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## Mic Check

I want to clarify that this integrated performing arts group did not begin as a research project, only as a cultural program. It wasn't until we were deep into the detailed planning stages that I realized that implementing a training/workshop/sharing time with a group of young artists was a desire I'd had for a long time. Acknowledging this desire was for me a moment of lucidity. Transitioning from a performance poet to a mentor shifted how I viewed my own performances and my own purpose. Up to this point, my only goal was to be a dope artist and to get my degree. When I cofounded the group, my purpose became intertwined with the success of the student artists on and off stage. My goals stretched laterally because my energy was no longer flowing in only a vertical direction: from God, to me, to an audience. Instead my purpose widened to include teaching and learning with a group. Working in community was new and very powerful for me. So much of my experience as an artist and as an academic, the act of writing especially, takes place alone, in solitude. Concentration, competition, and discipline were taught to me as necessary for professional successes. Outsiders could not be trusted, so these successes were also individualistic endeavors. Plus, I had no "teachers" to look to while I was learning the ropes as a first-generation college student. I had to actively seek and pursue mentorships and friendships and endure the rejection of those that were refused. Community on campus was there, but not always obvious or even welcoming. But teaching and learning require an acknowledgment of the dependency we have on relationships with others. It was working with Collective Energy that taught this lesson to me. In performance, in spoken word poetry, and teaching in a classroom issues of objectives arise. Identifying the objective behind a decision or performance choice can help sharpen the precision and focus behind each subsequent action that is taken. The objective in this chapter is to clarify the overlapping goals and roles of two defining aspects of the Collective Energy experience: my own position as researcher and artist and the impact of spoken word poetry performance on the student artists.

As the cultural program continued, I realized that there wasn't much background written on a group like ours that was specifically geared toward spoken word poetry. There were many manuals and guidelines for general arts groups or for "poets," but most of these templates were focused on very specific demographics, and I constructed this group intentionally to avoid being generalized. They are not all students of color, they do not all identify as feminists, nor are they all first-generation college students.

My purpose behind this mixture of distinct experiences was precisely that: to bring these different elements together and see what happened. I feel that the wild variety in each component is what makes this project so important. Frequently, there are examples of research that focus on one particular ethnic group or socioeconomic status, but I have yet to find substantial work that focuses on such a varied community of people who, instead of sharing a particular racial identity or gender, share instead a commitment in growing their artistic skill sets as social change agents. Through this work with Collective Energy, I hope to extend the conversation that is already taking place around the concepts of spoken word poetry, performance, and pedagogy by remixing them together in a different way.

. . . as for me  
*I'm one of Chief Thundercloud, Che Guevara, Harriet Tubman's daughters*  
*I feel right at home with my underground poetry supporters*  
*if God be for us*  
*that makes us unstoppable*  
*if it looks impossible*  
*if it sounds illogical*  
*that keeps things exciting, we don't blink at obstacles*  
*we don't shrink at threats*  
*we don't rescind our statements*  
*we don't expect you to understand if your vision ain't there yet*  
*No matter where you come from life ain't simple*  
*But simplicity is instrumental*  
*heart beats the bass, keeps the tempo*  
*there is so much I want to say to you but my words can't articulate*  
*Clearly*  
*If you choose to pay attention you will have to pay dearly . . .*

For me, the connection of theory and praxis clicked with Carlos. Slender and soft-spoken, Carlos had a curly afro and light eyes that, combined with an ill sense of wordplay as a poet, won him favor among the ladies

on campus. His peaceful demeanor and almost reverent attitude earned him my respect. He approached my desk in the cultural center with that sideways smile and greeted me with a head nod and hug.

What's up Crystal Leigh? I just had to stop by and say thanks again for bringing that fire last night. Man, it was crazy. Thanks for letting me spit, man. Um, so I was wondering, if maybe you had some time you wouldn't mind reading over this poem I'm working on, um, you know, I could just really use a muse right now, you know? It's like, I have all these ideas and I just need to, you know what I'm saying, bounce them off of someone.

