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## Troubling the "WE" in Art Education:

Slam Poetry as Subversive Duoethnography

#### Troubling the "WE" in art education: Slam poetry as subversive duoethnography

"Oh I thought you knew that"
"I could have told you that..."

While only certain groups are authorised to speak

There is such a richness to be found Such wealth of experience, humour and wit

Stories that tale off...don't always get lost
It's knowing how to read, how to listen, how to
ask questions
What questions to ask
And then asking them...

(Reeves, p.24, 2012)

Stories have the power to define communities, establish common ground and specify histories; but what of the submerged narratives? The stories below the comfortable mainstream? These narratives offer opportunities for disruption and destruction. We, the authors, are interested in the stories that respond and react to invisibility. Specifically, we are interested in the exposing the unseeability of whiteness¹ (Rodriguez, 2000), microaggressions (Kraehe, 2016), and all the other quietly destructive forces in the world. Scholarly dialogues are filled with discussions of teacher's perspectives, experiences, and challenges, but rarely do these dialogues

include the stories that lie underneath; the ignored, subversive tales confronting the limitations of sight (Knight, 2006). Stories of microaggressions (Kraehe, 2016), alternate histories (Acuff, 2013; Acuff, Hirak & Nangah, 2012), and institutionalized norms (Wilson, Shields, Guyotte & Hofsess, 2016) that shape the educational landscape we navigate daily. We are interested in the myth of stability being upended by the subversive actors, actions, and accounts below.

This paper is focused on bringing our own subversive tales to the surface and into the light. We begin by introducing ourselves and sharing our project, a performative slam poem. Then we move to a methodological and theoretical framing of slam poetry as a democratic means of expression that subverts traditional hegemonic forms. We utilize the poetic devices of antiphony and lament to frame our own poetic call and response as a "verse from below" (Reeves, 2012, p.93).

#### An Introduction

For the better part of a year, we [Authors] have corresponded through emails, google hangouts, and phone calls and find ourselves returning to this question: How do we speak to a complex humanity, using race as an opening? As art educators, we [Authors] both share a deep interest in racial intra/inter-actions (Wilson, et al., 2016) and arts based research and practice (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2013; Finley, 2014; Leavy, 2015; Rolling, 2013; Wilson, 2018) and have worked together on projects for the last four

The authors have chosen to give equal importance and consistency to racial designations of Black, White, Brown, and so forth; according to the APA Publication Manual, 6th edition, racial and ethnic groups are proper nouns designated by capitalization. Each author understands and acknowledges the arbitrariness/construction of racial categorization and self-identifies with the racial designations listed in this paper.

years. Each of us identifies and is perceived in specific racialized ways. Gloria has a complex history with race, and because of her mixed-race identity has embraced the nuances of a Black-adjacent identity (Wilson, 2018) and has also identified as Brown (Wilson, et al., 2016). In the last few years, Sara has begun to examine and unpack the privilege inherent in her whiteness, having spent much of her life not acknowledging the role of her race and its complexity in socio-political relationships. From these distinct positionalities, we (Authors) have chosen to address the complex nuances of our shared histories as high school and pre-service educators.

About four years ago we began working on a slam poetry project. It emerged out of difficulty in authentically representing our racialized voices/histories in our research and writing. While we continue to work alongside one another, we have encountered the trouble with the blending of voices that often happens in inter/intraracial academic collaborations (Wilson, et al., 2016). The word we in and of itself poses a difficulty, as this term fails to capture the centrality, relationality and construction of race in American politics and life (Omi & Winant, 2015). The pronoun we melds the multiple voices of the authors, forcing the reader to assign a collective identity to the we. By doing this, the complexity inherent in our intra-racial inquiries is reduced to a manifestation of othering. This inability to grasp the nuanced accounts of racialized identities (Wilson, et al., 2016; Wilson, 2018), their historical flexibility (Geller, 2012), and immediacy in everyday experience gives rise to our doubts and difficulties. We have found the practice of researching/writing from the perspective of we accomplishes one of two things. The first is that this designation allows individuals, belonging to differing racial categories, to deny complex connections to one another, further

denying our relational experiences. Second, these designations make it increasingly messy to enter into to scholarly conversations across race without one person (and subsequently their race) becoming the dominant or submerged voice in the work. Either way, the result is the same - by denying the *other*, we also deny ourselves and our relation to *othered* experiences. Thus, we believe that we thrive, not only when *in* but also *with* relationship to the other.

