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OUR MOUTHS ON PAPER: A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE,
SOCIAL IMPORTANCE, AND SELF- EXPLORATION STEMMING FROM SLAM
POETRY

A Synthesis Project Presented

by

CANDACE R. MCDUFFIE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2011

Critical and Creative Thinking Program

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Approved as to style and content by:

Carol Smith, Professor
Chairperson of Committee

Jonathan Cooper-Wiele, Senior Lecturer
Member

Peter Taylor, Coordinator
Critical and Creative Thinking Program

ABSTRACT

OUR MOUTHS ON PAPER: A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE, SOCIAL IMPORTANCE, AND SELF- EXPLORATION STEMMING FROM SLAM POETRY

August 2011

Candace McDuffie, B.A., Binghamton University
M.A., University of Massachusetts Boston

Directed by Professor Carol Smith

Upon entering the Critical and Creative Thinking Program, I was unsure of my strengths as an educator. I have always been interested in working with younger children, and found a career in education quite rewarding. Still, merging my personal interests with my professional ones seemed like a task that was not important for my growth as a teacher. Soon into my endeavors as a CCT student, I realized that intertwining both worlds is what keeps me motivated as a teacher and my students interested as learners.

This synthesis allows me to explore the arena of Slam poetry beyond a superficial level—to really understand what it means to align my writing with the works of others that are so introspective and provocative. As the CCT program has highlighted various times in each course that I have taken over the years, reflection is the key to growth. Therefore, reflecting about past courses and the curriculum/activities that were developed during them as well as on my own activities as a slam poet helps to pinpoint the direction I would like to take in activities I plan for

my students in the future. This paper also compares and contrasts Beat Poetry and Slam Poetry, since both have inspired me as a writer and have characteristics that can be used in curricular activities for preschool children. I also decipher my own thought processes by analyzing my own writing, and ultimately concoct creative writing endeavors for my students. These will hopefully foster an environment that promotes individuality and appreciation of different human experiences.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Deborah, who made me the person I am today.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Poetry.

The word itself often conjures up feelings of apathy, even resentment to those unfamiliar with it. Before I considered myself a writer, poetry was of no use to me. But during adolescence, I never really fit in with my peers, and was trying to figure out who I was. I was discovering the value of individuality, the importance of how others perceive you, social castes, and the necessity to alleviate stresses and pressures around you. I used writing as a method of escaping reality and also to reflect how I saw things. I kept writing throughout middle school, high school, and majored in English during my undergraduate career. I also realized my love for music, since melody and lyricism are important parts of poetry and music. Throughout all of these changes, I was able to identify and develop my writing voice. Ultimately, it was one of a slam poet.

What is slam poetry? In the words of educator and writer Greg Doherty:

The term "slam poem" is really an umbrella category for all poems meant to be performed for a live audience in a competitive environment. "Spoken word" refers to all poetry meant to be performed aloud, including in noncompetitive environments like open mics. Therefore, all other kinds of poems, from haiku to sonnets to love poems, can be considered slam or spoken word poems. And slam and spoken word poems can be the exact same thing (Doherty, <http://drake.marin.k12.ca.us>)

Slam poetry is a genre of creative writing that is frequently trivialized as rap music sans instrumentation. Categorizing it as such subjects it to criticism concerning the glorification of misogyny, violence, and drug use. Slam poetry is not a glorification of anything—it is a reflection (usually in the form of a narrative) of anything meaningful to the writer. Lines are conceived conscious of musicality and structure, with emphasis on how it sounds when performed. Slam poetry is about reality—it fully engages the listener with potent imagery and insurmountable passion when correctly delivered. It is dramatic; it is colorful. It embodies feelings, ideas, notions, stereotypes, lies, truths, histories, cultures, and everything in between. This is what makes it as alluring as it is inviting—because there are so few rules. No standard form, no guidelines to memorize or follow. Paper serves as a canvas for unadulterated and unedited ideas, which are later transformed into dramatic and often colorful performances.

While I am currently enrolled in the Critical and Creative Thinking Program, I pursue different writing endeavors in my spare time. I still write poetry whenever I can, and I am a music journalist for Boston-based publications Performer Magazine and The Weekly Dig. Mentally, writing remains a tool I use to combat stress, promote artistry and self-expression. Now, as an educator of young children, I strongly believe that it is my responsibility to encourage my students to write. I am using this synthesis as an opportunity to explore the creative processes of my poetry and to mediate activities to promote writing and self-expression among kindergarteners that I formerly taught.

During the Critical and Creative Thinking program, I truly discovered my passion for

promoting creativity. Some of my past projects for classes have included developing activities that stimulate meta-cognition in preschoolers, interviewing teachers about their thinking processes for their curriculum and motivations, as well as researching curricula that encourage critical thinking skills. It is important to lay the foundation for critical thinking at an early age because children can use it at all stages of their education. I found the professors in the program more like mediators of learning as opposed to traditional teachers. They were resources regarding the importance and relevance of creativity as it relates to education. They also served as models for open-mindedness and critical examination of topics like advanced learning and self-expression.

Chapter 2 takes a glimpse into the similarities and differences of Slam and Beat Poetry. Their histories are examined and certain characteristics extracted in order to contextualize how both are relevant to my style of writing and professional interests. Slam poetry inherently creates discourse as it serves as a mirror to societal woes and more often than not, personal dilemmas-- which is why I am devoted to that specific niche of creative writing. And Slam Poetry, like CCT, promotes creativity and reflection as tools in analyzing situations critically. Both also view problems as opportunities for personal growth. In this chapter, I conclude by discussing how both genres helped shape workshops I developed as part of a class project and how creative writing can be vital to children.

Chapter 3 consists of an analysis of three of my own poems, entitled “The More Natural Look of Pressed Powders,” “The Vanity Upstairs,” and “A Scenery Mural.” The purpose of including poems with contrasting subject matter (abuse, race/ethnicity, love/breakups) is to show

the range of slam poetry, my versatility as a writer as well as show how poetry can create discourse on virtually any topic. The processes used when I write poetry are dissected, especially when it comes to my use of critical and creative thinking and how my experience in the CCT program has influenced me. I also explain how creative writing is a useful tool both for my personal reflection and critical problem solving.

Chapter 4 gives glimpses into some of the creative writing exercises I have executed with the students in my former Kindergarten classroom. I argue for poetry's personal and academic benefits for children so young. Some aspects of children's responses to the activities are also presented so the impact on children can be seen more effectively. I also evaluate the pros and cons of the exercises, and which ones would be worth doing again.

In Chapter 5, I examine what I learned from my CCT journey, and where I go from here as a writer and an educator. One of the most critical goals of this chapter is to show my growth from the start of the Critical and Creative Program until its completion. At the very beginning of graduate school, I wasn't entirely sure of my purpose or how I fit in. Now, after spending nearly four years as a Critical and Creative thinker, I finally realize how it fits into my professional life both as a writer and teacher.

CHAPTER 2

“FOR THE PEOPLE”: A GLIMPSE AT THE HISTORY OF BEAT AND SLAM POETRY

As previously mentioned, my synthesis is exploring how creative writing can help my students cope with adversity in their own lives. Slam and Beat poets used their writing as a way to critique their surroundings and to confront hardships. I, too, find solace in writing poetry. I had never really considered the motives behind my own work, but by tapping into the history of Beat and Slam Poetry, I have gained insight on how I classify my poetry, and why it is important to promote writing poetry for marginalized groups. CCT has provided me with such a great outlet for conjuring up and trying out different ideas, and through various courses I have been able to shape my ways of thinking to help and serve other groups that feel marginalized as well.

History: Beat Vs. Slam

To understand the scope of Slam poetry, it is important to compare it to a more recognizable genre of writing. Beat poetry, which dominated the literary world in the 1940s and 1950s, is often linked with Slam poetry due to their common rebellious and experimental natures. As a writer, Beat poetry has inspired me. I really resonated with the brutal honesty. The writers wrote about what they observed socially, politically, and economically despite the backlash they received. They demonstrated how powerful words are and the effect they can have on others.

