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## The Emcee Spiel: A Poetic Reflection on Decentering the Self in the Classroom

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# The Emcee Spiel: A Poetic Reflection on Decentering the Self in the Classroom.

Adam Henze

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When you get to the top of the mountain  
Pull the next one up.  
Then there'll be two of you  
Roped together at the waist  
Tired and proud, knowing the mountain,  
Knowing the human force it took  
To bring both of you there.  
—Marc Kelley Smith<sup>152</sup>

The day that high school students took over my summer academy, I was arguably feeling a little defensive. Amidst the unfolding teen insurrection, a couple adult educators had arrived at the university to observe the morning lecture on “poetry and civic engagement.” I had to politely tell them it was not a good time for visitors, neglecting to mention that all the students of color attending the academic camp had quit in protest and were now inhabiting the lecture hall.

It was not a good look. The counseling staff and I waited with nearly 70 white students in the atrium, while their peers deliberated inside. I reminded one of the two counselors allowed in the lecture hall that the cafeteria staff was expecting us soon, but my concerns weren't the priority at the moment. Everyone seemed generally angry with me.

When we were finally invited back into the room, all the students and staff filed into rows without a word. The phrase “Occupy Slam Camp” was scrawled on the dry erase board in black script. Roughly a dozen Black, Latina, and Asian high school students stood in the front of the room with

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<sup>152</sup> Marc Smith, “Pull the Next One Up,” in *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip Hop & the Poetry of a New Generation*, ed. Mark Eleveld, (Napierville: Sourcebooks MediaFusion, 2003), 128-129.

their arms folded. As I was directed to my seat—in the audience—I wondered which character from *Lord of the Flies* I emulated most. After judging some of the glares in the room, I realized the answer was probably the staked pig head.

Over the course of the next thirty minutes, I sat quietly as the minority students attending the summer academy where I served as director told me that my actions were racist and that I was fostering a toxic environment for young people of color. Some students said they wanted me to apologize. Others said that my apology would be an insult. I remember feeling very tired. I was sleep deprived and probably not making the best judgment calls. Thankfully, I was too drained to be temperamental. White students in the audience watched silently as their peers listed grievances about microaggressions they had experienced while attending the camp. I noticed that some white students had fixed their gaze toward the front of the room, while others were fixated on watching me watch the front of the room. I felt frustrated and ashamed. Students in the front of the room “passed the mic” to one another, giving each person a chance to speak in a space where they claimed they felt silenced. One of the Black counselors squeezed my hand as she passed by and said, “I know this is hard.” Then she walked away without any further comment or offering of unearned encouragement.

June 24th, 2016 remains the most humbling day I have ever experienced as an educator. A common adage in the profession states that teachers make 1500 decisions a day,<sup>153</sup> and while I have grown accustomed to consistently making mistakes in my daily interactions with young people, there are still days of head-hanging shame that all teachers experience. The entire week seemingly went well, but on the last day of classes a lecture I had given a dozen times before went south. I’ll break the lesson down later in this article, but long story short: I am a professional wordsmith who should have

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<sup>153</sup> Gravity Goldberg and Renee Houser, “Battling Decision Fatigue,” *Edutopia*, July 19, 2017, <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/battling-decision-fatigue-gravity-goldberg-renee-houser>.

been more careful with his words, and as a result, I hurt the feelings of young poets who were hoping to find dignity in the institution I helped build.

The day my students “checked me” for being a problematic white person, I had to take in that moment and then almost immediately set it aside. I still had a camp to run! Moments after the session, I walked a handful of students to another building on campus to pay their remaining tuition while talking on the phone with the Business Affairs Office to make sure the staff got their paychecks before the next billing cycle. From there I had to make sure students got home safely. Rooms had to be cleaned, keys had to be turned in, and lo—that is how “being busy” can bury an opportunity to think deeply about the day your students called you racist.

Ibram X Kendi said it is not enough for educators to be “non-racist,” because historically, neutrality has been “a mask for racism.”<sup>154</sup> Instead, he argued that we must commit ourselves to being “anti-racist,” which he described as a process of actions and interrogations one must make to rid the world of racist policies and practices. If a gatekeeper such as myself wishes to become an anti-racist, then it is vital that I attempt to foster an “antiracist space.” While I may not be able to provide an unassailable “safe space”<sup>155</sup> to all students at Slam Camp, I should have done better in providing all students a space where stakeholders involved work actively to combat racism. Kendi described “space antiracism” as “a powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity between integrated and protected racialized spaces, which are substantiated by antiracist ideas about racialized spaces.”<sup>156</sup> While I may be able to hang my hat on the 1499 other decisions I made that day, I made one terrible decision. Despite my intentions, I decided to foster a racist space—a space where students of color felt marginalized by myself and other white actors.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibram X Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 9.