#### A Slam Poem<sup>2</sup>

At the age of 14, a tradition presented itself to me a newcomer to the Deep South baptized by the "devotional song" [Bread of heaven, bread of heaven...feed me til I want no more...]

Black men, advanced in their years
Lined up like soldiers on the battlefield
facing the pews.
Deep humming and chanting
beckoning for audience response
and preparing for the minister to call the service
to order.

Black women, advanced in their years responding, ["Glory Hallelujah, help him Lord"]
Confirming that they too, were ready to receive the word

<sup>2</sup> Alternation of text style denotes a shift in author voice (e.g. italicized versus non-italicized). Bolded text indicates both authors voices, speaking in unison. The repeated statement "In optimal conditions the human eye can only distinguish between 32 and 64 shades of grey" serves as a pronounced aural space that exists between each of the poems. The authors consider this point of speaking in unison as an acknowledgement of the inherent limitations and problematics of a racially colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) and how through our poetry, we aim to disrupt this acquiescence. An audio version (QR code) of this slam poem is available at the end of the article.

At the age of 8, a tradition presented itself to

A small Quaker child raised in quiet religious traditions

Thrust into the church of Christ on Wednesday nights

A strange place where White men passed the collection plate

Counting the totals as the velvet lined platter circulated the congregation No praise or joy- only judgement The pastor called: Let us confess our sin before God and one another.

The dutiful congregation responds: [Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you We have not loved you with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.]

[In optimal conditions the human eye can only distinguish between 32 and 64 shades of grey]

Despite this my eyes once only saw Black and White us and them me and you

The first time I remember being grateful for my whiteness

> I felt young eyes staring up at me waiting for my next move

["Ms. (Scott) can we learn how to draw portraits today?"]

blinded by the blackness filling the seat in front of me

I did not meet their gaze Instead I looked down Seeing my White hands in contrast to Brown ones

["How do I draw my hair to look right?"] Slowly my line of sight began to rise Still counting the cold white squares on the floor Hyperaware for the first time of my White skin and my straight hair

I felt the words escape my body - [gasping, grasping, grabbing]

Those eyes - once filled with anticipation sensed my fear, unrest, discomfort And dropped their gaze downward

This was not a simple case of the first day jitters It was much deeper than that I went home that night and cried into my White hands

How could I be afraid of my own students? How could I be afraid of blackness? How could this happen to me?

[In optimal conditions the human eye can only distinguish between 32 and 64 shades of grey]

This vision, that distinguishes the difference between being served as first class citizen or being served a death sentence denies "seeing color."

This dominant vision assumes the objective worth of certain types of knowledge. Privileging some over others.

The first time I remember being affirmed for my

Was when I was 14 I was not invited into Cindy's house She said: ["you can only be my friend at school"]

color

The eyesight of the Black child, simultaneously

oscillates between center AND margin
From the center, this gaze rests on the superficial
and fragmented treatment of diversity
failed attempts toward pluralism
And still, from the margins, the stare penetrates
as teacher says: ["I don't see color."]

Why then, when I gaze directly in your eyes, Black child, do you recognize yourself in me?
Recognize me as "mother, auntie, SISTAHHH"
A fictive kinship and safe place to rest your gaze becomes visible

from the center AND the margin.
Your shade of grey demands a double-vision
for your double-consciousness
Oscillation from periphery to center and back
Meeting my gaze that is at once familiar
yet troubled
but recognized as safer

than the gaze that looks up, down or simply away from you.

You see, this vision also sees my grey as
problematic
Pale skin [not quite White]
A visual dis-ease with our deeper shade of grey
bends our reflection
An astigmatism, pulling the vision out of it's
roundness

A distorted perception, A farsightedness, holds our grey at a distance It sees WE as us, and us as them.

