Poverty Capstone
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POVERTY SLAM!

how slam poetry transforms the lives of impoverished youth

"Besides our current welfare system couldn't feed a family for a week, you're not pumping enough money into education to teach my children not to do the same stupid shit I did."
—"This Is For You," Chico Speaks Out

Three teenage boys shouted the above quotation to a crowd of listeners at Sacred Grounds Café in Arcata, California. Cameron Bartolini, Isaac Miller, and Ulises Dorantes yelled the line in unison as part of a slam poem that discusses abuse toward young women, the shortcomings of the welfare system for single mothers, and abortion. A bridge is built between the poets and the audience members, as these issues are all part of life in urban poverty. Yet the performance is also extremely personal; as Bartolini shouts about his sister's cheating boyfriend and his mother's depression, it's clear to the audience that his words come from the heart. The audience responds in a standing ovation upon the poem's final words: the three boys spread their arms and announce, "this is what a feminist looks like." Bartolini, Miller, Dorantes, and the rest of the Chico Speaks Out team went on to become finalists in the 2005 National Youth Poetry Slam in San Francisco, just one of many slam competitions that take place around the country each year for young poets.

"This Is For You" exemplifies the power of slam poetry; the boys speak out against the injustices of the system as well as the actions of fellow members of poor urban life, and cheers from the audience reward their strength. The performance shows that not only is political

activism alive amongst America's youth, but so is the art of poetry. This paper will discuss slam poetry's impact on impoverished youth by looking at the format and history of slam, slam's connection to poverty, and why slam makes such a connection to impoverished youth. The most important sections of the paper will illustrate how slam poetry empowers youth performers through the political and contentious messages of their poems. The paper will conclude with a discussion of slam's critics and defenders, as well as slam poetry's future. Through literature reviews, examples of youth slam poems, and scholarly research, this paper shows not only how and why America's poor urban youth participate in slam, but how they are transformed as a result. Although slam has not yet mobilized its participants to create organized political change (yet), the movement has made powerful and lasting impacts at the individual level, making slam an influential and infectious force in the lives of impoverished urban youth.

The Form and History of Slam Poetry

Though poetry slams take place in communities throughout the U.S., many individuals are unfamiliar with the phenomenon's history or current format. Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz gives a definition in her book *Words in Your Face*, explaining that the poetry slam is an oral poetry competition in which "anyone can participate" (xxiii). Poets perform an original poem before an audience while five judges, selected at random from the audience, rate the poetic performance and declare a winner at the end of the evening. In other words, there is no criteria on what constitutes a "good" slam poem; as long as the piece is under three minutes, it has a chance to win. Aptowicz emphasizes that the audience members at these competitions are "just as important as the poets" (xxiii) as it is up to them to declare a winner. Through their words and performances, poets attempt to influence the audience in profound ways, each "just a little more deeply than the last person did," whether it be through laughter or tears. Poets can speak on any

topic, but many choose to discuss contentious social or political issues they know will stir emotions.

Slam poetry is the love child of several literary movements centered on the desire to express emotion through art and to achieve civil rights. In their article "Spoken Word and Hip Hop: The Power of Urban Art and Culture," authors Priya Parmar and Bryonn Bain outline slam poetry's cultural influences. They attribute the Harlem Renaissance (1917 to 1935) as having a profound impression on the movement. The work of Langston Hughes, in particular, "laid a rebellious aesthetic foundation that would be emulated by generations of poets to follow" (136). The poets of the Beat Generation of the late 1940s through the 60s also created poetry though personal experience and struggle. Writers such as Jack Kerouac "dismiss[ed] the standards established by the academic poetry critics of his day" and instead "mirrored the improvisation of black American folk music in his spontaneous writings" (137). In addition, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s employed performance art, including the spoken word, to "demand for black liberation and self-determination that was heard nationwide" (138). Each of these artful as well as controversial movements contributed to the creation of the poetry slam.

Finally, the increased popularity of rap and hip-hop starting in the late 1970s was a direct pre-cursor to slam poetry. Parmar and Bain discuss how the rap "battles" that began in the 1970s were "the ultimate test of lyrical skill in hip hop culture" (141). In these contests, two rappers "engaged in a back-and-forth rhyming competition" with a musical track to keep the beat. Audience reaction and applause determined the winner. This tradition of competing through spoken word, and using audience members to judge, is closely related to the poetry slam.

