basis without the active cooperation and investment of the youth. More than halfway through the program Diego generates an open and "honest" discussion in which he finally asks what the youth want out of the program.

> *Diego*: I want to open it up to conversation. What do you all want? This is hopefully not negative; this is honest.
>
> *Rodney* (with the same degree of hesitation that Jae exhibited): I feel like there needs to be more activities. We just come in, read a poem and talk about it, and then we are left to think about it. If we do something more productive instead of the same thing every time, then… (Diego defensively interrupts Rodney). (field notes, 2/2/2016)

The overall lack of dialogue in the workshops was striking, because Poetic Shift prides itself on being one of the few youth spoken word programs in the southwest that "help youth bring their own personal narratives into dialogue with the issues and themes being discussed in their community."

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

The past two decades have seen spoken word grow into a highly influential performance art form and witnessed a concurrent increase in literature on spoken word. This work made a conscious attempt to provide a nuanced, contradictory and partial analysis of space, place and power in relation to youth spoken word and sought to generate an understanding of how spaces where spoken word poetry is taken up as a form of social and political activity are produced and reproduced by a constant stream of negotiations. The on-going discussions surrounding youth spoken word tend to center on spoken word as a site for empowerment and transformation while failing to take into account the dynamic, relational, and transitional nature of power that constructs space and subjectivity. This study was in part undertaken for the purpose of critically questioning the ways that space designated for spoken word is dialectically produced and reproduced, and maintains or subverts dominant relations of power. Additionally, I aimed to more explicitly examine the notion of place (geographical or social) with regard to spoken word in effort to understand how one's positionality impacts, and is impacted by, their involvement in youth spoken word.

This study intends to build upon and finds its place within the four interrelated themes among the existing spoken word literature that I explicated above: spoken word as critical literacy, as performative autoethnography, as youth development, and as counterstorytelling. Chapter four intended to show how these four themes are interwoven through Poetic Shift's pedagogy, at least on a theoretical level. The curricular components and workshop "rules"/expectations – bravery, respect, and value of voice –

of Poetic Shift are such that they promote performativity, counterstorytelling and youth development. Poetic Shift serves as a platform for youth to engage in the performative process of narratively constructing and reconfiguring their identities. As an embodied epistemology (Alexander et al., 2006), spoken word as it is taught by Poetic Shift centers on examination of personal experiences and urges youth to write from a place of recalling the oft-times taken-for-granted sensory realities of navigating the world in their bodies. Spoken word poetry and social location, therefore, are inextricably tied together. Spoken word is a vehicle by which youth, like Sarah and Juan, make meaning of their identities and differences.

In this way, Poetic Shift's ideological position that attributes value and validation to the voice and lived experiences of each youth is an explicit rejection of the dominant paradigm of knowing that relegates some voices to a culture of silence. Youth were asked to tell their stories through spoken word as inventions and negotiations of their own subjectivities (Baszile, 2009), which, for many of the youth, were not representative of the master narrative. Poetic Shift then serves as a pedagogical space of temporary resistance, of confronting, challenging, and disrupting the discourse that have marked certain subjectivities as inferior (Prier, 2013; Tinson & McBride, 2013). This process of counterstorytelling, or "[uncovering] the subjugated stories of the marginalized," (Baszile, 2009) seeks to deconstruct the superiority of dominant subjectivities.

The point at which the present study deviated from most other literature on spoken word is where it offers a critique of Poetic Shift as a site of critical literacy and of utopia. The liberal multicultural call for student voice accompanied by a language of diversity has messy and conflicting implications on a discursive level and on a micro

level. The critical perspective that is taken up to address rhetorical and relational limitations and assumptions of Poetic Shift are derived from Dhamoon's (2009) critique of liberal multiculturalism and Luke and Gore's (1992) poststructural "skepticisms" of critical pedagogy. Poetic Shift's curriculum is grounded in an examination of self through spoken word poetry for the purpose of using one's voice to analyze systemic injustice and to become an agent of social change. This curriculum model is linear, overly simplistic and slips into an "unproblematized focus on the self" (Brookfield, 2012, p. 131). In other words, Poetic Shift falls short of making the "connections between power, knowledge, language, and ideology, and recognizes the inequalities, and injustices surrounding us in order to move toward transformative action and social justice" (Mulcahy, cited in Desai, 2010, p. 118). The notions of diversity and inclusion that are highlighted by the normative liberal multicultural approach tend to mask issues of power and domination (Dhamoon, 2009).

