Spoken Stories, Spoken Word: An Insurgent Practice for Restorative Education

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Abstract

This paper uses the terminology of whiteness, settler colonialism, culturally responsive pedagogy, and restorative education to interrogate the usage of spoken word in schools. I argue that spoken word can function as a form of resistance to white colonialist practices and as an advocate of emotional learning and critical education. This paper focuses on representation, student empowerment, and identity exploration in the context of education institutions. It crosses borders between education and authenticity, between classrooms and real life, and between teachers and students. I aim to ground this essay in the American Studies discipline as it discusses systems of power in the United States and seeks to disrupt dominant narratives through spoken word as an alternative education strategy for dismantling white supremacy and validating marginalized identities. This work is only a small part of the larger conversation on restorative justice in education.

For many young students in the United States, schools are more of a prison than a place for education. Schools enforce strategies of whiteness in order to prohibit freedom of expression and force youth into a constraining box of what they ought to be. Yet, education is credited for expanding the mind and opening up a world of opportunities. For bell hooks, "the classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom."[1] bell hooks captures the essence of what the U.S. education system sorely needs: liberation. Non-conforming strategies of learning offer multiple modes for fulfilling this aspiration. One of those modes is spoken word.

I have never taken a class on spoken word, but I did attend performances by my high school's class for

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[1] Quote by bell hooks found on azquotes.com

Black Box Theater. When I watched their collaborative, multi-person spoken word performances, I was awestruck. Spoken word to me has always been a compelling, raw, vulnerable way of communicating the self, experiences, thoughts, and feelings. I *felt* every poem and I resonated internally with the words and emotions of the speakers. With creative voice and rhythm, spoken word is a way for students to talk about social justice and issues that matter to them, while moving, acting, and working together. The unique, personal quality of spoken word pieces offers a wide range of possible ways to tell stories and make meaning.

I aim to write about spoken word in order to speak out against whiteness in education, which hurts us all. From whiteness arises disparities that harm and privilege people based on categories of identity. This paper is a reflection on how classrooms can move away from institutional whiteness and towards a more liberated education and community. One way to actively dismantle whiteness is through fostering critical ways of thinking at a young age, starting by addressing discrimination and identity development in the primary and secondary classroom. In this paper, I will explore spoken word as one method to adopt critical thinking, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and active, supportive learning environments for students. Spoken word can be used as a tool for agency in learning, committing to social justice, promoting genuine care for students, and working towards a resistant—restorative—education.

Positionality

To begin, I want to clearly state my positionality. I am a white, cisgender female student coming from an upper-middle class family. I live in the Twin Cities in Minnesota on stolen land that was once occupied by Dakota and Ojibwe tribes, a land rife with broken treaties. I am complicit in that colonialism and continue to struggle to understand my whiteness and complicity in racism. Needless to say, my pre-college classes did not critique whiteness and how it showed up in the classroom, even though we discussed themes of social justice. My ideas of race and racism have changed immensely—and for the better—since coming to Macalester, and although many of Macalester's classes have not radically addressed whiteness, I am much more aware of my identity, my personal responsibility, and the reality of racial oppression.

I grew up in a mostly white neighborhood. While my high school had a somewhat racially and culturally diverse student body, my International Baccalaureate classes had mostly white students and mostly white teachers. I highly valued the diversity of my high school at the time, which influenced my decision in applying to Macalester, where "24% [of students] are citizens of another country" and "23% of U.S. student body are students of color" (Macalester College website). I wanted to go to a "diverse" school, but in this desire, I overlooked the way I was buying into the commodified

diversity Macalester was selling and the way whiteness was still foundational to the institution.

The (neo)liberal arts college of Macalester uses racial and ethnic diversity as an enticing factor for prospective students. While the website highlights the number of students of color on campus, it neglects to mention the number of white students, which is much higher. Macalester proclaims its multiculturalism and commitment to social justice, but racism thrives on campus. How can Macalester say that it "values the diverse cultures of our world and recognizes [its] responsibility to provide a supportive and respectful environment for students, staff and faculty of all cultures and backgrounds," when we have racist imagery written in bathrooms, student and teacher-initiated racial aggression, demeaning feedback on language use in papers, and swastikas vandalized around campus? (Macalester College Mission Statement). Macalester has a plethora of words with little action for change. As a higher education institution on Native land, Macalester reproduces whiteness; thus, the college cannot say that "by making the commitment to diversity, the College plays its part in reversing the impact of [the lengthy history of discrimination and restricted opportunity], and thereby provides new hope to succeeding generations of scholars" (Employee Handbook, 12.11 Affirmative Action Policy Statement). Neither can I, as a white college student, ever say that I am done playing my part in the fight

against white supremacy. It is a continuous journey and we have very far to go before this statement can hope to be true.

Glossary

Spoken word: Guante, a Minneapolis, Minnesota-based spoken word artist, activist, and educator, describes spoken word as "an umbrella term. It refers to poetry that is read aloud; it may contain elements of theater, stand-up comedy, storytelling, rhetoric, jazz, hip hop, or other forms. We could go deeper with this, in terms of the difference between 'recitation' and 'performance,' or the difference between creating work that is meant to be performed vs. work that is about the page first and then happens to be performed (and how each approach impacts the writing itself), but I think this is a good starting point. You could also potentially use the term '**performance poetry**'" (Guante, 2016). Spoken word is valuable for youth identity development, resistance, and resiliency, and can be used in education to combat white supremacy and empower young, marginalized voices.

Spoken word has origins in numerous black arts and non-conforming cultures throughout the 20th century. The Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s reinvigorated black arts culture and black artists worked to combine written and spoken art forms through poetry and music (Fisher, 2003, 363). The Black Arts movement, a relative of the Black Power movement which lasted roughly from 1960 to 1970, aimed to establish greater

representation of black people and culture in art and literature. The movement was politically engaged and saw the most radical development in poetry thus far (A Brief Guide to the Black Arts Movement). Black poets experimented with poetry by using black English language varieties, jazz and blues musical elements, rhythm, and techniques from the Beat literary movement. The idea of what poetry could be grew during this time as well as the number of Indigenous, black, and other artists of color involved, although it should be noted that the Black Arts movement was "sometimes criticized as misogynist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and racially exclusive" (A Brief Guide to the Black Arts Movement).

Spoken word emerged in the 1990s from the Black Arts Movement and from an oppositional,"non-conformist community of writers and poets" known as the Beat Poets (Miazga). The invention of the printing press had commodified the product of poetry, but poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Amiri Baraka revolutionized it. The new poetry became a revitalized, politicized, "visceral, in-your-face style of poetry" that was given the name "spoken word" (Miazga). Spoken word flows from oral traditions and performance, with influences from "rap, hip-hop, storytelling, theater, and jazz, rock, blues, and folk music. Characterized by rhyme, repetition, improvisation, and word play, spoken word poems frequently refer to issues of social justice, politics, race, and community" (Spoken Word—Glossary of Poetic Terms). As is the case for many poems, spoken work is highly personal, yet it adds another element: community engagement and interaction. Spoken word poetry events are an opportunity for many different poets to come together and audience members to participate in an 'open-mic' (Dymoke, 2017, 228).

From the spoken word movement of the 90s emerged an emphasis on youth spoken word, which now consists primarily of school and community programs, open-mics, and slam competitions. For instance, each year Chicago hosts the Louder Than a Bomb slam festival, which draws upwards of 10,000 attendants, of which 650 youth perform (Weinstein & West, 2012, 283). Other events across the United States and the world include Urban Word NYC, Brave New Voices (international), and Youth Speaks (San Francisco). Numerous scholars credit spoken word poetry as valuable for "the development of literate identities; increased self-confidence; a sense of self-efficacy, belonging, and purpose; and an enhanced understanding of artistic craft" (Weinstein & West, 2012, 284).