It was 11 a.m. on a Friday, and already a surprising string of visitors had stopped by my desk. I was tired from the late night before—it was the first cultural program I had ever planned in my life, and I had underestimated the toll it would take on my energy. The usual friendliness that most of my students attributed to my Southern rearing was wearing thin, and I was more than a little frustrated at the interruptions because they prevented me from accomplishing any work that required concentration. Two days of glorious poetry performances and critical cultural conversations that were a part of the Lyrical Legacies program designed by the director Toby Jenkins and the first Bed Spoken Word Lounge had satisfied an aching need that I had and also reaffirmed my confidence in my ability to perform. I had just shared the stage with the legendary Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka, who were later joined by contemporary spoken word artist Ursula Rucker and hip hop all-star Black Thought, lead MC of the Roots crew, a Philly-based band that rates in the top five for conscious hip hop music. The two-day event also featured a young brother named Jason Reynolds, whom I remembered from my initial introduction to the slam poetry circuit in Baltimore, Maryland. His skill had developed astronomically, and I was moved to step up my own game as a spoken word artist after having the opportunity to reconnect with him by inviting him up to Penn State as our artist in residence.

But now it was Friday at 11 a.m. and I was drained. I had paperwork to fill out, thank-you notes to send, and deadlines to meet as a graduate assistant in the Paul Robeson Cultural Center (PRCC). Carlos was maybe the eighth student who stopped by with positive comments on the previous night. His enthusiasm and eagerness to improve his artistry stirred me, because for a brief moment I saw a flashback of myself as a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate student and poet—I thought, what if someone had just taken the time to talk to me about what to expect in the spoken word

industry? What if my experience as a beginning spoken word artist and actor had been groomed by a group of friends who weren't driven only by the desire for personal gain or success but also by a deep commitment to making a change in this world?

These questions continued during a conversation over dinner with the director and my boss at the PRCC, and I jokingly shared the student feedback. Toby said she had actually invited me to dinner that day to discuss an idea she was inspired to start working on, part of which was to gather a group of student artists and create these more intense developmental experiences with me. After our meeting, modeling the collaboration we wanted from our students, Toby and I developed an outline for an integrated arts performance group that would groom artists like Carlos. Our goal was to construct a group that met on a regular basis with the hopes of growing their life skills and performance by exposing them to deeper experiences within their own campus as well as beyond. We wanted to create an environment where these student artists could correlate their personal experiences with those of their peers and use their spoken word poetry or other artistic methods to communicate those experiences to an audience. We were interested in creating a program that would allow them the chance to form and strengthen new and existing collaborative relationships in the hopes that they would practice learning from and listening to one another's perspectives. We were committed to their required participation in all the aspects of planning a program, from the set up to the tear down, and to creating regular performance opportunities for them to showcase what they were learning.

With all of these righteous intentions and meaningful learning moments built into our plans, Collective Energy was founded.

This is the "true" story . . . of eight artists . . . picked to perform  
together and have their lives taped . . . to find out what happens . . .  
when people stop being polite . . . and start getting real . . .  
welcome to Collective Energy . . .

### Spoken Word Poetry

Within these pages, I define spoken word poetry as a public poetry performance through which meaning is negotiated. Spoken word poetry is always contextualized historically and also undergoes immediate social reconstruction and reproduction during each performance. This is an important foun-

dation to build upon because, before a performer even takes the stage, the stage itself is understood to be a contested site where negotiations of meaning and subjectivity take place. The performance of a spoken word piece implies a constant state of change. No two performances will render identical meanings, nor is that a useful goal. Although the material being performed may remain consistent, the purpose of repeated performances in different venues and contexts is to gain different perspectives and values that will drive future understandings and readings of the performance and thus the performer.

Poet laureate Billy Collins (2003) suggests that poetry performance offers a double connection: one with the poet and one with the audience. He continues, "Hearing a poem lends the experience an immediacy, a reality not found on the page" (4). The key to this triple-layered energy flow is the bodily transaction that takes place during a live performance of original work. Throughout such a performance, variable understandings and competing discourses involve some pretty serious stakes. Spoken word poetry is a performance of the struggle for power that often results in the expression of a desire for agency. No singular outcome can be guaranteed; however, there is always the likelihood that multiple and opposing interpretations of any performance will occur. Spoken word poetry invites attention to why these interpretive fractures occur, making its practice useful in identifying the various social positions inhabited by the audience and artist and the power relationships that shape the dynamic of those positions.

Performing spoken word poetry has provided Collective Energy with an outlet, a way to interrogate their views, realities, and ideas about themselves and the world around them. The act of performing their perspectives both imagined and real is an act of resistance; their performances point out instances of oppression. As the student artists write and perform in ways that directly challenge these structures, and deny the "truths" that are parroted by larger societal institutions, their art practice reworks dominant histories. By resisting the structures that work to contain and immobilize, these student artists are altering the possibilities that currently exist for working in opposition to the negative ideologies and stale solutions that they have inherited. Spoken word poetry can be utilized as a new discursive practice by marginalized youth as a means to invert the practices of power within their own social and political context.