<sup>155</sup> Brian Arao and Kristi Clemons, “From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces,” in *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, ed. Lisa M Landreman (Sterling: Stylus Publishing, 2013), 135.

<sup>156</sup> Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 166.

Guilt and my generally anxious disposition have encouraged me to revisit the moment on a consistent basis, though an incident less than a year later encouraged me to think more critically about the student-led intervention. On April 15, 2017, the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI) was wrapping up in Chicago, Illinois. Since the tournament was hosted in the birthplace of poetry slam, organizers of CUPSI asked founder Marc Smith to perform a set of poems before the final round of the international tournament, in front of hundreds of undergraduate students and mentoring teaching artists from around the world. Though there are some similarities between the “CUPSI incident” and my bad day at Slam Camp, the protest interrupting his incendiary performance was a much more public blowup. Several young poets in the audience felt that Smith’s message was condescending and stormed out of the auditorium. As Smith persisted and moved to the third poem in his set, a number of young poets reentered the auditorium in unison. Journalist Vangmayi Parakala described the scene vividly, which several young poets recorded on their phones and posted to social media:

As he recited, a line of poets started forming a human chain at the foot of the stage. With their backs to Smith, they protested by crossing their arms in an X over their chests as he spoke about how those in “the third world” had real problems, while in “our comfortable homes,” we are “milking the repression of our easy existence, stirring . . . our still free voices into teacup whirlpools of angst and despair.”<sup>157</sup>

As someone who has competed and organized in the slam circuit for over fifteen years, it was hard to watch the scene unfold on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I grew up revering Marc. He has been a guest in my home. Once my car was towed while I was the feature artist at The Green Mill, and he gave me extra money to remove my vehicle from impound. Many other veterans, who did not attend CUPSI, swarmed social media in attempt to defend Smith from the young poets posting their own reactions to the scene online. Suddenly, a public disagreement between one man and an

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<sup>157</sup> Vangmayi Parakala, “How Did an Architect of the Slam Poetry Scene Become its Public Enemy no. 1,” Jan. 30, 2019, *Literary Hub*, <https://lithub.com/how-did-an-architect-of-the-slam-poetry-scene-become-its-public-enemy-no-1/>.

auditorium full of young artists turned into an intergenerational “flame war” across the World Wide Web.

It is hard not to compare the CUPSI incident to the time I was taken to task at Slam Camp. Poetry slam has been characterized as a “youth-led” movement for as long as I can remember, but now that the kids had turned their critique toward our “founder” it was like the grown-ups were saying, “well, not like *that!*” As I watched veteran poets I admire admonish teenage poets online, including some of my students, I asked myself dozens of questions: How did we get to here?<sup>158</sup> Was Smith’s call-out in the same league as my own? What should stakeholders of influence learn from this? What parts of my own practice as a white, male organizer and educator should I interrogate? What do the generations of artists owe one another entrenched in this intergenerational dialogue? Where do we go from here?

This article serves two purposes: first, I will complicate the origin story of the poetry slam movement and contextualize the shift of agency between elders and youth. An important concept to consider is how performance poetry has historically been used as a tool for disruption. Second, with the guidance of my students and colleagues, I plan to delve deeper into my own “Slam Camp incident,” in an attempt to audit my own best practices as an antiracist educator. Readers will be introduced to the concept of “erasure” and will be asked to consider how dominant narratives commonly erase the contributions of artists of color. By comparing Smith’s story to my own, I encourage white teachers and artists to consider whether their practices contribute to the erasure of voices from diverse backgrounds.

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<sup>158</sup> Andreana Clay, “All I Need is One Mic”: Mobilizing Youth for Social Change in the Post-Civil Rights Era, *Social Justice* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 105.