Whiteness: Whiteness is an institutional production and reproduction of power and a familiarity with institutions created by settler colonialism and ownership of property. Steve Martinot (2010), Instructor Emeritus at the Center for Interdisciplinary Programs at San

Francisco State University, offers an important definition to what whiteness is:

> Personal identification with institutional practices in their familiarity is what constitutes one's individual familiarity to the others of that social framework, one's sense of belonging to it. White racialized identity is not a psychological identity...It does not answer the question, "Who am I?" Instead, it concerns *what* one is in a social framework or system of social categorizations. It encompasses one's ethical possibilities, that is, what is permissible socially as structured by the underlying cultural logic that produces that racialized identity...Whiteness and white society can constitute themselves only by racializing, by dehumanizing and dominating other people they define as non-white for that purpose. (43-44, 66)

Whiteness extends beyond a psychological white-racialized identity to address the larger societal structures that give white people the most access to academic, economic, and political advantages. "When we describe institutions as 'being' white (institutional whiteness), we are pointing to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: white bodies gather, and cohere to form

the edges of such spaces" (Ahmed, 2007, 157). The result is a prescribed comfort for white people while, "frequently, People of Color are aware of the reality that not all space (physical, cultural, linguistic, etc.) is open to them" (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2016, 23). In these spaces, whiteness is perceived as normal. It appears in the form of colorblindness, of ignorance, spacial dominance, and belonging (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2016, 20).

Schools reproduce whiteness by placing value on white middle-class ideals above all others. This has been reenacted in boarding schools, in the punitive behavioral tactics of school administrators and teachers, higher level classes with majority white students, curriculum chosen by white, upper class school boards, and the criminalization of Native youth, students of color, and queer, trans, and poor students. Disregarding the presence of white hegemony denies the very real existence of racial hatred. As scholar George Lipsitz (2006) says, "as the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations" (1). Whiteness advances white people. Whiteness in the classroom can take the form of a single-culture climate, which privileges the cultures of white students over students of color. Based on the class environment, some students immediately feel that they are out of place, while other students do not have to question whether

or not they belong. "Monoculturalism affects institutional practices and beliefs whose effects can filter down to the individual student," letting students know that some lives are more valued than others (Gusa, 2010, 475). This culture of inclusion and exclusion creates an uneven sense of worth among students, to detrimental effect. Many teachers have looked to culturally relevant and critical pedagogy to counteract these harmful effects of whiteness.

White people tend to be more unaware of their privilege and participation in racism than the historically marginalized people around them. "Unaccount[ability] for Whiteness only serves to recreate this system of racial privilege and domination" (Cabrera & Watson & Franklin, 2016, 120), thus the process of dismantling whiteness begins with awareness of "White racial identity and ideology" (Gusa, 2010, 478). White people and whiteness are different concepts, although they overlap. White people do not necessarily agree with whiteness and some are actively working against it, but white privilege is something that all white people unfairly benefit from on account of being white. As white people, we have a responsibility to call out our own whiteness and work towards anti-racist change within ourselves and white communities.

Settler Colonialism: As addressed by Tuck & Yang (2012), settler colonialism is defined as the ideology and act of taking land from another group of people for personal gain and profit with the intention of abiding there. This results in forced "settler sovereignty" over the other group. As historian Patrick Wolfe (2006) states, settler colonialism is "inherently eliminatory" and, in the situation of the land that is now the United States, includes a logic of genocide. Some of the ways colonization manifests is through the control of economy, government, social contexts, and education. Settler colonialism has a long and devastating history in the United States and continues to claim space and devalue lives.

In his excerpt entitled "Colonial" from *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, David Kazanjian (2014) argues that the idea of colonial "American exceptionalism" fuels the myth that the United States is a just nation, promoting freedom and democracy for all human beings. In reality, the United States was built upon the labor, abuse, and genocide of hundreds of thousands of Indigenous and African people. The subjugation of Native people and land, the transatlantic slave trade, slave and exploited immigrant labor, and the murders of countless black and brown bodies "were not simply aberrations from or exceptions to the history and culture of the United States, but rather constitutive of all that it was to become" (Kazanjian, 2014).

Whiteness and colonialism are inseparable in the United States. la paperson (2017), also known as K. Wayne Yang and an associate professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, San Diego, describes this intersection:

The 'settler' is a site of exception from which whiteness emerges. Whiteness is property; it is the right to have rights; it is the legal human; the anthropocentric normal is written in its image. Not all settlers at all times enjoy the full privileges available to the "settler"; rather, settler supremacy is constructed and maintained by a number of technologies: citizenship, private property, civil and criminal innocence, normative settler sexuality, and so on. (10-11)

From the founding of the United States, land ownership, wealth, and whiteness determined who was considered a voting citizen and who was not. While intersectional identities—such as class, gender, and sexuality—lead to varied access to white privilege, white supremacy is rampant and (re)created by institutional hierarchies, including the U.S. schooling system.

Boarding Schools: Boarding schools created by white settlers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for the indoctrination, cultural genocide, and spiritual murder of Native children are one violent example of colonization in schools.

To further the eliminationist goal of white colonizers, settlers turned toward assimilation and constructed boarding schools for Native children. Assimilation was the best of both worlds for white settlers; they could "'civilize' Indians while demonstrating the power and vitality of America's institutions [of education]," thus reinforcing the white superiority of the United States (Hoxie, 2001, 11). As Richard Henry Pratt, U.S. Army general and founder or the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, stated, the goal of the schools was to "kill the Indian and save the man," through the prohibition of Native languages, the separation between Native children and their families, cutting their hair, changing their clothing, and instituting harsh discipline. The schools, first started by Christian missionaries, were rife with verbal, sexual, and physical abuse (Smith, 2013). This education intentionally targeted Native children and violently stripped them of their culture and personhood. Many were traumatized and angered by their experience; some still viewed the schools as a means to learn how to get ahead in a changing society. In all cases, the Native students were left stranded "between two cultures and faced an uncertain future" after their graduation (Calloway, 1996, 179).

Native boarding schools are only one example of the historical trauma that profoundly affects marginalized communities. The brutality and violence of slavery, humiliation and isolation of Japanese internment, denial of asylum and protection to Latinx immigrants, laws and policies supporting cultural genocide, and countless other acts of discrimination based on race and class all contribute to the generational trauma of many students today. Colonization and whiteness

continue in schools through the enforcement of standard English only, zero-tolerance policies, standardized tests and curriculum created by white, middle class administrators, rigid classroom structures, and police presence in schools. The oppression of students' identities and the language control and eradication practices in United States schools makes clear the need for a new, decolonized system of education. While this issue can never be solved without an institutional transformation and full payment of the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) owed to students from systematically marginalized cultures, I hope to add to the conversation one possible means of striving for something better. Spoken word is one workable method for installing an alternative education for students in schools today.

English Language Varieties:
- Standard English: A type of English dialect descended from white colonizers and taught as normative in institutional education. Most U.S. schools, private colleges, and universities expect a measure of Standard English in class work and discussions and disregard other forms of English dialects and languages. It is worth noting that the concept of a "standard" form of any language is fallible. Laura Greenfield (2011), associate director of the Weissman Center for Leadership and the Liberal Arts, contends that:

living languages cannot be standardized. The only standard languages—languages with finite boundaries and comprehensively accountable features—are dead languages. Any linguist wishing to dispute this would have a hard time producing empirical evidence to the contrary. My claim, therefore, is this: There is no such thing as 'Standard English.' Nevertheless, white American society has a deep investment in perpetuating the myth that 'Standard English' is real; the idea of a standard language as an equal-opportunity tool for advancement works as a perfect foil for the institutionalized racism actually to blame for contemporary racial inequities. As a rhetorical tool, the evocation of a 'Standard English' and all of its corollary linguistic impossibilities gives the false impression that the language practices of individual people of color, rather than the racist practices of American

institutions, are responsible for these inequities. (39)

Standard English exists as an actualized form of white supremacy, rather than as a static ideal. Whiteness establishes a hierarchy of language, thus allowing students who conform to the norm to succeed and those who don't to fall behind. Standard English-only policies perpetuate racism and present another obstacle for students.

- Black English Varieties: *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* author Geneva Smitherman (1977) writes that "Black Dialect is an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America. Black Language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture" (2).
- Spanglish: A blending of Spanish and English language varieties and idioms together.
- Code-switching: Vershawn Ashanti Young—performance artist, actor, anti-racism consultant, trans-disciplinary scholar, and professor at University of Waterloo—says that "code switching may be defined as the use of more than one language or language variety concurrently in conversation...The prevailing definition...advocates language substitution, the linguistic translation of Spanglish or AAE into standard English" (Young, 2009, 49-50).
- Code-meshing: "Blending dos idiomas or copping enough standard English to really make yo' [African American English] be Da Bomb" (Young, 2009, 51). Another way to think of Young's definition of code-meshing is to merge multiple language varieties and dialects in order to be true to yourself and every language culture you identify with as you speak, write, and communicate.

