

¡PALABRA PA'LANTE!
Artivism and the Transformative Power of the Written and Spoken Word

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SUMMARY OF WORK

“As a young, oppressed Generation, our poetry imagined a world where no one was privileged while millions were starving, or homeless, or preyed upon by drugs, or murderous, vicious killer-cops, invading armies, or arrogantly labeled “culturally deprived,” or “Third World,” or “savages” or “terrorists” merely for wanting freedom and Self-Determination.”

-Askia M. Touré (Bracey, et al. 26)

Within my major of Africana Studies I concentrate on Artivism, the use of creative art forms as tools of activism, which serves as the foundation for my research. The term has not been included in official dictionaries, but is a term as well as an activity and ideology that is alive and has been used throughout the past few decades within and around various social movements. For this thesis, I am interested in analyzing poetry in both its written and performative forms through the lens of artivism to answer my research questions: How does poetry promote social justice and liberation? What are the qualities that make it able to do so? How can they be described or defined? I have decided to focus on these questions because in reflecting on my own experiences of writing and performing poetry, I have noticed that there is something very special in the process as well as

in the product. There is a shared experience that often draws from the five senses and is scarcely discussed or written about. Reflecting on this shared experience, I have identified three factors; ritual, healing, and community-building that constitute that special and unacknowledged feeling that makes poetry, among other forms of art, a tool of liberation for both the self and society. Ritual allows for reflection and engagement on the part of a poet, which is important for matters of awareness and connection to their work. Healing is an important factor because in the context of my research, which focuses on the Black Arts Movement and Nuyorican poetry, it is a process of overcoming generational trauma and institutionalized racism for poets of the African Diaspora. Community building is equally important because it has the potential to mobilize and unite poets and audiences. The power of poetry in this case transcends the page and the space of the performance. It is important to look at these factors by way of form, structure, and trajectories of writing and performance in order to obtain a clear understanding of the similarities, differences, and transcending connections that they have in relation to activism. There is creative power in the production of poetry for those who are otherwise powerless, voiceless, or marginalized. To see the ways in which that power functions, it is necessary to analyze aforementioned elements.

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION: ARTIVISM AND THE FRAMING OF THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT AND NUYORICAN POETRY

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (*New King James Version* John 1.1 and 14). Although these biblical scriptures reference a religious ideology, they most certainly translate into the origins and meaning of words and language. In the beginning, or at the start of our lives, we possess language. We speak before we write. Therefore, words and utterances are the reality we experience preceding articulation and translation used in order to communicate. At first, those words and utterances have specific meaning for us. They are linked hand in hand with action because of the way we express ourselves through body gestures and movement. Before we are able to talk, we first demonstrate our needs and wants.

Words have always existed, since the moment our vocal chords came to life. We later learned a specific language, and even later learned to express that language in writing- at least those of us with the privilege to do so. It is words, or the Word, spoken and written that determine our reality, which is shaped and determined by words. There are institutional structures in place that limit and

confine words to have particular meanings and pre-constructed realities. However when those structures are ruptured, when they break to allow words to configure themselves into their own structures to define their own meaning and move away from a layered reality, revolution runs through the vibrations, or on the page.

Poetry is a genre of expression and meaning making that ruptures those structures through its distinct and varied forms. It pushes the poet against themselves to dig into and evaluate the core of their experienced reality instead of being fed an alternate version of that.

Poetry allows us to be introspective, which results in self-awareness and a greater consciousness of the world around us. It requires much attention to detail, personal connection, and the ability to transform ordinary ideas into beautiful images, sounds, and forms. Poetry is useful in the development of strategies for promoting social justice because it rests in the creative realm of our imaginations. This innate part of all human beings is usually suppressed by capitalist structures, meant to conform people into consumers in line with a social order, rather than in line with the work of liberation and the common good. In his book The Aesthetic Dimension, Herbert Marcuse writes about the creative realm of our imaginations, stating:

Inasmuch as man and nature are constituted by an unfree society, their repressed and distorted potentialities can be represented only in an estranging form. The world of art is that of another Reality Principle, of estrangement-and only as estrangement does art fulfill a cognitive function: it communicates truths not communicable in any other language; it contradicts (Marcuse 9).

According to Marcuse, we live in a society that distorts our ideas of reality and limits revolutionary thinking. As a social realist, he is critical of the structures in

place that affect the poor and working class. Therefore, he poses the creative imagination as a way and space by which the oppressed can liberate themselves because it cannot be controlled. The differences that we possess as human beings set us apart from the capitalist society in which we live that attempts to fit U.S. citizens into the mold of consumers versus creators. The creative imagination is linked to the human spirit, which differs in all people, allowing them to create unique systems and projects through whatever form they choose. Because U.S. society is highly driven by the idea of economic stability, it is often the case that anything not pertaining to making money and supporting the economy is discouraged. While media and other societal pressures attempt to steer and divert our thinking and attention toward consumer culture, the creative imagination lives independently and allows us to hone its capabilities, thus resulting in freedom of the mind and expression outside of the realm of consumer capitalism.

Marcuse's theory of art making and the creative imagination is but a part of the epistemology of activism, or art as activism. If we consider the meaning of activism, then understanding of poetry as a form of activism will become more clear. Carol Becker states that "Art is often a kind of dreaming the world into being, a transmutation of thought into material reality, and an affirmation that the physical world begins in the incorporeal-in ideas... Humans [have the ability] to anticipate what [they could] create. Art is the great anticipator" (Becker 68). According to this statement, art has the power to create, destroy, resist, and reform in the imaginative realm and has the ability to be manifested in reality.

Similar to the previously mentioned biblical reference, art as a method of language and communication is always first a thought, formulated into words, and then physically created into existence. The incorporeal is made flesh through the word. Artivism is thus the enactment of the word, which is a manifestation of what is created within the imagination. It is the process by which art is not only conceived, but utilized to promote thought and mobilization around a particular issue.

Just in the last three decades, we have seen many examples of artivism in multiple genres such as theater, music, visual art, media art, etc. From the public protest theater and promotional materials of the Guerilla Girls, to the murals of Judy Baca, to the street art of Tyree Guyton in Detroit, to the stimulating performances of Guillermo Gomez-Peña, artivism is key in U.S. cultural production and is demonstrated in various generations dedicated to creating change. It draws a tie between form and the social world, creating an aesthetic of interaction unique from traditional practices of expressing ideas and igniting consciousness and awareness. Artivism can also transcend forms of creative art by being implemented in school curriculums. At schools like El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in Brooklyn, NY, for example, Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Pedagogies are used to encourage students to own and utilize their voices. Beyond spreading awareness, artivism is a means by which to place the voices of marginalized communities at the forefront. It allows for the oppressed to express

themselves and engage in the process of self-liberation, which enables them to work towards the liberation of others through their narratives and words.

Activist projects feature essential components that are socially engaged. Collaboration and process are two of them and are important because of the interaction that happens between the art and the viewer or audience. In his book Education for Socially Engaged Art, visual and performance artist Pablo Helguera discusses socially engaged art, which can be considered activism. He writes, “what characterizes socially engaged art is its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence” (Helguera 2). This, of course, is the main objective of activist work. It needs to engage and interact with communities and society. Some projects work more directly with certain issues while others work indirectly. It can be said that poetry by itself on a page can be an indirect form of activism. In written form, poetry can speak to people on an individual level and has the potential to incite feelings that can potentially lead to action. It can also tap into a collective group of people who may choose to read and discuss together as a community. However when a poem is performed in front of a large group of people, for example at a protest or rally, or even just at an open mic, then the performance has the potential of making a larger collective impact with a different type of energy. Written poetry can shift hearts, minds, and open consciousness while also motivating audiences to action.

Poetry as a form of activism is related to Africana Studies in several ways. First, people of African descent in the United States as well as the Diaspora have

for centuries utilized different forms of art to make statements concerning discrimination, prejudice, racist structures and ideologies, as well as civil and human rights. The Black Arts Movement and Nuyorican Movement are two examples of instances where art was used to call out injustice against members of the African Diaspora. The 1960s and 1970s, in which both movements took place, can be characterized as the Black Power era. With the Civil Rights Movement in the South as its backdrop, which helped to end Jim Crow discrimination, the Black Power era had to do with confronting institutional racism and police brutality particularly in urban areas. This led to the rise of the Black Panthers who organized for community development and empowerment, as well as working towards ending police brutality. Puerto Ricans arrived en masse to the urban centers of the Northeastern and Midwestern United States in the 1940s and 1950s, socioeconomically grouped with African Americans. They were thus affected and inspired by the Black Power Movement. This cross-fertilization led to the rise of the Young Lords Party, an organization very similar in principles to the Black Panther Party. The Nuyorican Movement was birthed as well, alongside the Black Arts Movement. Both were comprised of artists and thinkers that made socially and politically committed work that confronted the subject of identity and centered the systemic issues that targeted their communities.

The Black Arts Movement featured a host of artists, poets, and musicians who embodied an overarching concept of self-determination and expression of African Americans as an oppressed people. With this came the concept of a Black

Aesthetic by which artists fused Black Power and liberation ideals with art making, in whatever form. The Black Aesthetic purposefully made itself distinct from and against standard Western art traditions. It highlighted public performance, playing to a tradition of orality and collectively transcended boundaries of genre and medium. It strived to make a Black audience see itself represented and reflected back in the work. In the Black Arts Movement, art became a process of social liberation. It sought to reveal the injustices against people of color and confront those injustices by making the work public and accessible. “Artists were extremely important in framing the discussion of what it would mean to be liberated, of what it did mean to be Black, of what the content of Blackness was” (Bracey 5). The movement was shaped by Black Nationalism, which had to do with self-definition and creating work that the black community could see itself within. The art of the Black Arts Movement served as mirrors not only for the black community, but also for society itself. Similarly, the art of the Nuyorican movement was not only based on an expressed response to discrimination experienced in U.S. cities, but framed by Puerto Rican Nationalism also, which defines a large part of a felt connection between Nuyoricans and the mainland.

The Nuyorican Movement reflected a lot of the same ideals of the Black Power Movement especially in regards to self-determination and constructing a community of socially aware individuals within a particular oppressed or marginalized group. Similar to the Black Arts Movement, Nuyoricans used

various art forms to express themselves and promote identity consciousness and social justice. They too developed a particular aesthetic in their work and tailored their mediums to suit their interests, culture, and goals. The created aesthetics of these two movements are important to note because they proved to be distinct from and against traditional Western or American art, which is based on hierarchy and oppressive practices, which set the standard for taste in addition to value. A brief example of such practices is the existence of art galleries and auctions that set prices extremely high for paintings, sculptures, and other forms, making them inaccessible to lower-class communities. Another is the inaccessibility of popular theatre performances on Broadway and even Off-Broadway. In that same vein, there is also the appropriation of art made by people of the African Diaspora. With Black Arts and Nuyorican art and literature, value is placed on socially engaging art that speaks to pressing issues, erased histories, and community empowerment while the high culture art is dedicated to maintaining a particular audience.

What characterizes Nuyorican poetry and the movement at large, for which the Black Power/Black Arts Movement served as catalysts, is the validation of the Puerto Rican experience. This experience consists of many struggles and obstacles. However, what has come out of it is not merely a spirit of empowerment and self-determination but also the birth of cultural organizations, and a certain aesthetic authentic to the experience of Puerto Ricans in New York and elsewhere in the United States. The aesthetic consists of (but is not limited to)

the use of Spanglish, themes of place, home, and subject position, and retelling history. The use of Spanglish, or even a few Spanish words, is important because it speaks to the process of assimilation that Puerto Ricans underwent during the great migration, which took place in the 1940s. Themes of place, home, and subject position are connected to the feeling of being neither here nor there and slipping between the cracks of society. Nuyoricans are subject to discrimination in the U.S. because they are people of color, and because the narratives of migration publicized on U.S. soil were misconstrued to promote stereotypical images of them. They are also subject to discrimination on the island of Puerto Rico because they are of a hybrid identity, born on the mainland and associated with its customs. In either case, later generations of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. are considered “the other.” In the United States, Puerto Ricans have often been grouped with the socioeconomic status ascribed to African Americans, which connects the experience to Africana Studies. It suggests a shared experience in urban America, not to mention that many Puerto Ricans claim African ancestry. Remembering and retelling history is extremely important for the Nuyoricans experience because it offers a sense of place, home, and origin. These aspects are what set this particular experience and movement apart from other movements. However, the root ideals and strategies have been extremely similar in part because of inspiration and forces driven by society.