During my undergraduate career, I took a course devoted solely to the works of various beat poets. Studied were the works of Jack Keurorac, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady, and several others. Like Slam poets, Beat poets “were interested in resurrecting the poetry reading as something other than a genteel diversion” (Thomas, 1998, 317). By dissecting their similarities and differences in this chapter, I learned more about the histories of both genres, as well as saw how I shared the same motives for writing as Beat or Slam poets. If you forget the reasons you engage in a certain activity, then you will probably forget to engage in that activity altogether or at least not as meaningfully. Reminding ourselves why passions are important is vital to keeping them alive.

As previously stated, Beat poetry was writing that was “for the people” and came to the literary forefront in the 40s and 50s. In short, it was writing that was a rejection of both the academy and white, middle-class culture—although ironically white men became the prominent Beat voice (Somers-Willett, 2009). Fed up with the idealism that became mainstream, Burroughs and his cohorts (most notably Keurorac and Ginsberg, as well as Gary Snyder and Philip Lamantia) soon classified themselves as “Beat” writers. The label, which originated in jazz clubs, soon took a range of different meanings, like poor, exhausted, broke, and bohemian. By the mid-1950s, “Beat” was used to describe anyone who was leading a rebellious lifestyle. As the Beat generation famously documented in their own writing, they engaged in drug use, experimental sexual ventures, and lifestyles that rejected any materialistic notions. In short, being “beat” was associated with a certain way of living. While the lifestyle wasn’t inevitable if one considered themselves “beat,” it was crucial evidence of allegiance to the movement. Those who were placed

in the forefront and considered the most influential (Keurorac and Ginsberg) were the ones who graciously participated in said lifestyle.

Slam poetry, on the other hand, is not a rejection of mainstream culture—it provides commentary on it. The 1980s poetry scene was a feeding frenzy for the academic types, whose degrees granted them poetic relevance and legitimacy (Smith, 2009). Because of its pretentiousness, poetry had begun losing momentum. Marc Smith, a Chicago construction worker turned poet, saw this was happening, and wanted to reconnect poetry to the masses by putting together his own readings, in collaboration with other local artists (Somers-Willett, 2009). Noting the lifeless and monotone nature of poetry performances, he decided to hold his own in bars and cabarets in Chicago’s white, working-class neighborhoods. These readings soon took the form of variety shows that featured musical experimentation and poetry that was not just recited, but acted out—complete with costume changes and theatrical makeup. Essentially, Slam poetry can be defined as poetry “that has been composed, polished, and rehearsed for the purpose of being performed—very often in a competitive arena, but not always” (Smith, 2009, 3). The most fascinating element of Slam is that the audience for whom it is performed is interactive, and onlookers have permission to talk back to let the performer know if they are getting their point across.

The Beat Generation can be credited with redefining the atmosphere for poetry readings. They often held them in coffeehouses and bars—venues that were noticeably non-academic to

promote experimentation and attract nonacademic audiences. Early Beat readings were where open mics took place to encourage new writers to perform in a laid-back and friendly atmosphere. Women and people of color were given significant stage time (Somers-Willett, 2009). They completely challenged the rules of academic readings by encouraging audience participation and the use of music. Readings were more of a party than a gathering to merely worship an author. This temperament also trickled down to what Slam poetry wanted to capture, and similar antics helped create the rules of an actual slam. During poetry slams, judges are usually members of the audience who are randomly selected to rate performers on a scale of 1-10. Only original work is performed, and the time allotted for a poem is 3 minutes or less, and props and costumes are not allowed. All styles of writing and subject matter are welcome. The audience is encouraged to laugh, boo, and applaud whenever they see fit (Smith, 2009).

Slammers tend to be marginalized or under-represented people, who write about things they have experienced because of their marginalization, which results in more diversity among writers. Unlike Beat poets, they do not aim to cajole audiences to become followers of disenchanted writers—they want to create empathy, inspiration, and discourse. As creator Marc Smith notes: “Many poets, reporters, and critics of the slam erroneously describe it as an extension of the Beat Generation. It is not. Its roots are more akin to the folk movement of the late 50s and early 60s. It strives to bring together divergent communities of people, not drop out from society to form a hipster elite as the early Beats did” (Smith, 2009, 20).

As previously mentioned, this “hipster elite” had its leaders. In contrast, while the origin of the Slam movement can be credited to a single man, Marc Kelly Smith, there aren’t key writers who are deemed necessary in order for Slam to proliferate. The genre is so accessible and has become so widespread over the 25 years that there are no exclusionary elements forcing writers to become its representatives. There are Slam poets who are better known than others (e.g., Saul Williams, Patricia Smith, Jeffrey McDaniel), but they are not the sole writers associated with Slam. This is because there is no certain lifestyle expected of Slam writers as opposed to the Beats, who became defined by their simplistic existences:

Crossing class boundaries was important to the image of the Beat poet. Most Beat hipsters were raised in middle-class families, although they ascribed to a voluntary poverty. This poverty was adopted as a response to bourgeois consumerism and social conformity, and the hipster consciously **projected** an identification with the working class to convey a fantasy of removal from or transcendence of dominant, middle-class culture. (Somers Willett, 2009, 58)

To be fair, their motives—to demonstrate social homogeneity and monetary wealth aren’t necessary to sustain personal fulfillment—were being personified through their actions, which explains why they completely rejected materialism in any form. Slam writings tend to have political undertones, but aren’t confined just to politics. The openness regarding subject matter leaves room for people having all types of beliefs and backgrounds to flourish.

Beat poets emphasized not only living in the moment, but writing in the moment. They were proponents of spontaneous prose--that is, writing whatever comes to mind. Often, this included ignoring grammatical discrepancy and how much sense it makes to the reader. They

believed that this increased the authenticity of the work, and that creativity should not be inhibited due to established writing conventions. This is best documented in Keurorac's infamous list known as "Belief & Technique For Modern Prose," where the reader is instructed to "write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind" and "dont think of words when you stop but to see picture better" (Keurorac, 1992, 59 reprinted in Appendix B). Lines in poems from these times were wildly experimental, giving us our first real ontomonopeia, racy imagery/language, and repetition. One of the most infamous poems known for adhering to these characteristics is Allen Ginsberg's "Howl." But his "Footnote to Howl" (see Appendix B for complete poem) is a more condensed version of his most well known work.

Holy the sea holy the desert holy the railroad holy the locomotive
holy the visions holy the hallucinations holy the miracles
holy the eyeball holy the abyss!
Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours! bodies! suffering!
magnanimity!
Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul !
(Ginsberg, 1992, 71)

Slam poets usually have similar sound characteristics when it comes to their poems on the page, except the spontaneity factor is almost non-existent. One of the most distinct parts of slam is that it is rehearsed and poems undergo a continuous editing process. It is not that spontaneity is discouraged, but it is hard to vigorously perform a poem (hand gestures, certain degree of emotion, props) without having it memorized. Rhyme in rhythm makes poems easier to memorize and intensely engage the listener, as in Saul Williams' "Amethyst Rocks" (see Appendix B for complete poem):

i be one with the rain and stars and things
with dancing feet and watermelon wings
i bring the sunshine and the moon
and the wind blows my tune
...meanwhile
i spoon powdered drum beats into plastic bags
sellin; kilos of kente scag
(Williams, 2003, 55)

Upon exploring the histories of both Beat and Slam Poetry, I realize that my writing contains characteristics of both genres--but I resonate more with Slam. There is emphasis on not adhering to mainstream values, but just through writing and not through actual lifestyle. I write about an array of topics, like race, relationships, and friendship. I try to put an unconventional spin on it through perspective. In past works, I portray myself as God, a jilted friend, and even a foul-mouthed anarchist to emphasize themes that have always been present in poetry. But I never take it upon myself to literally live out each line of my work. While they all tend to be autobiographical, they do not relate to strategically planned lifestyles as a reaction to society-induced pressures. Also, my poetry does not give credence to grammatical spontaneity. Much like Slam, it goes through various editing processes and is meant to be performed. Incredible attention is paid to structure, rhyme scheme, and line breaks.

