

The Pennsylvania State University

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**“ONE OF YA’LL GOT MY LYRICS”:
STUDENT ARTISTS EXPLORING SPOKEN WORD POETRY, PERFORMANCE, AND
ACTIVISM**

A Dissertation in
Curriculum and Instruction

by

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ABSTRACT

This text emerges from an arts-based cultural program that has evolved into the focus of my dissertation. Ultimately, this project seeks to investigate the rich and complex offerings of an integrated arts performance group with an emphasis on the critical intersections of feminist pedagogy, performance, subjectivity, and activism. Each of those areas is interwoven with the subjects of resistance, cultural production, and social justice and the multitude of other stories that are demanding my consideration even now. I think there is something important to learn about the possibilities performance offers to negotiate meaning and explore relationships within a framework of feminist pedagogy in a context that is activism-oriented, accessible, and passionate.

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I want to dedicate this work to my mamma, Clara F. Endsley and my daddy, Michael L. Endsley, and my brother, Michael C. Endsley. Thank you for never giving up on me.

And most of all to Collective Energy: Toby, Tony, Stacey, Alyssa, Jonathan, Carlos, and Q'tyashia. Collective Energy, energy all around, it can build you up and it can knock you down! Thank you for helping me find my own lyrics. Say word...

Chapter 1

Introduction

The integrated arts performance group was developed as a cultural initiative from the Paul Robeson Cultural Center and was designed to extend the concept of arts as a form of social action. Generally speaking, the program addressed a need felt on campus by students of all colors to have a venue for creative expression in relationship to their pressing cultural, historical, and social issues. This group of student artists named themselves “Collective Energy”—the title was chosen to honor the various types of skills, flavors, and personalities involved. We jokingly referred to the jingle for an old cartoon called Captain Planet, because the plot of the show involved several superheroes that represented different elements but their greatest power was available to them when they converged. Collective Energy had the makings of a colorful kaleidoscope with each member contributing colorful experiences and strengths to the stage. I attempt to find a source of light and focus that kaleidoscope here and each turn of the handle provides a different presentation—all breath-taking and beautiful, and only clears for a moment before being shaken up again. My reason for choosing this fruitful and intense site as a place of study is because of the things that each member contributed and because of my own role. Not only was the research accessible to me because I was in charge of the program, but it has vitally impacted my development as a human being, a feminist pedagogue, and a cultural worker in ways that I am only now beginning to recognize. As with any project, particularly those of an intimate nature, there are a multitude of heaving inquiries that boil up each time I re-read the story I’ve begun writing; however, the questions at the forefront of this study are the questions that surface

most frequently. Yet I expect that each ‘reading’ of this performance text will constitute differing and ongoing analyses. My aim within these limited pages is to provoke further query that will continue the important conversations around these topics, illuminating their complications while offering fragmentary suggestions. I begin by asking in what ways performance contributes to understandings of feminist pedagogy, subjectivities, and activism. This study seeks to explore the ways in which spoken word poetry and performance can serve as mediators between subjectivities and cultures. This examination takes place through a lens of poststructuralist theory and an arts-based feminist framework that seeks to analyze the competing relationships and discourses that developed through the year-long experience of the members of Collective Energy and the performance content of their spoken word poetry and song lyrics. I hope to inquire into the ways in which the experience (along with my own) among young student artists provides a space of resilience and/or fosters resistance. Such an inquiry focuses centrally on the relationship building that takes place among these students as they negotiate the ongoing transition between their home community and campus communities. In addition, an examination of the intersections between education, literacy, activism, and performance will be explored as the process in which the members of Collective Energy perform their understandings of themselves as artists. How do they perform their understandings of activism? What sorts of spaces are required to aid in the artistic exploration and development of social change agents in a university setting? Why is support of artistic exploration of social issues important? How do gender, race, and social class contour such spaces? Finally, I seek an understanding of the relationships that compose feminist pedagogy, performance, and activism in order to contribute to the practice of existing theories on these subjects. Mostly, what I will share proposes the need for a deeper reconsideration of performance as a means of effective pedagogy and what counts as useful knowledge production. I will begin with a brief introduction to the cultural program, followed by an outline of key terms in order to better contextualize the stories that follow.

Background & Description

Collective Energy is a group designed in direct response to the growing need to develop both critical art consumers and performers in a society dominated by popular culture. The Cultural Arts in Social Action Initiative was a series of several programs developed and hosted through the Paul Robeson Cultural Center that are focused on providing students with a means to explore various elements of culture and the arts. These programs include Bed: A Spoken Word Lounge, Collective Energy, and the Arts In Action Cultural Immersion Spring Break. The Cultural Arts in Social Action Initiative sought to join this critical conversation through exploring the creation of a model educational experience that integrates popular forms of arts and intensive study on social issues. The goal of developing artistic content that is reflective of cultural communities and focused on relevant social issues is what makes this program unique. The outcomes were anticipated to enhance both the experience of the audience in their consumption of art and the artists by expanding the scale and scope of their craft.

The emerging student artists who participate in the Cultural Arts & Social Action experience represent the potential of today's young artist to embody the community connectedness and social dedication of great artists. These students form a community-based performance group, "Collective Energy." Collective Energy has served as the headliner at the regular Bed: Spoken Word Lounge on the University Park Penn State campus and has also participated in travel performances to local schools, correctional facilities, and other Penn State Campuses. The group creatively conversed with their collegiate peers as well as local and international communities about relevant social issues through the use of spoken word poetry, song and music.

I was able to handpick who was invited to participate in Collective Energy. I recognized in each of the student artists a desire to cultivate their skills and an eagerness to show those skills off. The subject matter, the performances that compiled our “final” show, the questions we used to critique each piece, and the transitions between performances that resulted in an hour and a half show have been the product of group practices, trial, and error. Early on, we agreed that learning to be critical consumers and producers of art was a desire we shared. Keeping the desire to grow our level of analysis at the forefront of our decision-making process when it was time to select what pieces to perform forced us to examine with greater conviction what we were producing. As the name “Collective Energy” implies, one of my personal goals for this particular group was to organize our meetings so that the input and feedback of *all* of our members determined most of the artistic and social elements that would be included. I formatted an outline for the experience in the form of a syllabus; however, the workshop plans and topics were fluid as is usually necessary when implementing a cultural program for the first time.

While this was not the first cultural program I had planned, it was by far the most personal one. The reason I was chosen to become involved (indeed, part of the reason that I was hired to work at the PRCC to begin with) is because of my background in performance. I have been a spoken word artist and amateur actor for almost six years and I have both earned a living and found fulfillment in producing resistant performances. I was a full-time student and a full-time artist during the time period that Collective Energy first formed, and that background qualified me to assist the other student artists in their growth and development because they had less experience performing and composing their own original work. It feels odd even now to include a qualifying statement within this introduction, but I have not assumed a leadership position with no personal investment in the broad development and general well-being of each of the student artists involved. And although performance has been central to my life for some years now, I never dared assume that I would have the opportunity to conduct and produce academic

research on the subject. Although the library on activist art is growing all the time and spoken word poetry has become more mainstream through television series such as *Def Poetry Jam*, I realize that I am still discovering the importance in making associations between such performances and my students at the university. Learning to view ourselves as legitimate cultural producers has not always been easy. Just as this text offers me some sense of significance in a world of language and power relations that is very new and quite intimidating to me, it is my hope that should any member of Collective Energy pick up this text, that they would see themselves validated in a new and different way—not simply because I said they should be, but because their own work and words make up the core of this story. While I had the absolute permission of each member to record and recount everything that happened within our meetings, as well as their permission (and even request) to use their real names, I have changed their names in the interest of preventing any unnecessary discomfort at their expense. I wasn't sure of precisely how intimate each student artist would be and wanted to provide the cushion of anonymity should they find they desire it after all. The poetry and song lyrics that are included have the authors' names listed in the back of appendix so that they receive full credit for their work. Every song lyric and poem included in this text was performed publicly at some point during the Collective Energy experience; however, most of the conversations that the analysis is structured around took place either within the company of only Collective Energy members or in one-on-one interviews that I conducted with each member.

Collective Energy met each Tuesday night for three hours at the home of Zanna, our director and the co-developer for the program. We ate a home cooked meal together prior to each meeting and didn't officially begin our sessions until about 6:30pm. I recorded on video tape all of our group meetings and performances (which we examined in our group meetings sometimes) and, much later, the one-on-one interviews I conducted with each member. This collection of data prior to having a firm research question and clear system of analysis has made this process

feel somewhat like a breeched birth—it has come out feet first. When we hatched the idea of an integrated arts performance group, my original intention was to develop a curriculum and turn the experience into a class during the spring semester so that our plans to take the students on a study abroad experience could potentially receive funding for the trip. This process was so complicated that it made more sense to keep it as an informal but very structured weekly meeting. I was responsible for planning our lesson and determining what would actually take place during the weekly meetings while Zanna took care of the budgeting and logistical planning of taking a group of students overseas to the University of West Indies, St. Augustine Campus in Trinidad & Tobago. Zanna had been in contact with the Arts In Action program head at the University of West Indies and they also inspired us to develop an international cultural immersion experience for Collective Energy. The local campus performances we participated in on Penn State's satellite campuses served as a sort of rehearsal for our "final show." They were an opportunity to experiment with different versions and choreography of our performance pieces until we arrived in Trinidad & Tobago. Our "final show" was performed at the annual Literacy Festival held on the Augustine Campus. The international portion of the program was to serve as a sort of culminating end of the year experience for Collective Energy. While there is a wellspring of data rich with stories from the international experience we shared, I focus this story on what took place prior to our trip. Most of this text comes from exchanges that occurred during the process of fleshing out what Collective Energy would mean for us. While I hope to return to an analysis of the trip abroad, I focus here on the year of planning and performing that occurred because of the significance that negotiating social relations bears on performance.

