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slam:
taking poetry off its pedestal

A Project Assessment Statement
Following My Experience as a Slam Poet and Teacher of Performance Poetry

by
Leila Rachel Sinclair
B.A., Stanford University, 2001

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
The University of Montana
2004

Approved by



Chair



Dean, Graduate School

7-14-04

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Sinclair, Leila Rachel, M.A., June 2004 Fine Arts, Integrated Arts and Education

Slam: Taking Poetry Off Its Pedestal, A Project Assessment Statement Following My Experience as a Slam Poet and Teacher of Performance Poetry

Chair: Dorothy Morrison 

For this project, I intended to raise my level of participation in the slam poetry scene by performing my written work regularly on stage. I also planned to introduce my elementary school students to the art of performance poetry because I think there is profound pedagogical potential in its unique fusion of multiple intelligences. When my Creative Pulse professors encouraged me to engage in the most difficult and unfamiliar creative process I could imagine, I chose slam poetry because the in-your-face aesthetic of the form terrified me and brought to the surface years of struggles with my body and self-worth.

After two years of work, I am still not a “real” slam poet. I am a “real” teacher; kindergarten and eighth grade students absorbed my poetry lessons and wrote beautiful, honest work. I learned that slam is not as spontaneous as it seems. Most champion slam poets practice and script out their performances beforehand. Teachers would benefit from the same kind of practice and attention to detail, treating every lesson as a performance. Because of this project, I have decided to pursue a Ph.D. in Performance Studies and lead others to rigorous readings of performance in its many incarnations.

Table of Contents

Intent	1
Background	1
Outcomes	
<i>Artistic</i>	2
<i>Teaching</i>	4
Discoveries	
<i>Slam as Nourishment</i>	9
<i>Slam as Democracy</i>	11
<i>Slam is Not Spontaneous</i>	12
<i>Being In the Know</i>	12
<i>Respecting Minutiae</i>	13
<i>Children Like Poetry</i>	14
<i>Not Haughty, Human</i>	15
Impact	
<i>On Self</i>	15
<i>On Teaching</i>	16

<i>On Future Work</i>	17
Final Thoughts	18
Appendices	
A: Student Poems	
<i>Tape</i> by Daichi, kindergarten	21
<i>Giants</i> by Jackson, kindergarten	22
<i>The Woman</i> by Mikaela, eighth grade	23
<i>Not Popular</i> by Tracey, eighth grade	24
B: Some of My Poems	
<i>On Being Told By My Gynecologist</i>	26
<i>America</i>	28
<i>I Have an Ass</i>	30
<i>Dinner with Her New Boyfriend</i>	32
C: Jamie Kennedy's <i>Grim Fairy Tales</i>	35
D: Announcements for Various Slam Events	40
Bibliography	45

INTENT

My proposal for the Creative Pulse thesis project was two-fold. First, I intended to raise my level of participation in the local slam poetry scene by performing my written work regularly on stage. I wanted to continue shedding the I'm-just-a-white-girl-from-Ohio inferiority complex that I have developed living surrounded by so many exotic, troubled, talented writers in the extraordinarily diverse San Francisco Bay Area, and summon enough confidence to share my poetry. Second, I planned to introduce my elementary school students to the art of performance poetry because there is profound (and, I believe, remarkably untapped) pedagogical potential in its unique fusion of so many of the multiple intelligences.

BACKGROUND

My professors at the University of Montana encouraged me to grow as an artist and teacher by engaging in the most difficult and unfamiliar creative process I could imagine in order to simulate the feelings of students struggling to achieve in areas that are not their strongest. I chose slam – competitive performance poetry – because the spontaneity of the form terrified me. I considered myself a levelheaded short story writer, not a self-promoting slam competitor. I loved to read my writing out loud, but preferred some degree of separation between my body and the audience, some crutch – a notebook, a piece of furniture – and I rarely ventured beyond informal settings like friends' living rooms. The idea of being on stage with a microphone in front of a crowd of tipsy, entertainment-hungry strangers who had been instructed specifically to judge me on a scale of 0 to 10 was horrifying. It brought to the surface years of struggles with my body,

my appearance, my self-worth, my need for acceptance, and my sense of shame about being born white and privileged.

In high school, I received the senior yearbook superlative “best writer,” won writing awards and scholarships. As an undergraduate at Stanford, I edited a literary journal and wrote short stories and essays that earned good grades from professors and respect from peers. I dared to dream of corresponding greatness in the vastly different realm of performance poetry. I had visions of lighting up crowded rooms with my facility with language, my newfound stage presence, and the strength of my convictions. I expected that would I get up to the microphone (or to the front of the classroom) and shine the way I did as a young girl in elementary school musicals. But I had little experience with formal competition, performance, or poetry. Just the thought of the stage lights and the waiting crowd was enough to make me anxious and sweaty. Slam poetry was an authentic challenge; it was stretching the envelope, as my father likes to put it.

OUTCOMES

Artistic

I am still not a slam poet. I am a patron of slam, a participant-observer. I spread the word about slam, save seats for friends at slam venues, mention slam in casual conversation as often as possible. I attend a lively weekly writers’ “WordShop” led by Berkeley slam host Charles Ellick in his living room. I have slammed on stage and have done very well, have even won money and shared the stage with champion poets, but I do not consider myself the “real thing.” The poets I regard as “real” slam poets go to every slam venue in

the Bay Area (in Oakland, San Jose, Berkeley, San Francisco, Palo Alto, and Sacramento) every week to perform, work part time jobs or no job at all so that they have more time to write, carefully calculate scores and time poems with stopwatches during the course of every slam, gauge judges and choose the poem from their arsenal of memorized work that will have the greatest chance of winning first place.