In wake of the “CUPSI incident,” I believe that revisiting this moment is important for me as an educator, not because I wish to justify myself or dismiss the criticisms that were directed with me. Rather, my hope is to “think aloud”<sup>159</sup> my own process of self-reflexivity, to encourage other elder teaching artists like myself to allow their students to steer their own self-interrogations as well. My aim here is to be self-critical, and not self-defensive or self-deprecating. In more poetic terms: this is me, “baring it all,” on stage.

### RETHINKING THE EMCEE SPIEL

In this article, I adopt an “autoethnographic voice”<sup>160</sup> to position myself as a teaching artist within the global spoken word poetry movement. In my academic work I often employ a creative process called “poetic inquiry,”<sup>161</sup> where I adopt the tools of a poet to aid me in my storytelling. Before delving further into my own antiracist interrogation as an educator, it is necessary to give some context about the world of poetry slam. Archetypes are a foundational part of the establishment of narratives, which is why complicating the origin stories of artistic movements such as slam is important. However, even in my attempt to be inclusive, it is impossible to tell a complete story about the spoken word revolution. As slam organizer Becky Holtzman said, “Slam takes up space, and it doesn’t usually close into the pages of a book.”<sup>162</sup>

At the beginning of every bout of an official slam competition, it is tradition that the host reads *the emcee spiel*: a prewritten speech that details the historical notes, rules, and guidelines for the competition. The spiel functions as both a primer for uninformed audiences and as a set of precepts

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<sup>159</sup> Beth Davey, “Think Aloud: Modeling the Cognitive Processes of Reading Comprehension,” *Journal of Reading* 27, no. 1 (Oct. 1983): 44.

<sup>160</sup> Tami Spry, “Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 7, no. 6 (2001): 706.

<sup>161</sup> Monica Prendergast, “Introduction: The Phenomena of Poetry in Research,” in *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Science Field*, ed. Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo, and Pauline Sameshima (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008), xix.

<sup>162</sup> Susan McAllister, Don McIver, Mikaela Renz, and Daniel S. Solis, eds., *A Bigger Boat: The Unlikely Success of the Albuquerque Poetry Slam Scene* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 277.

for those ingrained into the community.<sup>163</sup> The spiel also tells the tale of Marc Smith, a construction worker from Chicago who took up the pen in his early fifties. According to the spiel, Smith felt disconnected from elitist literary circles, so one day he crafted a new form of a poetry open mic with a populist twist: each poet would be judged by members of the audience, who were empowered to applaud, cheer, or even boo competitors.<sup>164</sup> The impact of Smith's creation, however, is not covered in the spiel: although slam was created as an anti-academic "sport" in an Uptown pub, this method of expression exploded into mainstream popularity in the mid-1990s. Poetry slam has traversed beyond the bar and coffee shop scene, and is now a pedagogic practice embraced by numerous educational institutions around the world.<sup>165</sup>

Since the CUPSI incident, many venue organizers around the world have decided to remove mentions of Marc Smith from their spiel. One exhumed criticism in the CUPSI debate is that the Chicago construction worker narrative works to erase the contributions of artists of color.<sup>166</sup> Others argue that Smith is an irreplaceable fixture in the legacy of slam. This tension is particularly important for teaching artists to sit with because the conflicting narratives of slam encourage us to consider which stories to take with us into the classroom.

So, what is the commonly told origin story of poetry slam? In the mid-1980s Smith was hosting a vaudevillian poetry show at a "tiny and terminally funky neighborhood bar" called The Get Me High Lounge.<sup>167</sup> When one of his acts ran short one night in 1986, Smith devised an impromptu poetry competition where the audience would serve as judges—cheering for the poems they love and boo

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<sup>163</sup> Susan B.A. Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 149.

<sup>164</sup> Cristen O'Keefe Aptowicz, *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam* (New York: Soft Skull, 2008), 24.

<sup>165</sup> Jeffrey McDaniel, "Slam and the Academy," in *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*, ed. Gary Glazner (San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2000), 35–37.

<sup>166</sup> Birgit M Bauridl, "Contemporary 'Black?' Performance Poetry," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 718.