Chicagoan bartender and poet Al Simmons ran the first "poetry bout" in 1981 to settle an argument between two of his friends over who was the better poet (Parmar and Bain, 141; Nicolay). Simmons was "inspired by the idea of putting on a lyrical boxing contest," and billed

the ten-round fight as the "WPA's 'Main Event' Poetry Fight" (Parmar and Bain, 141). Fellow Chicagoan Marc Smith founded the "poetry slam" in 1984 (142). Smith held weekly slams in the Green Mill Lounge, "a landmark jazz bar and former Al Capone Speakeasy, in Chicago's Uptown area" (142). Smith's format and rules spread across the nation, and eventually "individual poets and poetry teams from every state in the union ultimately conven[ed] for an annual spoken word poetry tournament," a national competition which continues to take place in a different city each year. As slam's popularity spread from Chicago to New York, San Francisco, and across the nation, adult poets as well as youth audiences joined the movement.

The exact history of youth poetry slams remains hazy. Scott Nicolay, a former high school English teacher, moved to New Mexico in 1993, bringing his knowledge of adult slams from Chicago to the Navajo Nation. Nicolay introduced slam poetry to a group of students in an after-school poetry workshop. In 1995, Nicolay challenged Anne McNaughton, a fellow English teacher and one of the original organizers of Chicago's "bouts," to a slam between their students. Nicolay described, "as far as I know, that was the first youth slam ever" (Nicolay). Nicolay took part in organizing the first National Youth Poetry Slam in Hartford, CT, in 1998, which included five teams: Hartford, New York, Boston DC, and the Navajo Nation. The year after, the competition was taken over by Youth Speaks, naming the competition Brave New Voices. Though the creation of the youth slam movement took years of work, Nicolay described how easily the events come together. "If you do it correctly," he said, "the whole thing makes itself happen" (Nicolay).

Slam's Connection to Urban Youth & Poverty

Because of slam poetry's relationship to hip-hop culture, and its roots in urban Chicago, New York, and San Francisco, it is not surprising that slam's following has remained primarily in urban areas. Many inner-city teachers have realized slam's profound effect amongst disadvantaged students in particular. Urban classrooms are those with the most diverse student bodies, educating individuals of all different races, abilities, and socio-economic backgrounds. In his article "City Kids—Not the Kind of Students You'd Want to Teach," Joe L. Kincheloe argues that racial and economic stereotypes have led many teachers to believe that inner-city students are "unteachable," "dangerous," (5) and so "beyond help" that they are unworthy of economic resources that should go toward "education for the gifted and talented" (7). Yet teachers who are truly committed to developing rich lesson plans that focus on embracing difference in appearance, background, and ability amongst their urban students have found that urban students are just as capable of success. Kincheloe describes such lesson plans as part of the "urban pedagogy" (5), or curriculum that aims to educate inner-city students using materials and activities that inner-city students can relate to, understand, and get excited about. Included in this "urban pedagogy" is the poetry slam.

Organizations such as Urban Word, WritersCorps, and Youth Speaks help spread this urban pedagogy through slam poetry, bringing in-class and after-school poetry programs to inner-city schools across the country. Youth Speaks, based in the Bay Area, has created partner programs in 42 cities across the U.S. The organization provides a multitude of programs for schools, including in-school residencies, after-school programs, assemblies, and summer writing camps, as well as professional development for teachers and leadership development opportunities for students. Youth Speaks believes that "if young people are not given the proper opportunities to become literate," then disadvantaged students "will not attain personal, educational and professional achievement, and therefore risk being left behind"

(youthspeaks.org). Many teachers have found the benefits of taking part in the in-school residencies and after school programs, which provide a resident "poet/mentor" to work with teachers to incorporate written and spoken word poetry projects into ongoing curricula. Jenny Johnson, a teacher at Mission High School in San Francisco, saw a profound change in her students as a result of the program, saying that Youth Speaks was "empowering" and that "students found permission to step up and share their words who ordinarily shut down in a class environment" (youthspeaks.org). Art Concordia, a history teacher at Balboa High School in Oakland, said Youth Speaks had both a personal and academic effect on his students, and that, "This process opened my students up—emotionally and politically. I think it helped them make connections between 'history' as something in a book to 'history' as something created by everyday people" (youthspeaks.org). Both Mission and Balboa High Schools have about 58% of their students participating in free or reduced-price lunch programs. Other schools in the area participating in Youth Speaks, including McClymonds High School and East Oakland Community High School, have 64% and 67% of students qualify, respectively (greatschools.net). Clearly programs like Youth Speaks have found a way to reach out to impoverished schools and help students, teachers, and administration incorporate "urban pedagogy" into their classrooms.