One aspect of my proposal, that I would get to know local slam poets better, did happen as I foresaw. Getting invited to poets' barbecues, using their bathrooms, wading through their messy apartments, seeing them pigging out at the ice cream parlor, and hearing their behind-the-scenes conversations and gossip put a strange twist on my reverence. I saw clearly the differences between their relationship with slam and my own. I believe in slam as an art form, but I do not believe in myself as a slam poet. I sense that it is not my strength, this pouring of heart into drunken audiences' laps to be judged, and I am happy to accept this self-knowledge. I don't need to be the loudest or the most famous or the best. I have learned how hard it is to get to a point at which one feels comfortable on stage. It takes a lot of soul-searching, practicing, growing thicker skin, and developing a sympathetic audience, a stable fan base. I have taken the first steps down this long path. My relationship with slam gets deeper and more complex every day, and I am invested and interested enough in the development of the relationship that I am not as attached as I once was to my personal achievement.

The harder I worked on my proposed project, the more I realized my naiveté. My proposal to become a successful slam poet and teacher of slam was analogous to a declaration that I would master the art of trapeze in one year. It is perfectly feasible to

take on the goal, and to study and practice the art in a focused and ambitious way, but it is not realistic to expect great success. There are countless baby steps to take before proficiency, not to mention advancement. Tibetan Buddhists believe that students of the dharma must first do 100,000 full-body prostrations to antidote pride so that their minds are primed to receive the word of the Buddha. My work on this project was my thousands of bows to the art form. As a person for whom new skills usually come easily, this project was an exercise in patience, discipline, and humility. It is more fun to goof off on stage and get attention than to dutifully revise poems alone in my room; it is more glamorous to cozy up with local talent than to bind kindergarteners' poems into anthologies. Though it is more characteristic of me to go straight for the gold than to move slowly toward an intermediate goal, I committed myself to the baby steps and detached myself from any preconceived notion of triumph.

Teaching

The second part of my proposal, the part related to my teaching, came more easily to fruition. I did not want to make kindergarteners into slam poets. I wanted them to love poetry. I wanted them to feel that poetry was present, that it was alive, that it was there for them whenever they needed it. I wanted to take poetry off its pedestal and place it into my students' hands for closer examination. For this purpose, I invited the infamous local slam poet Jamie Kennedy to my classroom for a second time, again not sure what to expect, hoping he wouldn't say something inappropriate to my kids and get me fired. Jamie hosts the Oakland slam called "Tourettes Without Regrets," which he describes as

a “psychotic erotic vaudeville show,” and he has a reputation for being a free-spirited rabble-rouser. He asked me beforehand if he should wear a shirt that covered the many tattoos on his arms. I thought a moment, then told him to wear whatever he felt comfortable wearing. I want my students to see people of all sorts, not just cleaned-up, professional versions. The kindergarteners, of course, adored Jamie. At the end of the year, when the class was reminiscing about their favorite parts of kindergarten, his name was mentioned multiple times. Some of the more mischievous kids connected instantly with him, found in his rough-around-the-edges public persona a role model to which they could relate. He performed his poem “Grim Fairy Tales,” presided over a period of chaotic wordplay and performance with my students, and answered their questions about what it was like to be a poet for a living. The children blew me away with the relevance and sincerity of their questions. Jaxon, for example, wondered, “Does a poem come into your head before or after you start writing it?” Others wanted to know what age Jamie started writing, how long he took to write a poem, if he ever had to revise.

I found that my students were natural writers of spoken word, poetry that is meant to be performed, spoken and heard. Since many kindergarteners are just beginning to feel comfortable with letters, sounds, and the act of handwriting, they would much rather compose a poem orally and share it with their voices rather than pencil and paper. I did not specifically ask my students to write slam poems because slam calls for competition, and I did not want them to have the goal of out-doing anyone else. “Friendly” competition is a tough exercise for 5-year-olds. Kindergarteners can be very critical because they have not yet been trained to prioritize politeness over honesty. One of my

English-as-a-second-language students, Ashley, turned to me during a demonstration of another teacher's abstract oil paintings of trees and said, "Leila, what is this?" When I told her they were paintings of trees, she said loudly, "Not for me." I treasure this honesty, when it is expressed appropriately, and tried to foster it in my teaching. I welcomed the kindergarteners' opinions by inviting them to share their favorite line from the poems we studied and then explain why they chose that particular part. I felt that this was a positive exercise in personal taste and using one's own judgment, whereas putting classmates' poems under the same scrutiny would just lead to hurt feelings.

I planned poetry lessons geared toward kindergarteners – lessons that incorporated plain language, concrete images, and specific techniques that could be taught and learned. One poetic device that I taught and was proud to see come out in the kindergarteners' work was the direct address, the conceit. I demonstrated the difference between talking about a thing and talking to a thing, pointing out the immediacy and power in the latter. My student writers really absorbed the lesson. For example, they wrote, "You blue sky, great. / Are you friends with the sun? / How do you sleep? / Do you snuggle? / Do you have a doll?" (Sachi); and "Tape, O Tape / I like that you stick. / You help me put things together. / And I like you" (Daichi). The direct address is used often in slam poetry because it skews normal language toward the poetic just enough to get the attention of an audience without alienating them by being too "poetical" and erudite like dactylic pentameter or the villanelle form.