CCT, Slam and Me: Merging Academic Interest with Professional Development

I believe one reason that Beat and Slam poets have proliferated and have had such a strong

legacy is because they chose unconventional but productive ways to alleviate the problems they encountered. Both types of poetry are crucial, though, in the type of creative expression that can be both soothing and therapeutic to those who want to apply it to their own lives. This attitude, that I also strongly support, has managed to rear its head in my coursework.

In a class entitled, Reflective Practice, my final project included developing poetry workshops for single mothers who inhabit a shelter at which I used to volunteer. Although I never tried the workshops out, since my volunteering came to an end shortly after this course was completed, I proposed the study of the works of poets from different eras to see if their words contained any relevance to the lives of these women. The main goal of the workshops was for the participants to examine their own lives and, through writing, decipher what was the catalyst for their current situations and how they could eventually learn to become more self-aware and self-sufficient parents. The workshops were inspired by my Philosophy Independent Study with UMASS Senior Lecturer Jonathan Cooper-Wiele. The central figure of my workshop curriculum was Socrates, who questioned the teachings and recognized persons of authority (much like Beat and Slam poets) and expressed his criticism through the writings of his student, Plato. Inherent with such blatant questioning are the topics of integrity, self-exploration, and independence. To foster these concepts is to encourage self-esteem, which is not only vital for adults, but for children as well.

Each proposed workshop had its own theme regarding a certain genre of poetry, i.e.

American Poetry, Musical Poetry, etc. For the session concerning Beat Poetry, we would have read excerpts from various figures from the era and attempted to create stream of consciousness poems, as they often did. Students would define what the term “beat” means to them, and how it was a result of the political and social climate at the time. Then we would discuss political and social issues they found relevant to their lives and write a bit of spontaneous prose--leaving spelling mistakes and off-beat phrases intact. Socrates, like Beat Poets, didn't really cater to public opinion, which ultimately led to his demise. Therefore, we would also discuss the role of the audience, exaggeration, and honesty when it comes to writing.

My former place of employment was a childcare center, where all of the families were low income and either lived in government-assigned housing or in shelters. A lot of the time, the children that I worked with were aware of their surroundings and needed a medium to confront frustration and emotion. Often, because of their age, they are discounted and therefore are silenced. Encouraging creative writing activities is especially valued for children living in poverty, since, according to *Intervening For Literacy* by Charles Temple and James MaKinster, it is harder for them to participate in school activities due to “the myriad stress factors” they experience (Temple & MaKinster, 2005, 3). Also, engaging in creative activities can help give insight to their lives. As R.S. Nickerson lays out in his article, *Enhancing Creativity*: “Insight--the experience of suddenly grasping a familiar situation in a new and more productive way--is often associated with creativity” (Nickerson, 1999, 396). Although the insight of children might not be as groundbreaking as it is in teens or adults, it is still crucial when it comes to their emotional well-being. In addition, conducting creative writing assignments in the preschool classroom

promotes reading and writing skills necessary for successfully completing future educational endeavors. Both Slam and Beat poets relish in the challenging of thematic and grammatical underpinnings that define creative writing. To execute such a task, they must have refined literacy skills. While the creative/expressive writing activities for kindergarteners would be much smaller scale, it would still reinforce the importance of literacy. As Temple and Makinster continue to point out: "Children have a far greater chance of learning the basics of literacy in the early grades if they already have an accumulation of experience with language and print by the time they come to school. If they fail to get off to a good start in the very first years of school, they are unlikely to close the gap. They are unlikely to become proficient readers. What then?" (Temple & Makinster, 2005, 21). Literacy is important, regardless of age. I think children should be encouraged to write not only to develop literacy but also to deal with powerful emotions and to confront past experiences. Understanding the concepts and words I select in my poetry is a vital first step in figuring out not only who I am as a person, but also ways I can inspire creativity in others.

CHAPTER 3

APPROACHING THE EDGE OF UNDERSTANDING: ANALYZING AND DECIPHERING MY WORKS

An important part of using writing to help other people is realizing the reasons that you write. I have been writing poetry for years, and my poems fell under the Slam genre during my stint as an undergrad. I became hyper-aware of my marginalization—my university was mostly white in population—and turned to writing as an outlet for my newfound frustration. Poetry possesses a certain magnetism, and those who could relate to my work would seek me out (through courses) and vice versa. This created a positive environment for the exchange of ideas and experiences, which ultimately resulted in my increased confidence as a writer. Years and dozens of poems later, I have a newfound respect and understanding for not just writing, but the process of exploration when it comes to deciphering poems. This chapter is devoted to said exploration, in which I hope to gain insight into my writing processes and to remind myself why creative expression is important so I can better promote writing and critical expression in myself and others.

There are three poems that are going to be analyzed in this section: “A Scenery Mural,” “The More Natural Look of Pressed Powders,” and “The Vanity Upstairs.” They were selected to show the different facets of my thinking processes when it comes to writing, as well as to

explore the fragility of certain subject matter. “A Scenery Mural” pertains to the painful details of a breakup, while “The More Natural Look of Pressed Powders” deals with the sensitive nature of domestic abuse. The last poem, “The Vanity Upstairs,” speaks to the ethnic identity and pride, radiating a positive message—especially for those who struggle with accepting who they are, whether or not they identify with being African-American.

As the Critical and Creative Thinking Program has taught me, reflection is a vital tool in personal development and growth. Poems serve as documents to times in my life that I do not revisit often, but were important to me and helped shape who I am. These poems were chosen based on how crucial the message is, the relevance they still have in my life, and the ones I find the most powerful for the ears of the listener. In this chapter, some questions I am going to tackle include: What meta-cognitive processes do I employ to write poems? How do I come across ideas for poems? How did these poems come to be? And ultimately, did they create any discourse?

Poem 1: Race/Ethnicity

The Vanity Upstairs

Fuck modesty.

Honestly, I. Am. God.

My ecclesiasticism arises from my skin since my complexion is dark enough to provide the backdrops for constellations despite my frustrations due to its historical affiliations.

I have struggle in my bones for days and if you look closely enough at my skin you'll see where the sun had permanently embedded her rays and be amazed at the fact that the sole purpose of my epidermis is to remind you of African terrains, pain, and dances that

never

signified

rain

but were just simply beautiful.

My faith can be found in plates of collard greens, neckbones, and cornbread instead of books that look like promise and while most find solace in pews I choose to bestow power upon heads laced with braids that were too tight at the top but synthetic enough to be burned at the bottom.

My disciples congregate on street corners during the hours when the sun is not seen and lean forward into cars in an effort to give their children the world because when they were born they kissed their hands and promised them they would never have to suffer again.

My followers relish in their marginalization in a nation that glorified separation based on nothing but skin tone and while they stand alone in combating the past that has poured itself into the present they will keep their hands steady enough to cradle the future.

“The Vanity Upstairs” is a poem that focuses on race and ethnicity. It has taken over two years to write, but ultimately I finished it for this synthesis so I could perform it to receive feedback at my synthesis presentation. It has taken this long to complete because it is a sensitive topic, and I wanted to get all of the wording right. The subject matter is natural to me, and I just didn't want to use words as filler—I wanted them to be harmonious in order to convey certain sentiments like pride and self-awareness. Originally, I came across a poem with similar

intentions—Tamika Harper’s “Nig-Gods” (2003, see Appendix B for complete poem), and I thought I was long overdue for writing one of my own. I liked the power and attention that poem commanded. I wanted the first line of my poem to be “I am God.” I initially struggled with how to introduce such a vast (and shamelessly narcissistic) statement to the reader. I wanted to keep the shock and intrigue that came attached to that statement, but still warn the reader that an outlandish and self-absorbed statement was coming—hence the opening line. Starting a poem with the f-bomb also throws any convention or predictability out the window.