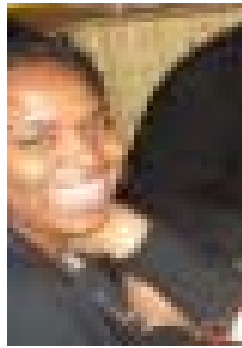
This new project was in addition to the regular cultural programming that I was responsible for, the classes I was teaching, and the courses I was taking. Zanna and I both agreed that the program should remain intimate, only a small number of students would be able to participate. As a result, I was in a position to invite students who I felt would benefit from the

experience and also work well together. Some of my personal criteria for selection included participating in previous cultural center programs and demonstrating a desire for growth as a performer. I relished this rare chance; I was completely aware of the privilege it was to pick and choose who I wanted to include. Before this even became a research project, I was tangling with the web that power often weaves. What makes this even tougher to admit was that I enjoyed it and I certainly exercised it. Most of the feminist teaching that I've received did not equip me well for this feeling. I had come to believe that power was a 'bad' thing, something a feminist would never work to gain or use for her own benefit. But as Foucault (1984) reminds us, "everything is dangerous, which is not the same as bad" and this was a danger I was eager to flirt with (p. 343). So I invited six students plus Zanna and me for a total of eight participants all of whom I had worked with in some capacity before. Everyone I invited accepted and agreed to participate. Below I offer a brief random sample of details that mark each of these student artists on a map of sorts to provide an outline of my motives when choosing them. The cast list for Collective Energy is as follows:



Joseph: Originally from Washington DC/Maryland, Joseph was a second year grad student at Penn State. A young black man, first generation college student, and fairly new to Penn State, Joseph struggled with themes of responsibility often because so many young folks looked up to him. He had worked for some time

prior to his decision to attend graduate school and major in College Student Affairs. His desk was literally attached to my desk in the PRCC and we worked and played hard together. He already had some experience performing his poetry prior to joining Collective Energy. We had traveled to Tanzania as part of a Women's Studies study abroad course together the summer before as well.



Zephyr: Also known simply as “Z,” this vibrant young lady remains one of the hardest working people I know. She hails from the island of Antigua and when she is angry or speaking very quickly her accent comes thick and fast. She has always held two jobs and was president of our Caribbean Student Association during the first year of Collective Energy. She also had a triple major and took her first Women's Studies class with me as the instructor. Her work ethic makes Z stand out. She was probably the youngest poet in the group in terms of both age and experience writing and sharing her poetry.



Rico: By far the most prolific writer of the group, we always teased Rico about his notebook because of the loose leaf pages he was forced to add and the tiny size of his print. Hailing from Philly, Rico is Puerto Rican and Black. He studies Kung Fu and is very conscious of his health and his way of life. Rico was not technically enrolled in school during Collective Energy; his financial aid did not come through. Rico is also a dancer—break dance, salsa, hip hop, you name it. We call him “Shooter” sometimes because of one of his poems. He boarded an airplane for the first time when we left the country for Trinidad and Tobago.



Chloe: A dreamer, an eclectic artist, and a huge Saul Williams fan, Chloe and I first met on the set of a theater production of *The Colored Museum* that we were both cast in. I was present at her first open mic performance and I was the person she texted when

she competed in (and won) her first slam. Chloe has been in attendance at most of the open mics the PRCC has sponsored. She is based out of Philadelphia, PA and is a junior. Chloe is a gymnast and a dancer and loves Jill Scott.



Raphael: Because of his slim build, old school dance moves, and smooth voice, we nicknamed Raphael “Ol’ Silky.” With a mother that is a college music professor, Raphael comes from a family of singers and musicians. An aspiring pianist and guitar player, this Black and Puerto Rican soul singer joined Collective Energy during his first year of graduate school at Penn State. After attending a Historically Black College for his undergrad, where he was heavily involved on campus as a student leader, Penn State was a complicated adjustment. Raphael is also a College Student Affairs major.



Amelie: We call Amelie our Songbird because of her deep voice and the harmonies that she belts out. One of a kind in her styles both on and off the stage, I first

met Amelie on the trip to Tanzania that Joseph and I were a part of the summer prior to the formation of Collective Energy. She was my director for a production of *Vagina Monologues* and she also participates in an acapella group on campus. A fervent photographer, Amelie has also been dancing since she was a child. Her red hair and freckles mark Amelie as the only white participant in Collective Energy. Her contributions artistically and thoughtfully make her shine.



Zanna: Every thoughtful and provoking poem that Zanna has shared within our group and on stage has earned her the name “The Teacher.” As director of the cultural center Zanna exudes confidence and has a reputation and expectations of excellence. She is in a constant state of internal critical reflection that often adds another layer of intensity to her work as an artist and a professional. She was earning her PhD during the time Collective Energy took place. I have known Zanna for almost as long as I’ve been at Penn State and she is more than a boss, a mentor, and a role model; she is a friend.



Crystal: my name is Crystal Leigh and I'm originally from Louisiana and I grew up in Virginia Beach. I have a background in theater and have been performing spoken word poetry at different venues around the country and beyond since I was 21 years old. I have produced two CD's of my own. I try to avoid specifically naming my ethnicity and often outright refuse to answer curious questions about my background—if I must be categorized I prefer to subscribe to a “mixed” group. *(At the same time, I name the racial categories that the other student artists belong to which may appear unfair. I realize that as author of this story I wield this power and I acknowledge that. I do this because each of the students named the ways in which they culturally identified and often spoke of the influence those subjectivities had on their performances. My subjectivity and racially mixed body also dictates a great deal of my performance and therefore I name myself as mixed. This is an issue that threads throughout the remainder of this story, so for now I set it back down.)* In reference to one of my poems and because of the passionate nature of my performance style the other members of Collective Energy sometimes call me “that fire.”

I offer these small blurbs not to initiate some false totalizing picture of who we are individually during this time, but to begin to darken in the starting points, to provide at least a shadow of the energy that collected for only a brief moment here. I want to clarify that this

integrated performing arts group did not begin as a research project, only as a cultural program. It wasn't until we were deep into the detailed planning stages that I realized that implementing a training/workshop/sharing time with a group of young artists was a desire I'd had for a long time. I also realized that there wasn't much background written on a group like ours that was specifically geared towards spoken word poetry. There were many manuals and guidelines for general 'arts' groups or for 'poets' but most of these templates were focused on very specific demographics and I constructed my group intentionally to avoid being generalized. They are not all students of color, they do not all identify as feminists, nor are they all first-generation college students. My purpose behind this mixture of distinct experiences was precisely that: to bring these different elements together and see what happened. I feel that the wild variety in each component is what makes this project so important. Frequently, there are examples of research that focus on one particular ethnic group or socioeconomic status but I have yet to find substantial work that focuses on such a varied community of people who instead of sharing a particular racial identity or gender share instead a commitment in growing their artistic skill sets as social change agents. Through this work with Collective Energy, I hope to extend the conversation that is already taking place around the following concepts of spoken word poetry, discourse, performance, and pedagogy by looping them together in a different way.

Spoken Word Poetry

For the purposes of this study, I'm defining spoken word poetry as a public performance through which meaning is negotiated. Spoken word poetry is always contextualized historically and also undergoes immediate social re-construction and re-production during each performance. This is an important foundation to build upon because before a performer even takes the stage, the stage itself is understood to be a contested site where negotiations of meaning and subjectivity take place. The performance of a spoken word piece implies a constant state of change. No two performances will render identical meanings, nor is that a useful goal. Although

the material being performed may remain consistent, the purpose of repeated performances in different venues and contexts is to gain different perspectives and values that will drive future understandings and readings of the performance and thus the performer. Poet Laureate [Billy Collins \(2003\)](#) suggests that poetry performance offers a double connection: one with the poet and one with the audience. He continues, “hearing a poem lends the experience an immediacy, a reality not found on the page” (p. 4). The key to this triple layered energy flow is the bodily transaction that takes place during a live performance of original work. Throughout such a performance, variable understandings and competing discourses involve some pretty serious stakes. There is a struggle for power that often results in the expression of a desire for agency. No singular outcome can be guaranteed; however, there is always the likelihood that multiple and opposing interpretations of any performance will occur. Spoken word poetry is a method that is useful in exploring these possibilities.

Performing spoken word poetry has provided Collective Energy with an outlet, a way to interrogate their views, realities and ideas about themselves and the world around them. The act of performing their perspectives both imagined and real is an act of resistance. I argue that the performance of these positions is feminist because the experiences the student artists have lived and the world we desire to live in have been continually stripped of its value and worth by the patriarchal, classist, and racist society in which we live. This society is experienced directly through their personal experiences in their home communities and through their higher education. By resisting the boundaries that work to contain and immobilize, these student artists are shifting the possibilities that exist for working in opposition to the negative ideologies and stale solutions that they have inherited. Spoken word poetry can be utilized as a new discursive practice by marginalized youth as a means to reconsider the practices of power within their own social and political context. Effective activist spoken word poetry works to open and engage, but the openings that puncture our borders cannot be measured or predicted. I draw on poststructuralist

theory because of its investment in the idea of permeable borders which is a crucial aspect of critical performance.

Discourse and Performance

Throughout the construction of the Collective Energy project and the performance of spoken word poetry I pulled heavily upon a feminist poststructuralist theoretical standpoint. Chris Weedon's (1997) helpful work on poststructuralist theory establishes the links between language and meaning and I find this a useful theoretical basis for the work that Collective Energy produced both in our meetings and in performances. Weedon states that "once language is understood in terms of competing discourses, competing ways of giving meaning to the world, which imply differences in the organization of social power, then language becomes an important site of political struggle" (p. 23). My question is not whether language holds power, rather, whose meanings (or which of the competing discourses) will win. The winner is determined by the organization of social power—whoever talks the loudest and has the access to distribute their words is often who is heard. I'm suggesting that through the weekly group meetings and the performances that each member of Collective Energy shared offered us a chance to re-write some of the dominant discourses that we named inaccurate. Teresa de Lauretis (1986) states:

Different forms of consciousness are grounded in one's personal history; but that history—one's identity—is interpreted or reconstructed by each of us within the horizon of meanings and knowledges available in the culture at given historical moments, a horizon that also includes modes of political commitment and struggle. Self and identity, in other words are always grasped and understood within particular discursive configurations (p. 6).

Applying de Lauretis' ideas to an integrated arts performance group vested in

social responsibility is key to the concept that through training student artists to be critical producers and consumers of culture, the “meanings and knowledges” that constitute the discourses available to them will be expanded as they deliberately engage with the political struggle of performance. Conquergood (1998) views such performances as interventions; thus performances and performance events become transgressive achievements, political accomplishments that break through sedimented meanings and normative traditions (p. 32). In other words, by performing our personal history the student artists are also performing the present and future and such performance adds to the obtainable vocabulary that constructs the ways we interpret those experiences.