Just as some experts say that playing classical music may make a person smarter and make plants grow more quickly, I was open to the possibility that the sound of poetry

might make my students feel more poetic. I read the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda to my class in English and in Spanish, though his writing can get quite sophisticated, and though few of the kids understood Spanish. There is something to be said for letting the sonic quality of poetry surround the kids, for exposure's sake. They particularly liked a Neruda poem called *Ode to a Pair of Socks*; we acted out the lines so that we could inhabit and better imagine them:

Maru Mori brought me
 a pair
 of socks
 that she knit with her
 shepard's hands.
 Two socks as soft
 as rabbit fur.
 I thrust my feet
 inside them
 as if they were
 two
 little boxes
 knit from threads
 of sunset
 and sheepskin.

My feet were
 two woolen
 fish
 in those outrageous socks,
 two gangly,
 navy-blue sharks
 impaled
 on a golden thread,
 two giant blackbirds,
 two cannons:
 thus
 were my feet
 honored
 by
 those
 heavenly

socks.

Another aspect of performance poetry that the kindergarteners loved was memorization. I used to think memorization in the classroom was a sign that an educator was too lazy to think of a more creative method of teaching, but now I see that once students commit something to memory, especially poetry that they like, they can carry it with them, feel some ownership and pride, and share it with whomever they please whenever they please. The kids loved learning a poem together that they could then recite during recess like a high-class jump-rope rhyme. As a group, we memorized Douglas Florian's *Crickets*:

You don't need tickets
to listen to crickets.
They chirp and cheep for free.
They fiddle and sing
by rubbing each wing,
And never will charge you a fee.

I could almost bet that I would hear a choral rendition of this poem floating out of the kindergarten yard everyday as I walked into the staff room for lunch.

I didn't limit my efforts to bring performance poetry to students by working only with kindergarteners at my own school. I was connected to an English teacher at an all-girls' middle school in Oakland through several degrees of separation – he was dating the secretary of the mother of the fifth grader I tutored once a week, to be exact. He heard through the grapevine about my slam poetry project and convinced his administrators to invite me to bring slam to his students. For a few afternoons in early spring, I commuted to his school and worked with eighth grade girls on writing slam poems. Our mission was

to introduce a visiting Korean-American slam poet named Ishle Yi Park at a special fundraising event at their school – not in the usual way, by reading off her biography and accolades, but by performing the girls’ own slam poems inspired by Ms. Park’s work. The first time I met the girls, I performed a slam poem I wrote about my ample butt, and they were impressed and thrown off guard, I think, by my honesty. Teachers don’t usually draw attention to their physical selves. As a result, the girls wrote poems that were very body-conscious, very honest and raw and beautiful. One girl wrote about what it felt like to be unpopular, another about her eating disorder, another about her curvy body, another about her pride in being a strong female. I think that they trusted me, and I felt honored because I remember how wary I was to trust anyone when I was thirteen. The night of the fundraiser, the girls brought the audience to their feet in a roaring standing ovation. Ishle Yi Park kept interrupting her own performance to praise the girls who had performed. I felt exhilarated, overwhelmed with pride and hope and joy. It was truly a highlight in my teaching career, one that made me suspect that I should try teaching older students on a more permanent basis.

DISCOVERIES

Slam as Nourishment

The last two years would have been much more difficult for me if it weren’t for slam. Slam poetry has been my fuel, my padding, my safety net, my backup plan, as essential and familiar as breathing. For me, staying up way past midnight at least once a week is not a great idea when I have to wake up and be cheery eyed and singing by eight o’clock

the next morning, but the sleep deprivation is more than worth it. When my lead teacher treats me like her indentured servant, I make up slam poems about her in my head. My boyfriend adopts a “slam” tone of voice when he wants to complain about something to me – loud and low, annunciating each syllable. When he speaks this way, I laugh, but I have to admit, I am more prone to listen.

Sometimes I couldn't drum up the energy to make it to the slam – meetings went late, my bones hurt, the dog chewed up my CD collection and peed on our bed. On those nights I felt my temperature drop, my gusto go go go, my sense of hope deflate like a days-old balloon. I need poetry. It makes me well. It makes me better, makes my life better. At the slam, words were food for me; I felt nourished by them. Sometimes during the course of a slam, I forgot to eat dinner or go to the bathroom. I was perfectly content in my seat. I was much more comfortable in the seedy Irish pub that serves as the Berkeley slam venue than at garden parties or bridal showers with colleagues. I felt at home within its crumbling brick walls. I also felt remarkably fine about the heckling that is encouraged at slams – about booing a score I found offensively low or cheering after I heard a line that spoke my thoughts better than I could speak them. I wasn't raised to shout out; in fact, as a young girl I had to go to manners school on Saturdays at the Saks Fifth Avenue in downtown Cincinnati. It felt good and freeing to be vocal and involved with the performance. It felt like active engagement, like loud constructive criticism.

Certain aspects of slam do make it the natural choice for me. I am an honest person, honest at all costs, sometimes to a fault. I am a talker and a listener; I simply cannot keep truths inside, cannot bear watching others bottle up their feelings. I like to

share my pain, spread it thin by talking about it, recognizing it, acknowledging its effects on me and on others. Though slam poets manage to seem mysterious, they are really making their lives an open book. I wish more people were as open as slam poets.