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[In optimal conditions the human eye can only distinguish between 32 and 64 shades of grey]

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Given the opportunity to open my eyes
I closed them
not because of my fear of blackness

But rather a relief for whiteness
Choosing to maintain the binary that kept me in
the front of the room and them in their seats
Under optimal conditions there might be a
modern-day Rosa

Refusing to sit quietly while my college education dictated the course of their actions But those kids learned their place long before they filed into my classroom and that day I assumed mine in the front bus - I mean classroom

This was my first experience to engage my own discomfort
but instead of desiring it, I ran from it
I chose to let my whiteness define me –

let my whiteness save them from their blackness

#### [I chose wrong]

I spent 7 years trying to raise Black bodies up Encourage them out of their neighborhoods and into mine

Nominate them for scholarships – Black scholarships, of course. Because why would I ever nominate Black bodies for my scholarships

[Black bodies are not normal]

I had been taught that by the silent insinuations of my grandfather

[Merciful God, forgive us of our sins
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.]
(whispers) Did you hear a Black family moved in
next door?

I had studied the normalness of whiteness my whole life without even knowing it.

[In optimal conditions the human eye can only distinguish between 32 and 64 shades of grey]

Yet a dominant vision, maintains the binary Offering a visual culture An informal curriculum simultaneously teaching that the modern-day Rosa is Beyonce Refusing to sit quietly

And yet this contemporary Rosa is perceived both lyrically and performatively violent by some and magically empowering to others That her lemonade is bitter AND sweet Further confusing the perception of the darker shade of grey

Cornrows affirmed when worn by Kylie or Mylie What would it feel like if those who perceive themselves to be White loved Black people...as much as they love Black culture?3

Your gaze rests on me, Black child You, who is the special exhibit in February but rarely part of the permanent collection. Your grey is their convenience. A way to calibrate the visual imbalance You look for safety at the school cafeteria table with others who share your shade of grey You seek affirmation for your intelligence You are uncomfortable Black scholarships and affirmative action Designed to right the wrongs Yet, your scholarship was awarded for your scholar-ship,

Not how fast you could run or how high you could jump

Your class ranking is veiled, shade of grey "You are so articulate," shade of grey "Why are you so angry," shade of grey? Defined by false perceptions, you ARE normal You know who you are wonderful shade of grey

#### [In optimal conditions the human eye can only distinguish between 32 and 64 shades of grey]

In art school when I learned ideal facial proportions

we carefully studied where the nose fell in relationship to the eyes

Eerily reminiscent of posters portraying Aryan phenotypes

I saw once in an Anne Frank exhibit I remember coaching my students to draw lines from the corners of the eyes Down to where the sides of the nose were supposed to go

"My nose don't look like that." Together we looked closely at the slim noses and narrow hips in classic paintings The small white breasts with even smaller

Hips protruding from this cinching, tapering down to delicate white feet Classical renditions of the Virgin Mary and baby

Representing all that is good in the world With their porcelain skin glowing under radiant halos above

These are the ideal facial proportions I proclaimed

These are the masters - the artists we aspire to be like

Not stopping long enough to notice the wide set noses and dark pupils looking back at me Looking right past the deep, rich tones on the arms of my students as they frantically wrote notes

My power points proclaimed more than the canon of modern masters each screen dissolve screamed "you are not worthy to be in these frames"

<sup>3</sup> This sentence references a YouTube video "Don't Cash Crop my Cornrows" by actress and activist Amandla Stenberg.

### [In optimal conditions the human eye can only distinguish between 32 and 64 shades of grey]

"Black folks don't make art," Black student says In art class in 1996, you learned that ideal was not you Art history told you so This historic vision, a bellows camera, with variable focus Maintains yet, a fixed vision Solidifying a truth that Black folks don't make art Or maybe Black folks are folk art resting at the margins Google, please show me famous artists This vision too, a near-sightedness A distorted filter Yielding the lightest shades of grey In 2018, Google says famous artists are not deeper shades of grey Black folks don't make art Master artists are not Black

[In optimal conditions the human eye can only distinguish between 32 and 64 shades of grey]

But the conditions I teach in are not optimal
They burn fresh in my eyes like chlorine
The kind of sensation
you don't feel in the moment
But after you leave the pool
all cozy in your towel it begins to fill your vision
If I had just stopped long enough to think
No - not to think - to see and hear