Urban Word, a New York City program influenced by Youth Speaks, has also found success in creating compelling curriculum for inner-city students. Urban Word provides after-school workshops with different themes, such as "Queer, Questioning & Allies," "New Skool Journalism," "Women Reborn Through Music, Media and Culture," and "Art & Social Justice," each tailored to provide students with a topic in which they are interested. The organization has found great success, particularly amongst impoverished youth. Its website reports that in the 2007-08 school year, Urban Word worked with over 15,000 youth in 112 public high schools, middle schools, community centers, and cultural institutions through free writing workshops.

These students were of all different ethnicities (85% classified as non-white), aged 13-24, and 85% were eligible for free or reduced price lunch (urbanwordnyc.org). Urban Word recently started a program called "Creatively College Bound," which prepares high school juniors and seniors for the college admissions process. Through a series of "wordshops," participants receive help writing essays and applying for admission and scholarships. In 2007-08, Urban Word awarded $100,000 in scholarships, including two full rides to University of Wisconsin's First Wave program, "the first university program in the country centered on spoken word and hip-hop culture." Urban Word NYC core students also received scholarships to Brown, Cornell, Princeton, Howard, University of Pennsylvania, Barnard College, and NYU, among others. In multiple ways, Urban Word clearly tapped into the potential of these disadvantaged individuals; 95% of their "core students," or those who had participated in the Urban Word program for at least two years, graduated high school and went on to college (urbanwordnyc.org). It is clear that not only are these non-profit programs affecting a large number of students, they also have positive impacts on the lives of each student they reach.

Why Slam Works

As the statistics show, slam has become extremely popular in urban areas, and has had a profound impact upon low-income youth. But how successful is slam in reaching at-risk students, and why? Studies have looked at the practices of successful inner-city schools in engaging and graduating their students. In her article "Developing Resilience in Urban Youth," Linda F. Winfield identifies several characteristics possessed by "resilient students in high poverty areas who succeeded despite their disadvantaged circumstances" (Winfield, 37). Winfield's definition of "success" includes tangible achievements, such as high school graduation and college acceptance, as well as intangibles like "increased sense of personal

control, heightened academic self-concept, and increased efforts to achieve future goals" (43). One study Winfield discusses (Garmezy, 1983) produced a comprehensive list of personal characteristics which set "resilient" children apart from those who lack the ability to overcome adversity. Though no statistics could be found on the relation between slam poetry and tangible achievements, many studies and much literature address the more subtle, yet equally influential, influences of slam. This section compares the personal characteristics of resilience outlined in Winfield's paper with the literature on youth slam poetry, showing that many of the behaviors of resilient students are fostered by participation in the youth slam culture. Slam gives students an internal locus of control by making school about the student; integrating social responsiveness through music; preventing violence; fostering positive interactions with adult teachers as well as peers; and creating a rewarding competitive atmosphere. These factors all contribute to the personal power that slam creates in impoverished students, which will be discussed in the next section.

About the Student, Not the School

One characteristic of successful impoverished students is an internal locus of control; in other words, students believe that "they are capable of exercising a degree of control over their environment" (Winfield, 38). Slam's presence in inner-city public schools helps create this internal locus of control through its ability to connect with students on an emotional level that traditional curriculum often cannot. In asking students to create their own poems, teachers place the assignment in students' hands, inviting them to use their own creativity. In this way, students are allowed to reject classroom culture, if only for a short time. In *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms*, author Maisha T. Fisher documents the feelings and reflections of students in a New York City high school in a "Power Writing" class. She describes spoken word poetry in the context of a test-driven educational system and quotes one of the

Power Writing students expressing, "Poetry is about us. In English class the reading and curriculum is about them. The school's work. I don't like that at all" (93). If students feel as though they are just completing "the school's work," as opposed to work that benefits them, they begin to resent assignments. In an article on spoken word poetry in America's schools, David Yanofsky[1] points out that students have consistently "found much of the literature and the poetry they encounter, especially in school, to be irrelevant to their lives, and sometimes an insult to their cultural and ethnic identity" (Yanofsky et al., 2). This does not mean that anthologized poetry has no literary merit; education is all about experiencing different or past cultures and ideas and comparing them to our own. Yet Fisher and Yanofsky point out the detriments of focusing exclusively on academics without expanding schoolwork to include personal (and urban) experience.