Slam as Democracy

Slam seems to me to be free speech at its most free, one of the last true democracies within our pseudo-democracy. Chicago construction worker Marc Smith is credited with birthing slam in 1984 as an alternative to mind-numbing poetry readings, an editorial venue, a stage open to everyone and everything under three minutes. Slam welcomes performers of all ages, races, lifestyles, and writing styles. There are very few places in this country in which people who call themselves punk rockers, gangsta rappers, folk singers, stand-up comedians, Rastafarians, yuppies, thugs, frat boys, feminists, immigrants, gays, lesbians, transsexuals, Black Panthers, teenagers, hippies, intellectuals, scientists, lobbyists, stage actors, computer geeks, and the homeless gather together and genuinely listen to one another. The slam scene seems very “California” and very metropolitan to me, an Ohio native. One never knows what to expect from a slam. It has certainly put me in some awkward situations, such as sitting next to my mom during long lyrical poems about sex, or bringing a devout Christian friend to a slam at which the master of ceremonies called all believers ignorant. I have walked in to slams to find poets performing in their underwear, performing from inside the bathroom, pretending to slit their wrists during the poem, chugging pitchers of beer on stage before beginning their poems. Despite all this, the slam scene is my idea of utopia, even on a bad night. I like

spending my time with strangers who would rather go to a slam than watch *American Idol* on TV.

Slam is Not Spontaneous

I learned that the spontaneity of slam that had once so intimidated me was an illusion, a common misperception. As outsiders, slam performances seem so effortless and organic that we imagine they have to be off-the-cuff; as an insider I know that slam poets practice like crazy. Slam is not “freestyle;” it is extremely rare to see someone come onto the stage with nothing prepared, especially seasoned performers seeking to win the slam. Though many slam poems do not look very impressive on the page because they are so full of slang, the pauses, gestures, and other live performance aspects are also scripted. Many slam poets are careful planners, attendants to nuance, just like me. In fact, there are people who specialize in slam strategy, in knowing which poem wins over which type of crowd most effectively. These specialists and coaches know whether to play into or against stereotypes, whether to do a serious or silly piece first or second. As someone who is still grappling with the whole process of writing a poem and performing it in the first place, the finer points of strategy are way over my head.

Being In the Know

Another aspect of slam that used to go over my head but doesn't any longer is the many inside jokes. Slam poets date one another, live together, hang out together, travel together, write together; they are a rather incestuous bunch. It is very common to see

them working out relationship issues in their performances. They love to refer to other slam poets in their poems – “Jamie Kennedy is an asshole,” for example, or “the fact that Mike McGee is not a household name astonishes me” – and to borrow work, riff on lines or steal them completely. I like that I can sense when a poet is making a subtle jab or re-appropriating verse. One poem I loved depended almost entirely on prior knowledge of the poem it was spoofing – it was a team piece by Team Monterey called “Nuns” which closely followed the Suicide Kings’ “Guns.” While “Guns” is a serious poem about the staggering violence and availability of guns in this country, “Nuns” is a comedic piece about the strictness of Catholic school teachers. There is a special feeling that comes from “getting it,” from knowing a place well after doing your time there. Your high school, for example, will never look the same to your significant other as it does to you because only you know the bubble-gum-stuck spots, the place you kissed the kid from math class – I feel like I know the slam scene in a way that only a few handfuls of people do. I have explored slam’s nooks and crannies and I have formed associations with all its quirky characters and characteristics. Newcomers to the slam look to me like tourists, and I welcome them, but I am glad that I am more like a native, more “in the know.”

Respecting Minutiae

Each wave of the hand and flickering of fingers at the slam was cause for me to make a note in my notebook – “she indicated her vulnerability by slouching her shoulders,” or “he marked his descent into and out of character by bowing his head deeply,” or “he compensated for his average physical stature during his superhero poem by standing on

his tiptoes.” I formed a great respect for minutiae, for details such as hand gestures. I found that I thrive on examining microscopically and then projecting outwards, considering how each part of a whole connotes meaning, indicates motive. A skilled slam poet can condemn a politician with a single choice in diction or express love with a curled hand. These kinds of tiny details and connections move me to tears, to action. I feel confident making connections in the arts because as a practicing artist I am familiar with the deliberateness of each creative choice. I have found that teaching is a kind of performance, as well. My most successful lessons are the ones during which I am acutely aware of the mechanics of my voice and body and the effects of my goals and biases on my student audience.

Children Like Poetry

I have seen children who do not seem the least bit interested in their own linguistic intelligence get excited about poetry. Somehow poetry masquerades as less difficult than other kinds of writing. Perhaps children imagine that poetry is easier because it is usually shorter than prose. They don't realize how meticulously they are plunging the depths of their emotional experience for material. It certainly doesn't hurt that there is no wrong answer in poetry. There is something so satisfying about watching children who are not used to doing well in academics feeling successful composing poetry, receiving praise for their efforts, and giddy with pride.