To really see your faces filling the seats in front of me To really hear your questions filtering through the room I (no you) would have known of Kehinde Wiley Filling paintings with bodies just like yours Brown child Regal renditions of Black and Brown bodies in classical stances I (no you) would have learned of Kara Walker's silhouettes How she played with black figures on white walls Telling stories about where you came from and where you were going I might have challenged my canon - and created something with real power A cannon that fired back at the world

[In optimal conditions the human eye can only distinguish between 32 and 64 shades of grey]

What happens when the conditions are less than optimal?

Corrective lenses need be applied, bending the distortion into focus

Lemonade has never tasted so sweet than to recognize unapologetic blackness

The deepest shade of grey disrupting the impaired vision of its ideal of beauty.

Being moved by a Basquiat
As much as a Renoir

Noir

The French word for Black
Aesthetic connection between viewer and artist is
expanded by this Noir
Tunnel-vision optic of classical and traditional
Kehinde and Kara
Noir, written **into** history
reconditioning a belief system

#### [In optimal conditions the human eye can only distinguish between 32 and 64 shades of grey]

We learned about value scales in art school Mixing white paint with black and black with We cut small squares out and arranged them on paper We showed our understanding of the subtle nuances of color If only it was that simple Right now...right here I pledge to my future students I will teach these values Not how to mix paint, but how to really look How to really see who is in front of you

[In optimal conditions the human eye can only distinguish between 32 and 64 shades of grey]

Corrective lenses rest directly on the eye Sharpen. Bending the distortion into focus Discomfort. Strengthening the muscles of the eye Being. WE includes I as equal to you [WE includes you as equal to me]

#### Methodology

"If the artist does not perfect a new vision in his process of doing, he acts mechanically and repeats some old model fixed like a blueprint in his mind"

(Dewey, 2005, p. 54)

Scholars (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Dewey, 2005; Greene, 1995) have conceptualized the interplay of art, education and experience and inspired others who have begun to explore alternative methods of qualitative inquiry. Duoethnography has become an approach used to study how two or more individuals give similar and different meanings to a common phenomenon, as it was/is experienced throughout their lives. Created by Rick Sawyer and Joe Norris (2012), duoethnography avoids the hegemonic style of the meta-narrative found in autoethnography by critically juxtaposing the stories of two or more disparate individuals who experience a similar phenomenon. Of particular interest to us is the use of duoethnography as a means to discuss racialized experiences and how these "lessons of difference" (McClellan & Sader, 2012, p.137) serve to move beyond mere superficial engagements with racial identity; that by starting with our words, we are able to unpack our lived racialized experiences. We believe that duoethnography is a useful methodology in exposing and engaging in the intertwining of racialized voices and experiences. Yet, without a deep understanding of the hegemonic system of racial privilege and (dis)advantage, it is limited. There is potential that, without this knowledge, one voice may impose a silencing or be silenced (Kuykendall, 2018); that the noble effort to give equal weight to both voices, may fall short. However, we see its collaborative potential beyond the autoethnographic lens.

Using a methodological lens of duoethnography to work between and through the primary

data of our dialogues, we shifted the autoethnographic and began to explore this question through poetic performance, starting first with a lament or call, and followed by a response, thus beginning antiphonal exchange. For us, slam poetry emerged as a form of communal art-making and a way to give voice through democratic participation in prolonged interaction.

With Chicago-based roots, slam poetry was catapulted onto the world's stage through the HBO series Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry; meant to provoke and reflect larger social constructions, such as identity politics. Orality itself is but one characteristic of the slam poem. Its range of performative aspects, the vocal dynamics, physical dynamics, appearance, setting, hoots and hollers from the audience itself, influences the experience of the performance. Slams are theatrical events, which highlight the difference between a poems transmission and reception. Those attending these performances are there for something more than the orality of the performance; they are there to engage with it. Slam poetry, as a form of poetic performance, has been seen as a democratic means for expression, which resists the traditional hegemonic forms of poetry (Cushman, Cavanagh, & Rouzer, 2012). As Somers-Willet (2009) suggests, "[it is this] renegade attitude that underscores [slam poetry's] sense of urgency and authenticity." (p.17); slam poetry is defined less by its formal characteristics and more by what it wishes to achieve or effect: a more immediate, personal, and authentic engagement with its audience (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 19). "Slam poets may appear to improvise or spontaneously recite their work, but in actuality most of their performances are the product of painstaking hours of composition, memorization, choreography, and rehearsal" (Somers-Willet, 2009, p. 17).