Weedon’s (1997) work establishing language as a political power provides the guts of what I am proposing as the pedagogical power that a spoken word performance has. Language is the thrust of the message that is composed by the performer; however, the delivery of that message, the embodied performance adds another layer to the already complicated performance moment. The embodied performance or “acting out” that carries the message immediately reconstructs the meaning that is embedded in the original written poem. Because of the very immediate physical situation that confronts the audience member, spoken word poetry becomes a method of mediation between the contentious dynamics at play in any given performance. Such dynamics are informed in part based upon the positions of the subjects—both performer and audience member—which are going to be diverse. Their positions will inform the performance and participation respectively and will hopefully lead to a multiplicity of interpretations, contradictions, and understandings. An assortment of responses and re-creations of performances will lead to revisions of the performance and of the subjects providing openings and loops that indicate fluidity repel ideas of stagnation or static subjectivity.

Performance Pedagogy

I braid performance pedagogy with feminist poststructuralist theory in order to explain what occurs whenever artist and audience member meet to critically examine ideologies, power relationships, and the discourses through which their realities and meanings are negotiated inside the space that is opened up through performance. This concept is vital to include because it implicates the audience member in the construction of each performance just as readily as the artist herself. Through feminist poststructuralist performance pedagogy, the competing discourses that structure how and why meaning are produced not only get acknowledged by poststructuralist theory but are also made visible through performance—thus creating a means to challenge and resist those meanings. The many subject positions that the artist and audience member take up are then available for re-hearsal and further auditioning.

Subjectivities are full of energy and are never realized in a neutral or non-mobile state. Indeed, bell hooks' (1994) reminds how important it is for pedagogues to consider “ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress” which implies that motion is required for any creative method of learning to take place (p. 6). It should not be assumed that a “teacher” will remain in that subjectivity or that a “student” remains only a receptor of knowledge. Instead, these are two subject positions that are useful within this brief exploration of performance pedagogy that overlap with that of “artist” and “audience member.” According to artist/educator Charles Garoian (1999), during performance there is a transaction of language, an exchange that takes place while the subjectivity of “teacher” and “student” constantly shifts between the “artist” and “audience member” until “both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire in Garoian, 1999, p. 60). When this dual role of teacher and student is acknowledged in a performance then the expectation of the outcome of a performance shifts slightly to implicate both the audience and the performer as responsible for constructing the meaning behind the language of performance. This strategy reinforces the poststructuralist tendencies of performance pedagogy by disrupting the traditional social structures and expectations of language, teacher/student, and

performer/audience. The positions of the subjects are broadened to encompass a sense of accountability for the meaning and social implications of said meaning that underlie language and performance. This is a central concept to the idea that performance can offer the student artists of Collective Energy an opportunity to reflect the social relations that contextualize their versions of oppressed reality and to simultaneously tilt the imbalance of power that constricts their relationships.

A disruption of traditional roles and the power such disruptions can yield was particularly important as I began to examine my own position in Collective Energy. It is my hope that by beginning to articulate academically what I am learning about artistically, the social structures that reinforce and sustain unequal power relations will begin to be dismantled. The student artists have indeed become my teacher even as I assume a position of supposed authority. In the next chapter, as I explore the methodology, methods and motives I used and the ways that my positions sometimes suffocated me and trussed me up and tied my hands and tongue, I am reminded of one of Collective Energy's vocalists' advice. We were sitting together, caught in a brief moment of stillness with one another and I mentioned something to Amelie, our songbird, about an idea for a melody that I had. "Why don't you sing it?" she asked me. Laughing at the idea, I asked her how she did it on stage time and again. Amelie brushed her shining red bangs out of her eyes and shrugged her shoulders. "Once you start thinking about it, you become more confident and you can just do it." The important part was to start thinking about it, but Amelie never told me how I would know when to stop.

And so it begins...

It all began with Rico. Slender and soft spoken, his curly afro and light eyes combined with an ill sense of word play as a poet won him favor among the ladies on campus. His peaceful demeanor and almost reverent attitude earned him my respect. He approached my desk in the cultural center with that sideways smile and greeted me with a head nod and hug.

“What’s up Crystal Leigh? I just had to stop by and say thanks again for bringing that fire last night. Man, it was crazy. Thanks for letting me spit, man. Um, so I was wondering, if maybe you had some time you wouldn’t mind reading over this poem I’m working on, um, you know, I could just really use a muse right now, you know? It’s like, I have all these ideas and I just need to, you know what I’m saying, bounce them off of someone.”

It was 11am on a Friday and already a surprising string of visitors had stopped by my desk. I was tired from the late night before—it was the first cultural program I had ever planned in my life and I had underestimated the toll it would take on my energy. The usual friendliness that most of my students attributed to my Southern rearing was wearing thin and I was more than a little frustrated at the interruptions because they prevented me from accomplishing any work that required concentration. Two days of glorious poetry performances and critical cultural conversations that were a part of the Lyrical Legacies program, and the first Bed Spoken Word Lounge had satisfied an aching need that I had and also re-affirmed my confidence in my ability to perform. I had just shared the stage with the legendary Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka, who were later joined by contemporary spoken word artist Ursula Rucker and hip hop all-star BlackThought lead MC of the Roots crew, a Philly based band that rates in the top five for conscious hip hop music. The two day event also featured a young brother named Jason Reynolds that I remembered from my initial introduction to the slam poetry circuit in Baltimore, Maryland. His skill had developed astronomically and I was moved to step up my own game as a spoken word artist after having the opportunity to re-connect with him by inviting him up to Penn State as our Artist in Residence.

But it was Friday, at 11am and I was drained. I had paperwork to fill out, thank you’s to send, and deadlines to meet as a graduate assistant in the Paul Robeson Cultural Center (PRCC).

Rico was maybe the eighth student that stopped by with positive comments on the previous night. His enthusiasm and eagerness to improve his artistry stirred me because for a brief moment I saw a flashback of myself as a 21-year-old undergraduate student and poet—I thought, what if someone had just taken the time to talk to me about what to expect in the spoken word industry? What if my experience as a beginning spoken word artist and actor had been groomed by a group of friends that weren't driven only by the desire for personal gain or success but also by a deep commitment to making a change in this world?

These questions sparked a conversation with the director of the PRCC, and together, Zanna and I developed an outline for an integrated arts performance group that would groom artists like Rico. Our goal was to construct a group that met on a regular basis with the hopes of growing their life skills and performance by exposing them to deeper experiences within their own campus as well as beyond. We wanted to create an environment where these student artists could correlate their personal experiences with those of their peers and use their spoken word poetry or song writing talent to communicate those experiences to an audience. Introducing other artists, styles, social change theory, and ideas about activism and social justice, it was not difficult to align this cultural engagement program with the values spelled out in the mission statement of the PRCC. We were interested in creating a program that would allow them the chance to form and strengthen new and existing collaborative relationships in the hopes that they would gain practice learning from and listening to one another's perspectives and backgrounds. We were committed to their required participation in all the aspects of planning a program, from the set up to the tear down, and to creating regular performance opportunities for them to showcase what they were learning.

This introduction sets the stage for the action that took place in between and amongst the plans, goals, and ideas I had for Collective Energy. With all of these righteous intentions and

what I thought were meaningful learning moments built into our experience, Collective Energy was founded.

This is the “true” story... of eight artists... picked to perform together and have their lives taped... to find out what happens... when people stop being polite... and start getting real...welcome to Collective Energy...

Section Two:Methodologies

I wrote the introduction to this chapter in order to lay the ground work for my methods. Because performance is such a physical method, and indeed is a method of inquiry in and of itself, it is incredibly difficult for me to attempt to translate from a performance text to a written text. I’m limited before I even begin. I’m asking that you understand the research that is presented here is partial and fictionalized because that is the only way I am able to reconcile myself with writing about the intense eight month experience that was Collective Energy. This lopsided view doesn’t pull evenly from each student artists’ quotes or artistic contributions. In this case, retrospect does not always promise the clearest vision.

There are an increasing number of academic contributions that have been made which define, situate and examine the usefulness of performance and art in a classroom setting, some of which provide guidelines on how to implement such techniques, as well as collections that explore connections between art and activism (Garoian, 1999; Becker, 1994; Boal, 1979; Giroux, 2006; Denizen, 2003; Klebesadel, 2003; Felshin, 1995; Kester, 1998). I have found support in most of these references and use them to frame a specific personal account of where I am and where I am not in the system of higher education and the world. This occurs through an examination and analysis of the relationships that exist between performance that is feminist and pedagogy that is feminist and the praxis of these two theories with consideration to social and

racial ideologies present within the context of Collective Energy. I formed the theoretical base for Collective Energy by interweaving the feminist and performance theories gestured to below. I conclude this chapter by highlighting the methods that shaped the ways in which this research was conducted while continually looping my inquiries back to my personal practices and experiences.

Conversations

The mode of performance that occurs most often in the analysis to follow is either the content or result of spoken word poetry. During our initial Collective Energy meetings we discussed a mission statement that included the clearly stated goal of creating performances that would “reflexively recognize, go against the grain of, and attack the dominant cultural ideologies connected to race, class, family, gender” and a combination of the ways these issues overlapped (Christians, 2000, p. 111). I told our group that as an artist I was not interested in producing art that was not rebellious and disruptive. The performance text that we were to produce must do more than invoke a shared response of empathy from the performer, the performed, and the audience, all of whom share their roles; according to the standard set by Norman K. Denzin (2003) spoken word poetry must “interrogate, criticize, and empower” (p. 55). The subject matter more often than not came directly from the lived or imagined experiences of the student artists. It makes sense that their personal issues were the most pressing and urgent for them to articulate and interrogate through performance. According to the definitions set forth by Sadonie Smith and Julia Watson (2005) each performance of spoken word is at some point a form of (auto)biography because of the use of “bodies, experiential histories, memories, and personal landscapes” that are the sources of composition and tools of performance (p. 5). This claiming of space and aggressive declaration of authority was understood to be part of the appeal behind performing original work. The question I pose now is what is at stake when women (and men)

remake practices of self-presentation to “claim their authority” (p. 4)? How can these self-presentations be interrogated and criticized?