Not Haughty, Human

Compared to the haughty hoity-toity poetry readings with much throat clearing that I attended at Stanford, going to the slam initially seemed like slumming. I thought it was barbaric not to care about meter. I was wrong. Slam poets do care about meter: the meter of living, of performance. In some ways, I respect slam poets more than I respect poet laureates because I see the slam poets at work every week. I watch them improve; I get to know their styles, their moods, their drinking habits. They are more human to me than illustrious title-holders. I look at photographs of famous poets like Billy Collins or Robert Hass and they look just as I expected: old, white, silver-haired, brilliant. Slam poets, on the other hand, cannot be detected. They look like soccer moms and Kinko's workers and waiters and truck drivers and students because they are. They just happen to come up to a microphone every now and again and blow everyone away with their poetry.

*IMPACT**On Self*

Poetry has become my "thing." My colleagues come to me with questions and ideas about poetry, and I am on every possible poetry committee at the elementary school. My friends and family constantly call to tell me to turn on the radio, there's a slam poet on. They send me newspaper clippings, magazine articles, hastily scrawled verse, and contact information for their best friend's sister's husband who is a spoken-word poet. I like this identification. I like that my friends have all seen me slam, that they call me when they have a poetry-related question. I like that the kindergarteners came to me for help with

their poems. I like it when parents thank me for “making my child into a poet,” for turning them on to poetry.

Though I am certainly less shy in front of an audience than before I began my slam project, I still feel challenged when I try to write my own slam poems because I am not an angry person and don't have many clearly defined issues, hardships, deficiencies, or hang-ups. I sometimes feel like I should write a poem about how confusing it is that I have a cute blond boyfriend and a house and an SUV in my life while others have domestic abuse and cardboard boxes and STDs. Slam makes me remember myself. Slam teaches me about myself and helps me define myself – what moves me, what I can and cannot tolerate and respect. It keeps me grounded in my blessings. For example, though it is tedious to wait in line at the DMV for my renewed driver's license, it is not as bad as waiting in line at an INS office for hours for paper to move so that I may continue living life as I know it rather than being deported. Going to the slam every week is like interacting with the editorial section of the newspaper; the poetry is headlines come to life; the performers are the faces behind the stories.

On Teaching

My mother keeps saying, “Write down your kindergarten stories;” she calls all my kindergarten trials fodder for writing, fodder for fiction, fodder for my screenplay, fodder for my novel, fodder, fodder, until I never want to hear the word fodder again. As an assistant kindergarten teacher, I spend the day putting chairs down, putting them up again, putting paint out by the easel and bringing it back in, dirtying my apron, searching

for the kids' red take-home folders, organizing backpacks, jackets, lunch boxes, snack boxes, book order money, making copies, cutting construction paper, putting artwork up on the walls, returning dress-up clothes to hangers and sombreros and football helmets to their proper resting places, feeding the African fat-tailed gecko his five crickets, checking voice mail, email, and my box in the office, opening yogurt containers and Tupperware, closing them again, searching for ice packs and Band-Aids and itch-stopping cream, discussing conflict resolution. Teaching poetry, on the other hand, ties my work in with my dreams, releases it from the mundane. It keeps me in tune with the reasons I became a teacher in the first place, the passion I wanted to share, the appreciation of the arts I wanted to cultivate in others.

On Future Work

Slam poetry is a folk movement worth formal attention. My explorations of it are not close to finished. I imagine myself studying this art form, teaching it, and trying my hand at it for many, many more years. While competitive performance poetry is increasingly recognized in the media – on Russell Simmons' HBO show *Def Poetry Jam*, on Broadway, in the 2002 film *8 Mile* – there is a dearth of related scholarship. I have decided to pursue a Ph.D. in Performance Studies. I am excited about the prospect of studying a young contemporary art form, asking questions that may not have been asked, contributing to the viability of arts criticism and scholarship. I would like to investigate a host of issues in slam that range across disciplines: adaptation of poetry from the page to the stage, the role of gesture and other body language, rhetorical methods, effects of

audience energy on performers' energy, popular culture, the links between slam and visual performance art, the codification of bodies in live art. A degree in Performance Studies would give me the theoretical and practical frameworks to articulate to others the processes at work when a tipsy bar crowd becomes transfixed by the three-minute performance of a slam poet, and, for that matter, when any audience falls under the spell of any performer: poet, priest, or politician. I want to lead others to rigorous readings of performance in its many incarnations. I see myself inspiring students to read parades and weddings with the same critical eye they bring to plays and concerts, as there are similar acts of meaning within events whether they are considered high art or everyday ritual.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I realized early in my educational career that an experiment was superior when the outcome did not match the hypothesis. It was honest, humble, true-to-life. Plus, it gave me more interesting things to write about in the conclusion. My slam poetry project puts me in a similar position because I am not that triumphant slam poet that I envisioned I would become. Though the project outcomes do not perfectly mirror the goals I set out to achieve, I think it makes the whole process of reflection more meaningful and rich.

I have been more patient with my snail's pace toward the goal of being a successful slam poet and teacher of slam ever since I rediscovered the word "denouement." According to the New Webster's Dictionary, "denouement" is "the unraveling or resolution of the complications of a story." Beyond the silken sonic quality of "denouement," its meaning struck a chord. My life is less a series of climaxes than

installments of quiet, less dramatic acts, acts of resolution, continuation, moving on, moving forward, wrapping up. At this point in my life and career as an artist, there is nothing more thrilling than performing poetry and analyzing performance, the grammar of gestures, the foreshadowing of eyebrows and breath. But I do not need every night to be an extravaganza, a tour de force. I am happy just living reflectively, mindfully, and consistently joining in a crowded room with others who do the same. For me, slam is a constant unraveling of complications.