Language arts material sanctioned by white-hegemonic schools places white cultural communication at the center of skilled, professional, and academic writing and speaking. Flores & Rosa (2015) contend that "raciolinguistic ideologies produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant even when engaging in linguistic practices positioned as normative or innovative when produced by privileged white subjects" (150). Whiteness in classrooms scrutinizes the "long-term English learners, heritage language learners, and Standard English learners" and non-conforming language speakers to pinpoint any sign of deviance and stamp it down. White people have a history of stripping away language from minoritized people, as in the cases of Native boarding

schools, slavery, and (Standard) English-only policies. Whiteness permeates accepted academic language and who is considered a "good writer" or public speaker. Culturally responsive and critical pedagogy seek to counteract whiteness; when applied to language, these tools attempt to conceptualize "how the white gaze is attached both to a speaking subject who engages in the idealized linguistic practices of whiteness and to a listening subject who hears and interprets the linguistic practices of language-minoritized populations as deviant based on their racial positioning in society as opposed to any objective characteristics of their language use" (Flores & Rosa, 2015, 151). The institutionalized validation of certain language varieties over others is a subconscious yet sinister underlying issue in many classrooms. Enforcing Standard English only in the classroom means enforcing white supremacy. Recognizing the way language is used as power but also as a key part of culture and identity is one necessary step in calling out whiteness in education.

Culture: Although culture is difficult to define, I think of culture as the lifestyle practices of people. Individuals each have a unique culture, but there are many cross cultural similarities among people that can make up a larger cultural group.

George Yúdice (2014), in his excerpt on "Culture" in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, writes that the word became widely used in the 18th century when it was synonymous to civilization. The noun evolved over time to mean the "intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development; the way of life of a people, group, or humanity in general; and the works and practices of intellectual and artistic activity" (Yúdice, 2014).[2] Modern uses of the word culture also include a focus on its communal aspect, "particularly since this notion of culture serves as a warrant for legitimizing identity-based group claims and for differentiating among groups, societies, and nations" (Yúdice, 2014).

Imperialist western European countries and the United States legitimized their authority to "civilize" other people through their claim to "high culture" and intellect. Post-enlightenment, culture became used "as a means of internalizing control" in which citizens were docile in the maintenance of cultural institutions of power. Anyone who diverged from this hegemonic norm was seen as uncultured and therefore excluded. As divergent groups form subcultures in which they create and define identity: this "implies [a] recognition of cultural difference as a basis for making claims...The problem is that bureaucracies often establish the terms by which cultural difference is recognized and rewarded. In response, some subcultures (and their spokespersons) reject bureaucratic forms of recognition and identification" (Yúdice,

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[2] Yúdice (2014) cites: Williams, Raymond. Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society Fontana;. 1976. Oxford University Press New York, London, 1983.

2014). Thus, strategies of inclusion and exclusion in United States label white, middle class, cisgender males as the norm, while women, people of color, and queer people are considered "others." Categories and stereotypes of otherness are perpetuated in schools, which create advantages for the dominant, "normalized" group.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Culturally Responsive (or Relevant) Pedagogy is a way of teaching that helps students maintain and develop their cultural identity in school.

Identified by researcher Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant pedagogy defines a superior quality of teaching aimed at changing the educational curriculum to incorporate values and experiences of the students in the classroom, particularly students of color, as the education system has mainly followed white cultural ideals (Woolfolk, 2012). Theories about students suffering from a cultural deficit in education began to surface after the Brown v. Board of Education court case when teachers had to confront for the first time the issue of teaching a classroom of students from very different cultural backgrounds. Mainstream (white) culture was viewed as the best and only way to succeed in society. Students of color were bused to white schools during desegregation and were expected to assimilate to a white academic structure (Schmeichel, 2012, 214). The issue of a cultural deficit is always centered on the students who deviate from whiteness; *they* are blamed for their lack of achievement rather than the inherently unequal education system.

Culturally relevant pedagogy involves three parts: academic success, growing in cultural adeptness, and developing a critical way of confronting the status quo (Woolfolk, 2012). It is a way of teaching students that does not deny their funds of knowledge, but facilitates learning and growth while valuing their culture. Teachers can practice culturally relevant pedagogy by having confidence in their students' abilities, instructing them by creating engaging and culturally diverse lessons that promote critical thinking and respect for multiple viewpoints, cultivating students' strengths, and encouraging them to see the purpose of academics beyond solely getting a job (Woolfolk, 2012). To be effective in teaching according to culturally relevant pedagogy, classroom content must be meaningful to students. Therefore, teachers must go beneath a surface-level understanding of culture and know how to teach in a way that is applicable to many different styles of learners (Howard, 2010, 75).

There are criticisms of culturally relevant education, including that it is an insufficient intellectual challenge for students, does not apply to main academic areas such as math and writing, and is only applicable to students of color (Howard, 2010, 70). Many of the concerns about the supposed indoctrinating, anti-American nature of (non-white) ethnic studies classes—as seen in the cases of Tuscon,

Arizona (Palos & McGinnis, 2012) and Oakland, California (Duncan-Andrade, 2011) high schools—are based on assumptions and false perceptions of what ethnic studies is. In reality, ethnic studies does not divide students but rather encourages them to be more loving, thoughtful, and capable citizens. It expands students' and teachers' ways of thinking and takes a more active role in social justice and dismantling white supremacy.

Although culturally relevant pedagogy is a necessary theory to expand the current understanding of classroom learning, it needs to move beyond merely "relevant." Scholar and professor at Michigan State University, Django Paris (2012), points out that cultural relevance is not enough; we must make education culturally *sustaining* for students. A sustaining education, in his words, "requires that [our pedagogies] support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence" (95). bell hooks (1994) writes about experiencing this type of learning before the Brown v Board of Education decision and the move to desegregate schools. hooks describes the immense joy that school brought her at the African American school, but how all that changed when she was bused to a White school after desegregation and culturally sustaining pedagogy was no longer present in her classes:

Almost all our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women. They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers-black folks who used our "minds." We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization...Attending school then was sheer joy. I loved being a student. I loved learning. School was the place of ecstasy-pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure...School was the place where I could...reinvent myself. School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in our all-black schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle. Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority. When we entered racist, desegregated, white

schools we left a world where teachers believed that to educate black children rightly would require a political commitment. Now, we were mainly taught by white teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes. For black children, education was no longer about the practice of freedom. Realizing this, I lost my love of school. (2-3)

The teachers in hooks' African American school took into account her and other students' funds of knowledge to empower them through education. As a result, hooks found life and love in education. Both hooks and Paris show that facilitating students' education through their cultural funds of knowledge is a way of fighting for equal appreciation of all cultures and languages in schools and of empowering students.

In his book, *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools*, Tyrone Howard (2010) cites Irvine and Armento (2001)[3] to emphasize that culturally responsive teaching is for all students, but historically it has only centered around White, middle to upper-class Standard English speakers who are citizens of the United States (71). This does not only affect people of color; when groups of people are systemically brought down, all are brought down together. White supremacy hurts all of us.

Therefore, in addition to culturally sustaining education, students—and teachers—need to apply critical thinking about power structures that exist inside and outside the classroom.

Critical Pedagogy: Critical pedagogy and critical race theory are essential in education and are foundational to American Studies. Biggs (2012) cites Barry Kanpol (1999)[4] in "[describing] critical pedagogy as the methods and means that test and hanker change in institutional structures that allow social injustices and inequalities to perpetuate. It is cultural-political…transformative pedagogy…purposed to invest autonomy and the ability to gain control of one's destiny" (165). In other words, critical pedagogy provides the tools to identify and analyze systems of power and to take personal agency outside of those domineering forces.

Critical pedagogy questions normalized power dynamics, including the student-teacher hierarchy and assumed learning targets in schools. Critical pedagogy and American Studies theories can be thought to employ desocialization, which consists of questioning previously accepted behavior, values, and knowledge normalized through dominant discourses and institutions of power (Shor, 1992). Peter McLaren (1995), distinguished professor in Critical Studies with a focus

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[3] Irvine, J. J., & Armento, B. J. (2001). Culturally responsive teaching: Lesson planning for elementary and middle grades. New York: McGraw Hill.