Some of the key differences between the Black Arts Movement and the Nuyoricans Movement are concepts of connecting to indigenous roots,

romanticizing the streets, the usage of Spanglish as previously mentioned, and pan-cultural nationalism. In James Smethurst's book The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s, he writes, "Attempts to link contemporary identity to a prehistoric culture, whether African, Aztec, or Mayan, are far less pronounced in Nuyorican poetry" (Smethurst 175). The poetry of the Black Arts Movement, as a result of the Black Power Movement, made linkages between the past and present by identifying with African ideals. Nuyorican poetry acknowledged indigenous, African, and European ancestry, but focused mainly on a hybrid identity based on being Puerto Rican, living in New York, and the circumstances that came along with that identity. Centered on the present, Nuyorican poetry also contributed and engaged with "pan-cultural nationalism," that contributed to the ideal of hybridity (Smethurst 176). This was due to their connections to the Black Arts Movement and their main location of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, which was home to "multiracial bohemian communities" (Smethurst 176). Also heavily influenced by Hip-Hop, the Nuyorican Movement was shaped by many forces. The Black Arts Movement on the other hand was an entity based on its own ideals, connected to others, but less influenced by them than the Nuyorican Movement was. Despite these differences however, both movements shared many of the similarities previously listed and revolved around social justice and lifting up their communities.

Since there is certainly a plethora of information regarding poetry and its connection with specific communities, I will be focusing primarily on the

Nuyorican experience. I will draw upon the work of others from different movements, namely the Black Arts Movement for comparison and contrast. This is a particularly important decision for me because I find myself personally connected to it. I identify as Nuyorican and a poet, and a lot of my work deals with issues of social justice, self-determination, and identity. Therefore, I notice that my gaze is very similar, especially because my work is very much influenced by the ideals of the Nuyorican Movement. I also engage with poetry on both written and performative levels, so looking at how each work with each other and independently is something I have wanted to explore. I have noticed how I have felt while reading and writing poetry and watching poetry performed, and am dedicated to linking words to those feelings while also studying them through research and interviews. I believe that academic work is nothing if it cannot be connected to the self and society. Also by including my own poetry into this thesis, and analyzing it, I will be inscribing myself into a particular narrative, which is important because narratives and histories belonging to the African diaspora have been erased and replaced with those considered dominant. That narrative is one that has been met with disillusionment through the discouragement of praxis. I am not including my work only to be a part of the narrative, but also to actively practice and engage in the processes that I write about. It is important for me to engage because it gives me a heightened and more personal sense of what I am studying.

Writing and performing poetry among other forms of art make the writer and performer visible. According to Gregory Sholette, “When the excluded are made visible, when they demand visibility, it is always ultimately a matter of politics and a rethinking of history” (Sholette 3). Therefore, it becomes a matter of the personal becoming political and vice versa. Writing and performing poetry become tools and tactics to demand this visibility, and rethink and reimagine history. When the two are utilized by people of color who have been marginalized and ostracized from a popular tradition of art making, then the act of demanding visibility through art becomes an act of revolution that creates a shift in dominant narrative. Creating that shift is a part of activism that contributes towards social justice.

The idea of inscribing oneself or making oneself visible in this work is connected to Black Feminist methodology, which relies on self-determination and inserting the self into a narrative that often is excluding the voices of women of color. According to Deborah K. King, “black women are empowered with the right to interpret our reality and define our objectives” (King 237). As a member of the African Diaspora and as a person of color in general, it is critical to be able to interpret reality beyond dominant discourse to notice the oppressive systems of power that are in place. Documentation then becomes a key factor because it keeps account of the particular voice that is writing. Poetry as documentation is extremely powerful because it highlights a person’s truth, which can function as a source of empowerment, to invoke certain emotions, responses, and actions based

on the piece. Shared truth serves as a catalyst for activism and the promotion of social justice because through it, consciousness is raised, groups of people are able to relate and therefore feel more inclined to share and work together as well as encourage and empower one another.

Beyond the concept of writing and art as documentation and self-insertion, they carry something far deeper than just the experience of the self. Gloria Anzaldúa writes that she likes to think of her creative work:

as performances and not as inert and ‘dead’ objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a ‘who’ or a ‘what’ and contains the presences of persons, that is, incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic powers. The work manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be ‘fed,’ *la tengo que bañar y vestir*. (Anzaldúa 89)

Just as any artistic craft, written and performed poetry need to be practiced. With them come the responsibility of strengthening and refining skills and as well as nurturing the creative imaginary. It is interesting to note how Anzaldúa claims that a piece or body of work can have an identity. I would agree with this statement because there is a particular power in writing or performing a poem that calls upon certain cultural elements. Those elements can be those previously mentioned, which characterize the Nuyorican Movement such as the use of Spanglish and code switch, references to Puerto Rico, elements of musicality, and disruptions in traditional structure. They can also be elements that have been passed down through the African oral tradition more generally. In my own poetry I utilize these elements to prove a point, call out forces by name, and add backing or validity to my point.

As previously mentioned, ritual is an aspect of Nuyorican poetry, and poetry more generally, that encompasses ideas of (re)inscribing, (re)claiming, (re)telling, and seeing the identity in a piece of work or performance. Ritual also matters when thinking about social justice because it invokes organization and centering, which is needed for doing the work and getting a message across. It is often associated with performance, because of the routines of action that occur before and during performances. In his book, Taking It To The Streets, Harry Elam writes about ritual, referencing Jean and Jon Camaroff saying:

Jean and John Camaroff maintain that ritual acts not only as symbolic mediation but also as a ‘signifying practice’ that defines and authorizes social action. The signifying functions of ritual are both consecrative and productive, both radical and conservative... imagining new social orders. (Elam 12)

Ritual in performance is symbolic because it highlights action through process. There is an embodiment of material, where the artist’s physical body becomes a site of information that comes from experience and the parts of themselves that they engage with through that ritual. It can be said that the process of rehearsal is ritualistic because the work is somatic and repeatedly ingrained into bodily memory. It is also made sacred by the importance placed on the objective of the piece to be performed. Rehearsal becomes a space solely for the act, allowing nothing else to hinder mastery of the performance and the way truth becomes relayed.

Ritual in written poetry is similar, but distinct in that it applies to the process of writing and revision. With writing comes a set time and place, like rehearsals, where the artist develops a strategy to create. In Borderlands/La

Frontera, Gloria Anzaldúa discusses poetry and poetics. Specifically talking about the process of writing a book, she said:

I can see the deep structure, the scaffolding. If I can get the bone structure right, then putting flesh on it proceeds without too many hitches. The problem is that the bones often do not exist prior to the flesh, but are shaped after a vague and broad shadow of its form is discerned or uncovered during beginning, middle and final stages of the writing. (Anzaldúa 88)

Besides the act of writing a poem, there is also a process of revision where the bones she speaks of are removed, replaced, inserted, and thrown away in order to perfect a piece. This series of action on a piece of paper is in itself a radical procedure, where the artist is consciously creating change to make a poem according to his, her, or their liking. Subconsciously they are developing critical thinking and organizational skills that can help beyond the realm of writing and apply to larger issues.

Now that ritual has been conceptualized, healing as a product of ritual in poetry can be introduced. Both at the performative and written levels, poetry has the power to create healing within a person or group of people. The act of releasing one's soul onto a piece of paper, along with the physicality and intimacy of dragging a pen or pencil across paper, is incredibly therapeutic. Writing poetry is the equivalent of meaning making. It is a process of navigating through the world, thought, emotions, situations, and figuring out (or not) what role it plays in one's life. Harriet Wadeson describes writing as, "adding the order of language to imagery and imagery saying what cannot always be expressed in words. The dual process not only allows for a strong emotional release, but can also give meaning to what is expressed" (Wadeson 240). Poetic devices such as imagery, metaphor,

repetition, rhythm, and so on allow writers to express themselves in ways they normally would not, which grants them the freedom to allow their creative imaginations and true selves to do as they will. It is a process of self-liberation, alluding to Marcuse's point previously mentioned.

How does this pertain to the promotion of social justice? Brazilian author and educator Paulo Freire states in his book Pedagogy of the Oppressed, that “the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well... Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both” (Freire 44). Poets and those who write poetry, but may not identify as poets, engage in a practice of self-liberation where they expand their thinking and consciousness, providing others a framework through reading and engaging with a piece to do the same. Therefore, a key aspect of written and performance poetry that is intertwined with ritual and healing is an established sense of community or relatability. They each do this in different ways, but however still manage to bring a communal experience to a poem or performance.

When it comes to performance poetry, there are a few things that need to be taken into account such as audience, physicality, and voice. No matter what kind of performance is being done, audience is a crucial factor. Of course there are categories and genres of poetry that can resonate within multiple groups of people and apply to different experiences. However it is important to understand that perception is based on social context and subject position. While writing

about Amiri Baraka's Black Revolutionary Theater, Elam claims that "An audience's perception of authenticity as well as participation in the social protest performance also depended upon the composition, the psychological and emotional disposition, and the cultural background of that audience" (Elam 111). This is also true for a space where there is poetry or spoken word being read.

At poetry events, the physical set-up is usually quite traditional, where there is a poet-performer on a stage, somehow separated from their audience. It may seem as though it is impossible for community to be fostered in that type of setting due to the invisible barrier set between the two. However, it is most certainly possible and occurs often through aspects of oral tradition, which engages with the audience. Elam also writes, "Liminal phenomena, such as rituals, tend to be collective. They stress togetherness and elicit membership and loyalty to the group" (Elam 15). Liminal phenomena can be described as "symbolic enactments, activities, events, and forms that occur at natural breaks within, or 'spaces in between' the normal functioning of the social system" (Elam 15). An open mic or other event where there is poetry can be classified as liminal phenomena because it is an outlet from society, and can therefore foster a feeling of belonging to the space based on common interest or relatability to performances. There are plenty of moments or spaces in between to surface emotions and sensations associated with liminal phenomena. They are caused by not only the orality of the poet's oral tradition, but also the physical presence that the poet possesses.

Physicality is when the poet physically exerts the emotions that come up within their piece. This causes a sense of urgency that the audience cannot help but feel those emotions within themselves because of the imperative message and the meaning that they assign to it. Along with elements of the oral tradition such as *nommo*, the physicality of the poet conveys an even stronger action, leading to a clear perception and reaction from the audience. For clarification, *nommo* is a term closely related with Afrocentricity that is defined as the generative power of the spoken word. In “Manifestations of Nommo in Def Poetry”, Felicia Walker and Viece Kuykendall wrote, “Nommo is manifested in characteristics unique to African orality. They include rhythm, soundin’ out, repetition, stylin’, lyrical quality, historical perspective, indirection, call and response, protests against the White establishment, and mythication” (Walker and Kuykendall 230). These are characteristics specific to both the African American community and the African Diaspora at large, which includes Puerto Ricans and Nuyoricans, especially because of their similar sociopolitical and socioeconomic conditions and oppression that helped form the particular culture around which they have been grouped together along with a strong oral culture replete with word play. With these characteristics, poetry becomes something more than words on a page or a simple recitation. It stands on the shoulders of history and shared language via performance and meaning while fostering a sense of community by the process of sharing. A sense of community fostered by performance poetry links back to ritual in that it, depending on the type of event, is often repetitive and joins people

together to be present for a common purpose. Oral elements like call-and-response and repetition engage the audience by bringing them into the narrative and story that takes place. They ignite a crowd the same way they do when a pastor preaches to their congregation. This is a form of promoting social justice because in unity, a group of people is stronger and more powerful than one person alone. There is a call for collective action.

