

Chapter Eight

Embodied Justice

We Are the Divine Text

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Throughout history, poets have served a sacred role as storyteller, teacher, and communicator. In many societies, these lyrical artists are heralded as cultural keepers and soul shakers. Consider for a moment the legacy of literary arts in West African Griot traditions, the clout of poetry in Somalia, the innovative, South Bronx street-based literacies that grew into hip-hop, and the contemporary youth spoken word performance poetry movement thriving from Sacramento to Soweto.

Unfortunately, within this ancient legacy of transformative praxis, there have been interruptions and injuries. Inside modern industrial classrooms, the literary arts were placed inside a literature canon where they were suffocated from the pulse of recitation and innovation. It is no surprise that far too often the word *poetry* conjures up images of dead white men. This erasure colonizes poetry and moves it away from its original nature and nexus of power.

In response to the larger colonization of learning, Greene (2009) explained that “of course we want to empower the young for meaningful work . . . but the world we inhabit is palpably deficient: there are unwar- ranted inequities, shattered communities, unfulfilled lives.” So, she asks, “How are we to move the young to break with the given, the taken-for- granted—to move towards what might be, what is not yet?” (p. 84). To answer Greene’s question, poetry provides a unique platform to play with words and picture alternative futures.

Between what is and what could be, there is poetry.

Exploring this sacred connection between pedagogy and possibility occurs in the teaching of spoken word performance poetry through the lens of *lectio divina*—divine reading. This investigation is guided by an overarching question: How do we educate the whole person in ways that nurtures personal transformation and collective belonging?

To answer this query, the research context will be provided followed by three core concepts in the literature that frame the analysis: research on spoken word performance poetry, the connections between art and activism, and the spiritual practice of slowing down to become more fully present. How these ideas are enacted and embodied will then be demonstrated inside disparate spaces—from continuation schools to juvenile hall facilities, from urban high schools to university lecture halls, from junior high school kids to professional development trainings for adults. Irrespective of the environment, these findings suggest that as we deeply and divinely read each other's words, we enact what I call *rituals of awakening*.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS) was founded in 2008 as an innovative critical literacy and teacher professional development organization designed to engage underperforming youth of color and educators in Sacramento, California. With hip-hop and spoken word performance poetry at its core, SAYS community-based poet-mentor educators work inside middle and high schools to provide culturally relevant instruction to predominately Black, Latinx, and Southeast Asian students via workshops, courses, mentoring, the citywide SAYS Poetry Slam competition, and a large youth conference that takes place at the University of California, Davis.

Over the last decade, SAYS has developed an award-winning youth empowerment model that connects the hood and higher education. SAYS has also created employment pathways for former SAYS students to become poet-mentor educators and teaching artists. In this capacity, they complete a rigorous training that focuses on critical pedagogy, social justice instructional strategies, and the literary arts. Subsequently, they work in schools and community spaces to reach and teach the next generation of artists, activists, and academics (Watson, 2013, 2016). For information and videos on SAYS, visit says.ucdavis.edu.

Inside various SAYS spaces—whether in the community, the university, or the schoolhouse—participants engage in intensive writing workshops and subsequently share their work during community circles. The sharing circles are highly personal, and many times the participants have to hold space for one another to heal (Watson, 2017). Haddix (2013) describes this act of critical engagement as “listening face-to-face” and “eye-to-eye.” The SAYS

vision of embodied learning is for each person in the room to be fully seen and deeply heard as an active member of the whole—a concept that will be contextualized through the literature and elucidated in the findings.

POETRY FOR THE PEOPLE

Writing can embody its own birthing process. As a practice of insight, what is believed starts to get conceived. As poets, this happens upon the page. And then through the sharing process—literary performance—artists publicly give birth to their words; now their ideas live outside of the self in/of community with the wider world. This communal process of sharing one’s story has pedagogical implications.