Effective activist spoken word poetry works to open and engage, but the openings that puncture our borders cannot be measured or predicted. The more we rehearsed and worked together as a group, although our backgrounds and social positions were diverse, we realized that we experienced

similar emotional reactions to experiences that touched on the humanity of us all. The more each member of Collective Energy was able to identify, explore, and even orchestrate such moments, the more critical and powerful our performance would be. Our borders were permeable; spoken word poetry performance equipped us to face and work within these vulnerabilities that are a crucial aspect of critical work.

### Discourse and Performance

To appreciate and respect the transformative power of spoken word poetry is to acknowledge the role of language in maintaining power and privilege. My investigation is not to determine whether language holds power; rather, I ask whose meanings or which of the competing discourses will win. The winner is determined by the organization of social power—whoever talks the loudest and has the access to distribute their words is often who is heard. I'm suggesting that the weekly group meetings and each individual performance of Collective Energy offered us a chance to rewrite some of the dominant discourses that we named inaccurate.

In other words, by performing our personal history, the student artists are also performing the present and future, and such performance adds to the obtainable vocabulary that constructs the ways we interpret those experiences. The disparate group of characters that are outlined in the bios of Collective Energy (see the appendix) engaged first among themselves during weekly workshops to “meet, clash and grapple” with the perspectives they had been taught and the experiences they had lived (Pratt 1999, 133). Then, through intentionally taking the new knowledges formed by those friction-filled contact zones, they enveloped their audience in yet another contact zone by producing cohesive, yet not identical, politicized performances. The transaction that takes place during each of these performances calls for even more multiplicities to form as audience members create and respond during the show with interpretations of their own. Through the very act of performing as a group, Collective Energy breaks with tradition, intervening and interfering with the status quo of their environment. Challenging their status quo means resisting oppression, because each show produces narratives that offer alternatives to a master discourse that positions the student artists as powerless and disadvantaged.

Language is the vehicle of the message that is composed by the performer; however, the delivery of that message, the embodied perfor-

mance, adds another layer to the already complicated performance moment. Weedon's (1997) important theoretical work establishing language as a political power provides the guts of what I am proposing as the pedagogical power that a spoken word performance has. It is the embodied performance or "acting out" that carries the message and immediately reconstructs the meaning that is embedded in the original written poem. Because of the urgent and undeniable physical situation that confronts the audience member, spoken word poetry becomes a method of mediation between the contentious dynamics at play in any given performance. Such dynamics are partly informed by the positions of the subjects—both performer and audience member—which are going to be diverse. Their positions guide the performance and lead participation, respectively, and will hopefully lead to a multiplicity of interpretations, contradictions, and understandings. An assortment of responses and recreations of performances can lead to revisions of the performance and of the subjects, providing openings and loops that indicate fluidity. Fluidity is both desirable and complicated; transforming can repel ideas of stagnation or static subjectivity, yet to have a fluid identity makes a person unwieldy to read and interact with.

### Who Are You?

Another key aspect of performance is the exchange that occurs whenever artist and audience member meet. The space of the performance opens up a unique moment to explore the discourses through which their realities and meanings are negotiated. During this transaction, many things take place simultaneously, including the critical examination of ideologies and power relationships. This concept is vital to include because it implicates the audience member in the construction of each performance just as readily as the artist herself. Through spoken word poetry performance, the competing discourses that structure how and why meaning are produced not only are acknowledged but are also made visible through performance—thus creating a way to challenge identity and resist those meanings. The many subject positions that the artist and audience member take up are then available for rehearsal and further auditioning.

Subjectivities are full of energy and are never realized in a neutral or immobile state. Indeed, bell hooks (1994) reminds us how important it is for pedagogues to consider "ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress," which implies that motion is required for any creative method of learning

to take place (6). We should not assume that a “teacher” will remain an expert in her class or that a “student” is only a receptor of knowledge.

The traditional role of teacher and student was quickly disrupted at the start of our Collective Energy meetings. At one of our earliest workshop sessions, I presented a PowerPoint full of what I thought were good focus questions to articulate goals for our group. As I was the most experienced artist, I felt I had a good grasp on what we needed to focus on to develop as socially responsible artists. I was the teacher, right? I got about halfway through my presentation before I looked up and saw that every participating artist at the meeting wrinkled their noses and shook their heads. “Do you want us to take *notes!*!” asked Q. I didn’t know what to do—it was the very beginning, and I was already falling back on habits from my classroom training. Tony quickly came to my rescue when he took out a piece of scratch paper and a marker and suggested that we “brainstorm our way through this.” I meant well and had done my due diligence as a “facilitator” or “teacher” to come prepared with a clear plan on what the student artists needed to learn. However, that traditional role did not ask for the very investment that we were seeking from our audience members, which ironically was the topic of discussion!