Written poetry has a different effect in regards to community building because it often has to do with the dynamic between the writer and the reader. The reader experiences a personal encounter with a piece based on form and structure on the page, and the way in which they read and receive it. The writer on the other hand puts forth work into the unknown, unaware of who picks it up, yet conscious of who they are writing for. The writer needs to be aware of their audience because they realize that their words cannot be empty, and must carry something special to their reader. This is a peculiar, yet interesting relationship because it shows that both the reader and writer have a shared trust without knowing it. The reader also has the opportunity to form a community around reading and writing after encountering another's work. What does this say about the promotion of social justice? It shows that a shared trust is needed in order to carry out certain projects. It also shows that there is a necessity to build a community of people that supports one another and is dedicated to meaning making and deconstructing material.

From the beginning of our lives we have language. Our language can be developed and used to express and liberate ourselves, as well as promote the liberation of others. Activism allows for that language and voice to be transformed into tools and strategies to promote liberation by calling upon history, ancestry, present-day circumstances, and visions of the future. Without vision and an understanding of the past, one cannot situate themselves within the present to create meaningful change or action. Poetry as a form of art and literature contains both through its spontaneous yet premeditated nature. According to Tara Skurtu, “it employs the limits of language, endangers the realm of the comfortable, approaches a silence or loss we feel yet can’t explain” (Skurtu). It is a coded language, carefully crafted through form and structure, which can be used, as exemplified by the Black Arts Movement and Nuyorican Movement, to take on certain projects. Therefore poetry both written and performed is an agent of activism and organizing that can create transformative shifts within the self and society because of its ability to express, heal, and draw people together.

CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY

The design of my project has taken a qualitative approach, meaning that I have used a formal, objective, systematic process where data is utilized to test the following research question: How does poetry promote social justice and liberation through form, ritual, and relationship/community building? The type of qualitative investigation that I pursued is historical, ethnographic, and narrative-based. I wanted to look at the historical trajectory of socially engaged poetry and current perspectives of it from other poets, writers, and audience or those who appreciate poetry. I attended and observed poetry events, conducted interviews, and conducted secondary research via documents, articles, and database reviews.

I incorporated interviews into this work so that there could be a presence of voices that speak to my research to grant it more validity by connecting it with real-life experiences that are not all my own. It is one thing for me to say that I felt something from a poem and another for multiple people beside myself to say that they have felt something collectively from a poem. It indicates that there is a pattern occurring that needs to be recognized. While it is great to read what other scholars have written about the subject, there is more power in the voices that

have yet to be heard and are doing this work on a consistent basis. Even if there are those who have already spoken or written about the meta-physicality and activism of poetry, more voices will only add wood to the fire and give more recognition to it. This type of knowledge production is necessary because it has become a collection of voices and narratives that speak to this particular topic. Especially in regards to people of color as a marginalized community, it is necessary that those voices be documented because of the mere fact that they are placed on the back burner of society.

In order to conduct interviews, I sought the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Mount Holyoke. Simultaneously, I got in contact with those I intended to interview in the area by sending out a feeler email to see if they were interested in participating. After getting cleared through the IRB and receiving indications of interest as well as signed consent forms, I immediately began one-on-one interviews. Before I did so, I created a set of structured questions based on preliminary research such as: What do you look for in a poem? How does written poetry differ from performance poetry? How is it the same? What makes a poem socially engaged? Interview results were then carefully reviewed, analyzed, and interpreted in order to apply to my discussion of my research question.

The interviews themselves were scheduled based on the availability of the interviewees and myself. Some were interviewed in person while others were interviewed through email correspondence and Skype video calling. Using

different interviewing techniques yielded similar responses, although those done over email correspondence tended to be shorter than in-person or Skype interviews. If given the chance, I would eliminate email responses and conduct interviews in-person and over Skype because there seemed to be much more that interviewees had to say, that was not limited to the questions I had to ask.

I interviewed eight people to whom I assigned pseudonyms: Hector, Lucious, Jenny, Rachel, Sara, Ana, Corrine, and Zelda. All identify within the age bracket of 19-33. Hector, Lucious, Sara, Ana, Corrine, and Zelda identify as people of color, while Jenny and Rachel identify as white. All have or are working towards a Bachelor's degree. Zelda is currently a graduate student. Hector, Lucious, Jenny, Rachel, and Corrine identify as poets as well as performance poets, while Sara, Ana, and Zelda do not, but have an appreciation for poetry. I thought that it would be a good idea to target poets who perform and poets who don't, as well as people who don't identify as poets but read poetry or listen to it. I made this choice because I knew it would provide a range of perspectives that can speak to different parts of my research and possibly inform new ideas.

Throughout the process, I maintained confidentiality with the interviews I conducted. Not only did I do this as a requirement, but also because sharing personal thoughts about an intimate subject should be kept private, unless an interviewee blatantly wanted otherwise, which was not the case. The nature of self-reporting became a limitation for me during this process. In my case, it was

exploring and describing a subject that cannot be seen, such as the way a poem makes someone feel or the way a poem, whether in written form or performance, can stir up a particular energy within an audience. It was challenging to describe a moment where a feeling was ephemeral but very much present. Especially coming from myself, an observation or opinion at times seemed not credible without ample backing from interviews and background research. However, what this has ultimately done is grant credibility to aspects of written and performance poetry that are not so clear but produce very strong reactions and feelings.

What I expected to be produced from this methodology is an analytical paper that could be used in the continuation of study around this topic. It can be used to shed light on the socially engaged, activist qualities that poetry possesses and how it promotes social justice through both its written and performed forms. Simultaneously as I conducted research and structured this thesis, I compiled a series of poems that speak to several issues of social justice and also to the overall process of writing. This was particularly important because I have taken a holistic approach of engaging as my whole self with the material and have allowed myself the ability to reflect after its completion. Reflection is a part of the practice of Sankofa, a Ghanaian word that means to go back and get, which I have internalized and utilized in order to use what I have learned to carry me forward in future research and art making. Going full-circle, this entire project relates back to Africana Studies because as a member of the African Diaspora, I am abiding by the concept of Sankofa to do a project that concerns orality, community,

documentation, and social justice, which are key components within the diaspora historically and in the present.

CHAPTER 3 – RITUAL, HEALING, AND COMMUNITY BUILDING IN WRITTEN POETRY

Written poetry and writing in general is a liberating process by which the person writing experiences a manifestation of thought linked to experience. It is also a way of writing oneself into history and making oneself visible to a public. It encompasses concepts of ritual, healing, and community in a way that is reminiscent of performance poetry, but different in that it is more of a personal process that focuses on the intimacy of the physical act of writing, although it is possible to write among a community of poets. It is this way for a reader as well because reading is usually an activity done alone, but not necessarily in isolation.

Ritual is identifiable in written poetry mostly through the tangible process of writing. According to Oxford Dictionaries, a ritual is “a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order” (“Ritual”). Based on this definition, it can be said that the act of writing can be ritualistic because it is performed according to a poet’s own order, whether that be a scheduled time to write, or at any time when they feel moved to do so. Whatever the case, there is a strategy of creating and meaning making that a poet engages in when preparing to write and actually writing. Anzaldúa effectively

demonstrated this through her concept of scaffolding and structuring a body of work. When it comes to poetry, the same course of thinking and structuring applies. A poet writes, and releases their words onto paper or a computer screen. They then add, remove, extend, or condense what is written based on their own judgement of how the poem should work on the page and in content. Revision is a radical procedure, by which an artist consciously creates change within a poem according to his, her, or their liking. It grants agency to the person writing and allows them to shape and evolve their own truth.

In her book Sister Outsider, Audre Lorde writes, “If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.” (Lorde 137). Crafting a piece of work requires everything about the writer or poet that is close and personal. It is necessary because self-definition is crucial to liberation work. One must utilize their voice to tell their own stories because if not, then their story will not exist. This requires a sense of vulnerability, which is shown through the documentation of feeling, experience, and other sources of inspiration. In conversation about the notion of ritual, Corrine made a distinction between two different types of poems being “one for living and one for giving life.” She claimed that “the former does not reflect ritual, because ritual requires consciousness and control. We do not live consciously and in control.” Her statement is striking because it separates ritual from writing in such a way that it is its own genre and not a signifying factor of process. This raises the question of whether or not the process of writing poetry is meaningful or not, or as

meaningful as the product. According to her statement, the product is the end-goal and it doesn't necessarily matter how one arrives at a poem, but rather what they can produce. However the process is just as, if not more, significant because it consists of the emotional, mental, spiritual, and even physical labor that goes into meaning making, discovery, and conveying one's truth as precisely as possible. If the poem itself were the main goal of writing poetry, then poets would be as Lorde put it, eaten alive, by a capitalist society that benefits from the labor, demonization, and erasure of their culture.

Nuyorican poetry, which focuses on identity and space, is an example of the self-definition that Audre Lorde writes about. If Nuyorican poets did not make their experiences known and visible through their poetry, plays, and other works, there would be little to nothing to show artistically and aesthetically for this large population of people and their existence. The narratives of Nuyoricans would be lost within the oppressive structures and systems that dwell in the United States. For this reason, it is critical to undergo a process of self-definition because it is easy to be erased by assimilation, by neglect, or by stereotypes created on the back of racism. Injecting a collective narrative into public consciousness through poetry is to subvert the stereotypes and push forward a creative shift in thought surrounding a culture or population of people.

Since the poems that we read are usually finished products, or complete enough for a poet to share, it is hard to tell what their creative process looked like by simply glancing at a piece. When reading a poem, inquiries arise such as

original intentions for the poem, where those intentions led, and whether or not the poet had planned or plans to change the piece. I can only speak for myself as a poet to say that I believe a poem is never complete. There is always space to change it depending on the context it lives in and the way in which circumstances evolve. An example of the process of revision can be seen in my poem, “Between the Cracks,” (See Appendix A) a poem about colorism and not being either here nor there in terms of space and belonging as a Nuyorican.

In the second version of the piece, I excluded the second stanza from the first version. I did this because I did not want the poem to be misunderstood, as it easily could have been because of the use of the word *was* in regards to identity. It had the potential for confusion as to whether the conceptions noted were in the past or present. I also removed the phrase *black sheep* to avoid misinterpretation of the word *black* and the phrase more generally. Although I grant myself full validity in my mindset at the time, which is important for a writer, I know that it came from a place of bitterness. The first draft brought up a lot of feelings in regards to identity and thinking I was inadequate because of my intersecting identities that are complicated by political relations and socioeconomic position. I identify as Nuyorican and therefore relate to aforementioned feelings of belonging to neither the United States nor Puerto Rico because of the implications of Puerto Rican migration, U.S. assimilation, and being a person of color in a society that marginalizes difference. I also knew at the time of revision that despite my editing, I could still make the piece as close to my truth as possible. Instead of

saying what I was not “enough” of, I could just say what I am while still shedding light on the stereotypes and problematic systems that take away a feeling of belonging from people of intersectional identities. Again, the process of revision in this case with “Between the Cracks” was one where I was able to think about audience reception, representation, and documentation of my experience. The amount of time I dedicated to the revisions contributed to the significance of ritual. I would repeatedly go over a few lines, think of them to myself, speak them out loud, and let my creative imagination take its course in deciding what left, what stayed, and why I made those particular choices. Repeating the words to myself, and constantly rewriting and copying the poem served almost as a litany or prayer. It was mainly to edit and constantly consider the precision of my words, lines, and stanzas, but it was simultaneously an act of acknowledging and validating my experience. There were sometimes other rituals involved in my process of writing, such as listening to conscious Hip-Hop and using a spiral, leather covered notebook that I use to write in on a daily basis. They are two things, familiar to me, that ground me in my expression.