[4] Kanpol, B. (1999). Critical pedagogy: An introduction (2nd ed.). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

on social justice, describes the way critical pedagogy:

> brings into the arena of schooling practices insurgent, resistant, and insurrectional modes of interpretation which set out to imperil the familiar, to contest the legitimating norms of mainstream social life and to render problematic the common discursive frames and regimes within which 'proper' behavior, comportment, and social interactions are premised. (231)

Racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and classism are all socialized into people at a young age. Passivity perpetuates negative socialization, which is one reason why teachers need an active strategy to dismantle whiteness in class. "To effectively advance the critical pedagogy agenda, justice and compassion must be the exercising rule" (Biggs, 2012, 165). Thus, a justice-centered education must be integral to classroom learning.

Critical pedagogy aims to name and deconstruct dominant systems, which inevitably makes race a central part of the conversation. Racism is one of the root causes of inequity among people and in schools. We live in the "reality of a racialized society" where "'raced' people" are affected everyday by racial constructions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006, 12). Critical race theory has a "goal of the psychic preservation of marginalized groups…A theme of

'naming one's own reality' or 'voice' is entrenched in the work of critical race theorists" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006, 20). In schools, students rarely get the chance to speak to their internal or external identity struggles. Furthermore, classrooms rarely facilitate for white students the realization of which voices are dominant in the room, which are silenced, and why. For white students, spoken word is a space to process things they haven't been exposed to, to question why that is, and to understand why that is problematic.

Towards a Liberative Education

Liberative education is restorative education and restorative education is resistant education. This education seeks to combat white and controlling tactics in classrooms. It is education that necessitates critical and culturally responsive pedagogy along with challenging the use of language in classrooms. Restorative education places the well-being of students and dismantling whiteness at its core. Schools are traditionally places of policing. Students are scrutinized, controlled, and disciplined through harsh measures to keep them in line. What, then, would it mean for spoken word to be a place of freedom from scrutiny? To have a method for education that is "self-consciously and vociferously resistant" to "dominant discourses around power, language, and identity"? (Weinstein & West, 2012, 288). Spoken word has the ability to facilitate restorative justice in education—education that

centers resistance, social justice, and alternative learning styles—only if in itself it facilitates the space for authenticity, truth-telling, community care, and empowerment for students.

Restorative education takes the form of resistance to dominant schooling norms, which prioritize knowledge acquisition and teacher-student hierarchy over the students themselves. Dr. Huey Newton, one of the founders and scholars of the Black Panther Party, created a design for an Intercommunal Youth Institute for black youth to have a more holistic, transparent, and uplifting education "to guide our children toward becoming fully capable of analyzing the problems they will face and to develop creative solutions to deal with them" (Hilliard & Newton, 2008, 5). Dr. Newton wrote this plan aimed specifically for black families and youth, but his ideas of community learning, critical thought, and action are valuable points in the conversation for truthful, anti-white supremacist, and culturally sustaining classrooms. "The instructors and students have mutual love and respect for one another; both understand the need for the principle 'each one help one; each one teach one.' They live, work, and play together. Everything is done collectively in order to develop an understanding of solidarity and camaraderie in a practical way" (Hilliard & Newton, 2008, 5-6). Teachers should not discount student knowledge. In a restorative classroom, every person in the room is cared for, worthy, and deserving of being heard.

Love, respect, and collectivity are what create a healthy, supportive, and caring space—one that is necessary for spoken word. Only in that space can students productively break down borders in the nation, in the classroom, and in themselves.

Spoken word follows no bounds and seeks to disrupt dominant narratives by subverting power structures, including dominant language rhetorics. Free form spoken poetry is open to using any variety of language and any form of language construction in creating the poem. The classroom environment should be a safe space for children to feel free to share their languages and cultures. Spoken word can encourage students to think critically about language constructs and implications, as well as bring awareness to the meaning of language as it pertains to each individual. Spoken word poetry is a means of validating each students lived experiences, their personal struggles, and whatever language they choose to express themselves.

Spoken word poetry is valuable for youth identity development, resistance, and resiliency, and can be used in education to combat white supremacy and empower young, marginalized voices. Its "reflexive use of performative arts and strategies subvert colonial racial representations, and addresses issues of social justice, equity, and healing" (Biggs, 2012, 162). As spoken word poets, students process identity and experience though writing, editing, and speaking. Students can bring their voices and critical

perspectives to light. With its oppositional roots, spoken word functions as "a kind of alternative curriculum through which often intensely disaffected young people have produced and maintained notions of community, history, and self" (Dimitriadis, 2005, 34). Spoken word empowers youth of all backgrounds to bring their own knowledge to learning spaces. It may be beneficial to have a class completely devoted to learning through spoken word and other popular culture, but it could easily be worked into an English language and literature class or history project. Spoken word is, after all, "oral literature" (Biggs, 2012 163). Practicing public speaking, presentation, and performance would give students confidence in their ability to express themselves in front of an audience and help them develop necessary skills for thriving in educational environments.

Spoken word is an anti-colonialist, anti-oppressive form of culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy that fosters a critical and identity focused way of thinking, learning, and engaging with material. Spoken word inherently works against diminishing anyone's voice. Rather, it creates a space for everyone to speak and for everyone to listen. All are worthy. Spoken word and critical thinking, with a focus on race in conjunction with identity exploration, are crucial parts of breaking down forced silences and social injustice within the classroom and beyond. Spoken word seeks to honor each student where they're at, dismantle teaching styles that force students into constraining language practices, and give agency to students in taking back their voice, language(s), and cultures in education. Spoken word is a method to work to create an education that liberates.

Restorative education can be realized through spoken word. Spoken word says to bring all of your identity—and your struggles—to the space with you. It is about community, solidarity, and trust amongst poets and audience members. This extends to student-student and teacher-student relationships in the classroom. In his book *Make Me! Understanding and Engaging Student Resistance in School*, independent scholar and education consultant Eric Toshalis (2015) says:

> Restorative-justice methods…seek to shift this dynamic not by using *power over* people but by using *relationships with* them. When a student commits some sort of violation of community norms (e.g., abusive language, bullying, theft, violence), the community rallies around both the victims and the transgressor who committed the injurious act. People care for victims by immediately focusing attention on the impact of the event and providing specific structured opportunities for them to express their needs and feelings as well as suggest ways the situation might be ameliorated.

The transgressors are then confronted both by authorities and by peers in a way that brings the transgressors deeper into the community rather than banishes them from it. Conflict, in this case, is used as a catalyst to deepen community and interpersonal connections. (273)

The emphasis is not on the perpetrator's intention, but rather on the outcome of the situation and the effect on the targeted student(s). Toshalis describes a practical process for carrying out restorative justice in which the perpetrator listens to the point of view of the victim(s) as teachers prompt active listening, reflection on actions and words, and intention to restore rather than destroy relationships. As a tool for listening, reflecting, and relationship building, spoken word can be a form of restorative justice in schools as well as a means to cultivate academic skills. Spoken word is a companion to social and restorative justice that works for the benefit of students and teachers together.

Spoken word is an oppositional culture of language, poetry, education, and art. Therefore, spoken word in schools is an outlet for student resistance. In the cases of white, middle and upper class students who have never felt underserved by their education, spoken word can help them visualize and understand their part in oppressive institutions and resist whiteness. Restorative education should not be mistaken as something only for groups that have been historically marginalized; white students need a restorative education just as much. In restorative justice, it is necessary to recognize and critique whiteness in a way that forgoes conventional ideas of politeness and is mindful of the previous knowledge of both white students and students of color in the space (Tohalis, 2015). Whiteness is rarely named, let alone analyzed and condemned. In order to dismantle whiteness as ideology and institution of power, it is necessary to get to the root of the problem and see whiteness as socialized into people. Through spoken word, white students can confront their connection to whiteness and begin to critique their complicity in it.

For the actualization of resistance in the classroom, students need to understand their positionality, how they relate to the systems of power in the United States, and the space to speak about it. What both Dr. Newton (Hilliard & Newton, 2008) and Toshalis (2015) advocate for in schools is a teaching structure that "gives students the context they need to understand what they are experiencing (or perpetuating), and it provides a venue for safer explorations of how oppression might be productively resisted" (Toshalis, 2015, 217). We need to "help students negotiate the worlds they occupy" and that means addressing race and other identity constructs in the classroom (Dyson, 2001, 78). Yet, real-world issues are often kept outside of the classroom for K-12 kids. While some

discussion of discrimination, the news, personal lives, or popular culture may come up through indirect means, many schools do not focus enough on the realities of students. Schools "naturally represent the prevailing values of mainstream society, values that privilege certain forms of cultural expression while oppressing others" (Toshalis, 2015, 203-204). Nearly every situation can be tied to race in some way. Scholar Howard Winant says that "U.S. society is so thoroughly racialized that to be without racial identity is to be in danger of having no identity" (HoSang & LaBennett, 2014). Race has been used to define and create "freedom and power," which means that race has a role in every academic institution (Ferguson, 2014). The world is racialized and politicized, as is the classroom. The issue is whether or not teachers acknowledge that reality.