Thankfully, what Collective Energy brainstormed was a very effective and inclusive list of questions adapted loosely from a reading we had all completed about activism by Yvonne Bynoe (2004). Tony’s quick thinking and the group’s willingness to be fluid about the course of the workshops disrupted the traditional social structures and expectations of language, teacher/student, and performer/audience. This constant shifting of roles between me and each of the student artists also yielded incredibly creative outcomes for most of our group discussions; outcomes that would never have surfaced without a commitment to critically engaging with one another as a teacher *and* a student. Although uncomfortable and new, we agreed to transgress these traditional roles and thus transform the Collective Energy workshops and rehearsal processes to spaces where we were each held accountable for our own investment. You can only get a return on what you put in.

The same is true on the scale of an artist and an audience member. We modeled the transaction during our group sessions, but the challenge was to include the same strategy during performances. According to artist/educator Charles Garoian (1999), during performance there is a transaction of language, an exchange that takes place while the subjectivity of “teacher” and “student” constantly shifts between the “artist” and “audience member” until “both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire in Garoian 1999, 60). When this dual role of teacher and student is acknowledged



in a performance, then both audience and performer are implicated as responsible for constructing the meaning behind the language used in a performance. In other words, language is the currency of the transaction between artist and audience. What Collective Energy discovered as time passed was that not every audience member wanted the responsibility of becoming a teacher. Conflict is inevitable in performance because of the different social positions each person present inhabits, so a possible objective of spoken word is to increase awareness of these subject positions. Doing so establishes a sense of accountability for the outcome of a performance from everyone involved.

The questions that Tony jotted down as we were brainstorming that night soon became the guiding questions we turned to as we approached each new performance opportunity. We asked:

- What do we want to accomplish?
- Who has the power to control the result?
- What do they need to hear in order to act?
- Who do they need to hear it from?
- How can we ensure that voice is given to these issues?
- What do we need to develop?
- How do we know what's working?

Every time these questions were asked, the student artists put themselves in a position of reflection about the social relations that contextualize their often-oppressed reality. They authored their own questions and then used that system during our sessions to employ an assessment of checks and balances. This coconstructed list of questions was one way that the student artists tilted the imbalance of power that shaped our interactions with one another as student and teacher and also served to imbalance their relationships with the audience. A disruption of traditional roles, and the power such disruptions can yield, was particularly important as I began to examine my own position in Collective Energy. It is my hope that by articulating academically what I learned about artistically the social structures that reinforce and sustain unequal power relations will begin to be dismantled. The student artists have indeed become my teacher even as I assume a position of supposed authority.

## Treasure Chest

One of the initial writing challenges posed for Collective Energy was one Toby called the Treasure Chest. The purpose of this exercise was to focus critical attention on the sources of inspiration for each student artist of Collective Energy. During our second meeting, she asked everyone to bring an item in the next week that represented a part of who they were and what motivated them to write. I explained that understanding our own motivations would assist in the shaping of our performances and we might be surprised by what we found. Stacey, who was typically pretty quiet during group discussion, was the first to volunteer to share her item for our Treasure Chest. Surprised, because I usually had to make it a point to invite her comments, I asked her to pass around the photograph she brought in. The image was of her older sister and her sister's new daughter. Again, I was surprised because Stacey was nowhere to be found in the image, with the exception of the similar features that clearly marked the girl in the photo as her sibling. We passed the photo around the room as she explained:

STACEY: A sibling that's older, you look up to them, but it was opposite with my sister. She was always the example of what not to do. I learned a lot about myself through her, and I learned how to interact with people and interact with life.

We have a different relationship. I do [love her] but I don't think I'm an emotional person, which is quite honest . . .

We're on two different levels right now, but I've learned to appreciate the type of person that she is and to see we have the same qualities.

CRYSTAL: What made you bring her pic for the treasure chest?

STACEY: During my teenage years it was hard. We had sibling rivalry. She was the pretty one, everybody loved her, and she was the best person—I don't know . . . the cool sister, I guess you could say. Which is weird because she was the cool kid, but I had my own group, but I was more on the positive level I guess you could say? We didn't see eye to eye. We never did anything with each other. I still feel like I don't know her. We don't really talk.