Freire asserts that “[h]uman beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (1993, p. 28). In poetic writing workshops, the prompts are personal (e.g., *When I look in the mirror I see; I am not who you think I am*), guiding participants to expose themselves to themselves. Often, during the freewriting response time, everyone sits in a circle and writes side-by-side; each person is encouraged to let go of the rational thought and forgo the technicality, skill, and product and instead intuitively dance with their own voice, play with words, and experience limitless creative expression.

For Lorde (1984), the practice of poetic creation is rooted in Black feminist theory. In *Sister Outsider*, she explains that within each person there is a dark, ancient, deep reserve of emotional power. She urges us to “respect those hidden sources of our power” and to “train ourselves to respect our feelings, and to discipline (transpose) them into a language that matches those feelings so they can be shared.” She then urges us to use words not only to contemplate reality, but also to reimagine it. She continues, “And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives.” This kind of *poetry for the people* is distinct and disruptive: “I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover their desperate wish for imagination without insight” (pp. 36–37). In teaching poetry, it is important to acknowledge its orientation toward resistance and understand its roots.

Building on Black poetic traditions, spoken word performance poetry and hip-hop pedagogies have expanded into a worldwide phenomenon—especially within youth culture. The literature base has also been growing rapidly. In the last two decades, empirical studies on spoken word and hip-hop have burgeoned (e.g., Akom, 2009; Emdin, 2016; Fisher, 2005, 2007; Hill, 2010; Jocson, 2008; Love, 2012; Rose, 1994; Watson, 2016; Weinstein, 2018; Weiss & Herndon, 2001). A number of these studies focus on how

adults and youth work together to create physical, intellectual, cultural, and emotional spaces where each participant may “insist upon [their] right to exist and declare [their] divinity” (Moon, 2014, n.p.).

Spoken word poetry is written for community; the intended publication is on stage in front of a live audience. This contrasts with the *literary* or *academic* or *page* poem, which is written primarily to be read on the page in isolation. Defining different kinds of poetry purely by their mode of operandi can be problematic; however, for some, spoken word’s poetic difference is located in its ideological orientation, described as a democratic approach to aesthetics and public pedagogy (Ensley, 2015; Hill, 2010; Stanton & Tinglely, 2001). In this approach, artistic excellence is decentered in favor of participation in an experience that encourages radical vulnerability, truth-telling, and courageous encounters.

A growing number of scholars are examining the ways multimodal literacies are holistic and embodied (e.g., Enriquez, 2016; Schmidt & Beucher, 2018; Yagelski, 2009). This is especially true in a poetry slam competition. Here’s a basic example of this unique literary extravaganza.

Generations of people from various backgrounds gather together at the local Opera House for the Youth Poetry Slam Finals. The event is sold out. Participants watch, snap, stomp, and applaud as middle and high school youth share stories, give testimony, and recite their lives on the mic. Each poet has only three minutes and twenty seconds to proclaim his or her piece to the world. Often, the short time span belies the depth of expression. These students have learned various writing and performance techniques (using minimal words to have a maximum impact); they have completed intense editing to reach this moment—when the poem is ready to share publicly. Their artistic mastery is often mesmerizing.

Prior to this penultimate moment on stage, there are important pedagogical implications of this literary arts movement that deserve exploration. At SAYS, we encourage students to become the authors of their own lives and agents of change. Our stories are not just for ourselves but can serve a wider purpose. There is strength in struggle, power inside pain, and even our existence embodies a form of resistance. The poem is teacher and student; art and activism.

ARTIVISM

Sandoval and Latorre (2008) define *artivism* as a “hybrid neologism that signified work created by individuals who see the organic relationship between art and activism” (p. 82). They posit that for Chicax youth, artivism is often deployed as a means to transform themselves and their communities. Dalton (2018) echoes this sentiment: “Art is a change agent” (p. 16).

Historically, marginalized populations have leveraged poetry as a genre and method to articulate their politics, and often to dissent, on their own cultural terms. Faulkner (2009) argues that poetry often pays attention to the “particulars” of embodied knowledge, providing insight into ideologies of new realities. Furthermore, women and youth have utilized poetry within social movements where they have been silenced. Clark (2004) and Hope (2018) posit that Black and Asian American women and youth in the 1960s were major poets of the period as they often used poetry as a form of activism.