<sup>167</sup> Larry Kart, "Joints are Really Jumpin" in a Rebirth of the Local Jazz Club." *Chicago Tribune*, August 3, 1986, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1986-08-03-8602260044-story.html>.



the poems they do not. Chicago poet Dan Sullivan explained that the judicature component of slam was initially devised as a gimmick to energize the audience and make them—not the poets—the stars of the show.<sup>168</sup> The spontaneous event was so popular that Smith turned it into a regular show. The event took place in Uptown, near Wrigleyville, so Smith and his friends borrowed terminology from baseball to host their “grand slam.”<sup>169</sup> Over time, rules were standardized: the applause metric was replaced with scorecards, and judges were asked to provide poems with an “Olympic-style” score ranging from 0 to 10. Eventually the audience outgrew the closet-sized jazz club, and the Uptown slam soon moved to the historic Green Mill, a former haunt of Chicago gangster Al Capone. The first prize for winning the Sunday evening slam was often a Twinkie.<sup>170</sup>

A construction worker gets back at academic tightwads by creating a global literary movement in the speakeasies of jazz legends and mobsters? It is a convenient mythos, easily memorable and self-contained within a single sentence. However, it is initially important that we problematize the construction-worker narrative of slam to better understand why a professed architect of a forty-year movement could be run out of poetry town on a proverbial rail in 2017. First, while Smith designed the basic format used in most poetry slam competitions today, it is important to distinguish that formal poetry competitions have long served as a heralded tradition in numerous cultures around the world, with notable examples occurring on every continent across the span of thousands of years. Hirsch explains that historically, “the poetic contest is a way of asserting, establishing, and proving selfhood,” and points to Ong’s claim that “in pre-romantic, rhetorical culture, the poet is essentially a contestant.”<sup>171</sup> Critics have argued that the construction worker narrative particularly erases Afro-

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<sup>168</sup> Adam D Henze, “Means of Conveyance: Spoken Word Pedagogy, Hip Hop Literacies, and the Challenges of Fostering Poetry Spaces,” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2020), 147.

<sup>169</sup> Aptowicz, *Words in Your Face*, 36.

<sup>170</sup> Parakala, “Architect.”

<sup>171</sup> Edward Hirsch, *A Poet’s Glossary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.), 466–67.

diasporic verbal sparring traditions such as “toasting,” “playing the dozens,” and “battling” as it is known in hip-hop culture.<sup>172</sup> This origin story of slam is much more complex in its telling.

Another reason to challenge the construction-worker narrative is because while Smith built slam as a practice, it was a diverse arts community that built slam into a global literary movement over time. Aptowicz explains that there was no homogenous slam culture in the 1980s that we might see at competitions today.<sup>173</sup> When I meet people who do not know a lot about slam, one of the first things they ask me is if the performances are prepared or “freestyled,” which speaks to the cultural undercurrent that links spoken word to hip-hop. However, descriptions of slam in its initial years sound much less like a rap battle or cypher, and much more like something seen at a vaudeville show in an old-style saloon. A 1988 article in the *New York Times*<sup>174</sup> depicts the slam at the Green Mill in Chicago as a gathering of blue-collar workers, and not professional artists: a waitress, a liquor store owner, a former boxer, and a military veteran all share their work. And while most successful contemporary poets supplement their income, the important distinction is that the markers of their identity are found in their roles in the work force and not as established artists who contribute labor toward that established network for artists.

As the lore goes, the *New York Times* article caught the eye of a New York–based poet named Bob Holman, who became passionately invested in bringing a slam to Manhattan. The first poetry slam in the Bowery District happened on August 20, 1988, after a masterly effort to fix the leaky roof of the historic Nuyorican Poet’s Café.<sup>175</sup> At the same time, poet Gary Glazner is said to have taken slam out west to the historically poetic city of San Francisco, California. By 1991, poetry slam had a

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<sup>172</sup> Alice Price-Styles, “MC Origins: Rap and Spoken Word Poetry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, ed. Justin. A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11–21.

<sup>173</sup> Aptowicz, *Words in Your Face*, 61

<sup>174</sup> Dirk Johnson, “Chicago Journal; It’s Pure Poetry, for Cheers or Jeers,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/03/us/chicago-journal-it-s-pure-poetry-for-cheers-or-jeers.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

<sup>175</sup> Aptowicz, *Words in Your Face*, 24.

presence in Ann Arbor, Michigan and Boston, Massachusetts, with venues beginning to appear in southeastern states in 1992.<sup>176</sup> Allan Wolf, poet and pioneering organizer from Asheville, North Carolina, informed me that there was no money at stake or career to build upon in these early days. Poetry slams belonged in niche bars and coffee shops, not schools or literary journals. However, even before spoken word exploded into a worldwide multimedia phenomenon, it is important to point out that the architects of this multicultural movement are often limited to the contributions of these white male organizers and institutional stakeholders.