Stacey's first words describing her relationship with her sister imply opposition and friction. She speaks of a sisterly relationship that is tumultu-

ous, in which she plays a role that is contrary, yet she acknowledges that they share “the same qualities.” Stacey’s identification of herself as both separate and same to her sister offers an interesting site for exploring how subjectivities and discourses are constructed. What makes examining this process even more valuable is that Stacey used her position as a poet to both affirm and disrupt the ways in which she recognized herself. Helen Harper (2000) suggests, “[I]dentification involves a recognition of similarity,” causing a subject to draw boundaries around the self and mark those outside such boundaries as “other.” Harper elaborates, “Identification is a process of substitution and displacement . . . where we attempt to replace internally what is missing externally” (3). Stacey concedes that she and her sister are familiar because they are related by blood; however, she proceeds to list several traits such as “cool,” “pretty,” or “loved” by everyone that mark her as not just different from but as less than her sister. Stacey does not recognize herself as legitimately falling into any of these categories because they are unavailable to her; they are occupied by her sister. Perhaps Stacey’s motivation to write and perform is derived from her ability to imagine herself inhabiting positions that she feels unable to otherwise access and to create subjectivities that may have never been vacant in her experience.

Recognition of self as a valid subject occurs during the process of being recognized by others as a valid subject. Operating as a particular subject within a particular discourse can be viewed as an activity that we partake of but do not wholly govern. In other words, Stacey refuses to participate in a discourse that would label her as “emotional”; however, she is not in a position to fully determine which discourses she gets marked as participating in. We don’t always get to determine the memberships we are identified as having by others, especially when those identifying us have more power than we do. Performing her own narrative is an opportunity for Stacey to transform the subjectivities she has grown accustomed to, or been assigned. Another person may view her performance as very emotional, thus inscribing Stacey with those characteristics whether she desires them or not. Our conversation continues:

STACEY: She made me view myself differently because I didn’t do a lot of things that other people did. Back home, like, back at school people don’t hang around people that don’t do what you do. She brought out my best and worst. She doesn’t know it and I guess I’m figuring this out myself now, but she, oh Lord, [Stacey tries not to cry], she taught me how to love myself and how to try to love other people. I’m really guarded and that’s sort of how I write.

CRYSTAL: I think that's really interesting seeing how you do write and you share it publicly. So why did you bring a picture of your sis?

Q: It was the first thing she saw on the dresser.

STACEY: [crying now] I think I brought this because with Victoria (her niece) because of the baby—now I don't see her as my sister. I see her as a mother; because we're close in age that's difficult for me to see. It represents someone I wish I knew but will probably never get to know.

Stacey continues to express a desire for intimacy with her sister in a relationship that is socially structured to fulfill such a need. She is determined to connect herself to her performance of spoken word in order to make whole what she views as a lack. Although she is the younger sibling, Stacey mentioned earlier her older sister's example of "what not to do," making Stacey feel the need to remove or demarcate herself from that example. While the audience may not substantiate Stacey's subjectivity, her performance and imagining authenticates it for her. Stacey comments that she sees herself as "guarded" and that she feels disconnected from her poetry in the same way. Stacey's choice to bring in this image of her sister and her sister's child signifies another desire: to be more emotionally expressive. It was difficult for me to hear this passionate artist describe a void that she associated with her defense mechanisms while being vulnerable enough to shed tears in front of the group during one of our first meetings. The photograph stands for difference in Stacey's life, and that difference is painful because it implies *distance*. The absence and loss that identify Stacey's subjectivity are also driving motivators for the ways in which she aims to use her spoken word performance.

Performance functions in this way as an attempt to make connections between the discourses she willingly takes part in and those that distinguish her as uncool, unpretty, and separate. Stacey uses spoken word poetry as a way to "assert difference . . . in all its forms and manifestations, to find a commonality in the experience of difference without compromising its distinctive realities and effects" (Gentile in Orner 1992, 85). In other words, Stacey is acknowledging her different and sometimes negative subjectivities through her performance and through the ways she contributed to Collective Energy. Stacey then acts out her difference, possibly as a mode of

seeking alliance and connection with others who also inhabit or are assigned “different” subjectivities. Spoken word poetry then becomes a tool for Stacey to distinguish herself, affirm her experiences of the consequences of her difference, and to make useful connections across the categories in which she is cast, providing her with agency and making tangible the social boundaries she abides within. Performance also illuminates the spaces where those boundaries are porous, making her subjectivities blurry and indistinct at times, blending and separating Stacey’s reality and imagination at different junctures. There is the chance for a great deal of personal mobility within such a performance practice. Stacey’s story is one example of the multiple roles the members of Collective Energy were cast in—and the casting was not simply passive, for Stacey cast herself there, too. Our identities were scribed by the audience and by our performances. Stacey demonstrates the process of recognizing herself as a subject through performance. She was busy learning to understudy for a variety of particular positions, as was I. Exercising new subjectivities is significant because it provided Stacey and me a place to experiment with a variety of roles should we desire to alter or adjust our positions.