The SAYS poet-mentor educator Denisha “Coco Blossom” Bland has a similar outlook on activism and defines it as “using your art to do better for your community. I actually learned it over the years, but just political art.” She explains:

I always have that on my mind every time I sit down to write a poem that’s like one of the first things I think about: Is this poem for me first? Is it something I just need to write and put in my book? Or is this a poem finna be something that I need to give to the people SAYS actually helped me learn that.

Speaking truth to power is at the core of the art of spoken word poetry and performance. Armed with nothing more than a microphone, spoken word artists have been disrupting the status quo, confronting injustice, and advancing critical engagement within communities, campuses, and the world. My research follows the disruptive oral genealogies developed and imaginatively explored by poets and performers of color such as Amiri Baraka, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Kendrick Lamar, Mahogany Brown, Sunni Patterson, Tupac Shakur, and Nikki Giovanni, to name just a few.

It is important to acknowledge that the next generation of artists are in our classrooms, *now*. They desperately need platforms that illuminate and celebrate who they are becoming.

The German poet and playwright Bertoldt Brecht (2015) once said in an interview about his poetry, “You can’t write poems about the trees when the woods are full of policemen” (p. 7). Although Brecht was from a different place and time, his account is an accurate reflection of a “reality pedagogy” that strives to meet students where they are (Emdin, 2016). Poetry is not always pretty and that is because it is meant to be truthful.

Consider for a moment the poem written by a young teenager, the now iconic Tupac Amaru Shakur, whose poem “Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete” (2006) exposes the immense strength and fortitude needed to overcome structural oppression and the material forces that constrain life and one’s ability to grow. In his writing, he further explains: “You see you wouldn’t ask why the rose that grew from the concrete had damaged petals. On the contrary, we would all celebrate its tenacity. We

would all love its will to reach the sun. Well, we are the roses. This is the concrete. And these are my damaged petals” (p. 3).

As life becomes primary text, the poem serves as an extension of the person. Liberating literacies is quintessentially about the poem. Not poem as rarefied object, but poem as revealer and healer; poem as movement maker.

This form of activism demands action. Yet in the realm of community organizing and the urgency to fight injustices, the work itself can become heavy. Slowing down might even feel selfish amid the immediacy of inequities, police brutalities, and constant emergencies. So we run and run and often barely catch our breath. Yet justice—literally and figuratively— demands balance. Thus a transformative praxis does not live just in our heads, but also in our hearts—and most definitely in our hands and feet. In other words, it is not merely what is conceived that is revolutionary, but what is achieved, daily, in how we are *living justice*. Thus liberation becomes the poetry of our lives.

P . . . A . . . U . . . S . . . E

There is a popular slogan in community organizing work: “Pause for the cause.” This is an important pedagogical concept. In 1968 Merton discussed the “innate violence” of being too busy with the “rush and pressure of modern life” (p. 81). Dalton (2018) extends this idea when she writes, “Ignoring my body and my heart, I force personal will to complete my ‘to do’ tasks, despite signs of fatigue or stress. I become oriented toward goals and making things happen, pushing against the very loud messages I receive to pause” (p. 21). Professional busyness can serve as a distraction from areas of our life and parts of our self that need attention, perhaps even healing.

Moving from the personal to the political, slowing down connects to decolonial practices—consciously reorienting oneself in relation to space and time (Patel, 2016). Pausing can serve as a productive interruption to competitive ways of being, doing, and knowing.

So then, where is the pedagogy that embraces the pause? One possible answer is *lectio divina* reading. Dalton (2018) writes, “The process of reading slowly, savoring and allowing words to be ‘felt’ or embodied, is counter to the pace of academia where the emphasis often requires grasping new ideas and concepts, oftentimes superficially skimming literature” (p. 18). As explored throughout this book, *lectio divina* is a ritual that reorients time and space, and more importantly, shape-shifts the space between us. As we draw closer toward one another—in this case, through poetry—classrooms become fertile ground for the creation of beloved communities.