The performative aspect of the slam poetry performance forces the performer to put themselves in a literal spot light, an experience, while wrought with nerves and discomfort, ultimately holds the potential to open a communal space between the performer and the audience. For us, the value of antiphony and lament, as realized through slam poetry, lies in these moments of (dis)comfort and vulnerability. This desirable difficulty (Wilson, et al., 2016) allows the authors to disrupt the autoethnographic research perspective by engaging in the collaborative and communal experience of working together to understand and unpack our central research question: How do we speak to a complex humanity, using race as an opening? By stepping into the spotlight and acknowledging the tensions between racialized bodies, we try to bring to light the intentionality of who is speaking to and with whom. This type of dialogic exchange pays attention to the inherent tensions in consciously choosing to speak to difference and begin to generate and create the brave research and pedagogical spaces necessary for these often uncomfortable conversations.

#### Theory

Striving for intimate connection, we have committed to tension aimed at understanding and revealing the complexities and connectedness of human experience. In keeping with a belief of researchers as the site of inquiry we pushed ourselves to consider how we might present the transformative outcome of this project to others. With historical and recent societal uptake in racially charged conversation, we see poetic performance as a method for engaging in generative performances focused on creating sites of dialogue with and about the critical issues often avoided or misrepresented in mainstream debate.

#### Antiphony

Antiphony, or call and response patterns of speech, are historically reflective of Black African and Black American oral and aesthetic tradition; more specifically attributed to a West African tradition (Smitherman, 1977), these speech acts functioned as a means of organized communication among the enslaved and have since expanded to include performative and improvisational expressions that can be thought of as communal forms of art-making (Sale, 1992). These characteristics of call and response patterns hold value not only in what is said, but also in the rhythmic nature of how it is said. Most notably, this tradition is often recognized in its lyricality and is recognizable in traditional Black American religious and spiritual observance and practice (Smitherman, 1977), aural expressions (such as jazz, rhythm and blues and hip hop) and in spoken word poetry (Walker & Kuykendall, 2005). An additional important characteristic of this tradition is democratic participation between speaker and listener. Knowing growth happens in discomfort, we seek to further understand how our antiphonal practice begins. Which voice makes the call for a response? Simply put, we see the generativity of placing what is often passive and submerged dialogue into active performance, a means for lament, or call to respond.

#### Lament

Looking again to the world of music, we found our way to the concept of the lament. The lament has been just begun to be taken up by other scholars in Art Education, with Jennifer Richardson (2015) recently calling upon it to conceptualize her own arts based research work. Similarly, we have conceptualized the lament both bodily and socially. Historically, the lament has been "an expression of mourning, but it is not necessarily mourning for the dead" (Holst-Warhaft, 1992, p.1). In fact, the lament moves beyond just a song or cry of mourning and is often used to memorialize an event of loss or great sorrow (Holst-Warhaft, 1992). Historically the lament is not just a call for mourning but also as a call for protest or action. Wilce (2009) is interested in the use of lament outside of the traditional funerary context, focusing instead on the power of the lament as "a powerful channel for venting all sorts of dissatisfaction or protest" (p.25). Similarly, we are not interested in laments as funerary cries, but rather for the broader potential of the lament as a cry or call for help. Viewing the lament as a call for help or support then, moves the focus away from the sorrow of the event and towards the conversation the lament produces. This call becomes the beginning of the antiphonal interaction that we spoke of earlier.

#### Discussion

For us, the value of antiphony and lament lie in the moments of (dis)comfort necessary to engage in call and response dialogue; it allows us to engage in the dialogic method of duoethnography and honor our individual voices. We utilize these two concepts as a way to explore 1) the personal concepts and narratives of pain and power and 2) the public way we are conducting research with each other. The tensions between racialized bodies brings to light the intentionality of who is speaking to whom and it pays attention to the inherent difficulty in consciously choosing to speak to someone other than self.