Because spoken word poetry performance is an embodied mode of inquiry, in order to be effective, it is important to address the ways in which my body performs for an audience before I open my mouth to share a poem. My body may be interpreted as telling a story that my words contradict. This point leads me to the concept of “passing” that I find myself continually returning to, mostly because I have passed on many occasions for numerous people. Passing is how I navigate the world I live in, because it occasionally allows me to either squeeze past conflict or to manipulate conflict. This privileged contradiction and performance has been the source for the majority of the splits in myself that I have experienced and that I have intentionally kept separate. Evelyn Alsultany (2002) speaks effectively to the logic that shapes such splinters:

My identity fractures as I experience differing dislocations in multiple contexts. Sometimes people otherize me, sometimes they identify with me. Both situations can be equally problematic. Those who otherize me fail to see a shared humanity and those who identify with me fail to see difference. (107)

The “either/or” option is unacceptable because it is both false and limiting as a dichotomy and it excludes the multifaceted variety that composes my

subjectivity. Another issue is that I have been forced to respond to others according to the response that my body and my being provoke from them.

I am never the one that raises the issue of identity politics within a conversation; typically, I skirt around it. Because of this, my response has not been an active one; my response has been “passive,” similar to the way that I have “passed” through life, through expectations, through society. I have grown tired of this feeling. It is exhausting to be required to justify my very existence and to locate myself so that others know how to interact with me. As a result of this common experience, what has become clear is that fluidity is something desirable, a skill to be developed rather than denied. A willingness to adapt or to adjust behavior in accordance with one’s environment is an ability that is demanded of most people of color, commonly understood as a “double consciousness” as defined by Frantz Fanon (1967) in his expansion of W. E. B. Du Bois’s work on race and society. Du Bois (1903) explains that having a double consciousness for an African American male is “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (4). While Du Bois was speaking specifically to the division that he perceived between being Black, male, and American, Fanon focuses that idea by suggesting that “the black man has two dimensions: one with his fellows, the other with the white man” (17). Fanon goes on to remark that mastering language affords remarkable power (1967, 18). Imagine then how much more extensive and complicated this process of fracturing identity and self can be for those of us who embody and exist on multiple ethnic and sexual planes at once. The fractures that Alsultany (2002) designates are a result of succumbing to and perpetuating the illusion that Brookes (1992) titled a deadly lie. Coping to survive may keep us in motion, and it seems that performance supplies us with tools to explore the cracks of our composure.

Similar to Stacey’s earlier example, Tony also used spoken word as a way to move between the multitudes of subject positions that he acknowledges. His lesson on fluidity and fracturing also stems from the item he brought to share for the Treasure Chest activity. The story behind Tony’s item, like Stacey’s, centers on a lesson he has learned from an influential family member.

TONY: In 1995, my Uncle Tony passed away from AIDS—when I was visiting him two days before he died, I was telling him,

“I need a wallet.” He was like, “What you need a wallet for? You young, you ain’t got no money.” [laughter from the whole group] And I was like, I do have money. He said, “Alright, well, when you go back to your grandma’s house, look in this drawer next to my bed and there’s a wallet in there. You can have that one.” I said, “Cool.” So I went to grandma’s house that same night, opened up his drawer, and inside was this really cool wallet, but there was a crisp, really clean one dollar bill inside. I looked at the dollar and thought why is this random one dollar bill in here? So the next day I went back to the hospital, and I said, “Uncle Tony,” except I used to call him UT for short. So I said, “UT, I found this one dollar bill in your wallet.” He said, “Good, you should keep that cuz although on the surface it says ‘one’ the dollar bill is four quarters, and it’s also twenty nickels, and it’s also ten dimes, and it’s also one hundred pennies.” He said, no matter what, people always look at you like you’re just a dollar, but there is so much more. Like, so many more pieces to you. Like, never just defining yourself by what’s on your face. So I’ve been—so I framed—laminated that one dollar bill; I’ve never touched it or spent it.

Obviously what I’m learning about myself is that there is so much more to me. And sometimes people just see this [waves dollar]. Um, so that’s what I wanted to bring and show . . .