Besides the act of inscribing oneself into existence through poetry is the fact that writing runs far deeper than the experience being written about. To revise a poem is to tend to it. It is giving it power by way of reworking. Anzaldúa states that a piece or body of work “manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be ‘fed,’ *la tengo que bañar y vestir*” (Anzaldúa 89). Therefore to write a poem or any other work is to breathe life into it and arm it with tactics, tools, and meaning

to carry into the consciousness of its readers. This too, is radical. This too is a process of critical thinking whereby the poet has to negotiate what their message is and how they are going to get it across. It is a process of picking and choosing what tools and tactics will efficiently impact the effectiveness of the piece. Bolton explains that “Reworking can bring insight and consolidation. The redrafting of poetry is a powerful and deeply thoughtful process of attempting to capture the experience, emotion, or memory as accurately as possible, in apt poetic words and images” (Bolton 120). This is all encompassed by ritual because it makes a poem sacred. It is connected to a different level of thinking and feeling at the inner being of the poet.

Reading poetry is both an individual and communal process. In How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry, Edward Hirsch metaphorically compares poetry to a “message in a bottle” where the reader “finds and overhears it, who unseals the bottle and lets the language emerge (Hirsch 30). The act of opening the bottle, reading, and letting language emerge is also a process of ritual because it is a conscious decision to engage with another’s words and truth. A message in a bottle is a personal statement that the writer directs to anyone and everyone because they truly believe that their readers will be impacted. What readers essentially do is, in the words of John Updike, “submit to whatever spell, weak or strong, is being cast” (Pritchard 231). Completely unrelated to sorcery or religion, readers and writers both submit to the spells of poetry. They continuously embark on a journey with one another to fall into the trance,

pleasure, healing, and community that poetry provides. They open themselves up to the unknown, where learning and self-discovery can take place. They possess the opportunity to engage with the material in a meaningful way that can be potentially transformative.

As a product of ritual, healing is another imperative component to written poetry. Healing can come in two ways, similar to ritual: process and content. When reading a poem, or any other form of writing, the reader is affected and impacted in some way. In order for someone to read and digest a piece of work, they must react to it. Through the processes of writing, healing is achieved through the physical movement involved and intimacy with paper and pen or pencil. It is also achieved through meaning making. It is a means of expression that allows the writer to connect with the self and the world around them. Through that journey, one must learn and unlearn many things in regards to themselves, the world, and writing itself.

When writing, one engages with bodily memory. The act itself becomes a remembrance of experience or thought or premeditated lyrics, lines, and prose. There is the obvious pathway of venting that allows the writer to release stress and anxiety. Poetry offers this opportunity in many forms and styles. One can use metaphors, similies, imagery, and other elements of craft to release his, her, or their words and truth. They can dabble into different genres as well, giving themselves constraints by which to unleash their creativity. Through genre as well as form, freedom of expression can be practiced. A host of poetic forms make it

easier for a writer to choose which way works for them aesthetically. Free writing makes way for complete freedom and the ability to break the rules of more structured forms, which can be quite liberating for writers, no matter the topic or subject. With the particular form a writer uses as well as what they choose to include and not include as far as content goes, they can create a system that requires more thought and creativity to navigate through. A poem can say a lot through what it does not say and that can be a source of healing for the writer and reader as well because they do not necessarily have to spill their entire life stories onto a page. They can choose to omit, or embellish, or state plainly, depending on what works for them individually. In “Every Poem Breaks a Silence that Had to be Overcome: The Therapeutic Power of Poetry Writing,” Gillie Bolton writes that “Poetry on the page can relate back to its writer (as well to other readers) more intensely than prose. One reacts not just to what is written but to what seems to hover around it unwritten on those suggestive white spaces which accompany the poem on the page” (Bolton 120). Corrine has had a similar experience with her written poetry in that it intensely related to them. She said, “Other days I write because I have something to say and I got to work up the audacity to say it to my own face, before I say it to anyone else’s.” With any type of writing, there is always a question of what is unsaid. However, with poetry there is a strategy or agenda with what is said and how. This even more so pertains to activist poetry, which aims to challenge the reader through the use of unconventional strategies. Therefore, healing comes in various ways that can accommodate the writer. Then

by experiencing the writing, the reader can also extract that healing by getting a sense of what the process could have been or by being impacted profoundly by the white space, styles, and punctuation. Lucios gave a glimpse of what extracting healing from reading the work of someone else looks like in his discussion of poetry and its correlation with healing. He said, “I remember... reading like Nikki Giovanni’s like [Black Feeling Black Talk Black Judgment] for the first time and I’m like, yo, this is Nikki Giovanni, like this is her first book... and she’s writing, you know, Black Arts Revolution...I didn’t know black people in general could say these kind of things.” Although Lucious’ statement speaks less to form, it still exemplifies the extraction of healing from another’s work. He was not aware that black people, like himself, wrote bodies of poetry, or that they wrote about blackness in general. He did not know that he would find poetry that would reflect him in any way. The healing that transpires from that experience is a sense of freedom to do similar work or inspiration to speak about things that people, specifically people of color, are discouraged from addressing.

Nuyorican poetry does a similar thing in terms of addressing issues not normally attended to in dominant culture. The work is about experiences specific to Nuyorican culture and socioeconomic positioning. Therefore the healing that comes out of it is from documenting a counter-narrative as well as using gritty realism or any other genre of writing to bluntly say what that position looks and feels like. Nuyoricans have coined the term “dusmic poetry” to define “the process of transforming aggression being directed at you by another person (or,

more generally, society) into your strength” (Algarín 129). Dusmic poetry is a literal process of healing because through it, one can turn pain into strength. One can transform a negative situation into one that is positive or able to be used towards developing growth and peace of mind. That very action is revolutionary, rooted in movement and social justice. It is a process of liberation for the self as well as the collective unit, which is necessary before trying to liberate others.

An example of a dusmic poem is “do not let” by Pedro Pietri. It reads:

do not let
 artificial lamps
 make strange shadows
 out of you
 do not dream
 if you want your dreams
 to come true
 you knew how to sing
 before you was
 issued a birth certificate
 turn off the stereo
 this country gave you
 it is out of order
 your breath
 is your promiseland
 if you want
 to feel very rich
 look at your hands
 that is where
 the definition of magic
 is located at (Algarín)

This piece works as a dusmic poem on many levels. First, in terms of structure and form, there is no punctuation or capitalization. The title itself is not capitalized. For this piece, Pietri felt the need to tell his truth plainly, without misunderstanding or direction. It allows his readers to take the words at face value

and to hold them true to themselves and their experience. The line breaks, quite short, place emphasis on specific words and phrases and guide syntax to the point where punctuation is not needed because Pietri had a way in mind for his reader to read and perceive the message. The poem begins with the same words within the title, which clarify the importance of the truth he is telling- for people to find and inhabit their potential.

Although “do not let” is a poem addressed to the reader, it is clear that Pietri had to first go through what he had written. According to Bolton, “The writing of poetry profoundly alters the writer because the process faces one with oneself. Poetry is an exploration of the deepest and most intimate experiences, thoughts, feelings, ideas: distilled, paired to succinctness, and made music to the ear by lyricism” (Bolton 118). At some point in his life, it is very possible that Pietri had to tell himself “look at your hands/that is where/the definition of magic/is located at.” He must have felt the pressures of society press on him as a person of color. However by the mere existence of the poem, we know that he had healed, perhaps moved on, and decided to share gems of advice and wisdom. Given the existence of an imperial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, institutionalized racism, classism, and other forces of oppression against Nuyoricans and people of color at large, there is a need to remind oneself and others as people of color that they are worthy of achieving their dreams and realizing inner potential and talents. There is a need to empower, encourage, and uplift those around us. That is a task concerning social justice and liberation

because it fosters collaboration, love, and collective healing. With that said, Pietri went far beyond himself when writing this piece. He practiced healing for himself and for his readers. He wrote, “your breath/is your promiseland,” telling his readers that they through their own words, writing, voice, and truth, can heal their own personal and societal wounds. Healing becomes a power that the poet takes on and instills into their reader.

According to Michael Ryan in “Poetry and the Audience,”:

In primitive tribes, extant and extinct, the poet is usually the central figure, the shaman-healer. Because-he* is close to the gods, through his "divine madness," he keeps the tribe together by celebrating in his chants and sacred rituals its shared beliefs, ancestry, and cosmology. In this regard, his role is even more important than the chief's, though, properly speaking, neither of them is separable from the organism of the tribe. It would be like saying the heart is more important than the kidneys: without either the body dies. Similarly, the tribe depends on the poet for its life. (Ryan 7)

Based on this passage, poetry has historically been a means of healing. Though gods and the divine may not be invoked in every poem we read today, writing and speaking or performing poetry still invokes the power of the creative imagination. That on its own can unleash powerful possibilities, as mentioned previously in my discussion of Herbert Marcuse. It is its own divinity. Ryan referred to the poet as the one who holds a tribe together. This means that poetry can create and foster community as one of its divine powers. The written word draws in an audience of readers. With this act comes a pre-established trust, where the person submits his, her, or themselves to a piece or body of work. Trust comes in a peculiar form here, where the reader chooses a poem depending on the position they are in mentally, physically, or spiritually. They then believe that they will receive

something from their reading. There is an expectation. That is after all the point of reading- to receive entertainment, information, help, an escape, or whatever else is sought on the part of the reader. If it were the case that a reader did not expect anything, then there would be no point to reading. Therefore, the requirement moves from expectation to trust or vice-versa. In order to receive something, one needs to have a certain level of confidence in the source. Rachel claimed that poetry is “translating your thoughts into something tangible and up for immediate consumption and interpretation.” This connects to the previous statement because in order to release a piece of work, or in order to consume and interpret, there needs to be vulnerability on the part of the poet and the reader.

Getting further into the dynamics of the relationship between poets and audience, Ryan quotes W.B. Yeats, saying:

Yeats nonetheless wrote: "Does not the greatest poetry always require a people to listen to it?" That is, not only does the poet require an audience, but the poetry requires an audience, so that it does not become "accidental and temporary," abstract, peripheral, precious, cut off from central human concerns- so that the poet does not "write but of his own mind." (Ryan 9)

With Yeats' perspective, it can be said that the relationship between audience and writer is necessary in order to keep the work alive. It makes the work intentional and long lasting, which is important for the writer to get their message across.

Yeats also points towards a relationship between the poem itself and the audience.

In order for a poem to be effective it must relate on some level with its audience.

It must be portable. Readers need to be able to respond to a piece of writing

because without the reaction and response, the work is nothing but thoughts of the

writer ricocheting off their notebook. Writing poetry makes the poet vulnerable, as previously mentioned, because of shared feelings, emotions, thoughts, and fears. Although the style and craft of a poem may differ from prose does not mean the piece is any less susceptible to vulnerability. In fact, using metaphor, imagery, similes, hyperboles, and other craft choices can actually heighten a sense of vulnerability because they reflect the radical ways in which the mind works. Through the use of metaphor, for example, a small gesture can be made to seem like a huge episode. With that said, a poet needs to be ready to share the deepest parts of them because it will surface in the work. Lucious spoke in a similar vein, “I think poetry is a medium of writing that allows one subject to find their voice in like the truest form that’s unique to them.” Therefore the freedom of form and structure combined with elements of craft are what pave a way for healing to occur within a poet. That then transfers to the reader who can experience the uniqueness of that structure and utilize it to inform future reading or their own writing. In her article, Bolton states that, “The process of writing required of the poet takes the writer into hitherto unexpressed and unexplored areas of experience” (Bolton 119). These areas are deep and often concealed, which is why vulnerability through writing and a trust in audience is needed to release them. This is a foundation for a sense of community between both writers and readers.