Appendix A:
Student Poems

Tape, O Tape
I like that you stick.
You help me put things
together.
And...
I like you.



Giants by Jackson, kindergarten

Big feet tall as trees.

Eyes big as round baskets.

Skin color brown as dirt.

Stomping. Making earthquakes

All around the world.

Thump!!!

giants
 Big Feet tall as trees.
 eyes Big as Round Baskets.
 Skin color ~~color~~ Brown as dirt.
 Stomping. making earthquakes
 all around the world.
 thump!!!
 ...

The Woman by Mikaela, eighth grade

I am a woman
 A strong proud confident woman
 From my grand sapphire citrine earrings
 That hang from my ears
 That have heard the sounds of the ocean
 The **cacophony** of a creaking ship withholding passengers
 To the wrap upon my head
 Bearing colors of
 Green my homeland
 Red the blood of my people
 Yellow the rising sun
 Blue the sky we all see but few enjoy
 I am a woman
 A strong proud confident woman
 My nose is bold
 Features passed down from
 Great-grandmother grandmother mother
 To me
 My hair is thick textured
 Many have but few keep
 My lips are full
 Full of me
 My skin is deep rich
 Filled with pain thirst triumph

Not Popular by Tracey, eighth grade

I'm not the most popular fish in the stream.

I don't have the most friends in the entire school.

I have gone home some days and wished that people wouldn't exclude me during lunch
or ignore me after I start talking to them.

I'm not the most popular fish in the stream.

Some people don't realize that words can hurt,
that their actions can scorn
and that their body language is cruel.

I do have friends but sometimes my friends don't act like they are my friends.

When they are with the "popular" kids they say, *So and So, Oh my god!*

I'm not the most popular fish in the stream.

It stings more than bee stings when I can't even count
the amount

of parties I haven't been invited to,

or the amount of times I haven't had someone to sit with at lunch.

I'm not the most popular fish in the stream, river, pond, sea,
ocean, lake, canal, creek, gulf, brook, lagoon, spring, reservoir –

I'm not the most popular fish in the stream.

Appendix B:
Some of My Poems

On being told by my gynecologist that I should lose five pounds after she kept me waiting for forty-five minutes wearing only a white paper mini-dress

Apparently my vagina is too fat.
I would have understood if she had looked at me all seriously
and said you need to lose twenty pounds for the sake of your heart
or thirty pounds to fit perfectly in the middle of the body mass index
or even forty pounds to more closely resemble a mannequin at the mall,
but five pounds,
I practically lose that everytime I go running with my dog.

There are so many things I would rather think about than five pounds.

Like how much I enjoy not living in Ohio anymore,
though I miss the thunderstorms.
Like what I have to do today, the broken sink, the empty gas tank,
the lack of funds to fix or fill these things,
the poems I've been meaning to write,
the people I love.

While my sisters cut out carbohydrates to lose pounds and fit into evening
gowns,
I cut out paper dolls and string them together with my 24 kindergarteners.
They ask me ridiculous and brilliant questions.
Max wonders, Leila, Do the sky and the sun snuggle up together when they
go to sleep?
Ashley, who speaks first and foremost Korean,
quizzes in broken, beautiful English,
What "tricky?" What "give up?"

Kindergarteners do not know the word "overachieve,"
haven't learned not to look directly into the sun,
and aren't afraid to sing off-key at the top of their lungs.

They never think about their weight.
They imagine that they weigh about the same as Pokemon,
about 33 inches, 57 sunsets.

While I waited for my late gynecologist,
I browsed the only reading available in the barren waiting room,
a book featuring headless photos of women post-mastectomy
their scars ranging from pencil-thin to shark bite-jagged,
many of their cancer-inflicted chests resembling cottage cheese.
None of the women looked like Victoria's Secret models,
though it was their breasts on display,
though they were at least five pounds lighter
than before their operations.

Now here's something worth thinking about:
Just as a baby girl is born with all the eggs she will ever have
already nested inside her,
my kindergarteners come to me with absolute potential
to become that scientist
who makes cancer as obsolete as beehive hairdos.

I have a dream that my gynecologist will tell me that I'm fine just the way I
am,
recognizing that am I not too big as long as kindergarteners
can reach their arms around me in bear hugs.
That will be my measure.
My thighs will be trunks
to support me against the weight of their brilliant questions,
my head an old sunflower bowing to their wisdom.
And when they graduate to first grade,
a piece of me will go with them,
and it will weigh much more than five pounds.

America

America, I love you.

I love you like I love the bed in my childhood home, downy and familiar.

I love the open invitation etched on the Statue of Liberty.

I love downtown signs written in English and in Spanish,
in English and in Chinese, in Vietnamese, in Greek.

I love trains that arrive on time and tickets that reserve seats.

I love farms knitted together like quilts.

America, I love kids with braces, symbols of love that extends even to teeth.

I love hospital helicopters and energy-saving revolving doors.

I love blood-red organic apples in rows.

I love urban hip-hop, nightclub jazz, Blue Ridge bluegrass.

I love stomping and cheering with so much gusto that the risers shake at high school basketball games.

I love open space, America, public land full of bears and moose and deer with huge racks to match their years.

You are full of brilliant minds, America, and you draw brilliance out of other countries.

You are beloved, envied, dreamed of, obsessed over.

I love that I am free to say these things.

America, I hate you.

I hate you like I hate my own skin sometimes.