Social Responsiveness Through Music

Winfield also identifies students who exhibit a "high degree of social responsiveness and sensitivity" as being capable of enduring instead of giving into impoverished society's struggles. Slam not only asks students to create their own poetry, but to do so in a way that is reminiscent of the musical culture around them. Fisher discusses the teaching and learning process in the Power Writing class, and the ways in which the students' teacher, Joe, instructs them to "sing." He often refers to their poetry as "music," bridging the gap between verse and song lyric, spoken word and hip hop. This links slam to students' urban culture. Yanofsky explains how the connection between popular music and schoolwork "is a relatively short jump for many teenagers, who have grown up on hip hop, but a huge leap from what they have thought poetry was limited to" (Yanofsky et al., 2). In addition, instead of giving into the negative connotations

[1] Yanofksy is the director/producer of the documentary Poetic License, about teenage poetry slams, and the creator of a curriculum package for schools on Spoken Word/Poetry Slams.

associated with inner-city life, urban teens are encouraged to "view their daily lives as an inspiration and material for their work" (Yanofsky et al., 2). By linking poetry to music, students make connections to the "real world." Slam poetry gives students a reason to pay attention, take note of their surroundings, as well as make changes. This is an exciting opportunity for these students to take part in and celebrate city culture.

The slam poem previously mentioned, "This Is For You," includes musical elements as well as outspoken attitudes toward life outside the classroom. Bartolini, Miller, and Dorantes repeat the line, "Mothers, sisters, daughters, women. This is for you, this is all I can do" throughout the piece, clapping their hands and stomping. The created rhythm is reminiscent of the pulsing beats in rap songs. The three poets also shout lines in sync at several points to add emphasis, specifically with powerful phrases such as, "my mother who would *hit* snooze and sleep my sophomore year away in a dark dream, no, nightmare-filled depression where reality is so *fucked up for a single mother with four children*," and, "he said he *purposefully gave that slut Chlamydia*, that she deserved it" (italics indicate the synchronized words). In these ways, Bartolini, Miller, and Dorantes turn the poem into an oral performance bordering on music, instead of just a poetry reading. The rhythmic and contentious performance makes a profound statement on the audience, as well as the performers.

Violence Intervention

Slam can become an outlet for students to voice their deep-seated struggles against poverty in a non-violent way. Winfield identifies "low degrees of defensiveness and aggressiveness and high degrees of cooperation, participation, and emotional stability" as more characteristics of successful poor students. Heather E. Bruce and Bryan Dexter Davis, two English teachers in inner-city schools, find that slam can be a powerful way to combat school violence. In "Slam: Hip-hop Meets Poetry—A Strategy for Violence Intervention" (2000), Bruce and Davis discuss

their blunt goal to "teach English so that people stop killing each other" (119). Several psychological studies (Gilligan, 1996; Kindlon and Thompson, 1999) have focused on replacing violent behavior with verbal coping strategies. They found that there is a "high correlation between lack of facility with verbal expression and aggression and delinquency" (120). Put simply, the students who act violently do so because they do not have the ability to express themselves verbally. Psychologists worked in juvenile prisons with "violent male offenders" to "maximize their ability to express the complexity of their thoughts in words to practice expressing those thoughts verbally, especially when it comes to emotions, rather than acting on angry, violent impulse." The studies found that "using words to talk about feelings releases emotional pressure and weakens the grip of anger and hostility," and allows these young men to resist using violence in exchange for words as means of expression (120). Bruce and Davis also suggest that while boys engage in outward violent acts, girls often tend to cause inward violence toward themselves through depression, eating disorders, or self-mutilation (120). Here we see the merit in introducing new ways for students to express themselves, replacing violence with spoken word.

Instead of waiting for violence to occur, Bruce and Davis see power in the hands of teachers to remedy the frustrations of student expression. They acknowledge the fear they, as teachers, carry to school as every day the classroom becomes more hostile, disruptive, and even violent. But they also recognize the teacher's ability to change these realities. They declare, "We believe that English teachers—experts in language use—can do a great deal to erase the inequality and discrimination that exists" amongst the at-risk students they identify as "poor students, students of color, and students from limited English-speaking families" (119). Teachers have an important role in showing students "the power of words in order to instruct them in nonviolence, leadership, character, and social change" (124), and a curriculum that "teaches for

peace" (119). Bruce and Davis recognize the plight of students who do not wish to complete merely "the school's work," as previously mentioned. Instead, they see the "need to examine more rigorously what we are doing in the name of English education and stop […] promoting policies that can harm our students, even if it means breaking some rules" (120). I can only speculate that "breaking some rules" means the test-driven educational system in which their at-risk students have grown up.