This poem was an emotional outpouring of what it means to be Black to me. From skin color to food to hairstyles, I’ve always struggled to be proud of who I am, to figure out where I fit into society as a Black woman. This poem is a realization of that, as well as a celebration. There are a lot of components to Black culture, and this poem is my attempt to comment on some of the most well-known elements. I wanted to keep religious references prevalent throughout, hence the use of certain terms (pews, disciples, and ecclesiasticism) to keep the metaphor apparent. The metaphor that is referenced is between religion and self-identity. Religion is often a tool for elevating certain forces, like a God or Goddess, over mere human beings. I wanted to maintain that same sense of elevation and power when it comes to describing African-American culture. The characteristics that are often associated with the culture can conjure up feelings of shame in people who consider themselves a part of it. But instead of being embarrassed or ashamed of those characteristics, I embraced them to show that those things are mere morsels of something bigger and more complex. Metaphor is a powerful tool in creative writing for drawing comparisons between two concepts that can be considered the same, but is

more interesting when you are trying to connect ideas that, on the surface, have nothing in common. Here, it is between religion and self-identity. In past poems, I've compared ideas of disenchantment with nature ("Monstrosity Strapped To A Body"), resilience and illness ("How To Fight A Hurricane"), and lust and religion ("Make Yourself Sick"). All of these works are included in Appendix A.

I also have two older siblings who have been involved in drugs. They paid for their actions, but are often painted as senseless criminals with no moral integrity. I use the term “disciples” since I regard them as fathers and dedicated believers in what society has dictated their future to be since they are both undereducated Black men--criminals. They never saw anything wrong with dealing drugs, and knew the risk of incarceration. But they followed this lifestyle intensely as if it were a religion engrained in them--making it nearly impossible to escape. By making connections between their actions and religion, I wanted to portray them in a less vile and more humanistic light. They are both fathers, so the stanza that contains the image or “leaning into cars” is sort of an ode to them. I wanted to explore the notion that all crime isn't always about greed--it's often committed because some believe it is the only way to provide for their families.

I wanted to end such an intense poem on a positive note. The last stanza (where the term “followers” signifies African—American people as a whole) recognizes a troubled past, but also expresses hope for the future. While segregation ended half a century ago, both my mother and grandparents lived through it, which makes it quite palpable to them when it comes to their views regarding modern-day race relations. In regards to racism, having an awareness of its history is

important, so I chose to talk about it with my preschool students in bits and pieces. For example, I found talking about racism with the children I work with (in honoring the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King) difficult, because although they are aware of physical differences among people of varying backgrounds, they are not aware of the history behind it. My role as an educator is to empower and enlighten, which is interchangeable with my mission as a writer.

The name of the poem comes from a line I heard from a local poet right before I started penning this poem, and it fit for a couple of reasons. Titles can come either first or last for me. I usually hear a line somewhere (song, book, or poem) and want to build a poem around that particular phrase. When the title comes last, it's because I had to write a poem about something and want the title to reflect the theme but not directly. I like having the title ambiguous and having readers interpret it however they'd like. "Vanity" reflects the over-the-top confidence in the poem, and "upstairs" is the obvious metaphor often used when referring to God ("the big man upstairs"). The spacing between stanzas and certain words is used to make the pauses in speaking visible, since I want the reader to have time to absorb references and phrases fully, while still maintaining a certain sound and rhythm.

Upon completion of this poem, I presented it at my synthesis presentation. This was important because it was a culmination of all the time it took me to write the poem coupled with a more palpable awareness of my creative processes. Finishing a poem for this process was a testament to the vitality and productivity of creative writing—with the right mindset, motivation, and resources, one is able to push beyond one's previously set limits. The feedback from the performance was positive, and reminded me of my love of performing. Also, one of my

most important goals of the poems was achieved (as I realized from the audience commentary) which was the feeling of empowerment transcended racial boundaries. Although no one in the audience was an African-American, everyone was connected with a certain culture or ethnicity. This is important when it comes to showing empathy and respect to one whose culture or ethnicity is different from yours. And while many people in the audience didn't consider themselves poets, they inquired about the poem presented and showed sincere interest in the writing process. This is extremely fulfilling to a person who dubs herself an artist.

From analyzing and eventually finishing this poem, I realized the fragile nature of certain topics. For other, more frivolous subject matter, I feel less inhibited. Structure and a clear assembly of ideas to convey an over-arching theme make poems come together for me. I tend to write about what I know, what I consider reality. I also hope that poems about touchy subjects will have a lasting effect on the reader, as well as get them to genuinely see things from the narrator's perspective.

Poem 2: Domestic Violence

The More Natural Look of Pressed Powders

You're not new to this—
Only this time he punched your stomach
To deliberately bruise your uterus
You say the baby's fine
But it's just ludicrous
How you are willing to be with a man
Who will always stay the same
And will use the back of his hand

So you won't ever forget his name

But I'm not telling you what to do

Like that night you two had that big fallout
And since he let his knuckles do the talking
You had finally let it all out
And said you wanted to leave
But that you had no place to go
And thought he wouldn't change
But could never really know
So you forgave him

And

I don't know what was said
Between you two
But I could guess verbatim
Something like:
"I'm sorry for how my actions
Will haunt you
Like that night I got on top of you
When you clearly didn't want to"
And you smiled
Because even though you didn't believe him
You thought you had to merely for the sake
Of your child

You're due in January
And you say he's excited
And even though you're afraid
He'll hurt you again
You're doing your best to try and hide it
To make the most of the future provided
But know that I'll be there for you
If you
Ever decide to fight it

You're my sister
And I love you through your weakness
Just because you're scared and unprepared
Does not mean you need this
You just haven't recognized your uniqueness

And that
Any man would pay to kiss the ground
You walk on alone
And if you've learned anything from what
I have shown
It'll only be a matter of time
Until you
Come
Home

“The More Natural Look of Pressed Powders” is a poem that is less ambiguous in nature due to my need to directly deal with a subject that was so hard to deal with. Unlike “The Vanity Upstairs,” the title for this poem came last—I read the phrase casually flipping through a magazine and it just stuck. It refers to putting on makeup to cover up physical bruises, with the point being to look as “natural” as possible as if nothing was ever wrong. My sister did that emotionally as well, by pretending her boyfriend never did anything wrong to her. What happened to her was extremely hard to listen to or even empathize with since this had never happened to anyone I knew before. Everything in the poem really happened, and the reason I wanted to start it off with such a horrific image is because I wanted it to be attention grabbing. When I come across poetry that addresses the topic of domestic violence, writers are usually roundabout when it comes to truly divulging the situation, and one is left to speculate whether or not the victim was abused, or if it was even that big of a deal. The reason I wrote this was not only to talk about what I observed, but to give my sister the voice that was silenced in all of this. Like the previously analyzed poem, spaces between words and phrases represent breaths in between each one. The spaces between the letters in the word “clearly” are supposed to stress my sister’s resistance to her ex that was sadly to no avail.

Each stanza's rhyme is based around a key word. For the first stanza, it was uterus. With the next two stanzas, it was the link between "forgave him" and "verbatim." The last two stanzas have the words "excited" and "weakness" that served as my jumping off points. Writing is a constant editing process. When it comes to revising a piece, reading it out loud is a clear indicator of what works and what doesn't. Usually, when a line is off or a rhyme doesn't quite fit, hearing it helps me figure out what needs to be fixed. It takes a lot for me to consider a poem complete—but it's more of a feeling than anything.

When I finished this poem, I read it to the poetry club as well as the creative writing course that I was enrolled in at the time. Although they had suggestions on how to change some certain parts, I ultimately didn't accept them because I felt like it should remain unchanged. The feedback from the poetry club was superficial—practically everyone in the room didn't know how to tackle such a sensitive issue. Their suggestions seemed thin—they consisted mainly of how I shouldn't rhyme as much as I did or how the ending didn't fit. Usually, I make a note of people's critiques, but I only change a poem when I feel the same way about it. While I didn't take their suggestions to heart, I did realize the importance of keeping an open mind about taking in feedback from others. I have edited lines in other works because I received suggestions that certain pieces would flow better when modified.

Although no one really spoke after "The More Natural Look of Pressed Powders" was performed, comments were made to me by listeners *after* the meeting had adjourned about how the poem touched them, and how it must have taken a lot of courage to confront a situation like that through writing. People even confessed that they, or someone they love, had been in similar

circumstances. Thus, I believe this poem generated an undisclosed kind of discourse—perhaps it was internalized.