This snapshot of Tony’s life is almost overwhelming in the host of thoughts, questions, and feelings that it reveals. As one of Tony’s closest friends, I have never heard him mention this story, or his uncle, outside of this one incident. During his membership in Collective Energy, none of Tony’s poems explicitly dealt with HIV/AIDS. The lesson being taught here is clear: you are more than your surface, or in poststructural terms, you are more than the subjectivities you are assigned or choose to take up. His uncle was also teaching him about interpellation and recognition—some folks “look at you like you’re just a dollar”—and Tony has since worked to refuse “just defining yourself by what’s on your face.” As a young African American male, this wisdom passed on by his older uncle is instruction that is particularly salient. Spoken word poetry has functioned for Tony as a way to measure and recognize himself as a subscriber to various discourses; it creates a space and opportunity for him to demonstrate “that there is so much more” to him, even when others only glimpse his surface. On

a larger scale, performing as a unit full of divergent subjectivities and a crisscross of experiences in each show was good practice in switching places for Collective Energy.

Another theme present here is the various combinations of coins that can work together to equal an entire dollar. It's possible that Tony's uncle was using this example to refer not only to the many parts of Tony as an individual but also to remind him that his family members had each contributed in some way to Tony's overall worth. If a dollar is missing even a penny, then it ceases to be a dollar.

Tony represents for his family a first-generation college student, a performer, and he has successfully completed a graduate degree at a major university. In a not-so-subtle way, Tony's dollar was a reminder to him that the appearance of wholeness that a single dollar gives is an illusion. By climbing the ranks of higher education and working steadily to earn respect through his academic work, Tony has sought the mobility and power that can be afforded by "mastering the language," as Fanon said (1967, 18). Tony has performed as a college student and an employee, operating in traditional discourses of success, and has at the same time disrupted the social ideals that fuel the definition of those same discourses by writing his own. He is aware that he is not one cohesive, whole entity but can be made whole through many different combinations that have been assigned differing values by the weighted scale of the society in which he lives. He uses spoken word to resist the value assignments placed upon his experience, his family, and himself.

Spoken word poetry performance has served him in this way as a method to subversively rebel against those assignments, at the same time affirming his experience and perspective. Spoken word has provided Tony with a way to challenge those who would judge him just by "what's on his face," while he also has actively participated in the practices (such as attending graduate school) that previously excluded African American men. By constructing his own performances to create new combinations of roles to participate in, Tony has effectively recognized himself and worked to rearrange what he wants to change. Tony sometimes uses his performance as a way to confront and challenge how others see him and the way that the matrix of domination has organized his life (Collins 1991). Highly intelligent wordplay, references to overlooked historical facts, and dynamic delivery are skills that Tony calls upon during his performance. Illusion disintegrates with each line that he pronounces on stage. He energizes stagnant possibilities for hope and charges those who witness his performance to take action.



**Black Man's Call to Action***Tony Keith*

Words have power

Letters are electrically charged and when bounded together create enough energy to cause massive explosions

Blowing massive mountain tops into tiny metaphorical erosions

And it is I that stands atop one of those mounds

With words, phrases, vowels, syllables, and sounds, and I'm screaming:

THIS IS FOR ALL OF YA'LL STILL DREAMING!

Those of you whose hue starts off as Black until you've been beaten down to blue

Don't know who the f\*ck you are cuz you're busy letting society define you

Ain't got a pot to piss in, a window to throw it out of, or no food to chew

And so you're starving

Starving for knowledge

Not cuz you can't grasp the language but cuz no one took the time to teach you

They claim you're too stubborn to listen to

Your head's too thick to even get a brick through

That you're nothing but a no good, pants sagging, baby making, juvenile delinquent

All that you're capable to do is eat, sleep, shyt, and screw

BUT BROTHERS I HAVE SOMETHING DIFFERENT TO TELL YOU!

And I invoke in my self the spirit of everything African within me

From my forehead to my collarbone

From my bloodstream to my skin tone

From my strong back to my humble knees

From my shinbone to my callused feet

AND I DECLARE YOU FREE!

No longer property

No longer a weapon for society to continue to arm you with massive missiles of misguided perceptions of manhood into your looking glasses

So F\*CK sitting in the back writing R.I.P. to your friends on that dirty desk you're now in the front teaching classes

So F\*CK being afraid to use slang; I'm granting you the right to use the language of your people to move the masses

And F\*CK waiting in the back of the line to get to the front; I'm giving you a lifetime supply of free V.I.P. back-stage passes

And if I someone says you didn't pay your way, say F\*CK you, it's already being deducted from my taxes

And if they need some proof, tell them they can find it printed on the receipts of paper made from trees once used to whip the back of slave's asses

And if they still have questions, tell them you can call up the Black Men's Headquarters and have them send that shyt out through smoke signals or Morse code dashes

And if they still have questions, tell them to take a pin, and prick your skin and check your deoxyribonucleic acid—better known as your D.N.A.