The Importance of Teachers

Without innovative teachers who embrace this idea of a creative "urban pedagogy" that will help students embrace their environments, students will be unable to take the poetry slam movement seriously or create such powerful pieces. In addition, Winfield also identifies positive "adult interactions" as another factor for resilience. Parmar and Bain discuss how using slam in the classroom creates a necessary connection between student and teacher. As students and teachers work with one another through the writing and performing process of the in-class poetry slam, "both teachers and students feel less of a need to compete, and tend to be more thoughtful and cooperative" (156). The hierarchy between teacher and student slowly disappears, and teachers become friends and team members, rather than authority figures. In Fisher's book, Joe and the other "Power Writer" teachers refer to themselves as "soul models" for their students. In the final chapters, Fisher describes the implications of what she observed in terms of the impact teachers had on students, their confidence, and their poetry. She writes, "In the Power Writing context, once students realized that they had the respect and encouragement of their teachers, they believed their words and ideas were valuable and worthy of being committed to paper" (92) and eventually, over the microphone.

Teamwork and Competition

Just as slam fosters a collaborative aspect between student and teacher, it also creates a

sense of teamwork between youth slammers. Winfield identifies a "wide array of social skills" and "positive peer interactions" as two more characteristics that benefit impoverished students. By becoming part of youth slam culture, students partake in a team dynamic—another reason why the slam culture is so influential and life-changing for students in poverty. Kids who become serious about slam poetry—and there are many of them—seek to participate in one of the many slam competitions around the country, such as the Brave New Voices National Youth Poetry Slam hosted by Youth Speaks. Bringing students from all different areas together at these competitions can be extremely influential to participants. The format of Brave New Voices fosters teamwork, as it requires not individuals, but teams of four to six members to enter the competition. Rules also include that teams "must prepare at least one individual poem per member," although up to four members of the group may be on stage at any one time. In other words, Youth Speaks requires each member to create and perform his or her own poem, but also allows participation from the other members of the group to support that individual's performance (similar to the way that Miller and Dorantes supported Bartolini in "This Is For You"). In their rules and guidelines, Youth Speaks explains how group pieces "are not only permissible, but encouraged. Each performing member of a group piece must have participated in the writing of the group piece" (youthspeaks.org). This combination of both individual and teamwork creates an interesting cooperative dynamic.

In addition to collaboration, many sources explain the importance of constructive peer feedback during the writing performance (Fisher; Bruce and Davis). Fisher discusses the "reading and feeding" process in which the Power Writing students participated, wherein students would read their own work and then receive peer feedback. Not only did this require critical thinking—feedback "had to be informed, critical, and specific" (21)—but also a sense of reliance upon fellow writers. One student, Arline, shared about the read and feed process, "It's a

partnership. Equal equal. They help me. I help them" (97). This reliance upon one another fosters both encouragement and cooperation during the writing and performance process, the same way students help each other but also maintain responsibility as members of an athletic team.

Poetry slams are competitions, and, like any competition, participants work tirelessly in order to prepare for (and win) a contest. Slam has so much in common with athletics in its format and competitive nature that it is no wonder it has been called the "Olympics of poetry" (Bruce and Davis, 121). Becoming part of a team creates both the team dynamic we have discussed, as well as individual "self-esteem and self-efficacy" (Winfield, 42), and creates a sense of belonging and ownership toward a student's school (47). Competition also gives impoverished youth something to fight for other than the struggles they may encounter in the home or on the streets. Participating in sports or slam poetry gives students "the opportunity to bring home a trophy for something inherently good," Scott Nicolay said. He described how, before participating in his slam workshops, "I don't think my students had won anything other than a fight."

Scott Nicolay also commented on his experiences traveling to competitions with his at-risk students, saying that his students became much better slammers as a result. "Seeing and hearing other poets, especially from elsewhere," Nicolay said, "would set off this light bulb and their level would go up like quantum physics." His students who had been "shy, holding the paper in front of their face" began to "belt it out" at competition. Overall, for Nicolay's at-risk students, it was "powerful for them to see students with the same problems using their voices."

All these characteristics of slam can contribute to character-building in impoverished students. Finally, Winfield identifies resilient poor youth as having "a sense of personal power rather than powerlessness." The next section focuses on ways in which slam empowers low-income youth, allowing them to take control of their struggles rather than let themselves be

consumed by their environments.

Empowerment

The most important aspect of slam is its ability to transform poetry into a life-changing experience in a way that other academic and extra-curricular activities cannot. Looking back at Fisher's book, we see the experiences of a group of students participating in an optional "Power Writing" class at University Heights High School in the Bronx. The class included students of various races and ethnicities, all of whom were victims of varying levels of poverty and suffered the hardships of urban life. Fisher discusses the way that the Power Writing class allowed the students, grades 9-12, to share truths on life. One "shared truth" was life in the Bronx. Fisher describes how students wrote and performed poetry on "the pervasive poverty and violence on their 'blocks'" (3). However, through their writing, "students did not romanticize these cycles" but were honest about being "angry that they had to live in these conditions, and they wanted to protect their younger siblings and themselves from cycles of untimely deaths, poverty, and the temptation to surrender to it all" (3). Joe, the teacher or "soul model" in the Power Writing class, describes the way that spoken word poetry is an opportunity for students to cope with these issues. He describes his classroom is as a "suffering zone" to nurture the "often complicated lives" (3) of his students.