Additionally, I sought to bring the rhetoric of student empowerment in critical pedagogy under scrutiny and demonstrate how dominant relations of power are reinforced even in spaces of possibility. There are problematic presuppositions within the call for youth voice of Poetic Shift – power as property and unreflexive othering – which tend to ignore assumptions that situate the teaching artist as the potent, emancipated agent of change and the student as the Other (Gore, 1992). Transformative learning spaces, such as Poetic Shift, are extremely complex environments where relations of power shift through time and space. This shifting is inevitable given the multiple subjectivities, philosophical and political positions, and embodied experiences that are present in the space (Tisdell, 1998). Therefore, teaching artists must step into

their role with a critical reflexivity, acknowledging how their positionality affects their teaching, their authority, classroom dynamics, and the knowledge they produce, if they are to avoid the pitfalls of emancipative authority.

By stepping outside of the discourse that emphasizes youth spoken word as a vehicle for transformative learning and youth development and by calling out the assumptions inherent in such discourse, I aspired to highlight the ways in which at least one youth spoken word program still has room for improvement. As Johnson (2010) acknowledges, "While some might see my criticism as attacking and detrimental to 'community…'" pointing out how power and subjectivity "define and shape our communities is the first step to make them stronger…Furthermore, remaining silent and not calling out our community struggles is by far more detrimental and destructive" (p. 178). It was my intention in this work to underline both the transformative potential of Poetic Shift and the taken-for-granted assumptions on which its pedagogy are based and to have them exist together in a dialectical, contradictory way as power and resistance do.

There are three limitations of this study to which people might object. First, it may be argued that there is a lack of generalizability, as this work only focuses on two teaching artists and two small groups of youth in one youth spoken word program. The number of youth spoken word organizations in this particular urban area is relatively low and the ones that do exist struggle to maintain consistent sources of funding or go without funding at all. I had initially hoped to at least include a comparative aspect by observing another teaching artist in action, but, not surprisingly, the other teaching artist had to quit the program early on in my research process to get a better paying job for his family. Secondly, I am aware that the research is laden with particular underlying assumptions,

values and motivations that I carry and that the research presented here is ultimately representative of my own vision. There are many alternative ways to read, interpret and make meaning of the research that I have partially represented in the previous pages and I would expect for there to be resistance to my interpretation. Lastly, I will be the first to admit that the lack of voice from the youth of Poetic Shift is a major limitation. I simply did not allow myself enough time to complete the institutional process that would have been required of me to conduct research with any youth under 18. I attempted to reconcile this by incorporating young adults who had been a part of a youth spoken word organization in the recent past.

While this study examines one youth spoken word organization, a rich examination of the broader power dynamics of slam and spoken word poetry communities is needed. There exists almost no dialogue on the politics of poetry slams. There is much to be said about this competitive performance art forum that has developed out of a lineage of Black art and culture yet is still dominated by men who embody the master narrative. Many questions have yet to be answered. I am particularly interested in how authenticity and story co-optation play a role in slam. I am also curious about how one's geographical location or region specifically influences their style of spoken word and the stories they share through spoken word. Or, as a member of my thesis committee once asked, when spoken word (and hip-hop) get commodified by neoliberal capitalism does it become devoid of the potential for resistance?

References

Ahmed, S. (2014). Selfcare as warfare. *Feministkilljoys.* Retrieved from
 http://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/

Akom, A. A. (2009). Critical hip hop pedagogy as a form of liberatory praxis. *Equity &*
 Excellence in Education, 42(1), 52-66.

Alexander, B.K. (2006). Performance and pedagogy. In D.S. Madison & J. Hamera
 (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of performance studies* (pp. 253-277)*.* Thousand
 Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.

Allen, R. L. (1999). The socio-spatial making and marking of'us': Toward a critical
 postmodern spatial theory of difference and community. *Social Identities*, *5*(3),
 249-277.