While slam may have started as a parlor game in the late 1980's, the second and third generations of artists entering the slam arena saw an explosion of youth organizations dedicated to hosting slam competitions for teens. Adult festivals such as the National Poetry Slam and Southern Fried Poetry Slam were barely breaking even financially in the 2000s, meanwhile a number of start-up nonprofit organizations such as YouthSpeaks, Louder Than a Bomb, Urban Word, and Get Lit-Words Ignite were growing into multimillion-dollar institutions, with professionally constructed curricula appearing in thousands of schools around the world. I used to be one of countless teens who grew up loving the gritty content of poems in the 1990s, and now, a generation later, an entire industry was marketing “engaging” content toward youth. Though slam was always thought to be a youthful movement—a fresh rejection of the old fogies peddling New Criticism in the academy—suddenly, slam was a bonafide youth movement. This is how the value system of the culture can shift from deferring to whatever the “old heads” say to focusing on youth critique as a driving force for pedagogy.

Before returning my attention to the student uprising of Slam Camp, it is important to point out that poets have historically used slam spaces to stage art in the form of disruption. For example, I witnessed a poetry slam festival transform into a protest when I attended my first National Poetry Slam in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 2005. Organizers claim that an unprecedented twenty

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<sup>176</sup> Bill Abbott, *Let Them Eat Moon Pie* (Whitmore Lake: Wordsmith Press, 2009), 9–10.

thousand audience members attended the four-day festival and when the Albuquerque team made the final round, thousands of New Mexico citizens packed the KIVA auditorium to cheer on the local squad. Competitors from the Charlotte and Hollywood teams claimed that some audience members were booing them during their performance. According to the organizers of the event:

The performances were stellar from all the teams, and the competition stayed tied through the final round. When the winner was declared and Albuquerque went to claim their trophy, two of the teams stood with arms crossed into Xs, while Queen Sheba of Charlotte acted as spokesperson to express the teams' distress.<sup>177</sup>

Several members of the demonstration were temporarily banned from all Poetry Slam, Inc. events, and Albuquerque would never bid to host another NPS.

While social disruption is arguably a long-standing quality of spoken word poetry, it is interesting to consider how these protests suggested the shifting values and attitudes of artists over time. Another example of protest is the summer of 2013, when the spoken word community had its own erupting #MeToo movement, years before the highly publicized controversies that took place in the artistic worlds of stand-up comedy, film, and music. In his book *Killing Poetry*, Johnson explains that the finals auditorium erupted in hisses and boos when a team took the stage during the pre-competition showcase, featuring a member accused of raping another poet.<sup>178</sup> While some poets dismissed the protest as “poor sportsmanship,” the disruption forced us as a community to consider how our actions worked to erase the narratives of women in the poetry slam scene. The action encouraged witnesses to believe and listen to women, and reconsider the possible ways we have reinforced the narratives of rape culture in literary spaces. Regardless of our individual stances on protesting artists onstage, the community as a collective agreed on one thing: we failed in our promise

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<sup>177</sup> McAllister et al., *A Bigger Boat*, 235.

<sup>178</sup> Javon Johnson, *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 78.

to provide everyone a “safe space,” and should instead focus on providing a “brave space,”<sup>179</sup> where stakeholders actively work toward ridding the shared space of sexual violence and misogyny.

I hope this context helps explain a scenario in which a multiracial coalition of teenage artists could seize control of a performance space occupied by a problematic elder white man. The irony of this dynamic is that it had always been Smith himself that encouraged the audience to make the slam space their own, emphasizing that the ego of the artist on stage is secondary. Considering the gravity of the CUPSI incident in 2017, Parakala writes: “It must have been surreal for Marc Smith—the man who believes that the show is everything, the audience is king, and ‘the greatest thing for a young artist is to be booed.’”<sup>180</sup> Though many people encouraged Smith to apologize, he never did. Smith’s refusal to address the incident with humility was disappointing to me, because it stood at odds with the social contract of the emcee spiel. Upon hearing the name Marc Smith during the construction worker narrative, familiar audiences traditionally shout, “So what!” at the stage. This tongue-in-cheek practice was even promoted by the man himself at the historic slam at The Green Mill Lounge.<sup>181</sup> The call-and-response practice presents the history of slam as a dueling set of counternarratives: a sanctioned voice establishes that it is important for the audience to know about Smith, a socialist working-class artist from Uptown Chicago, and an unsanctioned voice questions why the audience should give a proverbial shit. The move reinforces the foundational idea of slam that aims to privilege the experiences of the audience over any of the performers on stage.