Fisher describes the way that the Power Writing class was an opportunity for students to come to terms with their impoverished situations. In this alternative approach to education, "Joe understood reading, writing and speaking to be political for his students and literacy as a vehicle for enacting power over their lives and futures" (3). In other words, composing and performing spoken word poetry was more than creative expression; it was an opportunity to take action against injustices. Fisher explains the term she coined to describe this movement, *literocracy*, or

the combination of literacy and democracy (4). Through slam poetry, students create a partnership between language and action, creating a literary movement involving principles rather than just complaints. Another Power Writing teacher, Roland, describes the "Rebel Voices" series, public readings in which students specifically focus on speaking out against injustices. Roland says the name "Rebel Voices" comes from the fact that the students involved are "all rebels because what they have all done is rebel against the little slot, the little block in the pyramid that society has chosen for them. And they have chosen to rebel in the deepest, most profound way with their power, with their literacy, and this Power Writing workshop that we have is about helping them discover that" (12). Here Roland highlights the transformative power of slam poetry and the collaborative process involved. Together, through the Power Writing class, teachers and students have taught each other how to harness "their power," which includes "their literacy," to "rebel" against the injustices of impoverished life.

For example, one student, Robbin, a 15-year-old tenth grader in her first year of the program, wrote a poem she titled, "The Ghetto" (74). The end reads,

> The ghetto is indescribable to those who have never lived there
> Where kids carry guns and baby girls have baby boys who have baby girls
> Who follow their grandmother's footsteps
> The path continues

Robbin described to Fisher the "chain reaction" she discusses in the line "baby girls have baby boys who have baby girls." She said, "Most girls who have teenage parents are going to do the same thing and end up teenage parents themselves. And it's a chain I've noticed throughout the years. I've noticed this with most of my friends" (76). Here Robbin voices her opinions on the perpetuating factors of poverty.

In relation to mothers, Fisher speaks of the "African American single mother" of Kenya, an 18-year-old senior also participating in her first year of the Power Writing class. Fisher describes how Kenya's mother had "an uncompromising desire for her daughter to escape the

vicious cycles of poverty, teen pregnancies, and failing school" by saying things such as, "I told her to stay way from these kids who can't do anything for you and to graduate on time." Part of her wishes included Kenya participating in the Power Writing program, part of what Fisher calls "a particular set of navigational skills in their neighborhoods" for graduating on time and avoiding "such pitfalls" encountered by impoverished youth (34).

The Political Messages of Slam

Slam not only empowers students to speak out, but to speak out about political and contentious issues close to home for them. Several scholars, such as Susan B.A. Somers-Willett, feel that not only poverty, but also the associated oppression, are part of slam's culture. Somers-Willett discusses how slam is "regarded as a counter-cultural force," meaning that it is "characterized as the artform of the literary and social underdog" (Somers-Willett, 41). The issues raised by slam poets cry out on the oppressed and the political and social issues which plague them. Somers-Willett points out that part of the slam competition is the idea that slammers "must convince their audiences they have something important to say," and those "messages of counter-cultural complaint are awarded attention and rewarded by judges" (42). In order to make it in the slam arena, the slammer must be a member of the counter-culture; in other words, experience some kind of hardship, such as oppression. This makes slam more than just a part of inner-city culture, but a vehicle for social change.

In an *Education Week* article entitled "Outsiders' Art," authors John Gehring and Christopher Powers followed the D.C. Teen Poetry Slam Team to the 2005 Brave New Vices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival in San Francisco. Gehring and Powers highlight how, despite slam's growing popularity amongst all demographics, particularly higher income groups, it remains an "outsider's art." They describe how slam is, "home to the bohemian white kid who

bemoans suburban life; the black kid from the inner city sick of gang killings; the Latina paying respect to a mother who earns a living scrubbing other people's floors; the Asian teen struggling with sexual identity." In these ways, slam is an outlet for all students who feel powerless as a result of their surroundings, upbringing, or environment. It is particularly helpful for students in low-income areas who do not feel they have the tools to change their own lives.

The article contains several excerpts from the slammers' poems, highlighting some of the inner-city issues plaguing the team members. One example is from Alexis Alexander, who encompasses the violence of city life in her poem, including the lines,

> I want no more push and shove no more Crips and Bloods
> no more animosities brewing up between us no more empty love
> no one else sent up above by a nigga with his finger on the trigger
> of a gun I want to love someone and be loved back
> but it seems so hard for y'all to understand all of that.