WE ARE THE DIVINE TEXT

There is a fast-paced nature to life, and this often spills into SAYS spaces. Participants enter into the classroom quickly and loudly, distracted by their phones and competing activities. This is not merely about young people; adults can be just as difficult to engage in a process of slowing down.

To counteract this pace, today, all the chairs are in a circle. Two dozen tenth grade students from Grant Union High School in Del Paso Heights (D.P.H.) shuffle into class and grab their journals from the box labeled “5th period.” On the whiteboard, the following statement is written:

Come In
Place Your Notebook
And Pen/cil
Under Your Chair
Sit Still
And talk to the person sitting closest to you.
Ask them . . .
Who are you grateful for and why?
(Take turns answering this question. You have 3 minutes each.)

Following this conversational warm-up, students transition to focus on the activity. Through call-and-response, we first review our intentions:

As we grow as learners, we will read ourselves, one another, and this world anew. Throughout this process,

- *We commit to practicing freedom.*
- *We strive towards radical vulnerability.*
- *We represent personal and collective accountability.*
- *We recognize that our full presence inspires our full humanity.*
- *We will hold each other's words, hear each other completely, and will heal holistically.*

Today we are going to read a *I am from* poem that one of our classmates just submitted the other day. Denise is a student in this class; she is sitting amongst her peers within the circle and she gave me permission to share it. We only have one copy of her poem for the entire class to share. Let's begin our reading ritual.

We go around in a circle, passing the paper; each student reading one line at a time. I set my phone alarm for thirty seconds; the sound of chimes will bring our focus back together.

We enter into a moment of silence.

The chimes ring. So we go around the circle again, but this time when each student reads a line, we all repeat the line. This form of call-and-response fills the classroom with the voices of the students who are repeating each stanza in unison.

We enter into a moment of silence.

I ask the class which line speaks to them and/or their lived experience.

Students explain what aspect of the poem moves them and why.

We enter into a moment of silence.

One student is selected to read the entire poem to the group. If the author of the poem happens to be in the class, they will be the one to read it out loud to everyone else.

We take a final moment of silence.

To close the ritual, we go around in a circle with each student reading one line at a time (similar to what we did in the opening).

Below is the poem we are reading through the pausing and reflecting ritual of *lectio divina*:

D.P.H.

I am from a large crowd that is not all the same.

I am from the thud of a body drop after a bullet hits through [through] a little black boy's brain.

I am from whips, chains and physical strains that my ancestors had to go through [through] so that my people to remain.

I am from D.P.H.

The deepest part of hell and the name reminds me of the closing doors of a cell.

I am from the thug life looking for a savior.

The demons on my block because the devil is my neighbor.

I am from the quarter that drops into a hobo's cup or the greedy eyes that look at them like their shit out of luck.

I am from the long long lines of soup kitchen where people fights just to eat.

I am from scattered tears on abused child feet.

I am from a song by R. Kelly called I wish I wish I wish and I hope the lyrics come true as I wish myself out of this pit.

I am from a place where fear and hate concurs [conquers] our dreams.

There you will find what poverty truly means.

I am from a place with lost love where everybody seems to lose faith in you even the God above.

I am from a place where the words hope and pray are only used when you have to go to court trial the next day.

I wish that I could have made this poem a little sweeter before I begun.
But sadly it's just not sugar coated where Im from.

Through our reflection exercise, Denise shares with us that she needed an outlet for her anger; instead of having to fight, she learned how to write. Building on this sentiment, I direct the class to take out their notebooks and write a letter to poverty.

Dear poverty . . .

After four minutes, the students are told to put their pens and pencils down and take a deep breath. Stretch a bit. Tell a person near them, “Thank you for coming to class today. We needed you here.”

And we begin again. I offer them the next prompt.