Alpert, B. (1991). Students' resistance in the classroom. *Anthropology & Education*
 Quarterly, *22*(4), 350-366.

Alvarez, N., & Mearns, J. (2014). The benefits of writing and performing in the spoken
 word poetry community. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 41*(3), 263-268.

Ayers, R., Hodge, C., and Casal, R. (2010). Refusing to submit—youth poetry activism in
 high school. In *Studies in curriculum theory series: Handbook of public*
 pedagogy: Education and learning beyond schooling. New York, NY: Routledge.

Baszile, D. T. (2009). Deal with it we must: Education, social justice, and the curriculum
 of hip hop culture. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 42*(1), 6-19.

Besley, T. (2009). Governmentality of youth: Beyond cultural studies. *Contemporary*
 Readings in Law and Social Justice, 36-83.

Biggs-El, C. (2012). Spreading the indigenous gospel of rap music and spoken word
 poetry: Critical pedagogy in the public sphere as a stratagem of empowerment and
 critique. *Western Journal of Black Studies, 36*(2), 161-168.

Brookfield, S. (2012). Critical theory and transformative learning. In E. W. Taylor, P.
 Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and*
 practice (pp. 131-146). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Chappell, S. (2010). Young people talk back. In *Studies in curriculum theory series:*
 Handbook of public pedagogy: Education and learning beyond schooling. New
 York: NY: Routledge.

Cheng, W. (2013). *The changes next door to the diazes: Remapping race in suburban*
 california. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.

Denzin, N. (2010). A critical performance pedagogy that matters. In *Studies in curriculum theory series: Handbook of public pedagogy: Education and learning beyond schooling*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Desai, S. R. (2010). *Emancipate yourself from mental slavery/None but ourselves can free our minds: Spoken word as a site/sight of resistance, reflection and rediscovery* (Ph.D.). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (863662496).

Dhamoon, R. (2009). *Identity/difference politics: How difference is produced, and why it matters*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Diversi, M., & Moreira, C.(2010). *Betweener talk: Decolonizing knowledge production, pedagogy, and praxis*. Walnut Creek, Calif: Left Coast Press.

Endsley, C. (2013). Performing blackness: Spoken word poetry and performance. *Transformations (Wayne, N.J.), 24*(1-2), 110.

Endsley, C. (2009). "One of ya'll got my lyrics": Student artists exploring spoken word poetry, performance, and activism. (Doctoral dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University).

English, L. & Mayo, P. (2013). *Learning with adults: A critical pedagogical introduction.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Espiritu, Y. L. (2014). *Body counts: The vietnam war and militarized refuge(es).* Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

Fisher, M. (2003). Open mics and open minds: Spoken word poetry in african diaspora participatory literacy communities. *Harvard Educational Review, 73*(3), 362.

Fisher, M. T. (2005). From the coffee house to the school house: The promise and potential of spoken word poetry in school contexts. *English Education, 37*(2, Literocracy: A New Way of Thinking about Literacy and Democracy), 115-131.

Forman, M., & Alexander Street Press. (2002). *The 'hood comes first: Race, space and place in rap and hip-hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University.

Forman, M. (2000). 'represent': Race, space and place in rap music. *Popular Music, 19*(1), 65-90.

Frink, J., Ares, N., Mukhopadhyay, K., & Tsoumani, E. (2010). Hybridity and

transformation: Social spaces and youth cultural practices. In N. Ares (Ed.), *Youthfull productions: Cultural practices and constructions of content and social spaces* (pp. 65-95). New York: Peter Lang.

Frost, C. (2014). Border disputes: Spoken word and its humble critics. *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies 10(3/4),* 1-20.

Gallego, C. (2014). Topographies of resistance: Cognitive mapping in Chicano/a migrant literature. *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory, 70*(2).

Gilmore, R.W. (2008). *Forgotten places and the seeds of grassroots planning.* In Hale, C. R. (2008). Engaging contradictions: Theory, politics, and methods of activist scholarship. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Giroux, H. A. (2011). *On critical pedagogy.* New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Giroux, H. A. (2004). Public pedagogy and the politics of neo-liberalism: Making the political more pedagogical. *Policy Futures in Education*, *2*(3), 494-503.