I hate that you behave like the teenager that you are.

You are self-centered, greedy, indulgent,
with a warped sense of entitlement like a pimped middle-schooler.

You flex your muscles in the mirror, and no one admires them as much as you do.

You would rather watch a starving millionaire actress sell her soul in a romantic comedy

than vote for your next president.

I hate that you value lawyers more than teachers, that you consider the right to shoot a gun equal to the right to speak.

America, you wear blinders like horses in traffic. You only see what you want to see,

the bottom line, the punch line, the prize behind door number three.

I hate the stars and stripes you leave like animal droppings on planetary bodies and foreign shores. You tread heavily, America. I hate the way you act when you are a guest, your whining, your lack of table manners, your neon colors and too-short shorts.

I hate super-sized things.

I hate Wal-Mart and AOL Time Warner and McDonald's and Coca-Cola, even though it tastes good.

I have seen Nepali men carry cases of you up sacred mountains to tourist lodges, their bare feet resembling bound feet, shrunken square clubs for feet, cracked and tough, ruined.

America, I want to leave you, and I want to hold you close.

I want to demolish you in order to reinvent you, and I want to grow old peacefully with you.

America, I hate you, I love you.

I Have an Ass

I have an ass,
a lot of ass.

I've always had it.

I didn't get it from drinking too much or
sitting too much or
having too many babies.

I was skinny once a while back and the butt was still there.
It looked really strange then,
like a thin woman's pregnant tummy,
only backwards.

According to Cosmopolitan and Glamour and Vogue and
my grandmother and my long-lost teenage peers,
having a significant butt is very bad.

But I was assigned this ass.
This is my mama's ass,
the ass my mama gave me.

She hides hers under long things,
like shawls or sweaters or jackets.

I don't hide mine because
I gave up thinking about dressing as hiding.
It made me too hot,
too sweaty,
all those sweaters.

Don't get me wrong –
having a big butt is an asset in some places.
Like in some clubs.
In some clubs I get eyes
running down and up,

up and down,
and comments like

“Damn girl, you mixed?”

As though a white girl is incapable of carrying an ass.

It doesn't matter to these people that I'm part Italian,
that I have unusually long eyelashes,
that I am a writer,
that I attend to tiny details like slaves to Cleopatra.

It doesn't seem to matter that
I do not like small talk and
I do not like to talk solely about my
ass rear buns bum behind bottom buttocks booty backside keister rump
heinie fanny derriere tail tush tooshie thing thang, my gluteus maximus.

I constantly have to remind myself,
console myself,
that because of this ass
it hurts less when I fall backwards.
I have reserves in case of some kind of emergency
in which I have to hike across a desert,
and I can hold two kids at once on my hips, no problem.

I never want to hear my mother
apologize again for the genes she passed,
for the shape we share.

I store magazines like Cosmopolitan, Glamour, and Vogue
in the bathroom,
next to the toilet,
where they belong.

Dinner with Her New Boyfriend

He sniffs uncomfortably
and counts his peas, knows
I am watching.

He has noticed by now that
women greatly outnumber men
in this family.

She, his girlfriend,
one of my younger sisters,
is stoic and soldierly.

I wonder if he appreciates
her laugh-snort, her wiggle-dance,
her driving badly, just the way I taught her.

I doubt he has noticed
her knees, raw and tiny as
broken china dolls.

To him, she is tall and blond, I bet.
Also well-endowed, busty, stacked,
or however boys say it behind girls' backs.

My sister flashes her gargoyle grin and
puffs out her padded chest.
She is playing with her food again.

I remember years ago when she bit me, the pain
paired with the satisfaction of tattling on her,
getting her into trouble.

Now I want to square her off with velvet rope,
fold her carefully along her creases and
put her away,

or strap her,
papoose her
to my back

and excuse us from this table.

Appendix C:

Jamie Kennedy's *Grim Fairy Tales*,
performed live in my kindergarten classroom
(reprinted with permission from the poet)

Grim Fairy Tales

I tell my daughter
if a boy who'll never be a man named Peter Pan
ever comes to your windowsill and knocks
and asks for your hand
to fly you off to Neverland

go

you don't even have to leave a note
just float
away
because tomorrowland
will never be better than today

Life is a grim fairy tale
and she makes me make believe

we build castles and towers
out of invisible pigs and chickens
she paints bathtub walls
like she's the next Picasso, Dali, or two-eared Van Gogh
she believes mermaids swim with her
that dragons compete with airplanes for runways
that unicorns put the holes in Swiss cheese
and we hide from wolves under blankets of wool
and I make believe I can be here
forever
that parents can stay together

that every snail you step on
has its own separate snail heaven
and the sorrow of angels makes rainy weather
she dances in her red ruby slippers
and says,
DADDY! THERE'S SOMEWHERE OVER THE RAINBOW!
when science tells us it's only a prism of refracted light
I say darling don't be afraid of the dark
because on the other side of earth
fairies' wings are fluttering in the opening dawn light
the sun will always come out tomorrow
and Barbie will always get a date
the White Rabbit will always need a late pass
and every mirror you see is a looking glass
so hold onto your fantasies
like Frodo clutched onto his ring
because the never-ending story will end someday

and she makes me make believe

that a kiss will wake up any princess
when her mother
is a sleeping beauty I'll never wake up next to again

that death
isn't the only happy end

so she teaches me to MAKE IT ALL UP

because no matter how many nightmares the boogiemani can give you
you can never dream enough