Rather than dismissing student concerns, even when they don't align with the teacher's intentions, the spoken word classroom should make space for discussing tension. "Resistance against perceived racism should be expected and encouraged" (Toshalis, 2015, 203). When students perceive that their teachers or the education system do not care about them, it's completely understandable if they resist class activities and disengage from learning. Spoken word is a method to work with students to activate their resistance. It is a way of making resistance constructive: it begins with conceptualization and confrontation of identity, then moves to communication

and emotionally impacting others. Since spoken word is performative, students can hold open mic events for their friends, families, and members of the community to hear what they have to say. Open mics are opportunities for students to get their opinions out in the world and inspire people to listen, then act.

Spoken word gives students agency, which is fundamental to restoration, as well as validates students' self-worth. It is a way of imagining and enacting inclusive literacy practices in the classroom. "Performance art fosters such agency by enabling artists to reclaim their bodies from oppressive and repressive academic praxes that downcast the role of cultural identity" (Biggs, 2012, 161).[5] Whiteness creates barriers in education for students to fully be themselves in the classroom while at the same time be seen as legitimate students. Whiteness takes language away; spoken word seeks to take language back. In this way, spoken word is not only education for restoration, but also education for restitution. As an "emancipatory discourse," spoken word reconciles both language and education to the speaker (Biggs, 2012, 161). Spoken word is an opportunity to blend multiple languages, dialects, and different styles of expression together, showing the "interconnectedness of forms of literacy" (Fisher, 2003, 381). It gives students permission to be themselves and access to that authenticity through freedom of

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[5] Biggs (2012) cites: Garoian, C. R. (1999). Performance art as critical pedagogy in studio art education. Art journal, 58 (1), 57-62.

expression. Visceral, genuine spoken word is exciting and offers room for self-expression however you feel and however creative you want to be.

Spoken word opens the possibility to engage in social justice and resistance in schools. Learning how to think critically and communicate ideas through spoken word is also a way for youth to find their activist voice. With the right tools and guidance from teachers, students can build the skills to dissect a problem and articulate what they believe. A "feature of anti-oppression is a focus on transforming systems of domination in broader society," systems that trickle down to individual classrooms (Dixon, 2014, 74). Spoken word attempts to deconstruct the hierarchies internalized within students and present inside and outside the classroom. Students need a place to process and discover who they are, not only finding their individuality, but finding it while in community. Spoken word is a means of figuring out who you are and understanding shared experience.

Instead of suppressing student resistance to white, heteronormative practices, spoken word celebrates dissent. "The resistant, resentful, or angry student who is quick to complain about racial or ethnic issues or who may be prone to accuse peers and adults of racism should not be silenced. That student may be attempting to dismantle what he or she perceives to be injustice, and that's a good thing" (Toshalis, 2015, 244). Rather than detract from class productivity, student perspectives add to the struggle for a more

positive learning environment. Spoken word is a non-violent method to release anger. Reflecting through writing that eventually is crafted into spoken word and articulated to the class can be cathartic. The purpose of spoken word is to "meet students where they're at…Because students' [ethnic and racial identities] are inseparable from academics, a concerted attention to [ethnic and racial identity] development is part and parcel of good teaching" (Toshalis, 2015, 244-246).

Student voices are meant to be heard. Spoken word contrasts traditional lectures in that adults in positions of authority are among those who participate in listening. Some of the most enlightening critical ideology comes from the minds of young people. Since spoken word poetry is rooted in oppositional culture and the Black Arts Movement and has flexibility in language, writing style, and composition, it is a resource for dismantling dominant colonial school structures. Spoken word breaks down teacher-student hierarchies and utilizes student funds of knowledge. "When we engage rather than suppress students' opposition, we can guide youth from what Ward[6] calls a 'resistance for survival' to a 'resistance for liberation.' Approaching resistance pedagogically rather than punitively can provide both students and educators with an

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[6] Ward, J. V. (2007). "Uncovering Truths, Recovering Lives: Lessons of Resistance in the Socialization of Black Girls" in *Urban Girls Revisited: Building Strengths*, ed. Leadbeater, B. J., & Way, N. (2007). *Urban girls revisited: Building strengths*. New York: New York Univ. Press.

'oppositional lesson in self-determination'" (Toshalis, 2015, 240). Student rebellion and emotional reactions are warmly invited into the spoken word space. Wrestling with self-understanding is a rewarding component of the writing and performance process. "The opportunity to explore the multiple, layered, and fluid dimensions of their cultures, identities, and linguistic/literate practices" can help students break out of hierarchical restraints and take their education into their own hands (Woodard & Coppola, 2018, 64).

There is a difference between schooling and education, where schooling privileges certain forms of knowledge over others. Schooling emphasizes prescriptive knowledge, traditional structures, and textbook memorization, whereas education goes beyond the contained walls of a school and learning extends to lived experience, social interactions, and emotions. Out-of-school and informal environments are often sources of more authentic education than in schools because these contexts are real life. Education based on student experience and emotional learning is not necessarily validated by white-hegemonic, westernized schools that prioritize cognitive knowledge as the most legitimate. Yet, students are more likely to acquire skills faster if they are interested in the class activities and feel that classroom content applies to their lives. Bringing spoken word into classrooms would appeal to young people's interest in popular culture and cultivate literacy, communication, and analytical skills.

Spoken word and its close relative, music, show youth "various ways that people make their voices *heard*" (Burr, 2017, 61). Popular culture, such as rap and spoken word, is an outlet for young people to rebel and work outside of an oppressive, suffocating learning institution. Students may have an easier time seeing relevancy in their education when popular culture comes into the classroom. They can connect to modern poets, performances, and music in ways that they might not be able to with classic authors like Shakespeare, while practicing their own personal and performative reflection. Spoken word is not a typical form of learning, but so much more can be discovered about people, the world, and critical issues when students have a way to embrace emotions, creativity, and their own funds of knowledge.

Spoken word is non-conforming because it creates a community of different people coming together to connect in the midst of the United State's highly individualistic and capitalist society. Community is what many people crave, especially those who are outcast. Weinstein & West (2012) say that youth spoken word forms "spaces that feel like home and family" and meets the "need[s] contemporary young people express to be listened to by adults…We find ourselves at a deeply generative intersection in which aesthetic, personal, and social needs are being met in overlapping ways" (291). In other words, spoken word is a place for youth to have freedom, be creative, and talk about things that matter to them, all

while feeling validated. It is a place for youth to be themselves and see others do the same. It is a place to find solidarity.

Spoken Word as an Insurgent Practice for Restorative Education

Spoken word as a restorative "counterpublic" is insurgent in that authenticity is privileged in the classroom, vulnerability is praised, people form understanding and community amongst difference, and students find empowerment (Weinstein & West, 2012). Spoken word embodies hope for a better world and celebrates each person for who they are. Performers take our current reality and with their words envision a picture of how they want the world to be. With voice and storytelling, both audience and performers create an alternative world with the power to break through institutional strongholds.

In spoken word, young people have the space to be authentic. Spoken word can help youth open up to each other and even be vulnerable. Performing and creating poetry in a supportive environment works against the notion that students have to conform to a singular way of being that fits into categorical representations of middle and high schoolers. For Weinstein & West (2012), youth spoken word poetry "is about generating a social world in which art is an integral part of everyday life, in which *speaking the truth* means being honest about one's experiences, and in which being honest in that way is a responsibility to self and community" (292). Each piece

of spoken word contains truths about a person—what someone may be thinking, feeling, or expressing, whether or not it changes later and whether or not the audience grasps all that is said. Spoken word poems are a moment in someone's life or a part of themselves that they want to speak aloud to. The audience member is honored to participate because the speaker has shared some part of their innermost being. The reality of the poet may or may not be the reality audience members understand from the poem, since words and actions are not the same thing. What's most important is listening, responding, and giving someone the space to share.