In 2012, I hosted the first Slam Camp, along with poets Sierra DeMulder and Cuban Hernandez. Slam Camp is a week-long academy for high school-aged writers interested in poetry slam. Our curriculum focuses on the development of reading, writing, and revision skills, as well as developing embodied performance, microphone etiquette, “slam strategy,” and other skills relevant to

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<sup>179</sup> Arao and Clemens, “Safe Spaces,” 136.

<sup>180</sup> Parakala, “Architect.”

<sup>181</sup> Somers-Willett, *Cultural Politics*, 149.

competitive spoken word artists. Slam Camp has taken place at colleges and universities across the United States, including in Minnesota, Indiana, and Florida. Our academy has grown exponentially since its inception, hosting seven students in 2012, fourteen students in 2013, thirty students in 2014, sixty students in 2015, and eighty students in 2016. There were many efforts to make Slam Camp as cost affective as possible for families in need, and thanks to a scholarship program we saw minor increases in the enrollment of Black students and students of color. Regardless of our attempts, our culturally diverse faculty typically concludes in post-mortem discussions that the student body of Slam Camp is “very white,” and we often leave the academy wondering what other steps we can take to recruit diverse students.

Over the years our faculty would include numerous artists such as Rudy Francisco, Neil Hilborn, Giddy Perez, Hieu Minh Nguyen, Olivia Gatwood, Khary Jackson, Melissa Lozada-Oliva, Ashlee Haze, G Yamazawa, Donte Collins, Heather “Hero” Wells, and graduate notable artists such as Blythe Baird, Jamal Parker, and Miss K. These are the names of brilliant artists who have carried the torch of legacy to make slam as influential as it is today. It was during our fifth annual camp, in 2016, when my students pulled my proverbial card. The disruption of my summer academy forced me to ask the question: in what ways have the voices of poets of color been erased by my actions too?

## **ERASURE AS CONFRONTATION**

There is a writing activity we practice at Slam Camp called erasure. According to the Academy of American Poets: “Erasure poetry, also known as blackout poetry, is a form of found poetry wherein a poet takes an existing text and erases, blacks out, or otherwise obscures a large portion of the text, creating a wholly new work from what remains.”<sup>182</sup> The entry goes on to explain that erasure is often used as a means of confrontation, “a challenge to a pre-existing text.” For example, in 2017 a White

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<sup>182</sup> “Erasure,” Academy of American Poets, <https://poets.org/glossary/erasure> (accessed Aug. 17, 2020).

House aid named Stephen Miller dismissed Emma Lazarus's poem "The New Colossus" while unveiling a racist immigration policy in a press briefing. In response, editors from the Guardian asked twenty-one poets to write a poem they thought Donald Trump would like to see at the base of the Statue of Liberty.<sup>183</sup> Poet Hanif Abdurraqib created an erasure poem entitled:

**Lazarus**

Give me                    your poor  
huddled masses            yearning to breathe  
The wretched                refuse of  
home,                    tempest  
beside the            golden                    door

Literary critic Parul Sehgal offered a separate definition of erasure that seems relevant to consider, saying it "refers to the practice of collective indifference that renders certain people and groups invisible."<sup>184</sup> Sehgal conceptualized erasure as the violence of dismissal, arguing that often the historical contributions of women and people of color are "blotted out" in dominant narratives. In the final section of this article, I consider erasure in both its definitions by returning to the site of Slam Camp. The history of poetry slam impels stakeholders to consider the power of stories, and therefore, I believe that reflecting on my own acts of erasure is in line with Kendi's interrogative practice of anti-racism.

At Slam Camp, students often practiced the poetic art of erasure using text authored by dead writers. Erasure is political in nature because "there is a desire to re-examine the institutions and narratives that shape Americans' lives, from government bureaucracy to new media."<sup>185</sup> The process of blotting out a canonical text creates a shift in power, because erasure transforms an existing text

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<sup>183</sup> "Huddled Masses? Losers! Trump v the Statue of Liberty," *Guardian*, Aug. 10, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2017/aug/10/the-new-colossus-emma-lazarus-poems-donald-trump-immigration>.