Here is an area of overlap with my research focus and the focal point of the group. If we focus for a moment on the issues of autobiographical interrogations that spoken word poetry can induce, then Collective Energy performances can be situated as a means of self-inquiry and knowledge production because of the audiences’ interpretation of a performance that is at once fiercely personal and unabashedly public. Each historical moment in which a spoken word piece is performed will render a new version or translation of the artists’ autobiography. I am interested in the What makes Collective Energy so powerful is that it provides an opportunity to examine those subject positions and impose new meaning upon them, which is part of the appeal of using Collective Energy for a research site. I ask, what does this mean for pieces that are developed collaboratively? For no matter how metaphorical or abstract the language used, no matter how delicate the melody and unified the harmony, the majority of content refers to an experience or idea that is seeded in the life of the student artists. In this way, the construction of collaborative spoken word performances, and I would argue a large scale show that is intentionally ordered, initiate conversations among a variety of autobiographical experiences. Such a performance invites the probing and handling of social consequences and material restraints that determine the texture of such autobiographies. Indeed, the process of writing, revising, rehearsing, and finally performing spoken word poetry offers occasion for negotiating the past, reflecting on identity, and critiquing cultural norms and narratives (Smith & Watson, p. 9). Through the effective critique, spoken word can become powerful and offer a creative means of resistance that enhances the student artists’ sense of autonomy and heightens the awareness of the many layers of active relationship that hop like a jumping spider. The focus shifts abruptly from performer to audience member and back in a jumping spider’s unpredictable, jerky, and downright frightening pattern that is not always traceable. Through such a vocalized assertion of

self what becomes increasingly difficult to ignore are the cultural distances and racialized interactions that shape what is oftentimes the driving force behind such performances.

Hoping to educate others and to discover for myself how to critically think through a performance meant laying a foundation using factors that would help set some porous guidelines for critical production and consumption. According to qualitative researcher advocate, C. Christians (2000), there are three criteria that determine whether or not a feminist communitarian aesthetic has been achieved. First, the productions must represent multiple voices. Secondly, the performances must enhance moral discernment. Lastly, they must promote social transformation (p. 145). The guidelines for constructing an inclusive performance appear simple enough; however, it is problematic when the following are considered: it is impossible and presumptuous to expect that *all* voices and viewpoints will be included evenly, so who determines which will be? Whose morals are going to be discerned? What ‘counts’ as social transformation?

These questions led me to settle upon certain concepts that must be in place in order to achieve some sense of progress. The process of writing and performing spoken word envelopes and exists in the understanding that the artist is in constant conversation during a performance. There are the multiple conversations taking place with the audience, other performers, and the subject of the self. Social transformation takes place through interactions with the audience during points of slippage where transactions of meaning are negotiated. The subject is constituted based upon the experiences that have been had and the social and cultural context of the performance. This subject is “neither unified, nor stable—it is fragmented, provisional, multiple, in process” and the discourses that subject either subscribes to or is assigned to are intersectional and constantly fluctuating (Smith & Watson, 2005, p. 10). I attempt here to pause the motion not to steady subjects that were changing even as we interacted, but to look at the fragments through a different light than the one I saw with while in the midst of the project.

Social transformation, then, begins to take place when the subjects (in this case, the performers or student artist) is able to re-negotiate a way of making meaning that no longer situates them in a victimized state. Rather, their re-positioning or re-alignment of their position, even if imagined, changes the social and material narratives that have scribed them at least within a certain time and space. By exercising agency in this way, they develop the ability to teach others (such as audience members) the same technique. Through the creation and re-creation of subjectivity the student artists produce new readings of old oppressive texts and tell new stories within stale social constraints. Spoken word performance provides a way to be seen and heard for students whose concerns, lives, and dreams are often unheeded. This seemingly independent attempt at making sense out of life becomes greater than the artist and the audience when what is personal to one becomes contextualized in what is personal to many. Realizing an active relationship between artist and audience is key for enlarging the scope that performance provides to view the effects of social injustices. These active relationships demand that all those present in a performance (artist and audience) recognize their location, position, and participation in the construction of the performance, as well as in the construction of the *content* of the performance. Then the oppressive sense of isolation that often results from experiences of injustice or inequality can potentially be identified and altered once these personal experiences are located within the structural divisions that determine material aspects of social existence. Performing spoken word makes available a discourse through which an alternate picture of such structures can be seen. Like a smudged, cracked mirror, the visions that can be seen are not always seen clearly, nor is seeing or hearing quite enough. However, once these structures are identified and their consequences are taken seriously and understood in relation to personal experiences, then new plans of action (or attempts) can be devised in order to promote social change.

Forms of critical and feminist pedagogy often align themselves with goals of educating for social change in many different environments by seeking to foster emancipatory aims by

legitimizing knowledge that arises from socially marginalized positions through decentering dominant traditions of power (Giroux, 1992; Simon, 1992; Freire, 1972; Ellsworth, 1989; Mohanty, 1989). The similarity of such aims with those of a spoken word performance steeped in desire for a feminist aesthetic and goal of social transformation invite further investigation. In fact the combination of characteristics that define each of these ideologies compose what I term “feminist poststructuralist performance pedagogy.” The drive to engage students in a classroom and the motivation for a socially conscious poet to actively engage the audience are fed by the same assumption: active critical questioning and forms of analysis and inquiry are required if the dominant ideologies that combine to steel the structures of racism, sexism, classism are to be undermined.

What I hope to explore are the ways in which resistance beads up like sweat upon the engaged face of such idealistic pedagogies. Understanding the theory and thought behind a critical pedagogy is one thing, but to actualize that pedagogy in a classroom setting or performance at a university is quite another. What happens when students resist what a feminist pedagogue doesn't *want* them to resist? In other words, what are the factors that contribute to students resisting “liberating” pedagogies (Lather, 1988)? How can an educator invested in social justice respond? Bell, Morrow, and Tastsoglou (1999) suggest that most often, such resistance is due to student investment and regurgitation of dominant systematic ideologies and that an intentional effort to bring a structural critique to the classroom will be a challenge that may be prepared for by fostering a “public culture of dissent,” an intentionally political stance, and contextualizing personal experience (pp. 40 -42). Performance pedagogy provides a particular method of addressing such issues in a way that has, in my experience, surprised students into reconsidering their notions of the “center.” Using performance to provide concrete examples of the structures that shape social experience makes visible the degree of mobility that privilege provides.

Viewing performance as an opportunity for renegotiation of meaning and movement between discourses and subjectivities service this research by providing a connection with the notions of multiple identities, deconstruction, and multiple readings of a text with the ways that different people subvert, organize, and resist oppressions (Dehli, 1991, p. 47). This is my effort to reconcile the separation of mind, body and spirit that is so often demanded by academic work (Rockhill, 1987; Brookes, 1992; Dehli, 1991). This is also an effort to re-focus the lens through which you will read this work. It is a means to tribute the emotion, desire, pain and pleasure that constitute the conditions of my being here (Dehli, 1991, p. 64). This is another way that I acknowledge that I am my home—I am a bridge, a conduit, and most certainly a medium.

Methods

I thought I began making such connections as a medium for Collective Energy with the hope that the lives involved in each would improve as a result. Of course, initially, these desires and efforts were based upon my ideas of improvement and results. We'll get to that later. Social transformation is often misunderstood to require an enormous and instant tsunami of change—a fierce, violent revolution that happens suddenly. Even though the majority of this study is focused on performance due to the very direct physical form of participation that it can potentially effect, what I am growing to realize is that the transformation that I've been searching for doesn't necessarily allow itself to be measured and doesn't always occur manifest as a large sweeping social movement. The examination and focused analysis of the Collective Energy experience (for both the student artists and the audience) help the student-artists and me to understand our living situations, discover new ways to articulate them (for that understanding is necessary in order to carve out a plan to change them at all), and to educate someone else about them so that we may alter the way that we live our daily lives.

Speaking to the problems and possibilities of feminist research methods, Michelle Fine (1992) reminds that it is vital to think of myself and all feminist researchers as activists whose

duty it is to press, provoke, and unbalance social inequity and to remember that such scholarship bears serious consequences in the lives of the researcher and the researched (p. i). She continues, “feminist researchers have little choice and much responsibility to shape our research through activist stance in collaboration with community based political women” (p. 205). The research methods used for this project begin as a combination of feminist action research and feminist participatory research. I explain below.

(Feminist) Action Research

A feminist action researcher is one who observes a situation and uses her research as a canvas upon which she sketches a plan to alter the conditions that she is observing; the observation and recording of data is not the completion of her project. Part of the reason that I apply the method of feminist action research is due to the premise that this particular form of research is conscious of the environment where the study takes place and is aware of the effects that space can have on all of the research subjects. Feminist action research is also flexible; it seeks to implement what Reinharz (1992) describes as “a fluid approach that is constantly evaluated” in order to discern whether or not the methods being used are the most beneficial to those involved in the research (p. 178). I often reminded myself that if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it, but if it *is* broke then fix it immediately! If a method is working and appears to be helpful, uplifting and productive, then continue to use it and if not, then I should ask what needs to be changed and adjust accordingly. The observation and data collection must include a goal that the researcher is working towards that involves a means of supporting the research subjects in a way that they choose and welcome support. In other words, there must be a goal for social change; however, the researcher is not a crusader coming to help anyone. Collaboration and communication, while always shifting and unsteady terrain between researcher and the researched population must be the means through which a goal is set. This was a lesson I quickly learned once I distributed my syllabus at the first meeting of Collective Energy. My detailed lesson plans

were almost immediately deviated from after the first night. While I had to have a plan and a guideline for what we needed to accomplish in order to meet my job requirements, I was also lucky enough to be working within an environment that had leeway for such changes. There was room for input from the student artists when it came to our goals as a cohesive performance group.

Schools of feminist thought approach the setting of goals in two ways. There are those who assert that the setting of goals should be open ended and flexible in order to invoke a continuous process of change (Bologh, 1984). On the other hand, feminist researchers Ann Bristow and Jody Esper (1988) suggest instead that specific courses of action must be executed in order for feminist research to be action oriented. I call upon these valuable contributions to action research and feminist methods because of their emphasis on outcome; they each stringently require that every effort is taken in order to ensure that there is evidence of change. Outcome and evidence however are particularly difficult to measure when performance and art are the techniques that are being used to produce proof of “improvement”. One reason for this difficulty is the slippery character of performance. Can reaction be measured? Should I even desire to quantify response or engagement? And I’m led to question what ‘counts’ as evidence—how does one best set a goal for a group of research subjects without claiming one’s own role? If it is the process of change that is important, whose process are we talking about? I want to know, change for whom?