Unlike spoken word, institutional education does not require authenticity in students. Students need to process who they are and the things that happen to them outside (or even inside) of school. Teachers can show care to students by offering them a chance to do that, and promote learning at the same time, with spoken word. Toshalis (2015) describes the detrimental effect of rejecting students' identities:

> Schools often force marginalized youth to check the ethnic portions of their identity at the door in order to be taken seriously as motivated learners and well-behaved members of a classroom community. This requirement subtracts the cultural resources that most inform who these students are and how they

think, communicate, and behave. To be included and encouraged, students learn that they must sever their identities from their education. Schooling thus becomes subtractive rather than additive—and resistance against that schooling becomes a rational decision. (216)

In contrast, spoken word poetry focuses on individuality and is enriched by the life experiences of the writer. Envisioning spoken word as restorative education is meant to be healing, not depleting. High school and University of Michigan graduate English teacher Jaclyn Burr (2017) believes that spoken word promotes student identity exploration and expression, social justice involvement, and empowerment. Through writing, students engage their own "struggles, experiences, and desires…critiquing their places in society" as well as their privileges (Burr, 2017, 61). In spoken word, silenced voices come to light, while power structures and injustice become identified. In having the freedom to be completely themselves, students will understand more of who they are and see that they matter in the classroom.

Spoken word is a tool for self-discovery, social justice, and authenticity. Faculty at Penn State University, Anne Whitney (2017), writes in "Keeping It Real: Valuing Authenticity in the Writing Classroom":

We draw too sharp a line between the world of school and the 'real world'…Too often school glosses over what is most real and immediate, such as students' day-to-day experiences and concerns, their hopes and fears, their relationships with one another and with their families and communities, and the powerful relationships they have—or at least can have—with us. Instead, we focus on the writing skills in a disconnected way, having them write 'for practice' about topics that are safe, easy, and distant. (16)

Whitney defines authenticity as doing real things, seeing realness in other people and events, and letting others in on the realness in yourself (16-17). She advocates for extending realness from life outside of school into the classroom and acknowledging authenticity in writing to make education relevant to the lives of students. This can be a slow, complex, and unexpected process. It can even be community-based, as students bounce ideas off each other and hear feedback for their work. When teachers acknowledge the dynamic, flexible writing process and give students liberty to dig deeper into their topics, the work they produce can be so much more profound and meaningful.

Pouring yourself onto paper holds some therapeutic purpose, but voicing your story for others to hear is an even more cathartic, albeit scary, thing to do.

Sharing something so intimate in front of an audience demands vulnerability. But this, according to professor of social work Brené Brown, is actually immensely empowering. Practicing vulnerability, while it may not be comfortable right away—or ever—builds confidence in taking risks, in being the first to open up to someone else, and in pursuing a project or relationship in spite of a fear of failure or hurt. It builds courage. "What made them vulnerable made them beautiful…vulnerability is the core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness, but it appears that it's also the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love" (Brown 2010). Part of vulnerability is acknowledging mistakes and failures; to do that among fellow students can cultivate an attitude of growth and change for the better. Maybe it takes a while to get to a place of honesty with yourself and others, but spoken word is a means to discover unknown truths within yourself, to uncover repressed emotions, and reveal untold histories. In spoken word, being vulnerable means being validated; it means affirmation and it also means challenging one another to go deeper, to reimagine and enact the world as you want it to be.

There is risk and safety in every spoken word performance (Weinstein & West, 2012, 289-290). Contesting dominant structures poses risks for already marginalized people, yet, at the same time, these spaces center young, marginalized, and non-conforming voices. These spaces are about solidarity, empathy, and healing.

Spoken word often comes from deep places; while that inevitably means exposing one's true self to the world, it also means that words more easily touch the hearts of others. It is common for performers to experience a "rush" during their time on stage, often coming from nerves and a sense of connection to the people in the space (Weinstein & West, 2012, 290). Speakers and listeners are both wrapped up in the feeling of the piece. Opinions of young people are not always validated by adults, but in youth spoken word contexts, youth are actually listened to as they share their work in front of peers and adults. Spoken word creates a space where young voices are sincerely valued and heard. Being true to one's identity opens up the possibility of fulfilling one's full potential. Going through that self-realization process vocally in front of others is to confront honesty and to claim that honesty in bravery within yourself.

Student openness with each other paves the way to a higher degree of comfortability and community amongst all students. Those who assume that they are alone in their struggles can see that many of their peers are going through similar things. How many classes do we have in which we don't know anything about our classmates? Spoken word raises awareness and hopes to break down barriers by addressing bullying and discrimination amongst students. If, in school, the emphasis was on community and social and emotional learning in addition to cognitive, we would be

teaching children that caring for each other is important, and that means dealing with hurt and anger and taking responsibility for wrongdoing. No student should be the recipient of hate or exclusion, but that doesn't mean students won't or shouldn't feel uncomfortable in certain situations. Discomfort, especially for white people, is a necessary part of seeing one's complicity in discriminatory institutions. Closeness that starts in the classroom has a better chance of flourishing outside of it. Building community first shows that each student is valued and supported in the space.

Spoken word presents a useful and accessible method for students to share what they feel with their peers. It is an extremely vulnerable experience to read aloud a narrative of one's deepest emotions, but the community involvement, creativity, and solidarity meant to be part of spoken word can help students find the means to express their innermost selves, even if not all students respond kindly. The student feedback mentioned by Burr (2017) and Woodard & Coppola (2018) show that poetry enabled students to express their feelings and thoughts in a new and unique way. Burr (2017) includes one of her student's poems to illustrate the depth of processing students go to:

"Veteran's Vision"

My room is dark,
There isn't anyone but myself.
I am alone.

Completely alone.
My mother's voice echoes through my head,
"Quit lying," she yells.
"You have a problem.."
"We need to fix it,"
I hear my father say staring coldly into my eyes.
Flash forward a month.
My first counselor judges everything I tell her.
"The Devil has taken over your life.."
But she's not a counselor. She's the preacher's wife.
Now I'm onto counselor number three.
Screams that won't make a sound.
I put on a smile to face the crowd.
Rocking back and forth, all alone.
Staring blankly as I shake and sob.
No one understands, they never will.
The parent pleaser has failed.
Will I ever be able to please anyone again?
Can I even please myself?
The guilt and shame never leave,
All of this for trying to be me.. (63-65)

The student reflected: "I have been through a lot this past year, and these poems really helped me express some of my feelings. I have been diagnosed with a small case of PTSD due to a traumatic experience I have had with my parents. I want to aim towards a happier life and prove to people that I am a strong, independent woman" (Burr, 2017, 63-64). Spoken word helped this student imagine the life she wanted to live and the person she wanted to be. She was able to create that vision through words.

Students shouldn't have to shut down their emotions or leave themselves behind when coming to class. Restorative education is about validating real life experiences in the classroom. Spoken word can be used to empower students and show that teachers and peers value what they have to say. Writers can find resiliency in self-representation and liberation in creation, construction, topic, and word choice. Freedom and creativity to talk about issues that matter to students enables students to invest in their education. No one owns spoken word. Free form is imperative to the practice; thus, spoken word has potential to be a site of reframing our world in rebellion against colonialism and white supremacy. Each person creates their own narrative depending on the story they want to tell. Spoken word is meaning-making in action.

Students need a voice in their education. One way to provide that is through the extremely powerful method of storytelling through spoken word. Ladson-Billings & Tate (2006) and Delgado (1989) argue that storytelling is mentally, physically, and emotionally alleviating for students of color that have been hurt by racial oppression: "The story of one's condition leads to realizing how one came to be oppressed and subjugated and allows one to stop inflicting mental violence on oneself" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006, 21). Through spoken word, students step into themselves and contend with whatever they find there. For young people who carry immense trauma,

self-confrontation can be an excruciating and terrifying process. At the same time, facing inner turmoil and pain is the only way to move forward. Spoken word is a way for students to tell their own stories and begin a process of healing.

Spoken word is healing not only for marginalized students, but also for students belonging to the dominant group. Students who have histories of inherited or personal silencing need a place where their voices are heard and listened to and white students need to investigate their own whiteness without expecting people of color to perform emotional labor in order to enlighten them. But all young people also go through stages of identity development in middle and high school. How can students reflect on their own persecution or perpetuation of persecution if they never deal with individual crises? These students are trying to figure out who they are and attend school at the same time. Students rarely get a chance to tell their stories in class; analyzing these issues through spoken word could give them that chance. I want children to grow up being able to learn in an inclusive, caring environment, critically examine oppressive structures and their own identities, and work towards social justice. Education should be meaningful to all students. Young people should be given a voice in their education and should never feel like they have to prove their worth to be heard.