<sup>184</sup> Parul Sehgal, "Fighting 'Erasure,'" *New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 2, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/magazine/the-painful-consequences-of-erasure.html>.

<sup>185</sup> Rachel Stone, "The Trump-era Boom in Erasure Poetry," *New Republic*, Oct. 23, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/145396/trump-era-boom-erasure-poetry>.

into a dialogue between an elder and younger poet. Notably, often the younger poet gets to reassign meaning. During one lesson, students took black Sharpie markers to pages of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, constructing their own new text through the destruction of an old one.<sup>186</sup> Erasure impelled writers at Slam Camp to consider art as a form of disruption, and given its political nature we often facilitated the lesson the same day as my lecture on poetry and civic engagement.

I had given some variation of the lecture the previous three years of Slam Camp, and it was always one of the most popular discussions. So, what went wrong in the summer of 2016? How did a home-run lesson plan turn into an error? I think it is important to say I expressed hesitance about the lecture to my colleagues. I do not say this now to be dismissive or absolve myself, because my students felt silenced regardless. Rather, it is important to accurately reconsider my decision-making processes as an educator so that we can reflect on both immediately evident mistakes, as well as mistakes that became apparent in hindsight.

One reason I felt I was not equipped for the lecture is because I was facing new administrative tasks as the director of Slam Camp. In four years, we grew from a humble size of seven students and three counselors to a large academy of eighty students and fifteen counselors, meaning I had to spend a lot more time outside the classroom. That year we also moved from a small liberal arts college to a large Research 1 university and I had to take extra administrative duties in the transition. In short, my mind was distracted by insurance forms and purchase orders. Two errors are evident here. First, I was not in an appropriate mental state to foster a critical conversation on race and gender. Research shows that busyness can impede creative thinking,<sup>187</sup> which is troublesome because these critical processes are necessary components of arts-based learning. Second, I had not put in the necessary time for

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<sup>186</sup> Andrew David King, "The Weight of What's Left [Out]: Six Contemporary Erasurists on their Craft," *Kenyon Review*, Nov. 6, 2012, <https://kenyonreview.org/2012/11/erasure-collaborative-interview/>.

<sup>187</sup> Jonathan Smallwood and Jonathan W. Schooler, "The Science of Mind Wandering: Empirically Navigating the Stream of Consciousness," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 66 (2015).



relationship building in the classroom. This may be an obvious oversight to some educators, but remember that a lot of spoken-word events function somewhat like explosive meet-and-greets: often a poet from a faraway place is brought into a learning space to publicly stage their perspectives in front of strangers. Obviously, that practice was not successful here. Building relationships is an important component to fostering culturally competent spaces,<sup>188</sup> and clearly I had not done the necessary work to build trust between myself and my students.

Another reason I was probably not the appropriate person to facilitate the lecture is because the growth of our academy meant the demographics of the audience had shifted. Though we worked to make Slam Camp as affordable as possible, the cost of travel and tuition was an investment for many families. A majority of our students were white teenage girls from upper-middle-class families, and over the years we made efforts to improve the diversity of our student body by raising funds for scholarships and travel stipends. In 2016, we hosted students from thirty different states and succeeded in raising funds to provide scholarships for students from low-income families. We increased the number of minority students at our academy, but in terms of actual representation, we still had a ratio where 4 out of 5 of our participants identified as white teen girls. This meant that despite our efforts, we were still fostering a conversation about intersectionality in a racially homogenous space. According to Kendi, “A space is racialized when a racial group is known to either govern the space or make up the clear majority of the space.”<sup>189</sup> Recognizing the optics of the situation, I invited another counselor to the front of the lecture hall to add to the conversation, and asked other counselors if they would chime in. However, in hindsight this move was a half measure. My body was still the body centered in the class. My voice was still the one directing the discourse.