In order to hold the researcher accountable for her participation, Terrence R. Carson and Dennis Sumara (1997) insist that “the educational researcher must generate new knowledge” and she does so by “learning to live a life that allows one to perceive differently” to “represent the path of thinking and inquiry that has led to these conclusions” (p. xvi). The researcher does this by “showing the connections between the researcher and the subject of inquiry.” This approach to research outlines a very clear expectation that part of the research itself will illuminate and

hold the researcher accountable for the connections with the research that are developed in the process. In other words, the life of the researcher is part of the research. There is no escaping the issue of responsibility and the question of investment, benefits, and respect that are often at stake, as well as subjectivity which is plays a strong role in Collective Energy's performances.

Carson and Sumara bring into focus the fact of relationship that is often considered an outcome of research rather than the cause, effect, and product of research. This definition demonstrates an understanding of action research as "a lived practice that requires that the researcher not only investigate the subject at hand but, as well, provide some account of the way in which the investigation both shapes and is shaped by the investigator" (p. i). Carson and Sumara are describing a form of research that is heavily invested in understanding the relationships that exist, determine, and are produced as a result of research *and* how that research also exists, is determined, and re-constructed because of relationships. This acute search for the location of power and the effect of that power on the affairs of those involved in a study is an important starting point for a project whose goal is to create performances that foster a sense of social responsibility and aim to effect social change. This is part of the link that feminist action research has with a politics whose goals align with that same mission. Simply stating who was in charge wasn't enough, and it certainly wasn't always easy, nor was it always the case that I seceded any of my power cheerfully. But the effort to acknowledge, struggle with, and attempt to create a democratic space that we could work in together was a start. Reminding the student artists constantly that it was up to them which direction our performances would take was an effort. Recognizing and apologizing when I messed up helped to build the trust between members in the group. Feminist action research as a methodology partnered sensibly with reflexivity on these points. The level of social change, the talk around activism, and the revision that took up much of our time had the movement of a pendulum; one moment we were in it all together, the next we were off balance again.

Participatory action research has been described as a significant method for development and change within communities and groups; ultimately, as Carson and Sumara (1997) state, “action research is a set of relations among persons, their histories, their current situations, their dreams, their fantasies, their desires” (p. xx). It focuses on the effects of the researchers direct actions of practice within a participatory community with the goal of improving the quality of the community (Dick, 2002; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Hult & Lennung, 1980). This type of research also utilizes a systemic method of planning, taking action, observing and evaluating; this is identical to the rehearsal process of a theater performance and also similar to the format into which our group meetings evolved. Evaluation of a participatory action research project includes and, in this case, emphasizes critical self-evaluation and reflection in order to improve upon both the method and the results of the route taken (O’Brien, 2001; McNiff, 2002). Thus, value is placed not only on the product, but on the process as well, which is directly useful because Collective Energy’s product has been many performances and vibrant relationships that breathe on their own; performances are never final or solid outcomes. As Carson and Sumara (1997) state “Who one *is* becomes completely caught up in what one knows and does,” meaning, what I do as an artist, teacher, and friend with the students of Collective Energy is shaped by who I am in these different roles and those roles are determined by the relationships that have evolved from working with these students (p. xvii). They shape my life as I am shaping theirs.

Action research is above all concerned with the production of knowledge and understanding which is precisely why performances by arts based groups like Collective Energy make a good fit with this method of research (Carson and Sumara, 1997, p. xviii). As stated earlier, one of my main focuses for Collective Energy was to provide time and space through the weekly workshop sessions that would allow and encourage them to develop their ideas about the role they, as artists, play in enacting social change. This process requires that we consider audience, self, society, and the message we wish to convey just as action research “is not

considered apart from the historically, politically, culturally, and socially effected conditions of its production” (p. xvii). In order for our original performances to be effective at this task, they must engage with the surrounding community around issues relevant to that community. Thus, the knowledge each performance produces “is always knowledge about one’s self and one’s relations to particular communities” (p. xvii). These relationships are understood to be evolving constantly and performed differently depending upon the circumstances and personal context that never stays the same. I ask each student artist to look to the external to understand the internal effects of their cultural production and vice versa.

This description is the same stuff that Collective Energy is made up of; our memories, our futures, our performances and ideas, the time we have spent traveling together, where we have gone as a result of whom we were and where we are as a result of who we have become. In an attempt to determine who we are ‘being’ as artists, I turn to visual artist Elizam Escobar (1994): “hence, even if the role of the artist, like so many other roles, is conceived as a historically and socially determined construct, it is in the body of the artist—its physical, physiological, mental, spiritual, emotional totality—where we can locate the true impulse and source of art...it is the particular concrete individual who will decide how far he/she can go” (p. 50). Recognition of the vulnerability and sacrifice of one’s body during a performance of spoken word poetry or song is crucial to understanding how effective and how damaging such work can be. This individual decision as made by each artist will prompt the distance and breadth covered by any given artistic community. Within and between each of us there remain questions that are not yet answered. How will responsibility be shared? Who decides what? How do we do what we do and what, pray tell, are we doing? What will be the effects of this work we have undertaken together? If we desire to stimulate and to transform ourselves and others through performance, then our lives must reflect that desire.

This method is not without appropriate criticism. While Wadsworth (1998) suggests that the critical reflecting on historical, political, cultural, economic, geographic and other contexts can be a genuinely democratic or non-coercive process, this is only so when those to be helped determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry. However, this process is still complicated by the suggestion that the community or “those to be helped” want or require assistance. Although I am a member of the Collective Energy community I am distanced in particular ways because of my leadership role. Although I pointed out some specific ways I had formed previous relationships with the students that joined the group prior to any leadership role I may have taken up or been assigned, there are moments where they hold back because of me. Thus, even the construction of the group may still be considered an externally motivated act meaning that I was responsible for arranging its conception (Chambers, 1983). I tried to lay the purpose of the group before the students and I aggressively sought their input. However, my position as a leader and my eager demands for their vocal contributions was problematic as well.

Speaking to the complicated calls for voice that are raised by most feminist and critical pedagogies, Mimi Orner (1992) offers a reminder that “there is always the possibility (and actuality) of a gap, of misinterpretation, of misrecognition when we try to make sense of our relation to others. We can never be certain of the meaning of others’ responses. We can never be certain of the meaning of our own responses” (p.84). Perhaps there is a certain measure of comfort to be found in the understanding that there is no way to predict when exactly a connection will be made between us and others or what kind of connection it might be. Perhaps we should be satisfied with the swish that indicates someone is close by, or the scent of something familiar drifting by that signals to us that at least we are not alone and someone is close by even if they can’t quite touch us. As a feminist researcher that uses performance as a method of inquiry, attention to voice and who is taking a turn to speak as well as the manner in which they are speaking is of utmost concern to me. However, a call to “empowerment” is a

responsibility that weighs far too heavily for any one text to support. I do not wish to contribute to the tiresome assumptions that have circulated that take for granted that any one person can empower another; that is not useful. I am also at once deeply troubled and somewhat redeemed because of Valerie Walkerdine's (1990) interrogation into why researchers desire to know certain things and she answers her own question (and mine) by asserting that we are all looking "for power, for control, and for vicarious joining in as well as a desperate fear of the Other" (p. 174). Yes, I think, yes! I am absolutely seeking power in my own life, control of my own knowledge and because I am an *active participant* in this research, I am, for all practical purposes, researching myself! I have been named "Other" for so long that I looked at myself this way and was afraid. Because of this placement, this overlapping of my subjectivities as bearing on this research, because I am a member of the "Others" that I am researching, the act of research and the effort to share those findings is an act of opening. I am no longer attempting to "Other" my own experience now that I realize that was what was happening; however, there are aspects of specificity particular to myself and to the other members of Collective Energy that may never be known or understood.

In her poetic and profound work on third world women and the mestiza consciousness, Gloria Anzaldua (1981) writes of a quest for the "center of the self" that has been alienated due to an internalized exile that women of color experience (p. 169). She argues effectively that writing helps us to survive that exile and alters our alien status. It is such a return to the center of many selves that I find myself fumbling towards in the dusk of the day, a careful searching for tender gaps that were rent in the split of myself when I first realized I was "Other," in those moments before I realized I could choose to be "Other" or not. Similar to the battle ground and sanctuary that Anzaldua finds in writing I find in performance. This is what I have tried to share with Collective Energy. The discovery that I was not alone in my performance experiences emboldened me as an artist and I was excited at the idea of throwing in my lot with other artists.

I had never been a part of such a group—I had not even written a collaborative poem before—yet I found the idea of artistic companionship appealing.

Perhaps we should be content to finger the texture of what can be reached and be content with sharing what we are able to. I turn to the research process here, the ways that I inquire into what exactly may be known or simply recognized as unknowable. The research process itself serves as a performance of subjectivities and as a teeming site of further questions, which suggests how the discourses that assist in building them might be dissected and understood as shifting and contingent. Such an understanding is useful for a feminist methodology that strives to mold itself as inclusive versus empowering. I felt a constant struggle to strike a balance between employing an inclusive approach to this study and to the work of running Collective Energy efficiently. Duty and desire were in constant competition.

Walkerdine's argument by no means frees me of ethical responsibility as a researcher simply because I am researching to find out about myself as well; in fact, I'm being held accountable on another level. What I report within this text marks me as a witness and as an instigating force because I held a position of authority I am doubly responsible as a participant as well as an organizer. This implication increases the critical nature of self-reflexive work that constantly checks itself for evidence of betrayal, of selfishness, and disloyalty. Although this conclusion partially addresses the question of my own investment, it also raises several more regarding my ability and efforts at disclosing all of the historical, cultural and social forces competing to shape the perspectives and perceptions that are included here. How confessional should one text be? And to what end? Can we ever fully know ourselves (much less others) both as historical products and as pliant, able to be bent and twisted from our own hands and at the hands of circumstance?