I waited a year before I showed the poem to my sister because I felt like she could read it without being overwhelmed. But it was important for me to share it with her for several reasons. I wanted her to know that I had been listening to her and internalizing everything she had told me about her relationship. I also wanted her to know that our family was affected by her choice to stay with him, although she eventually did leave. Lastly, I wanted her to know that I would be there for her, no matter what she chose. After she read it, she said it was good. That had to be forced out of her though, because she didn't bring up the poem. Even though her response was one word, it was the words left unspoken that let me know she appreciated my honesty, and openness about such an intense and painful situation. It also reaffirmed my love and support for her, which is something I was desperate to get across when this was written.

Like “The Vanity Upstairs,” “The More Natural Look of Pressed Powders” supports the notion that I write about things that have actually happened. Personal experience makes for the best details since they are readily available and are concrete. Writing is cathartic in the sense that it is a way of getting something positive from negative occurrences. From these poems, topics that are often neglected are brought to the forefront for discussion. Even if discourse isn't verbal, audience still may internalize ideas. This can include taking the time to decipher the content of the poem as well as the word choice and structure in order to fully understand it.

Poem 3: Relationships

A Scenery Mural

It hurts more to write

Than to live it

Cause in it

Are hollow promises overshadowed

By the existence of doubt
And though his name is something
I can learn to live without
I still press it past my lips
To pass the time

I admit
I've turned my mouth into
My body's biggest wound
The amount of his skin consumed
By it
Is endless
And everytime I think
I'm finally done
There's evidence in crevices
From where his torso
Scorched my tongue

I used to use my mattress
As our atlas
To map out points of stimulation
To which his body was adept
And though we're both proponents
Of sleep
I think we could agree we were at best
When our bodies never slept

Now I can't remember the meaning
Of rest
Since my nights consist of dreams
Devastated by the presence of you
I've spent months trying to
Outrun my sadness
Though my mind is devastated
By the presence of blue

Through and through
You were never a waste of time
Nothing's left of my breath
When I think about how
You were mine
I'll trace the path of your footprints
In verse
And recreate our fall
Line
By
Line

For the last poem, I opted to analyze a breakup. Personal relationships are a topic that often is considered cliché and overdone. But this relationship took a lot out of me, and coincidentally the breakup was considerably drawn out. “A Scenery Mural” had the poem “She” by Saul Williams as its catalyst—that is where I saw my opening line. As soon as I saw the phrase “It hurts more to write it than to live it,” I knew that’s exactly how I felt. The next three words, “cause in it,” was a bridge between the internalization of pain with the execution of it (“Though his name is something I can learn to live without/ I still press it past my lips to pass the time”). I was advised by several of my friends that as soon as a breakup happens, you must immediately find somebody else and move on as soon as possible. “A Scenery Mural” was a kneejerk reaction to that idea, and my way of saying it is OK to wallow and feel devastated for a

little while. The next stanza takes responsibility for the longevity of misery I've subjected myself to with the line: "I admit//I've turned my mouth into my body's biggest wound." Here, I am referring to my talking about such an intense topic so openly, only to relive the pain. I also use my mouth to refer to the physicality inherent when dating someone. This idea lends itself to the following stanza with the line "I used to use my mattress as our atlas." Next, I talk about losing sleep because all I used to do was dream about my ex. I wanted to end the poem with a wistful tone ("recreating our rise and fall"). I also wanted the reader to know that writing has kept me balanced, and that I can re-hash these feelings in a productive and creative manner—which is what I want the children to do.

The title came last, and I am not sure where I heard it, but it stuck with me for several reasons. Scenery implies serenity and peace, and I wanted to use this as a stepping stone to achieving peace with everything that happened. Mural gives the feeling of a vivid picture, which is what I wanted to divulge to the reader completely unfamiliar with my style of writing. I liked the juxtaposition of such a peaceful title with writing that exposes turmoil and the struggle to find closure. Contrast can be very powerful.

I have shown this poem to a couple of my peers, which gave way to an open discussion about feelings the poem invoked. One person in particular admired my honesty about everything, starting with the first line about how painful this is to think about, let alone write about it. I didn't show it to many people because I consider it very self-indulgent. While I believe poetry is a great opportunity to promote discourse with other people, it doesn't always have to be. For poems like this, I prefer exploring ranges of emotions through words without the opinions or

comments of others. Perhaps this can be categorized as personal discourse, whereas I can draw my own conclusions about my style of writing as well as why each poem I write is important.

Exploring Meta-cognitive Processes in Poetry Writing

This chapter has taught me a lot about my style of writing. First and foremost, I tend to write about things I have experienced, or I write about what I know. I tend to come up with ideas and build poems around a word to generate a pattern of rhyming. I use writing as a way to express my feelings and experiences, to empathize with the audience and to play with different words and phrases. It is also a way to help cope with past events that were difficult to deal with. Using metaphor is vital since it can tie two polarizing or foreign concepts together, like religion and self-identity or devastation with hope. It forces the creator of the poem to step outside the realm of their traditional modes of thinking to convey topics in innovative ways. It also implores listeners to open their minds to how they can interpret and perceive ideas. One of the main conclusions that I have reached is that writing isn't just spontaneous and is guided by explicit goals. I usually know what I want the tone to be like at certain points and what phrases and sounds I want to use.

CCT is important when it comes to fostering such open-mindedness on both ends. In the courses that I have taken, the way we are accustomed to thinking is challenged. As a result, I am able to compare and contrast meta-cognitive processes I've used in both poetry writing and CCT, resulting in a new understanding of how CCT influenced my career choices as well as the complexity of poetry writing.

In Processes of Research and Engagement, mind mapping was encouraged to help students visualize and organize their thoughts on paper. We were asked to complete a self-evaluation to see if we had met all of our goals. Collaboration was a vital part of the course as well, since our peers provided commentary on drafts of our projects. It made me hyper-aware of what was important to me in my professional career--promoting creativity in preschoolers. I interviewed teachers about activities they have done in the past and what they were planning on doing in the future to provide the most hands on and effective curriculum possible. During the interviews, a feeling of community and togetherness became palpable. That same feeling is present in the Slam community. Everyone wanted to make themselves as accessible as possible. In that course, I learned the importance of writing things down and how cathartic it can be. It also taught me the importance of the organization of thoughts as key to the creative process.

When writing a poem, I use a tool similar to mind mapping but it is not as visually appealing. I have a starting point, which is the overarching idea for a poem that I have. I collect various words and phrases (in journal or notepad) and keep them until I feel like I have enough of them to complete a poem. As previously mentioned, organization is vital in maintaining the words I use and the feeling or impact each one can potentially convey.

Creative Thinking was also another course where I was forced to examine not only the creativity in me, but within my classmates as well. Each week, we had to write in a correspondence journal that was handed in to promote dialogue between the professor and student regarding our thoughts on previous classes and the assigned readings. For my final project, I selected and analyzed an array of my poems. When I analyzed my poems in that

course, I didn't focus on the process, just the product. Structure was never critically evaluated, just why the poem was important to me and the motives behind why it was written. The history of the genre of Slam Poetry was never assessed, and neither were the grammatical characteristics of my poems, like spacing or rhyme scheme. Ultimately, in that course, I just explained ideas and concepts that I already knew. I made no effort to unravel more about the creative writing processes I've been engaging in for years. I left the course with increased self-actualization and with a new appreciation for the role creativity plays in everyone's lives. Upon the completion of this synthesis, I realized I had other motives for writing—not just to let out emotions, but to try to “top” previous poems that I've written. I also chose to analyze three poems here that I didn't in the aforementioned journal, which entailed exploring events that I had never really looked at critically before and seeing what I learned from them.

In that course, we also explored different factors that can affect someone's creativity, ranging from genetics to economic and social circumstances. Frame of reference, or how you view things, is one factor that always stuck with me. I possess multiple frames of reference inherently as a woman of color, a sister, as a teacher, and of course, as a poet. I choose to exclusively write from the view of first person because I don't feel comfortable writing from the perspective of another, but also because I strongly believe you don't need to in order to get a point across. “The More Natural Look of Pressed Powders” could have been written from the perspective of my sister, but I didn't feel comfortable doing that. Words come effortlessly when I write from my point of view. I appreciate the personal element that comes attached to it. Frame of reference also makes me re-examine the way I teach, and if I view my environment in the most creative ways

possible or am letting logic dictate the classroom. Luckily, I came to the conclusion that I can balance logic with creativity when it comes to working with six and seven year olds.