Spoken word is essentially a way to tell stories, and stories have power. Spoken word may not always be a story about

yourself, but it is at least a story about something that matters to you. Thinking of storytelling as a component of spoken word brings an intentional creativity to the story cultivating process. In *Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative*, Richard Delgado (1989) writes about the importance of storytelling:

> The therapy is to tell stories...Storytelling emboldens the hearer, who may have had the same thoughts and experiences the storyteller describes, but hesitated to give them voice. Having heard another express them, he or she realizes, I am not alone...Stories humanize us. They emphasize our differences in ways that can ultimately bring us closer together. They allow us to see how the world looks from behind someone else's spectacles...Telling stories invests text with feeling, gives voice to those who were taught to hide their emotions. Hearing stories invites hearers to participate, challenging their assumptions, jarring their complacency, lifting their spirits, lowering their defenses. (2437, 2440)

In spoken word performances the speaker feels empowered in telling their oral histories while fully listened to and the audience can feel empowered by what the speaker says. In the realm of restorative education, where social justice, resistance, and alternative learning are primary tools, storytelling and spoken word are part of a greater narrative of authenticity, vulnerability, community, and empowerment that works to liberate students from all forms of dominant institutions.

Putting Words Into Practice

Spoken word in the classroom can function as a flexible tool that can reach all students. First and foremost, the basic needs of each student must be met in order for them to be able to learn to their full ability and feel supported in doing so (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs). Through classroom practices and interactions with students, teachers should make sure students know how essential they are in the community and base their education on pedagogy that values the students themselves. Teachers can begin a new school year by creating a list of community guidelines with their students—a list compiled of both students' and the teacher's needs. This opens a discussion right away about where the students and teachers are at and eliminates many false assumptions that may otherwise surface. A collection of community guidelines can begin to counteract prejudice in the classroom and begin enacting care.

Community guidelines create the understanding of a community-shared safe space, while spoken word actualizes it. Poet and performer Sarah Kay outlines "spoken word 101: Choose your language

carefully; pick a story that you want to tell, that you're excited to tell, because if you're excited then we're going to be excited;...[and] having the courage to get on stage" (CNN). The reflective nature of spoken word demands a personal approach to writing in which teachers can foster a critical mindset within students' work. This presents an excellent opportunity for white, middle and upper class students to examine their privilege and complicity in whiteness and for students who experience marginalization to explicitly uplift their voices. Through spoken word and restorative educational means, all students can work to deconstruct dominant institutions. Spoken word is a practical method for constructing a social justice oriented classroom in which all students can find a home, a voice, and a personal stake in their education.

For spoken word, context—not just form—matters. Students, especially white students, need to understand its history and meaning. Spoken word is part of an improvisational, oppositional culture and came out of the Civil Rights era as a form of radical black art. When writing spoken word, students must tackle their positionality and how discrimination has affected them or how they have played a part in it. Honoring the history of spoken word means being true to yourself, true to your audience, and mindful of social justice.

It is important that students see themselves in their education and that teachers adopt non-dominant teaching styles. Teachers can have an immense impact on students. Students need to feel valued by teachers, be challenged in classes, and know that they have a voice in their education. In order for students to deeply appreciate the value of learning and relevance of education, classrooms need to relate to students' lives. If students find meaning in their classes and if teachers honor all backgrounds of the students in their lessons, students will grow in their interest in learning and thrive in education, as well as begin to think critically about who they are. Connecting students to spoken word within the classroom can foster identity development, which is essential to growth as community members.

"More Than Words: Student Writers Realize Possibilities through Spoken Word Poetry" by Woodard & Coppola (2018) discusses a spoken word class for Chicago Public School students in middle school. The class "[enacted] a culturally sustaining literacy pedagogy that aimed to perpetuate students' linguistic and cultural assets that are often marginalized in school and society" (Woodard & Coppola, 2018, 62). Coppola, the teacher of the class and one of the article's authors, "embraced the theory's charge to decenter colonial norms, creating authentic spaces for youth of color to 'explore, honor, extend, and, at times, problematize, their heritage and community practices'" (Woodard & Coppola, 2018, 62). Students studied both classic and modern examples of poetry, including works from the documentary *Louder Than a Bomb* and Shakespeare.

Types of poetry ranged from Japanese to Arabian to hip-hop, reflecting the cultural backgrounds of the students. Students were able to reflect on their identities in a number of writing activities in addition to crafting and performing their own spoken word. As a way of helping students visualize the "communicative power of writing," the teacher and students gave and received a written response to each other's spoken word poems, describing the emotional connection produced (or not) by the poem (Woodard & Coppola, 2018, 62). Coppola allowed for students to have plenty of agency in the class through self-expression, feedback, and input on grading method. Through poetry, students were able to create meaning for their own lives and engage the effects of hurtful experiences.

Spoken word itself has the power to deeply affect students and their learning, but Burr (2017) points out that the role of the teacher is important as well. The classroom environment is much more engaging for students if the teacher uses curriculum that they are passionate about and that is relevant to students, as well as including points of view that differ, while acknowledging that they may not be able to reach every student with each topic. Giving students choice in which poems, performances, and popular culture pieces to study can work as one solution to lack of student engagement (Burr, 2017, 65). Spoken word may not interest every student, but it is a method of breaking out of a colonialist education structure and

fostering students' critical thinking, identity development, and expression.

Authenticity in the actual writing process is important, but so is authenticity in audience, teachers, and students as well. The side of ourselves that we show the world, especially in a high school classroom, isn't always real. While "trying to look smart, we block off what is actually most smart and interesting in ourselves" (Whitney, 2017, 20). As people, we need to take risks, to create meaning while writing, and to let ourselves come into the work we do. As a teacher of authentic writing, "you're asking students to take risks. You can also risk them knowing you" (Whitney, 2017, 20). When students see the unguarded struggles a teacher has with writing, it not only breaks down the hierarchy between students and teachers but helps students feel okay in struggling with the writing process themselves.

Spoken word performances seek to dismantle the power structures of traditional poetry reading where the audience members are only passive listeners; the spoken word audience is meant to engage and interact with the performer. Coppola promoted the idea of active listening and participation in spoken word by creating a blog for students to post their reactions and thoughts about their peers' poetry (Woodard & Coppola, 2018). Blog posts could be used as a place for students to share deep feelings and challenge their vulnerability. In doing so, Coppola created an atmosphere wherein students

could talk about issues that were important to them, form a close-knit community, and feel valued for their thoughts. The environment was meant to be a safe place where students could open up and be their true selves. Spoken word opens up a way to build understanding of the experiences of others but also to gain greater understanding of one's own experiences and emotions. Reflection on learning, writing, performing, listening, and community is imperative for critical thought, identity empowerment, and affirming what is most important in living.

Peter Kahn, a Chicago high school social worker, created a spoken word program to reach out to youth surrounded by gun violence and decreased funding of public schools. Kahn's project centered on social and emotional healing and learning through poetry. In an interview with a former student, Kahn mentions that several of his students who either had very low grades or were about to drop out of school, excelled in writing poetry (Sutton, 2014). One of Burr's (2017) students commented that education through poetry helps the process of writing research papers, revealing the positive effect it has on the students themselves and their ability to have a strong, critical voice in their papers. Burr (2017) writes, "after hearing the voices of various artists, students found value in their own voices, too" (65). In answer to a question about the importance of teaching poetry in the middle of opposition, Kahn says that "students need to know their stories, their

voices matter to adults and to each other" (Sutton, 2014). Teaching poetry expands beyond crafting the skill; students develop competence in oral and written expression, literary analysis, and social and emotional understanding. Students gain confidence and become more involved in their education, "thus building hope and academic investment" (Sutton, 2014).

Spoken word offers a revolutionary method of education. Through spoken word, teachers can create lesson plans and grading techniques that celebrate student passion. Most paper assignments in a typical public school in the United States require students to align with standard academic, white English norms. The papers are for teachers to read and rarely go beyond the classroom. It is easy for students to feel frustrated by what, to them, are irrelevant activities. Enabling students to write with more versatility and for a wider audience:

gives youth opportunity to (re)present themselves, transcending single storylines that schools have boxed them into...Writing units like this that privilege students as knowers, in both how they name their worlds and share their voices, are critical and timely. They provide compelling evidence that rigorous outcomes can be realized with unit designs that intentionally decenter dominant cultural, linguistic/literate, curricular, and assessment norms.