With Nuyorican poetry, there is a responsibility to the community because of the acts of injustice and discrimination that have been committed against the

community figuratively and literally. Lack of resources, lack of care, neglect by the local city government, and the demonization of the community by way of racist discourse, are reasons Nuyorican poetry takes on the responsibility of confrontation. It also engages in advising, uplifting, and comforting the residents of the community. The trust is there, but the passion for activism, change, and shifting the narrative is also required of it. In Nuyorican Poetry, Miguel Algarín writes that:

The poet sees his function as a troubadour. He tells the tale of the streets to the streets. The people listen. They cry, they laugh, they dance as the troubadour opens up and tunes his voice and moves his pitch and rhythm to the high tension of 'bomba' truth... The poet pierces the crowd with cataracts of clear, clean, precise, concrete words about the liquid, shifting latino reality around him. (Algarín and Piñero 10-11)

With poetry as a form of activism, it is necessary for the poet to communicate with their community. It is required to raise awareness, incite action, inspire, and promote social justice. In his quote, Algarín mentions voice and pitch and rhythm, which is indicative of spoken word and performance poetry. However, this is just as applicable to the written word, which is supposed to be a story, a requiem, or essentially whatever it needs to be in order to reach a certain community. This concept was also applicable to the poetry of the Black Arts Movement. Algarín's statement can be revised to say Black instead of Latino, because it would encompass more than the Nuyorican Movement alone. When he mentions telling "the tale of the streets to the streets," that also includes other members of the African diaspora and people of color. The "street" refers to a particular setting as well as socioeconomic and sociopolitical position. Algarín and Piñero write that

“The Nuyorican poets have worked to establish the commonplace because they have wanted to locate their position on earth, the ground, the neighborhood, the environment” (Algarín and Piñero 181). A sense of community comes from a sense of common ground. Because oppressive forces such as racism and classism hover over anyone who does not fit the traditional standard of white, male, and Christian, other marginalized people of color are included in this method of poetry and community building.

Nuyorican poetry, which can in some cases be considered or classified as dumatic, does just this. Although speaking to the Nuyorican experience, Nuyorican poetry also intersects with other genres of poetry such as that that came out of the Black Arts movement because of the similar social locations. In his poem “The Book of Genesis According to St. Miguelito,” Miguel Piñero uses the first book of the bible as inspiration for describing the ghettos of New York City. He writes about how God created the ghetto and all of the things that the ghetto consists of like drugs, disease, lack of sanitation, and so on. Then he writes:

God was riding around Harlem in a gypsy cab
 when he created the people
 and he created these beings in ethnic proportion
 but he saw the people lonely & hungry
 and from his eminent rectum
 he created a companion for these people
 and he called this companion
 capitalism
 who begat racism
 who begat exploitation
 who begat male chauvanism
 who begat machismo
 who begat imperialism
 who begat colonialism

who begat wall street
 who begat foreign wars
 and God knew
 and God saw
 and God felt this was extra good
 and God said
 VAYAAAAAAA
 (Algarín and Piñero 350)

In this portion of the poem, Piñero calls out the actual neighborhood of Harlem with the symbol of the gypsy cab. He then goes into more problems that he found representative of the ghetto, followed by a list of systemic issues of oppression. The poem ends afterwards with God saying “VAYAAAAAAA,” which means “go”, or in this case “go forth and dwell in the misery I’ve created.” This piece by itself can speak to almost anyone. However, it means more to the communities it has been forged with, being poor people of color in urban ghettos, specifically in New York City. It is a radical piece in that it uses conventions of the biblical book of Genesis to talk about aspects of society that can be considered much less than holy. It is radical also because it explicitly states the flaws in a corrupt society. It is an attention grabber. At first glance it may very well seem like a faith-based poem, but when it is encountered, a completely different message comes out of it. Piñero does this in order to subvert any preconceptions that come with a first encounter and also to make the reader feel uncomfortable, and thus encounter the poem differently to understand its main point. This is an example of Yeats’ quote in Ryan’s article because it requires active attention and listening. By forcing a reader to engage with the piece on multiple levels, it becomes a form of generating reactions and relationships. Furthermore, Piñero’s work reflects

activism by bringing the reality of the street to public consciousness. He aggressively calls out the systems of oppression that hover over his community and society.

The implications of gender in the Nuyorican Movement are worth mentioning because of the attention that male Nuyorican poets have gotten over female poets. This applies to both written and performed poetry. Since Nuyorican poetry is a tale of the streets, it is assumed to take a masculine stance because of the aggression associated with the work. This of course is tied to traditional gender roles in marginalized communities, with the idea that men come together outside of the household whether it be to hustle or to organize while women stay at home. Although the prominent male poets of the Nuyorican Movement, such as Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, and Felipe Luciano, were given much credit, there are many women whose work helped shape and speak to the Nuyorican experience. Some include Magdalena Gómez, Diana Gitesha Hernandez, Maria Aponte, Nancy Mercado, Maria Fernandez aka Mariposa, Caridad de La Luz aka La Bruja, and Lydia Cortez among many others. Not only did the poetry of these women contribute to the movement, but articulate the female Nuyorican experience, which differs from that of male poets.

Nuyorican poet Amina Muñoz Ali writes about the implications of womanhood in her poem “The Day the Mermaids Sing.” She writes:

It's rough to walk tough all the time,
 drinking malta in the street
 as fire hydrants piss
 their false salvation
 into blasé gutters.

I throw my leftover Fritos into the
 rubble,
 really wanting to dispose of
 useless exclamations made by men
 too drunk to see how colorless they are.
 Maybe tomorrow
 I'll say a rosary for them-
 when I dance in my bright coral dress
 and shake my hair loose,
 when music comes from wood shells
 and my heart and what's inside my pants
 are equally and rightfully loved. (Muñoz Ali)

In her poem, she speaks to the issue of having to protect and navigate her identity as a woman walking through the streets that are male-dominated. She frames that conversation around “exclamations” (Muñoz Ali) or catcalls that create a dynamic of tension between her and the men around her. However she confronts that issue, as a product of patriarchy and the abuse of the male privilege, by writing about her own practice of self-care, self-love, and religion, as suggested by the mention of rosaries. The power of this poem resides in her process associated with those things. It lands on the fact that her “heart and what’s inside my pants are equally and rightfully loved” (Muñoz Ali). That is a point of self-liberation and promotion of social justice because she acknowledges her value and through the existence of this poem indirectly encourages other women to do the same.

Mariposa writes in a similar vein in her poem “Poem for My Grifa-Rican Sistah Or Broken Ends Broken Promises” (See Appendix A). This particular poem focuses on the struggle of having to cosmetically tame one’s hair in order to be deemed as beautiful or acceptable. Because American society holds white, straight-haired women as a standard of beauty, the ideals have become a dominant

consciousness that has made its way into communities of color, shaming black features in women. Mariposa allows her reader to feel the pain and sadness she experienced around processes of hair relaxation by writing, “‘It hurts to be beautiful, ‘ta te quieta’/My mother tells me./’ ¡Pero mami me pica!’” (Fernandez). She brings up the commonly known phrase that beauty is pain, which is a very false conception based on patriarchal and racist ideology. Her use of Spanglish here works to tell the narrative of female Nuyoricans having to navigate the arena of language as well as beauty standards. It juxtaposes a universal struggle with one that is more specific. Mariposa ends the piece with, “Black hair/African textured hair/ Care free crazy curly hair/ is beautiful./ ¡Que viva el pelo libre!/ ¡Que viva!” (Fernandez). She makes the affirmation that textured hair is beautiful despite the discrimination and hate she has experienced because of it. She also makes an exclamation praising textured hair and the natural ways in which it exists. The ending to her poem becomes an anthem for Afro-Latinas, which serves as a form of activism because it can promote mobilization amongst that particular community and encourage self-love.

The process of healing and building community between the poet and reader through ritual is an inherent form of social justice because it is dialogical and allows for meaningful engagement with issues and emotions evoked in the poem. It requires on the part of the reader, a careful reading and an analysis of craft, motives, experiments, and purposes such as those earlier discussed in the works of Pietri, Piñero, Muñoz Ali, and Maria Fernandez aka Mariposa. That skill

translates into community organizing, which further proves the activist propensity of written poetry. Written poetry has the potential to mobilize a community around a particular issue if it is circulated and discussed among its members. Activism in this sense goes beyond just the relationship between the writer and reader, and promotes discussion and organizing through what the poem evokes.

CHAPTER 4 – RITUAL, HEALING, AND COMMUNITY BUILDING IN PERFORMANCE POETRY

The realm of performance poetry is something that is entirely different from the written experience. However they are connected through ritual, healing, and community building. To discuss performance poetry, and more specifically spoken word coming out of the Black Arts and Nuyorican movements, requires the analysis of performance techniques because it makes up a huge part of the aesthetic pertaining to those movements. Analysis, more often than not, comes from a theatre performance perspective, which is similar because both have the goal of communicating a message to an audience via physical movement and voice. Both are embodied forms of knowledge and storytelling. When it comes to performance poetry and spoken word, there is an element of oral tradition that manifests itself. For the work of Black and Nuyorican poets, the oral tradition and orality of the work is specifically descended from African and Indigenous practices via culture and ancestry. Although there are oral traditions that stem from other cultures around the world, the focus here is on African oral tradition.

Like written poetry, the powerful concept or act of ritual is present within poetry performance. In his book, Elam writes about ritual in relationship to social

protest theater embodied by Amiri Baraka's Black Revolutionary Theater (BRT) and Luis Valdez's El Teatro Campesino. He draws upon the work of Jean and Jon Cameroff, writing that "ritual acts not only as a symbolic mediation but also as a 'signifying practice' that defines and authorizes social action. The signifying functions of ritual are both consecrative and productive, both radical and conservative... imagining new social orders" (Elam 12). Imagining new social orders is an inherently activist notion that speaks to the fact that the structures and orders already in place are in some way, shape, or form unacceptable. Although Elam writes about social protest theater, performance poetry can be analyzed through the same lens. Ritual in this case becomes a means by which to strategize and develop the imagining that is "consecrative and productive, both radical and conservative," which links back to Marcuse's theory of the power within the creative imaginary because it is the space where the process of ritual begins and is developed. A poet can engage with the task of imagining social orders not only through writing, but through elements of ritual that are manifested through performance and its defining factors such as physicality, space, and orality.

Physicality is an important piece of ritual because it relates to how the spoken material is embodied. The artist's physical body becomes a site of information that comes from experience and the innermost workings of themselves. With that, there comes an awareness of the body in space and what that looks like in terms of positioning with the audience, positioning in a larger social context, and what it means within that context. Elam states in the context of

El Teatro that “In order to perform spontaneous, socially relevant improvisations, the farmworker/performers had to be aware of and sensitive to the pressing political and economic concerns of their audiences” (Elam 102). This is arguably the same scenario for poets who perform their poetry, because unless the poem is about a flower or inanimate object with no meaning or metaphor, then the work has something to say to society. There is a purpose and objective to both poetry and theater performances. Acting, whether fake or real material, is a chance to give something to an audience as well as receive a response. Yes, it can be a liberating experience for the performer/poet as an individual, which I’ll later address, but ultimately there is an expectation that the performance or poem gets received on a certain level. According to Rachel, “Each poetry piece has its own goal,” and for that goal to be achieved in performance, attention to physicality is imperative.