Professionally, I had free reign to implement all types of creative curricula as I saw fit, and had supervisors who were really trusting and open-minded. Being a teacher for such a young age is the perfect platform for trying out various creative activities.

The most painstaking course I took was Critical Thinking. There were many facets to being successful in it--running a discussion board, posting twice a week on the blog, completing a collaborative project. It was an online course that was as interactive as possible. We got a chance to define what we thought critical thinking was, as well as fair-mindedness, assumptions, and again, frames of reference. This course was a good way of seeing situations from the perspective of other people and to re-evaluate what it meant to think creatively. The point of view for my poetry never really changes--it is typically in first person. But I often empathize with the people that I write about more because now I feel inclined to view their situations beyond a superficial level. With every poem I write, I try to give common events (a friend's illness, a romantic encounter) uncommon comparisons and phrases to display how complex, and even life changing, things like those can be. I also realized the importance of having an interactive environment in order for learning to take place, so I try to make my classroom as interactive as possible. This is evidenced by games and activities that will be described in Chapter 4. Slam Poetry also promotes interaction between the performer and the audience, making it a much more enriching genre of writing. It is also unpredictable, especially when it comes to finding inspiration to write.

It is also important to rely on the works of others for inspiration, and to remember that it

can't always be anticipated in any certain form. Titles and lines for poems have come from songs, conversations, magazine articles, and most predictably, other poems. I find these sources plentiful but I never know which words and phrases will resonate with past experiences that I choose to write about. As for meta-cognition and writing, I try to find a balance between revealing enough for the reader/listener to understand but not enough for the underlying message to be completely obvious. "The Vanity Upstairs" exudes pride and hope by channeling cultural references. "The More Natural Look of Pressed Powders" juxtaposes brutality with family, which represent warmth and acceptance. "A Scenery Mural" combined heartache with repetition--which was me running memories over and over again through my head. In all these poems, the messages of self-realization, hope, and loss are clear, but the phrases used to describe them can be interpreted in a number of ways. This is what I consider the most appealing aspect of poetry--you are free to interpret the text however you see fit.

Writing poems about situations like these turns pain into creative endeavors, which can hopefully inspire and help others—especially children. In the next chapter, I will use what I have learned from analyzing my work as a poet to suggest ways that I could begin to involve young children in the excitement of using language for self-expression as well as propose activities that would help build skills necessary to engage in this process.

CHAPTER 4

THE CLASSROOM TIE-IN

As the preceding chapters have already stated, writing poetry can be a therapeutic creative outlet for self-expression. It has helped me navigate through personal problems, as well as reflect on myself as a person--which in turn fosters growth. Children can also benefit from developing their own poetry, and in their own way, can achieve similar results.

While I am interested in the emotional development aspect of composing and writing poetry for children, it can have academic benefits as well. Children can begin forming poetry before they can read and write. For younger children, someone else (e.g. the teacher) can jot down their ideas and words for poems, then review with the kids what they transcribed. Capital and lowercase letters can be pointed out, as well as the definition of unfamiliar words. By writing things down, teachers are showing the importance of knowing how to write without verbalizing it. Beginning and ending sounds can also be discussed, which is key in recognizing words and is crucial when learning how to read. Also, knowing the function of words, like if they are used to describe the physical characteristics of something, communicate an action, or share a feeling makes it easier for children to understand when to use the right ones. That makes writing cohesive sentences easier for them. Also, experimental (unconventional and/or open-ended) reading and writing have their own academic benefits. As children engage in activities to develop

basic concepts of print, they also:

- Increase their attention span
 - Learn vocabulary
 - Develop personal interests
 - Match spoken words with written words
 - Use descriptive language to explain and explore
 - Show familiarity with rhyming and beginning sounds
- (Temple and Mackinster, 2005, 66)

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the creative writing activities I have implemented in my former Kindergarten classroom that are primarily for building language and cognitive skills while simultaneously promoting socialization and letter/word recognition. The descriptions of the activities also emphasize creativity, socialization and self-expression.

One activity that the children enjoyed was a describing game that we did during our morning circle time. I selected a simple object, like a yellow block or a blue truck. I picked a word to describe it, like hard or small. Then I would pass it to a child and they would have to use a different descriptive word. The game ends when someone becomes stumped, or when a word is repeated. This game emphasizes the power of adjectives, which are vital tools for description in poetry. It also promotes cognitive skills since it forces the children to pick creative words as well as listening since a word cannot be repeated. Other important social interactions are learned, like turn taking. As we went around the room, the words were written down so letter recognition comes into play. The list of words alone could even be considered a poem.

Weeks later, I recalled the game with the students and asked them if they could remember

the words on the list. This allowed me to measure the effectiveness of the activity to decide on how to modify this game in the future. Instead of using classroom objects (blocks, rulers, writing utensils), I would use more items they were unfamiliar with or ones they rarely have seen/used. This would add to the excitement to the game, further motivating the students to think about the right words to use. The children lamented when asked to recall the words from this activity and also shared how difficult they found this task to be. A few words were remembered, but not many. They also found it difficult to describe common items in the context without repeating the same word, which frustrated a lot of them.

In general, I found this game was most effective with silly objects, like a baby bottle or a picture of a classmate. The children found them amusing, and were more excited to participate. Vocabulary is the core of writing creatively, and this helped to expand the words they know and how to use them properly and in the right context. Reiteration of this activity at home was evidence of this/ Parents of the students told me that their kids would discuss this game at home, and talked about not only if they liked it, but would give examples of the objects we used and would try to play the same game using some of their favorite toys.

Listening is also another very important facet of expanding vocabulary. Reading poems aloud, or even common childhood chants, helps strengthen familiarity with auditory characteristics of poems, like alliteration, line breaks, and speed. Rhyming is also fun and critical since it helps to develop phonological awareness, which is strongly connected with learning to read. Simple chants like this one are good during a time when children are gathered together, and

are asked to clap when they hear words that rhyme:

Miss Mary Mack

All dressed in black

Silver buckles

Up and down her back

Here, child-child interaction is also being encouraged, which makes for a very palpable learning experience. The same exercise can be used for alliteration as well. Instead of clapping when they hear words that rhyme, they can clap when they hear words that start with a certain letter. They could also clap when they hear words that are sizes, colors, names, shapes, or feelings. The possibilities for this activity are truly endless. The children love any excuse for making loud noises, so the clapping was welcomed by them. Often, though, they would get so excited with how hard or fast they could clap that they stopped paying attention to the words. Often, they had to be redirected to focus. I liked this activity, mostly because of the positive energy the children radiated while doing this. Changing how fast or slow I said the categories also added to the fun, and made the students listen even closer. I believe this was one of their more favorite games, and would definitely use it in the future.

Another simple activity I have used is to have children do a poetry “mad lib.” I usually picked a simple concept for children to understand, and usually it's something they like to talk about, like dessert. I explain to them what a poem is by saying that it's when words are put together in a fun and creative way to explain something that has happened, an idea, or a way we

feel, and that we are going to write one using the topic I have selected and then they will be able to pick their own. Instead of having them bear the burden of writing the first one on their own, I explain that we are going to create one as a group. It is up to them to fill in the missing words to complete the poem. Here, I exercise discretion to make up the structure of the poem whichever way I'd like. I tend to keep it simple due to their attention span. A sample of the poem can go as followed:

My favorite dessert is _____ (type of dessert)

It always tastes _____ (adjective)

Me and my _____ always eat it together (family member)

It makes me feel _____ (feeling)

Although I no longer have the examples they produced, I remember how excited the children were to complete this exercise. It started off with serious answers, like “chocolate” for dessert, or “mom” for the family member. Then it turned comical, with answers like “cat” for dessert and the names of classmates for family members. I wrote and recorded all of their ideas, which inspired ideas for other poems. We completed ones that featured their favorite tv shows and places they like to go. I explained to them that an adjective is a word you use to describe the way something is. I used myself as an example, and said I was tall. A noun was defined as a person, place, or object. Although I doubt the definitions were fully understood, I am confident they will be familiar with them as they are reintroduced in later grades.