(Woodard & Coppola, 2018, 63 & 66)

More freedom in possibilities for educational and personal expression allow students to work through identity crises that are all too common in middle and high school. Students rarely get to write about themselves or choose their own topic. Spoken word enables students to do both and, thus, the work they produce is more meaningful to them. Young people often care about social justice issues, but have little space to actually discuss them in school. When students are given freedom to choose their own projects, they can focus on what really matters to them.

In performances of students' spoken word, their teacher has a chance to see into the lives of the students, which can illuminate inner struggles that affect what they do in school. Having agency and opportunity to tackle difficult issues can empower students. Coppola's blog equalizes the relationship between students and teachers and their roles in the classroom: every person can share their own words and thoughts and each person is valued equally (Woodard & Coppola 66). Encouraging student responses to focus on content, composition, and feeling of the poem rather than grammar can work to counteract the idea that there is only one (white, Standard English) way of writing. As a result, the classroom space could foster less writing discrimination.

When it comes time for students to share their spoken word poems, active listening, voiced agreement, and constructive feedback affirm the students' humanity and the struggles and victories in their lives. Spoken word is not just about rhyme and rhythm; it's about word choice, tone, and the feeling conveyed through speaking and performing. Dissecting work by spoken word artists and fellow classmates lead students to consider the challenges and sentiments faced by others, which promotes critical thinking and practicing empathy. Grading should not be about the letter or even about the poems themselves, but rather the process of writing, developing, and performing. Assessment should be about the effort and commitment of the student and should not conform to aspects of conventional education. Coppola asked each student to evaluate their own poems, opening up an opportunity to practice integrity while avoiding outside judgement of another person's personal work (Woodard & Coppola, 2018). Spoken word privileges hearing student voices, listening, and interacting. Feeling valued is an important component of student learning if teachers want students to be invested in their own education. The non-traditional grading structure and learning style challenge dominant education structures and make way for a more culturally relevant curriculum, essential for the engagement of culturally and racially marginalized people.

Each classroom will function differently, but the teacher can work with the students to adapt activities and community guidelines in a way that is most beneficial to student growth.

Fortunately, an asset of spoken word is its adaptability. Assignments should give students ability to talk about things that matter to them, while the class should facilitate the tools to flesh out those topics in depth with high levels of thinking, writing, and communicating ideas. Spoken word is not formal and should not be constraining. It should challenge students, but not force them to be someone they're not. Bringing informal education practices such as spoken word into the classroom is part of recognizing that "education is an ongoing twenty-four-hour process" (Hilliard & Newton, 2008, 6). In condemning all forms of racism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other oppressions, spoken word says that students' lives matter.

It is necessary to grapple with racism and other discrimination in order to achieve the first step towards social justice: naming the problem. Students who find themselves excluded because of social outcasting will carry their experiences to class. It is hard enough for adults to separate their personal and professional lives, let alone youth still in the process of emotional and cognitive development. If students are to grow as people and learners, they need to be able to bring all of themselves into the classroom. They may need to "divert vital cognitive functions away from academics and towards analyses" of their home and social life (Toshalis, 2015, 235). In that process, students may lash out at the teacher or peers, as resistance to authority is a direct response to feeling overwhelmed or misunderstood (Toshalis, 2015, 227). It can be a confusing, anguishing process, but sharing self-reflection in classrooms can have transformative effects for students, who have a greater chance of feeling cared for and having confidence in thriving academically (Toshalis, 2015, 224). Spoken word incorporates elements of poetry, rap, performance, rhythm, and creativity, which leaves a wide range of options for students of all backgrounds to enact resistance.

Spoken word is what the performer wants to make of it. Students should be able to use whatever funds of knowledge they choose, including code-switching and multiple language dialects, to craft their work. Multilingual and multi-dialect speakers should be able to mesh and use language to their own desire, without having to conform to one white-centered writing norm. Spoken word can be used for free expression and facilitation of anti-racist living in order to liberate rather than constrain students. "It's poetry that doesn't just exist on the page...It brings wonderment and happiness and joy and contemplation to people's lives" (CNN). Spoken word is a freedom for all students of all backgrounds to talk about their own experiences, conflicts, and passions. As English teacher Jaclyn Burr (2017) says:

> As educators, we have power in allowing students the freedom to think for themselves, and in nurturing a care for critical

analysis and societal betterment. It is vital to foster dedication to social justice with our students, as well as to allow them room for personal analysis and growth. Poetry, music, research, action, reflection, and passion are all useful components that can feed the warmth of this fire, and hopefully brighten our world. (66)

Limitations and Future Studies

I am not claiming to have a prescription for the problem of white supremacy in education. Rather, I am describing a workable solution that is already available for teachers. This paper is part of a much larger body of work on restorative justice in education; it cannot encompass all facets of the conversation and therefore has limitations. Some questions for further studies include:

- How can spoken word be a "counterpublic" and work to dismantle the system while situated inside it? To what extent can we dismantle the system from within?
- How can majority white classrooms and white teachers use spoken word to dismantle whiteness without co-opting the spoken word practice that originates from non-conforming and black arts cultures?
- Is it problematic for white teachers to use a black art form in classrooms for the purpose of learning and empowerment for students? Can any group "own" an art form?

- How can white teachers avoid hypothetical and generalized language to discuss the lives of people who hold different identities? How can teachers talk about people and events that happen(ed) outside the classroom without making assumptions?
- What are the accepted modes of classroom conduct that stem from whiteness and colonization—for instance, "behaviorist and normative assumptions"? (Toshalis, 2015, 274).

White teachers cannot allow the fear of failing to inhibit addressing race and restorative education in the classroom. In fact, spoken word is a great method for white teachers to become aware of their own racism. Teachers who use spoken word in classrooms will need to confront how to deal with the issues brought up in poems and how to teach to a variety of different student bodies. Teachers will need training as to how to deal with possible triggerings for students during performances. Writing and performing spoken word is not easy—students need support and ways to reflect on each part of the process.

Putting spoken word in classrooms is an opportunity to work against white supremacy from within the institution. We will not obtain complete restorative, anti-colonialist, anti-racist, anti-oppressive education through spoken word alone; this paper scratches the surface of a much larger battle towards liberation.

Conclusion

Spoken word poetry can be used in schools to support students personally and academically; promote critical thinking, writing, and communication skills; encourage identity development and engagement in education; and function as a means to deconstruct whiteness, work towards decolonizing classrooms, and make culturally sustaining and critical pedagogies a priority. Spoken word is as much about personal identity development as about social justice. It is inherently political. Spoken word came out of a context of opposition, a counter-reality to the endemic of cultural violence in the United States. Spoken word and identity exploration are companions to resistance. "Identity, a meaning-making system that shapes thinking, feeling, and acting, is as political as it is psychological because identities are formed in (and in spite of) groups" (Toshalis, 2015, 252). Exploring all components of oneself—race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and more—is "a liberating process that, if circumstances support it, gradually moves towards a psychologically healthier state" (Toshalis, 2015, 224). The journey towards liberation is not a neat process. Especially for marginalized students, life experiences will understandably provoke anger and torment, while white students might wrestle more with guilt. Spoken word poetry gives students the chance to vocalize and enact their pain and culpability, calling out self and others' complicity in oppression and recognizing students' resiliency.

Spoken word breaks traditional education and poetry structures in that it has greater emphasis on student knowledge and presentation. It prioritizes free-thinking through expression of cultural identity meshed with art and language. The fact that spoken word supports the use of broken and non-dominant language dialects indicates that spoken word in and of itself is a means of challenging colonization both outside and inside educational institutions. Spoken word is truly teaching from the bottom up—a kind of circular learning where teachers foster effective communication strategies in each activity, but adapt them to students' needs and knowledge.

Students are encouraged to question previously accepted truths and make their own meaning in their lives. What students talk about in their spoken word should matter to them. Similar to jazz, rap, and other forms of hip-hop culture, spoken word is a safe space for truth-telling, community building, and engagement with resistance. Spoken word meddles with and reconstructs dominant English. Standard English, as a language of colonizers and source of oppression, holds no power over spoken word storytellers. Language is meant to be useful for students, not a limiting factor. When students have a stake in their own learning, education is restorative and justice is realized.

Forms of resistance that are accepted in schools may not be considered by some to be truly radical. Yet dominant, white schooling institutions do little to encourage students to add their own voices to educational transformation. Spoken word is radical because it does just that. If we are truly committed to the fight against white supremacy, activism, and all other forms of justice, these values need to overtake the classroom. Spoken word is from the people and can be used by the people to take back their education.

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