The other members of the team also speak out against injustices, such as Tony Denis, whose poem "Godchild" speaks of a young prostitute. He dedicated the verse, which includes the following, to a friend:

> She sways one hip after the other switching up and down
> backwards alleys dying fast but still alive
> dead chick walking no attention with regular clothes
> so this day she gives her privates a chance to breathe as high
> expectations from men hoeing gets her in six feet deep no strength to
> stand she's found crawling on her knees I said no strength to
> stand she's found crawling on her knees.

All six team members, including only one white girl, speak of controversial issues such as race, rape and the treatment of women, religion, and of course poverty, shown in Christon Bacon's poem "Money Gives You Options":

> Now once upon a paycheck assigned to me for two weeks of hard
> labor making $5.15 there lived federal, state, and these FICA
> cats but I'm breakin' them off it's like sex on first date
> and never call you tomorrow so I live with my mom and my status is poor.

The examples provided by the D.C. team show the issues plaguing low-income students, and the willingness of these students to speak out against them. Notice how the attitude of some of these poems seems to blame an oppressor outside of the counter culture, such as Bacon's poem which cries out against "federal, state, and these FICA cats," accusing them of the fact that her "status is poor." Yet Alexander and Denis hold other members of counter culture responsible for the proliferation of poverty and its hardships; Alexander bemoans the gang members for the "animosities brewing up between us," the "us" seeming to mean all the members of poor urban life. Denis' message is less clear; while he blames inner-city men for taking advantage of young women, he may also be criticizing the young prostitute for putting herself through such struggle. In these poems we see both an outcry against mainstream culture as well as a critique on fellow members of the counter culture; either way, the poems strongly advocate for change.

Slam's Critics and Defenders

Billy Collins, the U.S. Poet laureate from 2001-03, said there is "no doubt that the slam poetry scene has achieved legitimacy and taken its rightful place on the map of contemporary literature" (Aptowicz). Yet there remain many who do not feel slam should achieve the same quality academic attention as the written word. Therefore, the major criticism of slam is its lack of intellectuality. Many see the movement as less of an art form and more of a way for members of oppressed America to complain on stage. Harold Bloom, "poetry slam's most famous critic," has called slam "the death of art" in the *Paris Review* (Aptowicz, 286). Somers-Willett also quotes Bloom saying, "I can't bear these accounts I read in the *Times* and elsewhere of these poetry slams, in which various young men and women in various late-spots are declaiming rant and nonsense at each other" (42). Many critics have dismissed the poetry slam as a sister to hip-hop and rap: something that is part of America's inner-city culture as opposed to an art. Others

discuss how slam's association with low-income artists has caused it to be "relegated to the status of 'poor poetry' by some academic critics" (Parmar and Bain, 134). Slam's lack of text and abrasive nature (there seem to be few slams that do not include explicit language) add to its separation from canonical poetry. Scholars grapple with the idea of slam poetry as a form not only because it challenges traditional notions of poetry, but also because of who is allowed identification as a poet. Slam's very nature as an "open forum" promotes participation from any and all individuals, "regardless of age, education, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, poetic form or style" (42). This challenges the traditional notions of poetry as a highly educated art.

English teachers Bruce and Davis do not see this criticism as detrimental to poetry as an art form. Quoting an article in *The New York Times*, they argue that the proliferation of slam poetry through the classroom and American media "has expanded the popular notion of what poetry is and has brought 'a wider, younger public to a form long associated with intimidating erudition'" (122). Though this is the critic's main argument, Bruce and Davis see this aspect of slam as one of its greatest accomplishments. Bruce and Davis discuss the ways that slam overlaps with the more traditional study of canonical poetry, saying that, if English teachers can study written and anthologized poems, they should be able to support slam, saying,

> In any other context, English teachers comfortably argue that explicit, powerful, imagistic language is poetic material. We argue that taking the fewest words and making them mean the most is what poets expertly do. We argue that repetition, rhythm, and mimesis are important elements of poetry. We argue that poets manipulate the standard forms of English and use the language with license in terms of structure, rules, and meaning. (123)

The writing and performance of slam, in or out of the classroom, employs many of the techniques and practices associated with more traditional poetry. Bruce and Davis summarize this, saying, "As we strive to create conditions in English classrooms that will allow students widely to embrace both oral and written literacies, we need broaden connections between our students' cultural literacies and the conventional English curriculum" (123). If teachers are to

educate today's students on poetry, it is necessary for them not only to discuss the history of verse, but also where it is going in today's modern society.