*What is your response to this quote by Bryan Stevenson (2014) in Just Mercy:
“The opposite of poverty is not wealth, the opposite of poverty is justice.”*

Students sit writing with music playing lightly in the background. Five minutes before the bell rings, we specifically thank Denise for sharing and inspiring us. We collectively acknowledge her radical vulnerability that opened us for deeper reading and more radical writing. Notebooks are placed back into the bin and students leave class.

Now, from a pedagogical standpoint, what just happened during this fifth-period English class at a large urban high school? A divine reading process was used as an embodied and liberatory practice. This was an adaptation of *lectio divina*, which was originally designed for sacred reading of scripture. Through the *lectio divina* process, reading is made communal. The reader repeats words and practices forms of meditation with the text such that he or she is able to listen through the ear of the heart. As a way to enact mindful literacy, *lectio divina* “can inspire in us a reverence for word and thing and for one another” (Hall, O’Hare, Santavicca, & Jones, 2015, p. 55). Building on this scholarship, inside SAYS spaces, students’ writing is as precious as any holy manuscript. As demonstrated above, we slow down to contemplate the poem—and in the process, the person who wrote it experiences the transcendent reciprocity of seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard.

CONCLUSION

SAYS strives to create spaces wherein students’ lives are the primary text (Watson, 2017). To fully appreciate this idea, Winterson (2011) teaches, “A tough life needs a tough language—and that is what poetry is. That is what literature offers—a language powerful enough to say how it is. It isn’t a

hiding place. It is a finding place” (p. 40). Similarly, in his best-selling memoir *Heavy*, Laymon (2018) provides an astonishing account of his childhood, coming of age in Mississippi, and his relationship with words, white folks, and the generations of Black women that raised him. He shares, “I realized telling the truth was way different from finding the truth, and finding the truth had everything to do with revisiting and rearranging words. Revisiting and rearranging words didn’t only require vocabulary; it required will, and maybe courage” (p. 86).

Many of us, like Winterson and Laymon, have survival stories: experiences and intergenerational traumas that eat us alive and torment us into a form of nihilism and numbness. This is not all of who we are, but pain can be paralyzing. Often it is that which we bury that weighs us down. In a quest to be free from our own suffering, poetry can become a cathartic emancipatory exercise. The poet Khalil Gibran echoed something similar in his own poetry: “Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars” (1923;n.p.).

SAYS wants participants to experience that they are already whole and holy—we are all just trying to put the pieces back together. Spiritually grounded practices (e.g., Palmer, 1993) such as this move us from piecemeal to peace, from disconnection to connection. Offering a fresh way of doing *lectio divina* is a form of resistance to an educational system wrought with inequities and dehumanizing pedagogies.

The divine text is us. And through rituals of awakening, learning becomes the soul of social change.

As demonstrated in the case of SAYS, classrooms are sites for opening up in community, growing, and healing. But far too often, we expect students to compartmentalize tasks and engage with curriculum that is irrelevant to their lives. Holistic strategies, on the other hand, activate and actualize a sense of full belonging. As a transformative praxis, *lectio divina*, as sacred reading process, paired together with spoken word poetry, provides a platform for divine discovery, contemplative creativity, and emerging imaginations. This form of pedagogy aligns art, science, and soul—nurturing an awakening that brings us closer to ourselves and each other.

ESSENTIAL IDEAS TO CONSIDER

- We are the authors of our own lives and agents of change.
- Poets have served a sacred role as storyteller, teacher, and communicator. In many societies, these lyrical artists are heralded as cultural keepers and movement makers.
- Spoken word performance poetry, in particular, is deeply emotional, provocative, and public. It embraces full-bodied knowing.

- Speaking truth to power is at the core of the art of spoken word poetry and performance. It isn't always pretty, yet seeks truth as a matter of justice.
- Through rituals of awakening, such as dynamically combining *lectio divina* and spoken word performance poetry, learning becomes a praxis of personal transformation and beloved community.
- Between what is and what could be, there is poetry.

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