In discussing the importance of the social protest theater of El Teatro and the BRT, Elam refers to the argument of Gilbert Moses being, “Theater offered them [the performers] the possibility to be artists and to be black people. Being an activist was exercising the highest form of art” (Elam 107). To my own understanding, this can be applied to physicality as well as essence because performance allows for the actor or poet to be themselves if the piece so calls for it. Especially in the case of people of color, there is a history of oppression and physical as well as mental trauma that precedes them and can therefore show its face within a performance of poetry. What Moses is essentially saying in his

statement is that the opportunity to be an artist and to be a black person is to not have to code switch, or hide one's narrative, or deny one's history. This is clearly seen in the work and performances of Nuyorican poets and poets of the Black Arts Movement. The performance becomes an opportunity not only to embody, but reenact and reprocess what has been experienced. In regards to the ritual of embodiment through rehearsal and memorization, Jenny speaks to their process before performing:

I run through any possible poem I might perform before I reach the venue. When I reach the venue, I run through the poems each one time. I then sit down and quietly start to focus in on the emotion. The poem before me is the only poem I completely ignore and run the poem in my head one last time. Then. I take the moments as I walk onstage to center in, take a breath, and begin the poem.

The process of rehearsal in her case is a facet of physicality and ritual because she has a premeditated strategy that ingrains the poem into bodily memory. Memory is important to point out here because of the historic and even current erasure of narratives and voices of people of color. Inscribing a piece into bodily memory grants agency and voice to the poet/performer by providing a space to do so and to (re)member their stories and experiences. Although Jenny is not a person of color, their account provides an example of the amount of time and energy that a poet puts into a performance.

With that said, space is also a significant part of performance. There are two different type of space, being literal space that is physically inhabited by the poet/performer for the duration of their piece, and there is the figurative or imagined space that the poet creates. The literal space is that which visually affects the audience and the figurative is that which affects the performer, yet still

has the possibility of affecting the audience. With literal space comes the opportunity of engagement with the poet-performer. This happens in multiple forms such as call-and-response, demonstration, and physical gestures, which generate often physical and even non-physical bonds or relations between audience and poet. It also is what sets certain parameters in the imagination of the audience. If they are too far from the poet, or if a large and tall stage separated them even more so with lighting, then the audience will tend to naturally feel more distanced and less likely to engage beyond the realm of entertainment. The space in which the performer and audience come together is intimate because of this engagement. Figurative or metaphorical space is what is created by the poet in order to strengthen the purpose of the poem. Just as solo performance actors develop scenes, characters, or senses of setting in their work, so can poet-performers. Depending on the nature of the poem, a performance can allow the audience to enter into its world. This is also dependent on the audience and whom the poem is for. Thinking about space during poetry performances is important because its physical and metaphysical components can inform meaning making and effect on the part of the audience.

Voice is also an extremely important factor of performance poetry and spoken word, as it is through voice and language that words can be articulated in the first place. According to Shawnkeisha Stoudamire:

Stephen Henderson, a theorist from Howard University and spokesman for the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts Movement said, “there is this tradition of beautiful talk with us- this tradition of saying things beautifully even if they are ugly things. We say them in a way which takes language down to the deepest common level of our experience while hinting still at things to come.” (Stoudamire 59)

Poetry by itself is considered a delicate form of art and literature, often assumed to make things pleasant and palatable. Poetry coming out of the Black Arts and Nuyorican Movements was not made to be so. Although much of their poetry may be pleasing or interesting to read, they deal with issues of identity, discrimination, and other issues associated with their experiences as part of marginalized communities. Yes, the way in which they are written or performed may sound appealing but ultimately there is a greater project within that appeal. When it comes to performance poetry and spoken word, the performance itself is meant to reflect those greater projects. It is interesting that Henderson mentioned taking “language down to the deepest common level of our experience.” There is a clear connection between that statement and the work of Black and Nuyorican poets whose work is centered on experience and commonality. It reflects as previously mentioned, the dusmic quality of this group of poetry, which is to turn pain into strength. Lucious similarly said that performance is “a lived experience or something that I firmly believe in... that’s what makes it authentic. That’s what makes it real. That’s what makes the performance really flow.” Therefore in order for a performance to be authentic, it needs to come from or harken back to real life experience, which means that the experience needs to be voiced clearly including the emotions and thoughts that pushed the content to be a part of the poem initially.

Digging deeper into where the beauty of language and voice inflection come from, it is necessary to consider oral tradition in the particular context of

Black and Nuyorican work. With that comes the ideology of Nommo, which is powerful and generative because it requires participation and listening on the part of the audience. The utilization of the characteristics listed above has the potential to convey a strong message to an audience because of how it is heard and felt. They add substance to performance because they tap into other parts of the creative self like rhythm, memory, and movement. Also, with the power that spoken word holds, a poet-performer has the agency to call things into existence, to speak truth, and to be heard. There is a power of command that resides within spoken word/performance poetry. Walker and Kuykendall state that “To command things with words is to practise ‘magic.’ And to practise word magic is to write poetry.” It can be said that this magic is the component of poetry that no one really sees. To practise magic is to conjure and use the influence of the supernatural and mysterious. In poetry, and performance poetry, there are elements that can be considered mysterious or supernatural, like the natural way in which a poet-performer gets his, her, or their audience to respond to the work. “And then after the words come the snaps. The applause. The power,” Corrine said which reflect the supernatural side of a poetry performance. Again, there is much power in the spoken word and that power comes from a shared or acknowledged history. That power is rooted in the resilience and persistence through adversity that the African Diaspora has gone through over the centuries. That is what Corrine experiences during her own performances. Specifically in discussion of African Americans, Janice D. Hamlet states that:

African American cultural expressions have been a way of resisting racial oppression by articulating experiences of resistance and struggle and articulation oppositional identities in highly creative and dynamic ways, beginning with the oral tradition from which all other cultural forms originated. (Hamlet 27)

This is what makes performance poetry and spoken word forms of activism. They are activist by nature because they are utilized to resist and oppose oppression, as the works of Black and Nuyorican artists have shown. They are dynamic because they draw simultaneously upon history, experience, issues of social justice, and effective strategies of captivating an audience.

Because spoken word and performance poetry contain qualities that resist oppression, this means that the performative aspect of poetry can be healing, as written poetry is. It provides a way for the poet-performer to freely express themselves, thus releasing their concerns in whatever way they see appropriate. As written poetry is an art form, so is performance poetry because it deals with the embodiment of the poem. A sensational release occurs when the work is embodied both physically and vocally because one is speaking and acting at the same time, communicating and demonstrating on a number of levels. I term it as a sensational release not only for the way in which the poem is communicated but for the effect that performance has on the poet themselves. There is a power that enters the body as one takes the stage, with the task of expressing, releasing, and engaging. That power, that chill that rushes up the spine- that is the essence of the cause of healing through performance poetry. Lucious described what he felt was the essence of healing to be found at a poetry event where the work is performed:

Just hearing someone's truth, someone being so honest because, how often do we have people who are just as honest and that clear in the moment or maybe that

two, three minutes or five minutes that they are on the stage? And so that's a lot about appreciation and recognition... And it's very important for a community to have a space in which good energy is passed along, that maybe traumatic events can be broken down and heal and like transformation can happen.

Honesty and truth emerge as critical factors of performance for Lucious because it allows the audience to be honest as well, therefore causing healing because of the release of that energy they mentioned and the way in which it is received and circulated. In Aloud, Miguel Algarín writes “It is part of the political and aesthetic responsibility of the oral poet to tell people how to relieve themselves of the anxiety of the day” (Algarín and Piñero 10-11). In this case the release is for both the poet and audience. It is an experience by which the poet relieves themselves of their anxiety by showing others how to do so. This can be through content as well as the performance itself. This of course “depends on what type of audience...the atmosphere... the vibes, who’s performing, what [they are] performing” as said by Hector.

When it comes to describing and analyzing theatre performance, the concept of death often arises because of the association between theatre and the act of memorialization. Since theatre and poetry performance are here put in conversation, this concept must also be negotiated. In Mourning Sex, Peggy Phelan writes:

Our cultural moment behooves us to think more seriously about what theatre and performance have to teach us about the possibilities and the perils of summoning the incorporeal. To what end are we seeking an escape from bodies? What are we mourning when we flee the catastrophe and exhilaration of embodiment? (Phelan 2)

William Ball writes similarly in A Sense of Direction, saying that the act of taking on the role of someone else to act as they did is a form of memorializing death.

Both provide us with an interesting way to look at and digest performance.

Mourning may be an act more specific to certain theatrical performances and may not be as relevant to poetry performances unless the content of a piece calls for it.

Summoning the incorporeal on the other hand is very much tied to poetry performance- the incorporeal being the emotions, feelings of release, connectivity between poet and audience, and the power that incites or calls the audience to thought and action. Writing or performing poetry however, is not a symbol of death. According to poet and educator Sonia Sanchez, “Poetry is a language that says, ‘stay alive, do not die on me, do not move away from life.’ Because poetry is life, and it keeps people alive” (Dickerson). It is for this reason that those who write and perform poetry identify as poets. The title is a marker of their passion, of what keeps them going, and what challenges them to be inspired, act, and produce. In terms of performance poetry specifically, life is a dominating factor because in order to perform well there needs to be variations in speech and language, physical movement, and the circulation of a message. This all must be breathed into the work.

Life is what conjures a sense of community between the poet-performer and the audience. Life in this case is essence. Rachel said, “There’s a feeling of love and acceptance that I feel at poetry events,” which is reminiscent of what humans need as social beings. We all need to experience the feeling of love,

whatever that means to anyone, and feelings of acceptance. She also stated that, “Poetry bridges the gap between people from all walks of life, who possibly never would’ve had a chance to interact.” Therefore, although death may be used as a lens by which to analyze performance and its critique within theatre studies, it is imperative to use life as a lens by which to view performance poetry. It sheds light on the element of healing and collectivity in healing.

There are other underlying elements that cause a relationship between a poet-performer and his, her, or their audience. There is call-and-response, as previously mentioned by which audience members actively participate within the performance of the poet. From this a feeling of belonging or inclusiveness can come to an audience member. There is also the act of storytelling on the part of the poet-performer, stemming from oral tradition, which enables the audience to engage deeply with content. A corridor opens, inviting the audience to enter into the reality of the poet-performer and to choose whether or not to give in completely to their message and meaning. Those meanings can be familiar, beneficial, or striking to an audience, depending on how they relate. It is very possible for an audience not to relate at all to a particular poem, or even appreciate a performance. All of this is dependent on the setting and what the audience, poet, atmosphere, and event at large offer each other as mentioned by Hector.

In Amiri Baraka’s performance and reading of his poem “Why Is We Americans” on HBO’s series Def Poetry Jam, there are a few things that he does

that calls for reaction from the audience. At certain moments during his performance, they applaud without a direct or obvious cause, meaning that there is a transaction between poet-performer and audience. Both communicate with each other through words, gestures, sounds, etc. An example is when he breaks from his words to sing a jazzy tune, which he uses as transition throughout his poem. As he transitioned from “All these are suits, specific litigation, as we represent we be like we, for reparations for damages paid to the Afro-American nation” to “Bu-de-daaaa. Bu-de-daaaa. Be-de-daaaa,” (urbanrenewalprogram) a strong applause came from the audience. This could have been from how the musicality appealed to the audience, or how they appreciated transition to allow them to digest the poem, or how what he said resonated with them. The reaction of the audience could have come from a variety of sources and emotions. However, what is important to note, is that they felt somewhere within them the need to applaud unanimously as a singular voice, as a community. That break in Baraka’s poem unleashes something in many audience members, causing them to react and applaud. Later on in the piece, he uses comedy to spark laughter among the audience. That can be considered a more conscious call for response because it was premeditated. He did not perform improvisation, but performed a rehearsed poem that embodied a line that would be received as funny among audience members.