Mutual trust and respect for positions and values became part of our explorations and engagement with one another; crossing racial boundaries, through personal, institutional and public conversation become shared sites of tension. We acknowledge that in order to affect relational transformation, we must disrupt the notion of autoethnographic navel gazing by calling out pain and responding and receiving or sitting with the pain/discomfort of the other; like autoethnography, it demands a reflexivity that is mindful and contemplative, both to ourselves in general, and in our case specifically, one another.

Contemporary ethnographic researchers reflexively appreciate linking the dynamic processes of performative behaviors with social and ethical concerns (Reinchaert & Earl, 2016). The way people think about and organize their lives...the dialogic engagement between researchers, generally and specifically, performativity of lament and antiphony stretches us to expand our knowledge of self/ other in context by continually (re)activating our methods of representation. Scholars have noted that our world is performance-based (Denzin, 2003); as researchers who aim to expand on methods of representation, we see our stage as a socio-political and socio-structural place to ethically interact with one another, and as Barbour (2014, p. 174), sees it, "[we] have challenges to face with both entrances and exits from these stages". In collaborations between colleagues/friends/difference it is important to realize that it is not the job of the Black/Brown scholar to pull their White counterpart into the conversation. Disruption and discomfort should not be placed outside of self, instead we must find ways to disrupt ourselves and take responsibility for our own subversive acts. Black/Brown scholars are always thinking of themselves in relation to whiteness and perhaps this identity marker needs de-centering, to move past fear and anger and into places of vulnerability.

This brings us to call attention to how we have theoretically grappled with transforming the we in our writing into something else that speaks to a collective existence, maintains the uniqueness of multiracial voices, and yet, holds open a space to reframe our relationship with one another and our reader. A relational experience requiring active participation; an embodiment of our writing, so that its lyricality is not sub/merged, a sometimes uncomfortable multisensory experience for one another, our audience, our listeners, and our readers. We, and subsequently this paper, reside at the intersections of poetry's traditional abode in print, while also existing in the oral and subversive context of performative free verse (Reeves, 2012).

Educators must begin to search for these kinds of alternative sites (Knight, 2006) to (re) present themselves. These spaces, though subversive, can become opportunities to upset the practices and procedures of pedagogy. In Heritage from Below (2012), Robertson suggests that subversive poetry is the poetry that serves as a counter narrative to the cultural standard. We contend that like the slam poetry we have presented here, the tradition of confronting one another is disruptive and uncomfortable, but also has the potential to begin to push towards a reconsideration of how we come into knowing ourselves as educators. There is something powerful about being forced to work with another person who, because of racial categorization, experiences life differently. This practice pushes one to take a more honest reflection of oneself and lived experience. We challenged one another to try and put words to what is feels like to write, talk and step outside of one's whiteness or into one's blackness. How many White art educators step into their whiteness (Spillane, 2015)? What does it mean to work below traditions (McLaren, 2016)? We upended the clean and tidy narratives we told

each other about how we engage with one another and with our students. We sought to unearth the silent messages we had given and received through the daily microaggressions encountered in educational spaces (Kraehe, 2015). It is the responsibility of educators to consider what they are leaving behind. This practice allows one to critically unpack the baggage you have shouldered, while also finding ways to expose the baggage you refuse to carry. In closing we ask, shouldn't pedagogy do this? Shouldn't pedagogy be disruptive, subversive, and uncomfortable?

[A]nd sometimes if you listen hard You might think you can still Hear a distant humming Like powerlines after a storm Like a collective tinnitus Like the wind, rush between the feathers of a buzzards wing You listen hard and you can hear The sound of you inside

You can hear what they heard, still The silence that the hurtle of the intercity breaks

But what will they hear tomorrow? What do you want to hear tomorrow? What will you leave behind, your legacy: your tale?

(Dave Reeves, excerpt from The Damson Pickers, 2006)



https://anchor.fm/sara-scott-shields/ episodes/Poem-recording-e42000

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