This was a great opportunity to discuss writing words some of the children didn't know as we completed each line of the poem, as well as listing different feelings and family members. Everyone was excited to share their individual experiences, and usually there were long stories that came along with them.

What I like most about completing these activities is seeing how this relates to Slam poetry. Word choice is important in any type of creative writing endeavor, but Slam poetry hinges on word choice, vivid description, and syntax. All of the activities previously mentioned start to get the student to think about how they use words, and what words can mean. While they are very basic in nature, the activities subconsciously sparked an interest and desire for students to want to learn more. My children just happened to be competitive, so they also wanted to outdo their peers. This makes for a more interactive learning atmosphere. I find it interesting because it resonates with Slam in that way—it also exploits the motivating power of competition. The competitive component of Slam poetry is a theatrical tool intended to liven up the show and inspire the poet to do his best (Smith, 2009, 39). Competition may not be the point, but it's an essential ingredient. I plan to continue to do more activities like these in the future. All of the previously mentioned activities were completed for the first time in my Kindergarten classroom, so it was a type of trial and error experience. I would definitely keep the mad lib activity, since it personalizes the experience for children—especially the shy ones.

I learned a ton about what motivates children when it comes to learning new ideas—especially presenting them in fun ways. In theory, I could have had the students sit at their desks

and executed a more traditional lesson plan, but I gauged the temperament of the group and decided they were too lively for that option. Instead of disciplining them for their rambunctiousness, I channeled that energy through creative exercises. Personalizing the writing by interjecting personal memories made the experience more exciting and enjoyable. The fact that such crucial skills like turn-taking and socialization were effortlessly integrated in the activities made them that much more rewarding and valuable.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

After all of my classroom experience, I am able to gain a sense of what is important when teaching students who are all so young. Often, when it comes to education, concepts like memorization and simply obtaining the right answer take precedence over emotional feats like developing self-awareness and creativity. The aforementioned curricular activities made me feel like I was successfully completing the latter with activities that were fun to engage in as well as simple to teach. Creative writing, through the venue of poetry, acknowledges every child individually. It is vital since currently classrooms are steadily increasing in size, sometimes leaving students (and parents) feeling overlooked. While some of my students had difficulty completing some of the exercises, they were forced to think critically. Other vital skills, like turn-taking and following directions, were also worked in. In the end, I truly believe I made the most of my stint as a Kindergarten teacher, and am lucky to keep in contact with some of the families from that center.

Consolidating my experiences within the context of this synthesis allows me to see how the Critical and Creative Thinking Program has shaped my career. I had worked in childcare before joining CCT, but because of the way the classes were tailored to each student's professional goals, I saw that my passion for education surpassed all of my original expectations

The most beneficial facet of CCT is the importance given to reflection--it is a necessary element for sustenance and growth. Many times, career paths are chosen without crucial examination of why those choices were made and what we learned from them. When I did childcare in high school, it was merely out of convenience regarding my schedule and location. Upon acceptance to UMASS, I applied to another preschool position as a part of my work study because of my experience working with children. But CCT forced me to take a hard look at what I've been accomplishing as an educator. I was a teacher for years, but what were the children learning? Did I share the same reasons for teaching as my coworkers? And while I've always regarded myself as a highly creative person, did my students benefit from my creativity? Courses like Creative Thinking challenged me to think even more outside of the box, while other classes like Processes of Research and Engagement asked me to take a more logical approach to problem-solving while still intertwining my professional aspirations. I also learned the importance of collaboration (Critical Thinking), the complexity regarding someone's ability to learn (Meta-cognition) and why having various mediums is important in communication (Dialogue Processes). Working together and communication are inherent when it comes to teaching others. Without realizing it, the Critical and Creative Thinking Program solidified my future endeavors as an educator.

It also made my penchant for creative writing feel validated. I have always used poetry as a vehicle for expressing emotions in a positive and healthy way. I never really examined how to use it in an academic setting with children. In CCT, I was encouraged to explore why I write and relay that reasoning to others. CCT fostered a sense of support and community. Peers and professors held genuine interest in my past in poetry and often told of theirs as well. By being in

this atmosphere, I felt more comfortable to share my inspirations and influences, as well as my work. The curriculum I planned for my students was shared, and was welcomed with kind words. The classes contributed to the educator I am today.

During the completion of this synthesis, I also changed the age group I work with. I now am a Toddler Teacher as opposed to a Kindergarten teacher. Also, I work at a preschool located at Newton-Wellesley Hospital, so the demographic has drastically changed (from low-income/homeless families to upper class). While literacy isn't focused on as heavily with toddlers as Kindergartners, listening skills are. Although the children are only two, they do a remarkable job sitting for stories I tell orally, without the use of pictures of any kind. They are often able to recall details from them. We also read books and sing songs on a daily basis, which they enjoy. They are able to identify colors, textures, and sizes in all types of pictures and objects, which could generate enough discussion to get some poetry exercises going even though we haven't tried them out yet. I was surprised by how much I genuinely enjoy working with this age group.

I still write for The Weekly Dig and Performer Magazine. I also had a 3-month stint as a middle school English and Math tutor. After UMASS, I want to freelance for more magazines and newspapers. I would also like to be instructing a creative writing course for older students part-time while still working full-time at my preschool. I have also considered volunteering abroad. I now know I would not have such a strong foundation in teaching if it weren't for the guidance CCT has provided me. Words could never express my gratitude.

APPENDIX A. MY POEMS: FURTHER EXAMPLES

Monstrosity Strapped To A Body

Give up.

The rain outside crystallizes and sympathizes with me as I trace his steps to the best of my ability and it's heavy like a dagger consoling an empty wound as his half smile cuts corners caught chasing a dream that was already dead to begin with.

In my mind, there's no such thing as fantasy so I can't tell where heartache stops and reality begins caught gasping for air I wear thin as the cold winter wind licks the side of my face as I put my head down in a stretch to seem unforgettable I'm memorable in only my posture and the behavior I pretend when I've had too much to drink.

Just give up.

Eyes give it all away and although I could stare into his eyes until time runs dry they no longer condone intrigue as much as they safeguard righteousness fighting this warrants battle scars the size of human hearts and if he could overlook the fact that I was never a fighter I can overlook the fact that he needlessly sugarcoated a situation when I could have laid down and given him something sweeter to taste. Effortlessly.

He told me he found beauty in nothing, but if I was his version of nothing I wouldn't be standing here wasting words like countless batting eyelashes because instead I'd be lowered on a staircase striking up conversations from ideas scribbled on napkins laughing at my own nervousness waiting for the cab to arrive only after I hugged him goodbye promising I would contact him in the future to talk about poetry and that just proved worthless.

So I just give up.

How To Fight A Hurricane

I am drawn to him because
He blinks at nightfall and
Suffers from delusions of grandeur.

The hallucinations he held hold
Nothing to his monochromatic bruises
So whatever he chooses will be fine with me
And when I read his words I know
That finally the stars he never mentions
Will align with me.

So silently, I take deep breaths and spend
Days envisioning scars from where IVs embarked
The top of his arm and pretend to understand
The origins of his armor plated strong suit.

I am drawn to him because
He revels in emotion and his general
Disregard for keeping things whole.

His body is a constant fixture
of artistry and is as threatening
to me as a knot between my shoulder blades
and though his hands were never still enough
to emulate sentences they never stopped writing.