Similar reactions occur in a poetry performance by Sandra Maria Esteves, which took place at El Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College in

New York City. During her performance of her poem “Take Some Dreams,” an array of responses come from the audience, whether individually or collectively. As she listed her ideas of dreams throughout her poem, she mentioned “Lolita independent struggle dreams,” (Areizaga) to which an audience member snapped as a few others clapped from a distance. Therefore, the shared memory of Lolita Lebrón fighting for the independence of Puerto Rico resonated with members of the audience. Throughout the rest of the performance, certain people make sounds like “Mmm,” indicating their understanding or feelings associated with or agreement with what was spoken. These type of reactions are important in indicating a dialogical aspect of poetry performance. Of course, it is not completely dialogical because audience members do not normally relay poems back to the poet on stage, although depending on the poem, a poet may have the audience say or repeat something specific that would help the movement of the performance.

Performance poetry such as that of Sandra Maria Esteves and Amiri Baraka set the tone for performance as activism. Both physically and vocally embody the content of their poems, whose content is based on issues of social justice and misconceptions of the supposed American dream. The ways in which they physically reflect their poems speak to how history and ancestry are drawn upon, as well as techniques associated with the African oral tradition. Both engage in ritual, healing, and community by not only having written their poems but sharing them and allowing their audiences to reflect and be moved. Both have

the power within their words to promote a call to action or mobilization around their chosen topics because through their performances they stir the energy present in the spaces they occupy. Performance is activism because it keeps the energy moving in order for it to be used for action.

CHAPTER 5 - FINDINGS

My interviewees certainly had much to say in terms of ritual, healing, and community building which has informed a lot of my analysis of poetry as a form of activism. However, there is much more that they have said that strikes me as profound. Because I have wanted this work to include other voices besides my own, this space is for them. This space is for their truth surrounding poetry.

Corrine stated during her interview that “God spoke words and put the universe in existence, and paved a specific way for us to get out of it and back to Her”. Hinting at the introduction of this thesis, her quote reflects the power behind the written and spoken word. In other words, if God created the heavens and the earth with a/the word, then as people created in His or Her image, according to the bible, we also possess the power to call things into existence. By her statement, we also have the ability to pave a way for an audience to navigate and engage with a poem or performance in a way that will allow them to transcend it with a new understanding or realization.

After talking about reading the work of Pedro Pietri, Hector said that Pietri was “like the founder of my own poetry.” This is particularly interesting because

it points towards the aspect of community in a different way where the interaction between poets is one of sharing and inspiration. Hector meant that Pedro Pietri's work has informed his own in terms of content and sometimes even form. He has tried to embody the spirit of Pietri's poetry in his own work and share that with others, along with the immense joy and fulfillment that it brings him. To say that another poet is like the founder of one's own work is to say that there is a shared understanding between both poets; that the creative work is put out into the world to be encountered and used, and that influence is a huge part of what it is to create art, specifically poetry in this case. This is also a part of healing and community building. The fact that Pietri's work is also written by others leaves a legacy of documentation to draw upon and relate to, although in a different setting.

The two notions that came up between Interviewees 3 and 4 go hand in hand. Not only is writing and performing a conjuring of the divine within the poet, but it is also an exchange of that divinity between poets. Therefore imitating or drawing from someone else's work is not an infringement on any sort of protocol for writing, but rather a source of inspiration and an opportunity to build on that person's work. In regards to the poetry of others, Lucious said, "I encourage people to read others' work. Not just like to themselves, but actually even memorize it and spit it sometimes." The practice of memorizing and spitting or reciting someone else's work is a method of liberation because that poem could be a mantra or a reminder of some sort. It could be a source of encouragement or a way to practice performance skills. There are a number of things that could be

done with the work of other poets. As long as respect is paid to the poet, then another can play and experiment with the reading, content, or craft of the piece.

Zelda reached an epiphany during her conversation about poetry and what it does for her. “I would have to say that it shows me another part of myself... or the world,” they said. This is important to note because it shows that poetry is not only healing and liberating, but also revealing. Poetry causes certain things to surface that the writer may or may not have witnessed before. Again this ties back to the concept of the divine, where the writer creates, yet also discovers. They (re)member themselves, with a remembrance and reflection on the parts of themselves that they know while discovering and integrating new pieces of themselves.

Although these ideas and statements deviate a bit from my discussion of poetry as Artivism, they bring up very interesting and valid points that are also necessary for the analysis of poetry. The sentiments of each interviewee varied, but ultimately revolved around the same ideas. I was intrigued to hear recurring themes come up in conversation such as spirituality in relation to Christianity and church. Corrine, Rachel, and Zelda all had commentary regarding the parallels between poetry, performance poetry, and the church. This is no surprise as the church is a site of oral tradition. However, there is a deeper connection between that notion and the interviewees that permeates through the way they express themselves and how they tie their faith or interactions with religion with their work. For example, Zelda said in regards to ritual and performance:

Its like going to church. And you have a word. And I think as someone who is in seminary and training right now, and getting ready to write my first sermon for one of my classes, is like, there's a practice that you go through and a birthing period. You're giving birth to a part of your life through words similar to the preacher in the pulpit.

Zelda was able to make a personal connection between her present experience at a theological seminary to the performance and ritual of poetry. To her there is a supernatural process of birthing by which she believes that poets perform and share their work. This is relevant to activism because of the self-liberation that is promoted during the birthing process. It signifies a breakthrough for the poet, and if the poet can share their breakthrough or testimony with an audience, then there is potential for the audience to be inspired by it to then share or think about their own testimony, which they can then spread to others outside of the space in which they had that encounter.

One thing is for certain; if the word has existed since the beginning, since the dawn of time, then the word is everlasting because it is the basis of communication. We as people are physical sites of language. Therefore as poets, as writers, as artists, and as activists, we are sites of revolution because we possess the tools for healing, engaging with ritual, and building community. We are in control of our creative imaginations and can therefore create change in fresh and meaningful ways. From elements of craft to visual structure, and embodied performance, there is a tradition and culture that rides along the back of our pens and in the vibrations of our voices.

CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION

Because humans are creative beings, there will always be a demand for art. As long as there are systems of oppression hovering over marginalized communities, activism will always be necessary. For centuries, people have used art as an escape from reality, but have also used it as a means to confront reality, like many poets, music artists, visual artists, and dancers today. Artists such as J. Cole, Jaenelle Monae, Kehinde Wiley, Kara Walker, Danez Smith, Warsan Shire, and Rashaad Newsome among many others have created songs, dances, paintings, choreographies, poems, and much more around black and brown bodies and the ways in which they are marginalized by society and killed by militarized police. Many of them have created work directly in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, while others have spoken to issues of black womanhood and issues concerning identity.

I am continually inspired and moved by artists such as those previously mentioned. They inform my own writing as well as my intellectual interests because their work makes me look at and think about the world around me in new ways. Knowing this, I only see activism continuing. It is sustainable as long as

people continue to hone their creative imaginations and recognize it as a place to build a revolution, of self, of community, and of society.

As I continue onto mastering my craft at Pratt Institute, and practicing my craft while working with my high school, El Puente Academy and surrounding organizations and activist efforts, Sankofa comes back to mind. I have looked back and taken my experiences, my knowledge, and my passion for activism here with me to Mount Holyoke. I have written, performed, and engaged within the 5 College Community and greater Pioneer Valley, co-organized Ign!te the M!c, an open mic created by and for youth in Springfield, MA, and have facilitated activism/creative writing workshops at this year's New England Latinx Student Leadership Conference and in collaboration with Mount Holyoke's Art Museum. This is not a list of accolades, but a list of opportunities I would not been able to have had I not taken the time to reflect and think about the work that is important to me. It is now at the end of my senior year that I am again reflecting and thinking about where activism not only fits into the general future, but my future. My take away from this work, and reflection, is that activism is not only a practice. It is a way of life.

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APPENDIX A: POEMS CITED

Between the Cracks – Version 1 – October 7, 2014

She never fit into a box-
 four lines intersecting at
 four corners
 with the ability to encompass
 all that she is without
 asking.
 Or wanting to know because
 All that mattered
 was the amount of
 melanin saturating her skin
 which told a tale of a thousand suns
 of a thousand centuries
 a thousand traces of ancestry
 which only mean that
 she
 became black sheep.

She was not white enough
 Nor black enough
 Slipping between the cracks
 She was too much rhythm
 Too much hips
 Falling between the cracks
 She was more espanglish
 More ebonics
 Descending between the cracks

She was gringa
 She was yankee

She never fit into a box-
 small compact space to embody
 All that she is
 She is not White nor Black
 She is
 thick bones
 long curls
 defined curves
 She is
 Bomba
 Plena
 Fire hydrants and
 Lemonade stands
 She is
 Palm trees and
 Concrete jungles
 She is hip-hop
 Salsa
 and
 Straight teeth with
 Full lips
 She is light skin gone brown
 under a thousand suns.

Between the Cracks – Version 2 – December 15, 2015

Melanin saturating her skin
which told a tale of a thousand suns
of a thousand centuries
a thousand traces of ancestry

She never fit into a box-
small compact space to embody
All that she is
And all she has to offer.
What this society doesn't understand is
She cannot be defined by paper
That fails to acknowledge the entirety
Of her being:

She is rhythm & hips
She is espanglish
She is
thick bones
long curls
defined curves
She is
Bomba
Plena
Fuego
Fire hydrants and
Lemonade stands
She is
Palm trees and
Concrete jungles
She is hip-hop
Salsa
And agua
Straight teeth with
Full lips
And feet that won't stop
She is light skin gone brown
under a thousand suns.

The Book of Genesis According to St. Miguelito by Miguel Piñero

Before the beginning
 God created God
 In the beginning
 God created the ghettos & slums
 and God saw this was good.
 So God said,
 "Let there be more ghettos & slums"
 and there were more ghettos &
 slums.
 But God saw this was plain
 so
 to decorate it
 God created leadbase paint and then
 God commanded the rivers of
 garbage & filth
 to flow gracefully through the
 ghettos.
 On the third day
 because on the second day God was
 out of town
 On the third day
 God's nose was running
 & his jones was coming down and
 God
 in his all knowing wisdom
 knew he was sick
 he needed a fix
 so God
 created the backyards of the ghettos
 & the alleys of the slums
 in heroin & cocaine
 and
 with his divine wisdom & grace
 God created hepatitis
 who begat lockjaw
 who begat malaria
 who begat degradation
 who begat
 GENOCIDE
 and God knew this was good
 in fact God knew things couldn't git

better
 but he decided to try anyway
 On the fourth day
 God was riding around Harlem in a
 gypsy cab
 when he created the people
 and he created these beings in ethnic
 proportion
 but he saw the people lonely &
 hungry
 and from his eminent rectum
 he created a companion for these
 people
 and he called this companion
 capitalism
 who begat racism
 who begat exploitation
 who begat male chauvinism
 who begat machismo
 who begat imperialism
 who begat colonialism
 who begat wall street
 who begat foreign wars
 and God knew
 and God saw
 and God felt this was extra good
 and God said
 VAYAAAAAAAAA
 On the fifth day
 the people kneeled
 the people prayed
 the people begged
 and this manifested itself in a
 petition
 a letter to the editor
 to know why? WHY? WHY? qué
 pasa babyyyyy?????
 and God said,
 "My fellow subjects
 let me make one thing perfectly clear
 by saying this about that:

NOCOMMENT!"
 but on the sixth day God spoke to the
 people
 he said . . . "PEOPLE!!!
 the ghettos & the slums
 & all the other great things I've
 created
 will have dominion over thee
 and then
 he commanded the ghettos & slums
 and all the other great things he
 created
 to multiply
 and they multiplied
 On the seventh day God was tired
 so he called in sick
 collected his overtime pay
 a paid vacation included
 But before God got on that t. w. a.

for the sunny beaches of Puerto Rico
 He noticed his main man Satan
 planting the learning trees of
 consciousness
 around his ghetto edens
 so God called a news conference
 on a state of the heavens address
 on a coast to coast national t. v. hook
 up
 and God told the people
 to be
 COOL
 and the people were cool
 and the people kept cool
 and the people are cool
 and the people stay cool
 and God said
 Vaya

APPENDIX B: SUPPLEMENTARY POETRY PORTFOLIO

A Dosage of Words

If a poem could heal me
 I'd lay at its feet,
 wait for metaphors
 to resolve pain,
 hide me in the closet
 of reality in blades of grass
 beneath mango trees,
 a scorching sun spelling
 my name in its rays across
 my skin.
 I'd pray that sun rise like
 fresh bread at the
 nearest panaderia,
 like similes smiling loudly
 down on the ripe juice
 dripping from my chin.
 I'd await imagery to
 baptize my sins in crystal water,
 clean enough to purify
 a poet's fractured heart
 that once pumped positive palpitations,
 beats counting breath
 and time.