BECAUSE THEY DON'T NEED ANSWERS

THEY DON'T NEED ANYTHING

And if they do—tell them to come see me cuz Brothers I got you

I'm holding ya'll up on my shoulders to give you a higher view

And I'm carrying ya'll through mountain tops and through muddy waters, and don't worry, cuz historically, I've been known to split that shyt in two . . .

This piece symbolized a sort of breakthrough for Tony. This was one of the very first poems he wrote and delivered in an aggressive, unapologetic style. Tony's performance prior to this poem was very diplomatic. He took a risk in this piece by boldly pointing out the illusions confirming their existence and then offering an alternative. Spoken word poetry functions for Tony here as a method of recognizing himself as an autonomous, authoritative young Black man. He names himself author of freedom for the young Black men listening to him. He begins by listing the traits often ascribed to young Black men, such as "lazy" and "stubborn" "juvenile delinquents" whose sole ability lies in their practice of consumption, production of waste, and careless baby-making. Then, he boldly denies each and every one of these categories on his own authority. He calls upon his cultural heritage and stands upon nothing except his birthright as an African American to rebuke the negative stereotypes projected onto young men of color. He invites them to participate in other subjectivities that share in the authority he has taken as a way to resist "the misguided perceptions of manhood" that are made available.

Tony used "Black Man's Call to Action" as a way to confront his frustrations with the view of the "surface" that he once identified with and, as Althusser (1971) reminds us, answered to. Tony's poem calls up sameness by addressing a broad yet varied category of people unified only by a racial thread that signifies home and a sense of familiarity of experience. At the same time, he also works to establish difference by othering his participation as a member in the subjecthood of "Black men." Tony subverts the ways he is expected by society to enact his role as a "Black man." In other words, he makes use of the "surface," of "what's on his face," to gather his audience under one banner and then disrupt that unity by isolating the smaller units that create the whole. In this way, Tony uses spoken word poetry to rebel against the same discourses he willingly takes part in—so they will be overlapped with new and different discourses that provide better options for his objectives. Tony works to counter the very culture he participates in by singing his own melody throughout the illusion of harmony.

Social transformation, then, begins to take place when the performers or student artists are able to renegotiate a way of making meaning that no longer situates them in a victimized state. Rather, their repositioning or realignment of their position, even if imagined, changes the social and

material narratives that have scribed them at least within a certain time and space. By exercising agency in this way, they develop the ability to teach others (such as audience members) the same technique. Through the creation and recreation of subjectivity, the student artists produce new readings of old, oppressive texts and tell new stories within stale social constraints. Spoken word performance provides a way to be seen and heard for students whose concerns, lives, and dreams are often unheeded. Realizing an active relationship between artist and audience is key for enlarging the scope that performance provides to view the effects of social injustices. The oppressive sense of isolation that often results from experiences of injustice or inequality can potentially be identified and altered once these personal experiences are located within the structural divisions that determine material aspects of social existence. Performing spoken word makes available a discourse through which an alternate picture of such structures can be seen. Like a smudged, cracked mirror, the visions that can be seen are not always seen clearly, nor is seeing or hearing quite enough. However, once these structures are identified and their consequences are taken seriously and understood in relation to personal experiences, then new plans of action (or strategies) can be devised in order to promote social change.

If we hone in for a moment on the issues of autobiographical interrogations that spoken word poetry can induce, then Collective Energy performances can be situated as a means of self-inquiry and knowledge production because of the audiences' interpretation of a performance that is at once fiercely personal and unabashedly public. Each historical moment in which a spoken word piece is performed will render a new version or translation of the artists' autobiographies. What makes Collective Energy so powerful is that it provides the space and focused time to examine those subject positions and impose new and plural meanings upon them. Our experiences together still operate for me like a palimpsest, an old scroll or writing tablet that is used again and again after old writing has been erased. Collective Energy is the tablet as much as the writings for me, and the stages we shared continue to impact the work that I do with students around the world teaching them how to utilize the arts as tools for empowerment. So I ask, what does this mean for pieces that are developed collaboratively? For no matter how metaphorical or abstract the language used, no matter how delicate the melody and unified the harmony, the majority of content refers to an experience or idea that is seeded in the life of the student artists.

This is my effort to reconcile the separation of mind, body, and spirit that is so often demanded by academic work (Brookes 1992; Dehli 1991; Rockhill