Another criticism regarding slam is its relation to minority and oppressed groups only, despite its increased popularity amongst other groups. These characteristics raise questions as to slam's progress and influence as a political force. As this paper has shown, slam gives impoverished, oppressed students the opportunity to voice their opinions in front of both small and large audiences. Many see the worth in this personal expression; in a very public arena, slammers describe their personal struggles in attempts to create a connection between audience and author. As seen in the D.C. Team's poems, "first-person narrative poetry is the most popular mode chosen by slammers," achieving a sense of validity through personal experience. Somers-Willett describes how, "slam poetry is also often specific to an author's social or cultural condition rather than invoking 'universal' themes and subjects" (43). Yet those personal issues ring true with members of the audience seen through the cheering and encouragement they provide.

Though all races are invited to participate, Somers-Willett notes that those who do (and those who win) are primarily minorities. The national slam poetry community does not record its members' racial demographics, as "some performers reject being 'pigeon-holed' in one particular racial category" (44). However, like Urban Word, Somers-Willett reports similar findings in that most participants in the adult slams are minorities, and reveals that "almost 84% of the finalists were non-white" at one New York City slam venue over the course of nine months (44). Somers-Willett goes on to describe how, despite minority performance, "the audience for slam on a national level has and continues to be predominately white and middle-class" (45). Audience demographics do not throw off the "counter-culture" aspect of slam, however. Though the audience may be well-educated and wealthy, "no one flaunts it." Instead,

there remains a distinct "anti-intellectual undercurrent" to slam (42). These demographics suggest that while upper-class individuals attend slams, the art form remains distinctly that of the oppressed. Does this mean that slammer's messages are reaching their intended audiences directly? And if so, why haven't we seen slam as a vehicle for drastic change over the last 25 years?

The Future Success of Slam

Although slam has not been responsible for alleviating poverty through poetic voice, it has provided a world of change for its young participants. This, I feel, is the major benefit of the movement: the students who participate in slam workshops and competitions gain academic, social, and emotional skills which increase their chances of escaping poverty. Researching for and writing this paper allowed me to read about and hear first hand many personal stories from slam artists. These personal stories of empowerment and self-discovery have shown me that the real power of slam is its impact on the personal level.

J. Ivy, a famous adult slammer who has performed on MTV's Def Poetry Jam and in mainstream rap songs by artists such as Kanye West, started out as a student in a low-income school on the south side of Chicago. Encouraged by a high school English teacher, Ivy began performing poetry orally, and eventually created his own poems, performing them in local youth slams. During his visit to Washington & Lee University, Ivy told me that the most important aspect of slam was its ability to teach him (and other urban youth) how to articulate the mind. "I learned how to communicate, which is something some people don't learn until later in life," Ivy said (J. Ivy). I see the merit in skills like communication for motivating and eventually freeing low-income students from poverty.

My interview with Scott Nicolay, which I peppered throughout the paper, also provided

insight into the power of slam. Nicolay told many stories of students who had "no confidence" prior to participating in slam, and how slam had a "positive influence on every student—some of them massively so." He described the many successful students who now own businesses and still write poetry. One young man saw the possibility of college through participation in slam poetry. Nicolay said, "he saw he could do this. 'Wow! I can go to college'—the idea had never come to him." But Nicolay explained, "alcoholism claimed him. … Unfortunately there were too many darknesses in his life, but for a while he saw the door." Despite successes and disappointments, slam "brought poetry to places where people didn't know poetry existed," and the impact it made was "never a negative influence on any student." It's just that, for Nicolay's students and many others, "some had problems that poetry couldn't overcome" (Nicolay).

These personal impacts, even if short-lived, are the most important element of slam. As I explained, slam's critics feel (and hope) that slam will never receive the same critical acclaim as written poetry. I do not feel, however, that intellectual approval is particularly important in the slam arena. In the future, slam will be recognized as having the ability to elevate and empower young people from all different races and socio-economic backgrounds. And as this paper has shown, more and more individuals and organizations are recognizing slam's power. Teachers around the country are incorporating elements of "urban pedagogy" into their inner-city classrooms. Organizations such as Youth Speaks and Urban Word are supplementing hundreds of classrooms and teaching thousands of students. And programs such as the University of Wisconsin's First Wave program are legitimizing spoken word through college curricula. These programs, as well as the more diverse groups of individuals who are attending slams (as Somers-Willett points out), prove that slam's cultural and academic importance has increased exponentially since the 1980's. As these movements continue, and as impoverished youth vault themselves to higher socio-economic statuses, I feel that the nation (including the critics) will

recognize slam as the powerful and edifying phenomenon it truly is.

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