But since the weights have been removed from
His chest he invests his time in counting spaces
On pages designed for repetition
So it is only natural for him to *breathe*
And to allow his docile body to assume
A sleep ready position

Make Yourself Sick

So peter baby, you said you need me, baby
But now say that with the lights out it's godless and strong
I can't hold on but I'll miss it when it's gone
Because I think that you think that I'm beautiful
I caught a fraction of light from running into fights
That can be traced to a miserable slight of hand
And I never thought I'd trust so much that I'd need this lust
Like I'd need some slight of hand but you can spit shine
Your way to the top don't stop d o n' t s t o p
And don't you dare fail me now because I could be your Mary
If you'd hail me now or your own little martyr if you'd nail me down
And like fireflies it's all been lies the numbers of your lovers
Make the same exact sound so I'll make my voice bounce off
The times you went down as long as you think that I'm beautiful
I've traced desperation to the face of impatience and it's blatant
That she never had a face to you and that in your heart she never
Had a place to you because after many nights any face would do
Your majesty magically I just don't give a damn about your tragedy
Since someone's always bound to succumb to the means of your tongue
And I say that tragically so to pass the time I'll count my lines
Until my lines all perfectly fit but to you I would never admit
That with this I just made myself sick

APPENDIX B. REFERENCED WORKS

Footnote To HOWL

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy!
The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand
and asshole holy!
Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is
holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an
angel!
The bum's as holy as the seraphim! the madman is
holy as you my soul are holy!
The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is
holy the hearers are holy the ecstasy is holy!
Holy Peter holy Allen holy Solomon holy Lucien holy
Kerouac holy Huncke holy Burroughs holy Cas-
sady holy the unknown buggered and suffering
beggars holy the hideous human angels!
Holy my mother in the insane asylum! Holy the cocks
of the grandfathers of Kansas!
Holy the groaning saxophone! Holy the bop
apocalypse! Holy the jazzbands marijuana
hipsters peace & junk & drums!
Holy the solitudes of skyscrapers and pavements! Holy
the cafeterias filled with the millions! Holy the
mysterious rivers of tears under the streets!
Holy the lone juggernaut! Holy the vast lamb of the
middle class! Holy the crazy shepherds of rebell-
ion! Who digs Los Angeles IS Los Angeles!
Holy New York Holy San Francisco Holy Peoria &
Seattle Holy Paris Holy Tangiers Holy Moscow
Holy Istanbul!
Holy time in eternity holy eternity in time holy the

clocks in space holy the fourth dimension holy
the fifth International holy the Angel in Moloch!
Holy the sea holy the desert holy the railroad holy the
locomotive holy the visions holy the hallucina-
tions holy the miracles holy the eyeball holy the
abyss!
Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours!
bodies! suffering! magnanimity!
Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent
kindness of the soul!

Allen Ginsberg, 1955

Nig-gods

In celebration of all black men-Nig gods
N-I-G-G-O-D-S
Real nigga's don't claim to be anything
they just are
who they are,
what they arew, where they are, ghetto superstars
I love the way a nigga walks and talk
how he maneuvers when he gets caught
sheer poetry in motion when a nigga puts down game
ain't too many nigga's lame
maybe insane
but only to those that can't understand
what it's like to be a Blackman
I love a nigga with sleepy eyes
black lips, and toned thighs
the rumor ain't true for all
but I like a nigga wit' some size
but dick ain't what makes me fall
to me the mind is the prize
brothers who seek knowledge
didn't necessarily go to college
but those who are conscious of the true plan
who realize God is every black man
can I get an Amen?!?
I'm your number one fan
from chocolate to caramel it all looks so sweet
visions of beauty as they walk down the street
head full of dreads, Tims on they feet;
they walk as if they're listening to a beat
Black men are the only creation
that command your attention on impact
by their color, their spirit, the way they act
as a matter of fact, I'm amazed
at how they handle situations
all across these nations
doors locking, purse snatching,
looks of fear as they enter the station

but they laugh and move on
steady grooving to a song
Fuck you, cracker, I might be blacker
I'm God's reflection so fear me
you need protection
I ain't here to hate just to celebrate
my nigga's from that south
with them golds in their mouth
with them fingerwaves, fades, and braids
forever pimpin' never ever getting played
my niggas from the west with them khakis and
chucks
permed out creased down, fly as fuck
my nigga's from this east
that belly of the beast
surviving day to day never a moment of peace
if all my kings understood their power
they wouldn't waste a minute,
a second an hour on this bullshit
They want you to quit your journey
to find your spirit and to ignore your heart
to where you can't hear it
Nig-gods.

Tamika Harper, 2003

BELIEF & TECHNIQUE FOR MODERN PROSE

LIST OF ESSENTIALS

Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy

Submissive to everything, open, listening

Try never get drunk outside yr own house

Be in love with yr life

Something that you feel will find its own form

Be crazy dumbsaint of the mind

Blow as deep as you want to blow

Write what you want bottomless from bottom of mind

The unspeakable visions of the individual

No time for poetry but exactly what is

Visionary tics shivering in the chest

In tranced fixation dreaming upon object before you

Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition

Like Proust be an old teahead of time

Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog

The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye

Write in recollection and amazement for yourself

Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea

Accept loss forever

Believe in the holy contour of life

Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind

Dont think of words when you stop but to see picture better

Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning

No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge

Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it
Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form
In Praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness
Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better
You're a Genius all the time
Writer-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven

Jack Kerouac, 1958

Amethyst Rocks

"what i got
come and get some
(get on up)
hustler of culture"

i stand on the corner of the block slingin'
amethyst rocks
drinkin' 40s of Mother Earth's private nectar
stock

dodgin' cops
'cause five-O are the 666
and i need a fix of that purple rain
the type of shit that drives membranes insane

oh yes, i'm in the fast lane
snorting...candy yams
that free my body and soul
and send me like Shazam!

"never question
who i am
god knows"

and i know god personally
in fact, he lets me call him me

i be one with rain and stars and things
with dancing feet and watermelon wings
i bring the sunshine and the moon
and the wind blows my tune
...meanwhile
i spoon powdered drum beats into plastic bags
sellin' kilos of kente scag

takin' drags off of collards and cornbread
free-basing through saxophones and flutes like
mad
the high notes make me space float
i be exhalin' in rings that circle Saturn

leavin' stains in my veins in astrological patterns

yeah, i'm sirius B
Dogon' niggas plotted shit, lovely
but the Feds are also plottin' me
they're tryin' to imprison my astrology
to put my stars behind bars
my stars in stripes
using blood splattered banners
as nationalist kites
but i control the wind
that's why they call it the hawk
i am horus
son of isis
son of osiris
worshipped as jesus
resurrected like lazarus
but you can call me lazzie
lazy
yeah, i'm lazy
cause i'd rather sit and build
than work and plow a field
worshipping a daily yield of cash green crops

your evolution stopped
with the evolution of your technology
a society of automatic tellers
and money machines
nigga what?

my culture is lima beans
and tambourines
dreams manifest
dreams real
not consistent with rational
I dance for no reason
for reasons you can't dance
caught in the inactiveness of intellectualized
circumstance
you can't learn my steps until you unlearn my
thoughts
fuck thought
it leads to naught

simply stated it leads to you
tryin' to figure me out

your intellect is disfiguring soul
your beings not whole
check your flag pole:
stars and stripes
your astrology is imprisoned
by your concept of white
of self
what's your plan of spiritual health?
calling reality unreal
your line of thought is tangled
the star spangled got your soul mangled
your beings angled
forbidding you to be real and feel
you can't find truth with an ax or a drill
in a white house on a hill
or in factories or plants made of steel

s t e a l i n g m e
was the smartest thing you ever did
too bad you don't teach the truth to your kids
my influence on you is the reflection you see
when you look into your minstrel mirror
and talk about your culture

your existence is that of a schizophrenic vulture
who thinks he has enough life in him
to prey on the dead
not knowing
that the dead ain't dead
and that he ain't got enough spirituality
to know how to pray
yeah there's no repentance

you're bound to live
an infinite consecutive executive life sentence
so while you're busy serving your time
i'll be in sync with the moon
while you run from the sun
life of the womb
reflected by guns

worshipper of moons
i am the sun
and i am public enemy number one
one one one
one one one
that's seven
and i'll be out on the block

hustlin' culture
slingin' amethyst rocks

Saul Williams, 2003

From *SHE*

the forecast is
we kiss good-bye and never hello
all kisses are then parting kisses

and it hurts more to write it
that it does to live it
for i know what written word can do
let alone spoken
and this is a spoken art

Saul Williams, 1999

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