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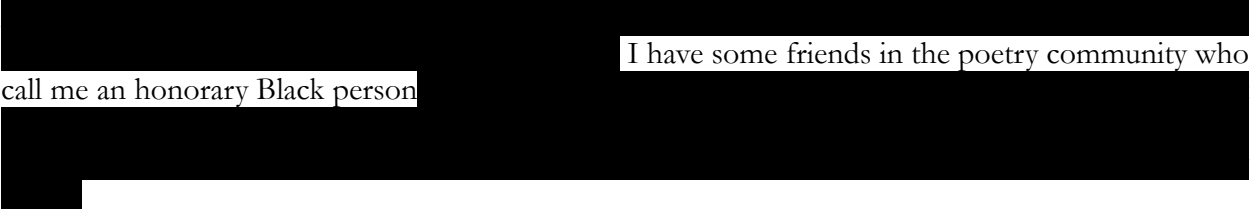
<sup>188</sup> Ann Egan-Robertson, “Learning about Culture, Language, and Power: Understanding Relationships Among Personhood, Literacy Practices, and Intertextuality,” *Journal of Literacy Research* 30, no. 4 (1998): 455.

<sup>189</sup> Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 169

Positioning my identity and stance as the vehicle for the lecture proved to be as problematic as I feared. This foresight suggests a number of ways a student might feel erased in this lesson. In addition to these optics, students highlighted two statements that I made. To appreciate the gravity of my words, I have conceptualized my phrases through the practice of erasure. I was attempting to foster a discussion on the relationship between power and whiteness. I am sure I am being kind to myself in my paraphrasing, but, essentially, I said:

As a white organizer in a multicultural arts community, I have to be thoughtful of my own white privilege and how it affects my perspectives. Now, I have some friends in the poetry community who call me an honorary Black person, as a joke. And while feeling included makes me smile, I know that they aren't being earnest. We may have equal standing on the stage, but I know as soon as I leave the poetry venue that I get all my privileges back. I can hail a cab, get a bank loan, and don't have to fear police.

Ask any teacher, and they will tell you that students listen in both careful and careless ways. In my experience, my students might ignore what I am saying, but they rarely mishear me. Erasure can strip away the words that did not carry as much weight to my students.

 I have some friends in the poetry community who call me an honorary Black person

A Black student left the lecture hall in a hurry, but in my mind I reasoned that maybe they had to go to the bathroom. I continued on, obtusely, attempting to comment on the white-industrial savior complex, a tired trope some white poets use to “perform” their allyship in public.<sup>190</sup> I had a book in my hand as if it granted me extra credibility. I continued my lecture:

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<sup>190</sup> Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” *Atlantic*, March 21, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

I am leery of white performers who use a benevolent tone to tell stories about helping people of color. I think these stories undermine the efforts of organizers from minority communities. As a white person, I don't think it is my responsibility to help Black people. I think it is my responsibility to help white people build a less racist society, which will create a more equitable world for Black people and people of color.

I did not mean. I did not mean. I did not mean, no matter. My careless words made young wonderers feel invisible.

[REDACTED] As a white person, I don't think it is my responsibility to help Black people. [REDACTED]

The lecture ended when a counselor informed the class that several students had congregated in the atrium. They wanted a platform to be heard. So they claimed the space of the lecture hall and wrote "Occupy Slam Camp" on the board.

After students took turns sharing the hurt I caused them, they gave me a turn to speak. I stood, and said I am sorry. I said their feelings were valid and that it did not matter what my intentions were. I promised to learn from this and do better. I cried, and when other white students in the audience saw me cry, I guess they felt that allowed them to cry too.

Later that day, when the lecture hall was cleared, I found a note a student left in my copy of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* that I referenced in the lecture. The letter accused me of breaking my promise. That I promised a "safe space" for students, and then I snatched it away from them. The note said that I stole their voices.

I wrote this article to help artists and teachers rethink their stance as gatekeepers and curators of culture. I don't know what lessons Marc Smith has learned, but my mistakes have made me reconsider the spaces around me and my sense of belonging in them. Some students said my apology wasn't enough, and I did not disagree with them. I have apologies that are harder to offer.

To my students: I am sorry I thought big words could supersede your experiences. I am sorry I assumed the authority to tell stories that are not mine. I am sorry I did not share the stage. I am sorry for turning the culture into a collection of names and dates to learn in a class. I am sorry for being so stuck on the construction-worker story. I am sorry this essay failed to decenter the white profiteers from the story of slam. I am sorry that I cannot say whether Marc's Smith's name should be struck from the spiel. I am sorry I don't know if we should erase his legacy or confront it. In saying sorry, I offer an erasure of my own.

When you get [redacted] the mountain  
[redacted] the [redacted] one up  
Then [redacted]  
[redacted] know [redacted]  
the human force it took  
To bring [redacted] you [redacted] here.

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