I wonder if rhyme
 can restore,
 if somehow cousins on
 every like shouted
 dozens of
 "I love you's"
 till the vacant space
 fills
 till the vacant space
 spills stanzas
 on my windowsill,
 absorbing light,
 replenishing gardens
 of hallucinogens and stimulants,
 the harvest of numb,
 creativity buzzing along
 neural pathways.
 If this poem could cure me,
 I'd watch cadence break
 as language
 reconfigures to
 a mere scribble on a scrap
 of blue paper.

Morning Glory

Inhale toxins of basura
 along the street, waiting on Thursday's pick-up
 Step by tiresome step, stomp the ground
 of your block, of the many
 cracks and stoops that made you
 Metro card machine makes time run by
 faster than the Z train on a good day
 But you hold tight to that café con leche
 sweetened by a familiar face
 that sometimes lets you take credit
 Mamita work is only 25 minutes away
 almost there sugar
 Debate on everything or sesame seeds
 cause the way hungry work is
 if you got the hookup

You catch la viejita in the corner
 little red cart filled with grocery bags
 bochinchando with her granddaughter
 about hombres sucios and mal intentions
 Slight smile nods, si wela ya yo se
 with feet stapled into the shaking floor
 can it get more sweet
 like morning time coffee

“Hello everybody, listen up!”
 Young cat from the South Bronx
 shimmy, jump, twist, flailing
 through the metal bars
 trying to pay for basketball
 foot almost jabs you
 in the face as he slides down
 his opportunity railing

“This is 42nd Street/times Square.
 Transfer is available to the A, C, E, N, Q, R, 1, 2, 3, 7,
 and Port Authority Bus Terminal...
 Stand clear of the closing doors please.”

Mija, the sunrise never
 felt this way
 Over the sleeping commuters,
 sleepless mothers
 dragging their ungrateful children to school
 imagining their destiny in the skyline
 along the blue organe fresh
 beginning of another day

La Operación

An elegy for the unborn of Puerto Rico, due to mass sterilization

The 50s, 60s, and 70s
were not meant for you.
They were afraid, dear
little ones, of the noise
you'd make.

Instead
hospital beds
lined with paper
laid out itching for blood,
a drip of magic
to induce the power
of a coquí's diaphragm
to brand generations of
goddesses by
unleashed genocide in their wombs.
they thought they could control
you
not knowing the rage
for injustice would
seethe within the veins
of future offspring.

Little fingers, I see you
Little toes, I feel you
could've counted the frituras
on your plate or creatures
in the sand or
the many times your soil
has been mutilated.

You carried the seas
in the lines of your palms
maps pointing you
towards love
towards life.

But you dear little ones
are angels,
your mothers, saints,
carved into the bark
of flamboyán trees to whom
we should pray
for your blessings.

The Dreams We're Sold

I wonder
 if my best friend knows
 she's scorched the
 life from her curls
 and inhales the fumes
 of a historically enforced aesthetic,
 intimidated by the elasticity
 and resilience of a
 force of nature

into her identity's vein
 tainting the DNA ingrained
 into each strand of hair,
 processed
 by chemicals, tools
 and learned self-hate
 the kind we're sold
 at our nearest
 beauty supply stores

I wonder
 if she remembers the taste
 of pastelillos and refried beans
 that filled the gap
 between her Hondur-Rican thighs
 if she still feels the clack
 of wooden claves
 clapping down her spine
 into her hips, steering
 her feet towards
 the nearest party

I wonder
 if she's heard
 the shouts of her ancestors
 calling her
 to look back
 and pick up the dreams she's
 given up and
 packed into her maletas

I wonder
 if her husband's machismo
 has torn at her smile
 pressured her synapses
 with tainted vapor
 manipulating neurons till
 no one is left
 to tame

I wonder
 if his uniform
 blinds her
 or reminds her of
 a supposed American dream
 sick twisted fantasy
 wanting so desperately
 to iron, strip, bleach,
 inject normalized
 stereotypes

Premeditated Impiety

I let him walk into my sanctuary
without removing his shoes
without requiring him to
pose prostrate at my altar
without burning incense
without urging him to worship
my female divinity

He slept on my pews
rested between
two plush cushions
and dusty bibles
He rocked
back and forth but
not with the spirit
Not in the magic glow
of glass stained windows
because light does not exist
at that hour
The stars did not cross
our backs or
crack the firmament
on which I've made my bed
constellations were not
drawn in ripples
of wet flames burning
between our navels

I let him into my house of prayer
without fresh garments
without requiring meditation
or patience for the supernatural
I also did not burn incense
and now the aroma
ascending into the universe
is bitter and unholy

Ode to the M Train

Beast of large proportion
 Steel screeching against
 Metal tracks that
 Sing morning, mid-day,
 Night time songs
 Reminding its riders
 To stay awake
 Stand clear of the closing doors please
 A stage that
 welcomes b-boys, musicians
 Preachers to share the gospel
 of the streets
 to share life from the soles of their Jordans
 to the seats in which
 commuters read, hum, close
 their eyes in tune with
 the rock and sway
 jolt into dark matter where
 artists of decades past
 have left their marks,
 throw ups on walls, hidden
 especially for the M and J
 And sometimes Z

Oh, M train
 How your cool blue seats
 Hold the world
 How your body
 Becomes home, becomes
 Guardian forcing us
 into our own
 into a deep pool
 of opportunity

Where the unknown is familiar
 And nothing surprises
 But everything awakens
 Loves, even the old white
 man with his crinkled brow
 and smug face
 impatient and late
 for work

The electricity on which you stand
 a pathway to
 Sites of power and resistance
 The curve after Central Ave.
 Where my prima inscribed
 Herself into Brooklyn's spine
 M line, you blow my mind

Urging me to
 Catch a glimpse of
 The skyline, sing my head
 Into the glory of the city
 Built with titans
 Standing tall together
 Kissing the wind but
 Never bending
 Never ending
 M train your windows
 Open infinity in the lines
 Of my palms
 A promise held tighter
 Than the grip of
 My shows to the bottom of
 Your trembling floor

Ars Poetica

Poetry be life

Be voice like
 Vibrations humming along blue lines
 And sometimes passing the margins
 Cause it wont be confined by red lines

Be imperative

Too much stuck in the gut
 So pen make hear vomit
 Make chanting rise from graves and oceans

Be inscribing hidden narratives

Erased memories
 Repeating again and again
 "Yo estoy aqui"
 I am here
 We are here

Be saying who is we

And what and where and how and
 We know why

Poetry be Sankofa

Be riding through time

To find truth on our backs
 Sketched into the bark of redwood
 Cause we be one of many

Be translation from past to future

Fists raised today like they were
 Yesterday- so long, so close
 So high we prohesy till God
 Decides to write new stanzas in His book of life

Be heaven-sent redemption

Spilled ink tapping into visions
 Dreams, consciousness busting
 From the seams of overstuffed bellies
 Filled with a good word

Be religion, medicine

Love, adrenaline firing
 Pistols click-clacking
 At the man trying to sew our mouths shut

Poetry be revolution.

Ancestor Poem

India, I do not know your name
 Its slipped out the memory
 Of my mother's umbilical cords
 Did not reach me
 India, with brown skin
 Blessed with sun flared melanin
 That burned pale eyes
 Did not reach me neither
 India, with strands of hair
 As dark as the night that
 Crept into your room
 But your light flickers through
 A thin fabric of time

I choose to believe your palms
 Held magic
 That fire danced in the pit
 Of your belly till poetry
 Rose off the tip of your tongue

India, I don't know your name
 But I know the world took shape
 In the glimmer of your pupils
 That the heavens and earth
 Bloomed love for your gaze
 India, mother of my other
 And of hers and of hers
 Mother from whom my voice
 Retrieves its arrows
 Mama India, your sharp tongue
 Was planted in my mouth
 Your hears, lining the soles
 Of my feet
 You, are the moment ponce
 Met Nueva Yol
 The line that draws palm trees on concrete
 Mama India, did your skin
 Still glow beneath the smog and under sidewalks?
 Did your hair greet the snow
 With kisses or barbed wire?

Mama India, was I a thought
 In your mind?
 Did you feel me in the hollows of your dreams?
 Did you know I'd wrap myself
 In such delicate parchment?
 That it would be torn off
 As if I waited to be opened?
 Did you do the same India?

The Last Will Be First

Inspired by Kehinde Wiley's *Michael Borges Study*

In the beginning, there was a word
 that spoke you into existence.
 Perfect hands that nursed and
 rocked you to sleep,
 fingers grazed your cheek with geography
 etched into the lines of her palms.
 She was your place of origin,
 the goddess who begat you.
 So praise be to your rows,
 dear brown boy,
 that reach far back towards the cape
 of your neck,
 pulling at your scalp, searching for
 ancestors within the twist of your braids.
 Praise be to the glimmer in your eyes,
 that can guide masses through
 tear gas, precincts, and line ups.
 That bring the sun up.
 That tears through
 the veil between us,
 burning at the stake a
 tradition of looking,
 of not seeing the goddess
 who bore you, the way
 she grounds you,
 sprouting roots through
 the heels of your feet.
 You will never fall, prince.
 Praise be to the posture of
 your neck. Don't ever drop your gaze.
 Let the power of generations
 perform choreographies
 along the vertebrae of your spine.
 Praise be to the stories
 mama diosa inscribed
 on the insides of your cheeks,

to frame precious lips,
 to formulate precious words,
 destined to catapult from
 the tip of your tongue to the murky
 lining of society's stomach.
 She told you to prophesy and
 wear truth as your armor.
 So praise be to the gold hanging
 around your collar bone,
 the way it lays prostrate
 on your chest, wrapped
 in purple jersey, see
 royalty, baby boy
 is not the thread
 of your garment.
 It's the many histories that
 collect within the melanin
 that's blessed your skin.
 So praise be to the brown
 and black.
 No weapon formed
 against you shall prosper.
 You were made in Her image, with
 a supernatural glow and cosmos
 rotating within your soul. Oh,
 the worlds she's promised you.
 The whispers she's blown
 in your ear
 at birth,
 that you were meant for,
 you will show them,
 you will spread
 the gospel, dear brown boy,
 that you are nothing less
 than glory.

These Streets that Raised You

Arise from rustled old sheets
with breath and sweat musk

Alaba al Señor

Peep Pito working on his car outside your window
Corona quenching his thirst for stability

Notice your notebook calling your name
Loose pages reaching out for jaded hands

Walk past it
May God forgive your trespasses

Hear mami singing with garlic y sofrito from
burnt-bottomed pots grumbling, never forget

Entranced by blessed fragrance
Bendiciones

God bless you baby
She says loudly

Shower with cold water
heat waiting, depending on next payment

Roach on your windowsill
reeking last nights high, morning's low

Save it for a bad day when
you find yourself lost in concrete jungle

Descend down stoop throne
into land of promise

Abuelos and OG's around tables gripping
culture between their fingers

Papo, I heard you leaving the hood!
All but one look, still gripping their fichas

Capicú!
Cries the one, still playing his game.

Alaba al Señor