Uma Narayan (1997) takes up the issues of witnessing and accounting for our interactions with one another and culture at large through a political stance. She acknowledges

this conversation as “an attempt to, publicly and in concert with others challenge and revise an account that is neither the account of an individual nor an account of the culture as a whole, but an account of *some* who have power within the culture” (p. 9-10). Again I turn to the act of performing spoken word poetry and how that political performance is an account and maybe a much more important pedagogical one, given the large numbers of young people in the audiences at the open mics where we performed. That performed account is as heavy in theory and politics as this text you are now reading because it enacts in a powerful way the tale of “some” that have the access and ability to perform and engages with the question of why that “some” holds only “some” power.

Knowing then, that this research has already been performed (and thus presented) by the original authors of it on several different occasions, I am relaxed in the struggle with the inequitable status in which my subject position of “researcher” and “organizer” places me. In fact, I still relish it. I’m getting to tell a story that until now, I did not believe I was capable of telling. Collective Energy does validate me, but only because I was a part of it. I didn’t earn the right to tell this story because I’m a woman of color, or working class, or first generation college student, or an artist. I earned the privilege because I was given permission to tell the story by those involved—including myself. I name myself author.

Gloria Anzaldua (1981) explains what naming oneself author means in words that I feel ringing in my own hands:

Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency I fear. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit. Finally, I write because I’m scared of writing but I’m more scared of not writing (p. 169).

For me, this attempt to share the work of the student artists that perform with Collective Energy is a demonstration of the bridges that Anzaldua and her comrades demanded be acknowledged. Anzaldua writes to know herself and to know the reader, just as the spoken word artist performs to learn herself, her audience, and her world. It is an effort to move somewhere beyond salvaging the remains offered by an oppressive and bitter system and towards our wildest imaginations because sometimes, what we can dream, oversights included, is all that pushes us on. Collective Energy is built on such dreams.

The focus on daily lived practices and human interaction is historically a feminist one. Reinharz (1992) agrees that feminist action research “includes the individual who [attempts to] honestly assess what she has learned about herself” in a public and political way, and in so doing, emphasizes the importance of understanding how components of activism and self-reflexive practices work together in useful and vital ways (p. 196). An analysis of performance is a nice fit for this particular method because of the repeated expectation that the findings be made public, or as Reinharz suggests be “open for public scrutiny” (p. 189). If the researcher claims that there will be an outcome that in some way benefits the research subjects, then it makes sense for a call of accountability to be sounded. However, there is also the likelihood that through the process of the research the participants will have a positive or provoking experience. This is particularly true for research that relies heavily upon disclosure, whose format is group discussion, interviews, and performance. Demanding that the public have access to the outcome calls into question the ways in which the findings are distributed, presented, and where such moments occur. Taking the steps towards ensuring that they do introduces methodology to praxis of spoken word for social change.

Feminist Participatory Research

Feminist participatory research deepens and personalizes what action research introduced. This form of research is described by Bologh (1984) as one that is “designed to create social and individual change by altering the relations of the people involved...the distinction between researcher(s) and those on whom the research is done disappears” (p. 181, as in Reinharz). The disappearing act is simply not possible due to my position and the role that I played in forming, planning, and finally controlling the aspects of the research that I choose to present. The logistical planning that is required by any student affairs program added to my already heavy load the duties of budgeting, supervising, negotiating, and reporting results to my superiors. These duties clearly distinguished me from the group as a leader and sometimes a mentor and because of this role, because of my personal stake in the recording of our time together, it was impossible for the other members of Collective Energy to ignore our distinctions. What I do find as key is the clear communication to the research subjects that it was my desire to share not only in the power of planning but also in the responsibility of what would be produced in the research space. While the student artists were aware that the video recordings of our sessions and performances, as well as copies of their notebooks would compile my doctoral research, they also appeared to embrace our time together and used it to engage with one another mostly focused on the goals of our group. They certainly didn't shy away from the camera. Because of their nonchalant reactions to my constant reminders that I was going to use their words and work to get my diploma I think it is important to view the space and time we shared as a research space and a space for cultural production. Although at times these spaces overlap or edge one another out the effects they had on me were distinctive. I found myself developing the characters of artist and researcher/leader and sometimes failing at changing up my costume at the appropriate time. I felt responsible for achieving my ideas of success which initially included each member claiming to be an activist/artist by the end of the project. I was disappointed when

they didn't respond in the way I predicted they might. I thought myself sensitive and broad and found I was still rigid and narrow in areas that surprised me.

At first I tried to think up ways to reduce the impact all of these subject positions and might have in regards to my attempts to construct a democracy and to invite participation and feedback from everyone involved. What I came to realize instead was that my subject positions and the perspectives they gave me were important to include. While this may sound basic, it was quite a profound moment of epiphany for me; how could I create a space that liberated and facilitated communication and honesty if I was downplaying the multiple roles that I was striving to fill? By acknowledging the stresses of this position and the added sense of obligation and efforts I was making, I was demonstrating how to use the space we created together as place where vulnerability was not only possible, but safe and desired. Here the grounds covered by action research and participatory research begin to converge.

Sociologist Francesca Cancian (1989) lists three core features of participatory action as follows:

“(1) political action and individual consciousness-raising...(2) relationships are democratic and participants share in making decisions and acquiring skills, (3) the everyday life experience and feelings of participants are a major source of knowledge” (as in Reinharz, p. 182).

Indeed, my own existence as an artist and my own production of knowledge within our group meetings and my cultural production through our performances instantly throw Collective Energy into the category of a participatory project, for it was from the overflowing fountain of “everyday life experience and feelings” that we drew bucket after bucket of inspiration for songs, poems, and themes for discussion.

During our group meetings it became evident that consciousness-raising was an important part of the immediate experience of Collective Energy. The reason for presenting bits

of this research to a broad audience through spoken word and theater performances and articles that will be read by my own demographic, as well as to a greater academic audience is to raise awareness of both the similarities and the differences in our experiences and to hopefully incite some consideration, some thought of communication, some effort towards inclusion, some outreach, some increased sensitivity to those of us who struggle to embody and execute a life dedicated to action. The project here is to present a thoroughly investigated portion of what such a life might look like for the purpose of bettering practices of educational, artistic, and activist nature.

A/r/tography

As stated earlier, the motivation for the action researcher is to produce new concepts from different perspectives and to clearly represent the journey that leads to those perceptions. Using arts-based research as a method of inquiry, these perceptions have the potential to be extended in many different and unpredictable directions by calling attention to ideas that may otherwise remain unconsidered. The importance of asking the questions that have been taken for granted is a central concern for the practice of *a/r/tography* which combines art, research, and teaching as a research methodology that is primarily focused on “self-study, being in community, and relational and ethical inquiry” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xix). As such, I employ the practice of *a/r/tography* through conducting this research prior to my recognition of its benefits. *A/r/tography* encompasses the methods of participatory and action research that I’ve outlined above because of its focus on the production of meaning, the allowance of dynamic movement between subjectivities, and the invitation for tension between the spaces of “art making, teaching, and researching” that occur simultaneously. This method focuses upon the production and process of art making and theory making at the same time (p. xx). Indeed, “theory is understood as a critical exchange that is reflective, responsive and relational, which is continuously in a state of reconstruction and becoming something else altogether” (p. xx).

A/r/tography acknowledges and encourages a lifestyle that nurtures and allows all of these subjectivities to flourish without privileging one over another which provides a new lens to view the competing desires that Collective Energy manifested in each student artist.

Practicing a/r/tography demands a blurring between the subjectivities of artist, researcher, and teacher because this practice-based research methodology does not “privilege one identity over another as they occur simultaneously” (p. 205). This blurring of boundaries between subjectivities is a difficulty that I explore further in Chapter Two. Performance requires the audience member and the performer to seek out the overlaps of subjectivities rather than offering firm or solid roles to adhere to. Understanding theory and praxis as inter-relational is absolutely crucial to an understanding of social justice and social transformation because such transformation occurs only through the context of relationships. Thus, a/r/tography provides an ideal method for Collective Energy, a research project with a focus on understandings of activism.

Further, this methodology emphasizes the act of practice, focusing on the “when” of an educational, research, or art experience rather than who counts as an a/r/t or what might be a/r/t (p. 205). In other words, “action researchers and a/r/tographers are concerned with creating the circumstances to produce knowledge and understanding through inquiry laden processes” whether those processes be one section or all three (a/r/t) at a time (p. xxiv). The practice of a/r/tography is focused on inquiry through the production of arts and writing that focuses upon relationship and upon a quest of understanding the occurrences that take place in the middle of multiple sites through “interconnected networks” (p. 205). One of my primary motivations for creating Collective Energy was to establish a “network” of socially responsible artists and support and so the goals of this research align directly with the fluid understandings tendered by a/r/tography. This method invites friction and finds it fruitful, validating moments of self-reflexivity and demanding the context of collective interpretation *especially* when it is

cacophonous. A/r/tography helps make this raw and intimate research bearable because a/r/tography understands that nothing stays the same for long.

A Note on Format

Poetry and scriptwriting are often implemented as ways to present research in a text in order to provoke a strong sense of empathy in an audience member or reader, specifically when such a work is based on lived experiences (Richardson, 1994, 2000, 2002; Smith, 1993; Ensler, 2001). Poetry and performance are the specific forms of arts-based research that I will focus on in this study. However, in order to best present those art forms, I will call upon the use of fictionalized autoethnography, lyrics and poetry, the format of a script, and pictures throughout this academic text. Peggy Phelan (1993) reminds that “representation always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing” (p. 2). I have no misguided hopes of fully representing the experience of Collective Energy or even of my own experience, but, I dare to hope that through the transgression of combining portions of all of these formats this research will invite multiple readings, and more importantly, multiple resistances of this interpretation will be welcomed. By experimenting with a variety of texts, I am asking the reader to participate in a variety of performances that are fluid so that there is a greater chance of engaging them emotionally and empathetically within the discourses that are represented here; I am asking them to relive certain events emotionally, along with me (Richardson, 2000, p. 931). Just as I often implement techniques outlined by Boal (1979) in the Theater of the Oppressed in order to rearrange students and allow them to experiment with re-aligning where they think they stand, I intentionally shuffle this text into a format that does not necessarily situate the reader into a linear position of control. The illusion of control and power is a barrier I have been forced to confront time and again throughout Collective Energy. Presenting our story to you in such a fashion would be a disservice and dishonest on my behalf.

Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth (1996) provide an excellent example of how to break any illusion of linear simplistic relations through the juxtapositioning of their separately written papers (in three different formats) into a single text that challenges traditional boundaries. Similarly, I wish to organize this representation of my research and the people involved in such a way that invites “inconsistencies, ambiguities, ambivalence, and foregrounds the fact that there will always be ‘unspoken themes’ that cannot or will not be interrogated” (p. 74). Inspired by their structuring of this particular article in a way that refuses “categorical, discursive, historical, and stylistic boundaries” I hope to draw attention to the ways that the cacophony of stories being told within my own pages is overlapping, drowning out, and happen in moments of time that are not neat, linear cause and effect (p. 73). Marnina Gonick (2003) addresses the complications that re-telling stories and representation provoke by suggesting that a disruptive text is one that makes room for “the representation of many different voices, as well as the many voices of a single individual” (p. 58). Gonick goes on to correlate the consideration of voices as contingent and relational by pointing out that doing so allows for a text that acknowledges and supports the construction of identities and discourses as plural, contradictory, partial and strategic (p. 58). This assertion of the characteristics of voice in no way attempts to costume the cultural and social frameworks that shape the stories being told (or not told), nor do they attempt to disguise the capitalistic profits that are due to the researcher at the conclusion of any project.

For example, I am manipulating the ‘data’ of our precious times together to find a fresh contribution to my fields of study so that I can graduate from university and go on to land a fantastic job. I feel guilty that I am practicing this and I feel guilty when I try to quit. This isn’t a smooth and shiny music video where the gritty gets made glossy. This is a very different sort of performance for me. I am still not quite comfortable with the responsibilities I have to my friends in Collective Energy because they have trusted me to be their spokesperson in this setting which assumes I can represent them properly, in the way they wish to be seen. They trust me now

because my heart and intentions are in a good place but I am unable to protect them or myself, neither can I prepare us for what may lie ahead. There is no insurance for this sort of risk. There is no orderly arrangement for what existed for us during that time. “In searching for structure to impose on experience it is all too tempting to reduce the complex to the readily apprehensible, assuming authority and control over one’s own motives and omitting states of serious confusion, violent feelings or acts, censorships, important failures, changes of course, and excessive pleasures” (Clifford, 1986, p. 13 as in Gonick, p. 29). You see, I’m hoping that this multi-modal format will continue to hold me accountable, exposed, and keep me stimulated to create. As you will read later on, it is in the moments of ugliness, of impending disaster that I was certain were coming, when I felt completely out of control worried that I had ruined any good thing that may have resulted from our work as Collective Energy, that some of our most brilliant and basic construction is filtered from.

This is the difficult part. Sharing the times that I was disgusted with my own lack of progress or inability to connect even the simplest of lessons to life is not necessarily hard to do, but it is painful. I know well the process, even of performing and writing that is all about the revision that Richardson speaks of (2002, p. 882). I strategized my lesson plans and driving the group discussions because I was convicted that there was a place we all needed to go together. Sometimes our group sessions took a turn toward the confessional. Self revelation onstage was one thing but in our group setting it complicated and fogged up a lens that started out very sharply outlining my aims in this project both as a researcher and a member of Collective Energy. Looking back, I see that I cannot call my own spoken word poetry activist and then neglect to utilize my academic studies in the same way.

As I stated before, one of my main personal obligations is to the broad audience that may never have an opportunity to enter the walls of a university or college and perhaps through participating in some version or format of this text they can imagine doing so. I continue to be

inspired by the doctoral dissertation of Anne Louise Brookes (1992) who intentionally designed her writing in the form of autobiographical/fictional accounts and wrote each chapter in the form of letters to her committee. This way she creatively contributed to the collection of multi-modal works that talk about and “know” the illusions and assumptions that organize everyday experiences through a variety of questions that offer only fragmentary suggestions and multiple solutions (p. 10). She works to locate herself in her writing and does so effectively and beautifully while suggesting a need to question and reconsider the exclusive and inconsiderate political implications of current pedagogical practices. By locating myself and the other student artists in a position to speak in an academic text it is my hope that the sounds we make might resonate with the current conversations and interchanges around socially responsible artistry.

Often art is viewed as an embellishment, as decoration, a frivolous (albeit beautiful) addition to academic work and to life in general. Art and culture are “fun” but unnecessary, a luxury that one can live without. However, Carson and Sumara (1997) continue “action research is not merely an activity that one adds to one’s life; action research practices...are *particular* practices that require that one’s lived experiences be configured in particular ways. This does not only include one’s beliefs, one’s philosophies, one’s attitudes to and about what constitutes research practices but, as well, includes the specific relational organization of one’s living conditions” (p. xvi). I want the representation of my research to be reflective of the lived experiences it is drawn from. The life of the action researcher, then, is similar to that of the teaching artist. If an artist who is also a teacher must make provisions in order to have time, energy, resources, inspiration, rest, and opportunities to create art, then the teaching artist will commit to disciplining herself around those needs. When an ideology is adopted or when a human being has certain values, she will strive to align her behavior with those values. Indeed one of the renderings of *a/r/tography* is contiguity, which places special importance upon the “ideas that lie adjacent to one another, touch one another, or exist in the presence of one

another...[because] the artist, researcher and teacher identities existing simultaneously and alongside one another” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxvii). Instead of trying to wedge a marked and static determination between these existences, living practice and inquiry requires instead that these “in between spaces” are cultivated and viewed as valuable connections. Collective Energy originates from the in between space.

The obligation of naming oneself an artist demands the inclusion of cultural production and meaning-making into one’s daily routine and practice; it is making it a way of life for myself and teaching my traditional students and my student artists how to integrate it into their lives. Caring for one another, caring for ourselves and how that translates into the jobs we take and the ways we spend our free time (which is not so free after all) are all factors in our happiness, in our resistance, and in our peace of mind.

In chapter 2 I dig into the subjectivities that I inhabited and take a closer look at what comprises an artist and Collective Energy as a unit of artists which offers an examination of the ways performance functioned as a means of self-recognition. Chapter 3 addresses competing renderings of what it means for a spoken word artist to be activist and how performance functions as a means of reproducing and thus resisting our experiences of the world. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes with an exploration of how performance is driven by the cooperative relationship of love and ethics.

Spoken word poetry functions as a tool for connecting social structures to racial and cultural constructs with individual but very co-dependent experiences. As a young woman artist of color, I feel an intense sense of isolation and loneliness. Spoken word poetry was for me always a way to assert my existence; a way to shed the urge to “belong” and to take up the mantle of rightful existence and entitlement to be where I am, in both the university and society. Luce Irigaray (1971) and bell hooks (2001) have worked hard to remind us that marginalized students

struggle to keep from disappearing. I endeavor to be seen by others so that I know I exist; spoken word poetry functions for me in this way because it refuses me a demure or apologetic entrance into the visible and verbal. I assume and understand that some of the members of Collective Energy experience a similar transformation while onstage and I wanted to utilize the weekly meetings to supplement the few performance opportunities we had at Penn State. Even though the self-portraits we sketched were only drawn in pencil, I wanted to burn the other erasers that worked to smear them or at least provide the student artists with some different angles with which to see themselves. Similarly to Helen J. Harper (2000), I ask the question of how we can possibly intervene effectively, using the power of spoken word poetry performance and identification in a project of social transformation? What are the openings a project like this provides for student artists? In what ways does it complicate their lives? What sorts of artistic and pedagogical practices might best serve the students and practitioners that seek to participate in developing programs such as Collective Energy? My current research questions and the lessons we learned throughout the year were a result of my inquiries. I had certainly never led any sort of class like this before. Impatient as I was to begin, I felt the small hard ball of doubt rolling around the pit of my stomach that was to stay there throughout the entire experience—after all, who did I think I was?

Chapter 2

From the Inside Out

The Set

This chapter opens with an introduction to the various roles that I played during Collective Energy's formation, namely that of "researcher" and that of "leader." The provisional construction of these roles continues to shape my interaction with the research(ed) presented in this text. I preface this chapter with a reference to these two roles in order to better prepare you for the journey we are taking and to acquaint you with a semblance of what it was like for me to slide and glide between different performances of my own off the stage. I also examine what constitutes an artist and the constitution of Collective Energy. The chapter will conclude with a gesture to my own goals for Collective Energy and the theories that fashioned those goals. These theories served as the starting point for most of the experience of Collective Energy and will thus shape the remainder of this text. This map is not drawn to scale and the sense of direction that may be gained by this introduction should be pursued with caution as there may be dips, detours, and large signs warning that most of the way will still be "under construction". Finally, you should be aware that the bridge may freeze before the roadway, creating conditions that are likely to cause slippage, so please proceed with care.

Splinters and Repairs

My background as an actor is what I blame for my tendency to switch character almost without thinking. I have been trained well through my experiences in the 'real' world to do so. There I am rewarded for a fast change. As an educator and as a woman I have often found graciousness from others because of my ability to read a situation and adjust accordingly in order to make others more comfortable. I have learned to trim back the amount of space I take up or to disappear. I have learned to flash and sparkle in order to better entertain if that is what

the occasion calls for. I use my in-betweenness to diffuse discomfort. I distract in the same way a magician waves a red flag so that his audience won't notice the terrified bunny in his hat wondering when it will be yanked out by the ears for another round of applause. Failure to switch up the ways in which I present myself through a quick alteration of how I speak, act, or respond have resulted in dire consequences for me. Rejection, exclusion, and being refused access to certain memberships are examples of those consequences. Abuse, rape, and emotional trauma have also been the end of the equation for me when I have resisted shifting. I acknowledge this ambiguity as a privilege and yes, I have used this slippery outward identity shift mostly as a means of protection, as a way to get "inside," and most definitely as a way to reap benefits of the "good" qualities of the contradictions I possess. Employing these tactics can prove to be confusing and often complicate relationships I have with others, leaving them to wonder who I am and what I'm after. This is why the moments when these complications arose throughout the research did not startle me; I was familiar with them. As such, it has been a tedious trial to untangle the moments that I played 'researcher' from the times that I tried to step into the persona of just another member of Collective Energy. I have always felt a bit of both.