Jackson, A. Y. (2013). Spaces of power/knowledge: A foucauldian methodology for qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry, 19*(10), 839-847.

Jocson, K. M. (2006). "There's a better word": Urban youth rewriting their social worlds through poetry. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 49*(8), 700-707.

Johnson, E. M., (2014). My culture, my voice: The impact of youth hip-hop and spoken word on adolescent participants in positive youth development settings. *Master of Social Work Clinical Research Papers, Paper 341*.

Johnson, J. L. (2010). *My words dance: Doing race, gender, and sexuality in slam and spoken word poetry communities in los angeles and chicago* Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Retrieved from http://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/851556992?accountid=4485

Kelley, R.D.G. (2016). Black study, black struggle. Retrieved from http://bostonreview.net/forum/robin-d-g-kelley-black-study-black-struggle?utm_content=buffer2ffe5&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

Kellner, D. & Kim, G. (2009). YouTube, critical pedagogy, and media activism: An articulation. In R. Hammer & D. Kellner (Eds.), Media/cultural studies: Critical approaches (pp. 615-636). New York: Peter Lang.

Kim, R. (2013). Spoken art pedagogies: Youth, critical literacy and a cultural movement in the making (Doctoral dissertation). UC Santa Cruz: Education (Sociology).

Kohn, M. (2003). *Radical space: Building the house of the people*. Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press.

Land, R. R., & Stovall, D. O. (2009). Hip hop and social justice education: A brief introduction. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 42*(1), 1-5.

Lawrence, R.L. (2012). Transformative learning through artistic expression. In E. W. Taylor, P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 131-146). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Levinson, S.C. (2002). Activity Types and Language. In Weinberg, D. (Ed.). *Qualitative research methods* (pp. 193-220). Oxford: Blackwell.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.

Luke, C., & Gore, J. (1992). *Feminisms and critical pedagogy.* New York: Routledge.

Morrell, E., & Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R. (2002). Promoting academic literacy with urban youth through engaging hip-hop culture. *English Journal [H.W. Wilson - EDUC], 91*(6), 88.

Otero, L. R. (2010). *La calle: Spatial conflicts and urban renewal in a southwest city.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Prier, D. D. (2013). Cultivating the spatial politics of community-based literacy practices in hip-hop. *Multicultural Learning and Teaching, 8*(2), 95.

Pulido, I. (2009). "Music fit for us minorities": Latinos/os' use of hip hop as pedagogy and interpretive framework to negotiate and challenge racism. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 42*(1), 67.

Reyes, G. T. (2006). Finding the poetic high: Building a spoken word poetry community and culture of creative, caring, and critical intellectuals. *Multicultural Education, 14*(2), 10.

Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Schademan, A. R., Ares, N., & González, N. (2010). Negotiating hybridity in youth cultural practices. In N. Ares (Ed.), *Youthfull productions: Cultural practices and constructions of content and space* (pp. 47-63). New York: Peter Lang.

Smith, A. (2010). Poetry performances and academic identity negotiations in the literacy experiences of seventh grade language arts students. *Reading Improvement, 47*(4),

202.

Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Dunedin;London;New York;: Zed Books.

Somers-Willett, S. (2014). From slam to def poetry jam: Spoken word poetry and its counterpublics. *Liminalities, 10*(3/4), 1.

Somers-Willett, S. B. (2009). *Cultural politics of slam poetry: Race, identity, and the performance of popular verse in america.* Ann Arbor, MI, USA: University of Michigan

Tinson, C. M., & McBride, C. R. E. C. (2013). Introduction to special issue: Hip hop, critical pedagogy, and radical education in a time of crisis. *Radical Teacher,* (97).

Tisdell, E. J. (1998). Poststructural feminist pedagogies: The possibilities and limitations of feminist emancipatory adult learning theory and practice. *Adult education quarterly*, *48*(3), 139-156.

Vargas, J. H. C. (2006). *Catching hell in the city of angels: Life and meanings of blackness in south central Los Angeles*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Weinstein, S., & West, A. (2012). Call and responsibility: Critical questions for youth spoken word poetry. *Harvard Educational Review, 82*(2), 282.