just turn on the lights, don't let the bed bugs bite
eat every apple every snake offers you
with rosary red lips red as Snow White's
dance with every Prince Charming you meet
because Cinderella never knows
when it's gonna hit midnight
and I make believe I have all the time in the world
for this little girl

and she sits and talks to her imaginary friends
who I tell her are unlike any other
because they last longer in the end
the rest just have COOTIES
and unless you have a force field,
you're as good as dead
and my daughter can shoot me with a pen
and balloon dogs still need to be fed
and she's gonna make me believe in Santa Claus again
I'm gonna cook up the eggs of the Easter Bunny
knock out my front teeth
because if I put them under my pillow
the Tooth Fairy will hook me up
with some CASH MONEY!
and Willie Wonka Golden tickets
and a map that tells me how to get to Sesame Street
when we fly Pegasus just you and I
I'll take you with me

but your Daddy still lives in a world of fantasy
and you're my ivory key to the secret garden
where we have tea parties with the Mad Hatter

and if you ever fall down a rabbit hole
you don't have to call home
unless I can follow you down

every little girl is a princess already
they don't need to be bought crowns
she makes me make believe
that she was a queen since birth
I as her father figure
enfold her in my arms
to defend her like calibered arms
against Mother Earth

Life may be a grim fairy tale
but she makes me make believe
to never let reality
tell you
what your imagination
is worth.

Appendix D:

Announcements for Various Slam Events



JULIA MORGAN SCHOOL FOR GIRLS
presents our 2nd Annual **WORD** Event

A NIGHT OF **WORD** WITH

ISHLE YI PARK

Poet Ishle Yi Park is published in *The Best American Poetry of 2003*, she was featured on HBO Def Poetry Jam twice, she performed her poetry on the NAACP Image Awards, and now she is coming to perform at Julia Morgan to raise funds for our financial aid programs. Please come and support the written word and raise much needed funds for our school!



Thursday, March 11th
Holy Names College
Valley Center
3510 Mountain Blvd., Oakland

\$50 for a personal meeting with
the author from 6:00-7:00 p.m.
refreshments served

Event starts at 7:00 p.m.
\$15 for tickets
\$10 for students

For Information: 510.436.1400
Learn more about us at:
www.juliamorganschool.org

**BERKELEY
POETRY
SLAM
SEMI-
FINALS
June 4**

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EVERY WEDS
\$90 CASH PRIZES
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3101 Shattuck (near Ashby BART) EVERY WED 8:30

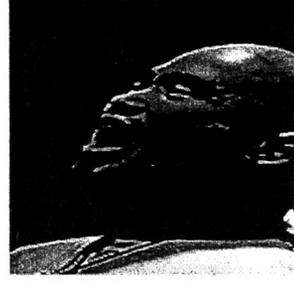
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PSYCHOTIC EROTIC VAUDEVILLE

first and third tuesdays



HARD CORE POETRY SLAM!

\$40 FREESTYLE BATTLE!

XXX HAIKU! DERANGED PRANKS!

ALL AGES!

HOSTED BY JAMIE KENNEDY AND GEOFF TRENCHARD

INFO:TONGUEARTILLERY@HOTMAIL.COM

OAKLAND METRO

201 BROADWAY @ SECOND, JACK LONDON SQUARE

\$6 SHOW AT 8:30PM

NEXT SHOWS

MARCH 18th

SPOKEN WORDSHOP

- * Join a unique weekly non-profit workshop for writers and performers focused on the exciting new art of Spoken Word. Everyone welcome!
- * Get tips from the pro's on content, non-verbal communication, vocalization, and competition.
- * Be sure to bring a poem you are working on, a pen to write with, and your sense of humor!
- * You may choose to read off the page, perform from memory, or just listen in as top touring and local poets present seminars on important topics and skills for poets of all levels!

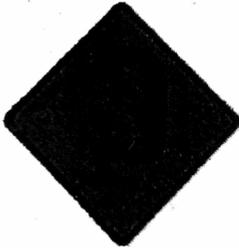
2112 Carleton, 510-883-9894. Every Monday 8:00 pm SHARP!
 \$5-10 donation requested. Hosted by Charles Ellik, coach of West Coast Champions, the Berkeley Poetry Slam Team.
 For more info: voluptuarium@yahoo.com
 A non-profit project of NorCal Spoken Word.

Do you love
 poetry slams?
 Have you ever
 thought

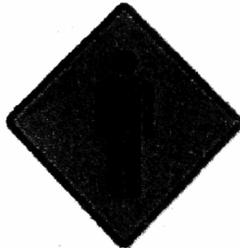
'Hey,
 I can
 DO
 that!'

\$5w/student ID (\$7 w/o) ALL AGES
 Show @ 8:30
 Sign up @ 7:30
\$90 IN CASH PRIZES
 WOMEN SLAMMERS GET IN FREE
LADIES NIGHT POETRY SLAM
 Nov 5th
 1ST WEDNESDAYS
 THE STARRY PLOUGH
 3101 SHATTUCK AVE,
 BERKELEY
 featuring : Prentice (oakland slam team)
 CHOCOLATEORANGE8@YAHOO.COM

Bring it tight.



Bring it true.



Bring it loud.



Cal Slam presents a

POETRY SLAM

Every other Tuesday
 at the Bear's Lair

All shows start at 8pm

All ages \$3

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