Recognizing Self

Anne-Louise Brookes (1992) investigates the causes and effects of multiple subjectivities by examining how they intersect with survival. This approach ties survival with the performance of those same subjectivities. Looking first at an individual level, Brookes states that learning how to split one's self in order to absorb blame and to succeed at "getting on with it" works to reproduce an illusion of harmony. Because the causes of such splits often remain disconnected from the societal conditions that enforce and regulate behavior, Brookes argues that the individual internalizes the ugliness of a culture that prefers the illusion because it is less complicated (p. 99). I am mesmerized by this description because although Brookes admits that she suffered from swallowing and denying her experience, this same act of refusal permitted her to stay in motion.

The divides she created within herself kept her alive. Her rehearsal of different modes of her self became a practice of endurance. Adrienne Rich (1979) confirms that “if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience, [imagination] has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment” (p. 43). The desire to transform one’s life may feel disloyal; especially if the current moment includes family or loved ones. Using the imagination to conjure subversive alternatives can become a fearful practice when betrayal seems an imminent outcome of transformation. This is important to note so that the options that result from the imagination can be fully appreciated. This practice of re-creating one’s identity and rehearsing that new role has the potential to be powerful because it sanctions the subject with an implied sense of control or authority in relation to external social and cultural boundaries.

In order to create and enact multiple subjectivities, they must be imagined and to imagine an idea means to be responsible for its inception. Imagination is a term used frequently in literature related to performance pedagogy and critical pedagogy. The imagination is the site that is responsible for inventing a “politics of hope” and the artist is expected to take responsibility for the alternatives created by their imagination (Garoian, 1999, Denizen, 2003, Giroux, 2006).

What I’m getting at here is how necessary it is to make the concrete connection between three different planes: how we envision our selves, the ways that we act out what we conceive, and the social conditions that force us to make these choices. The subjectivities we rehearse may appear deceptive and also may feed into an “illusion of harmony” that does not make space for an interrogation of the societal norms and ideologies that bind us to such an illusion. However, they are often employed because what they do offer is a way to maintain a steady pace and a semblance of progress inside the constructs of racism, sexism, hate and ignorance that we are often required to operate within. The split that Brookes (1992) speaks of is also a location layered with contradiction; it can be fruitful by offering a serious relief to audition and rehearse

various positions and outcomes through spoken word poetry performance and at the same time, these new subjectivities are then made available to the performer both on and off the stage.

Examining through performance the plural and constantly destabilized subject positions that are dispersed over a range of discourses invites a re-organization of the knowledge and practices that order our lives. However, the circumstances in which we find ourselves will determine how we strategically implement our power to resist. As Brookes stated earlier, it is an act of survival that is often measured against what society presents as reality. The scene that I'm setting here is not new, but it is important to keep these concepts at the forefront as I continue to divulge my own choices regarding my position and the choices made by Collective Energy throughout our time together. What may appear as frustrating contradiction and endless cyclical movements are really the textured attempts at managing the difficult discourses available to us all.

Treasure Chest

One of the initial challenges that I posed for Collective Energy was called the Treasure Chest. I attempted to use this exercise to focus critical attention on the sources of inspiration for each student-artist of Collective Energy. During our second meeting, I asked everyone to bring an item in the next week that represented a part of who they were and what motivated them to write. I explained that understanding our own motivations would assist in the shaping of our performances and we might be surprised by what we found. Chloe, who was typically pretty quiet during group discussion, was the first to volunteer to share her item for our Treasure Chest. Surprised, because I usually had to make it a point to invite her comments, I asked her to pass around the photograph she brought in. The image was of her older sister and her sister's new daughter. Again, I was surprised because Chloe was nowhere to be found in the image with the exception of the very similar features that clearly marked the girl in the photo as her sibling. We passed the photo around the room as she explained:

Chloe: A sibling that's older you look up to them, but it was opposite with my sister. She was always the example of what not to do. I learned a lot about myself through her and I learned how to interact with people and interact with life. We have a different relationship. I do [love her] but I don't think I'm an emotional person which is quite honest... We're on two different levels right now, but I've learned to appreciate the type of person that she is and to see we have the same qualities.

Crystal: What made you bring her pic for the treasure chest?

Chloe: During my teenage years it was hard. We had sibling rivalry. She was the pretty one, everybody loved her and she was the best person—I don't know...the cool sister. I guess you could say. Which is weird because she was the cool kid but I had my own group but I was more on the positive level I guess you could say? We didn't see eye to eye. We never did anything with each other. I still feel like I don't know her. We don't really talk.

Chloe's first words describing her relationship with her sister imply opposition and friction. She speaks of a sisterly relationship that is tumultuous, in which she plays a role that is contrary yet she acknowledges that they share "the same qualities." Chloe's identification of herself as both separate and same to her sister offers an interesting site for exploring how subjectivities and discourses are constructed. What makes examining this process even more valuable is that Chloe used her position as a poet to both affirm and disrupt the ways in which she recognized herself. Helen Harper (2000) suggests "identification involves a recognition of similarity" causing a subject to draw boundaries between self and mark those outside such boundaries as "other." Harper elaborates "identification is a process of substitution and displacement...where we attempt to replace internally what is missing externally" (p. 3). Chloe

concedes that she and her sister are familiar because they are related by blood; however, she proceeds to list several traits such as “cool,” “pretty,” or “loved” by everyone that mark her as not just different from but as less than her sister. Chloe does not recognize herself as legitimately falling into any of these categories because they are unavailable to her; instead, they are occupied by her sister. Perhaps Chloe’s motivation to write and perform is derived from her ability to then imagine herself inhabiting positions that she feels unable to otherwise access, and also create subjectivities that may have never been vacant in her lived experience.

Recognition of self as a valid subject is constructed by the process of being recognized by others as a valid subject. One way that this happens is through interpellation, which can best be defined by Louis Althusser (1971):

“...ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or transforms the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “hey you there!” (pp. 162-163).

Participating as a particular subject within a particular discourse is thus viewed as an activity that subjects partake in but do not wholly govern. In other words, Chloe is refusing to participate in a discourse that would mark her as “emotional”; however, she is not in a position to fully determine which discourses she gets marked as participating in. Performing her own ideology is an opportunity for Chloe to transform the subjectivities she has grown accustomed to. Another person may view her performance as very emotional thus scribing Chloe with those characteristics whether she desires them or not. Our conversation continues:

Chloe: She made me view myself differently because I didn't do a lot of things that other people did. Back home, like, back at school people don't hang around people that don't do what you do. She brought out my best and worst. She doesn't know it and I guess I'm figuring this out myself now, but she, oh Lord, [Chloe tries not to cry], she taught me how to love myself and how to try to love other people. I'm really guarded and that's sort of how I write.

Crystal: I think that's really interesting seeing how you do write and you share it publicly. So why did you bring a picture of your sis?

Z: It was the first thing she saw on the dresser.

Chloe: [crying now] I think I brought this because with Victoria (her niece) because of the baby—now I don't see her as my sister I see her as a mother because we're close in age that's difficult for me to see. It represents someone I wish I knew but will probably never get to know.

Chloe continues to express a desire for intimacy with her sister that she feels she lacks in a relationship that is socially structured to fulfill such a need. She is determined to connect herself to her performance of spoken word in order to complete what she views as a lack or absence. Although she is the younger sibling, Chloe mentioned earlier that her older sister's example of "what not to do," making Chloe feel the need to remove or demarcate herself from that example. While the audience may not substantiate Chloe's subjectivity, her performance and imagining authenticates it for her. Chloe comments that she sees herself as "guarded" and that she feels disconnected from her poetry in the same way. Chloe's choice to bring in this image of

her sister and her sister's child signifies another desire: to be more emotionally expressive. It was difficult to hear this passionate artist describe a void that she associated with her defense mechanisms while being vulnerable enough to shed tears in front of the group during one of the first meetings. The photograph stands for difference in Chloe's life and that difference is painful because it implies distance. The absence and loss that identify Chloe's subjectivity are also driving motivators for the ways in which she aims to use her spoken word performance. Performance functions in this way as an attempt to make connections between the discourses she willingly takes part in and those that distinguish her as uncool, unpretty, and separate. Chloe uses spoken word poetry as a way to "assert difference...in all its forms and manifestations, to find a commonality in the experience of difference without compromising its distinctive realities and effects" (Gentile as cited in Orner, 1992, p.85). In other words, Chloe is acknowledging her different and sometimes negative subjectivities through her performance and through the ways she contributed to Collective Energy. Chloe then acts out her difference, possibly as a mode of seeking alliance and connection with others who also inhabit or are assigned "different" subjectivities. Spoken word poetry then becomes a tool for Chloe to distinguish herself, affirm her experiences of the consequences of her difference, and to make connections across the categories in which she is cast. There is mobility within such a practice, particularly because "we can never be sure of others' responses" to our differences (Orner, 1992, p. 84). Spoken word poetry serves Chloe by functioning as a form of recognition and complicating the discourse by offering many different views of herself as a whole subject. Thus, multiple subjectivities are made available and auditioned through her performance. Chloe's story is one example of the multiple roles the members of Collective Energy were cast in—and it's not simply passive for Chloe cast herself there too. She demonstrates the process of recognizing herself as a subject through performance. She was busy learning to understudy for a variety of particular positions as

was I. Exercising new subjectivities is significant because it provided Chloe and me a place to experiment with a variety of roles should we desire to alter or adjust our view.

Researcher/Member

Two major subjectivities that were made available to me by the rest of Collective Energy were researcher and leader/member of the group. I intentionally switched between the roles researcher and leader/ member of Collective Energy because it was all I knew to do at the time. It was a method of survival for me. The trouble is going to be making that shift visible for an audience (which is you, reader) so that my motives are easily traceable. I have been trained theatrically and in my personal life to seamlessly maneuver from one character to another, to attempt to make a transition that is so subtle and nuanced that there will be no doubt in the mind of the audience that I have been this character all along. I work over the messy confusing blocking for my movement on stage, I memorize the lines, and I stuff myself into the costume backstage. Now, I have to invite you into the dressing room and show you the strokes I use to put on my make up; I have to reveal my vast collection of wigs, hometowns, backgrounds, and lifestyles. I feel insignificant and exposed like the Wizard behind an Oz that was never mine to run.

This text provides yet another rabbit hole for me to try to disguise my own desires and positions embedded in ambiguity and shape-shifting that at once offers me a sense of agency while demanding that I am held accountable for what I appropriate here. I am reluctant to reveal and thus remove any glamour or mystery that I have previously considered a benefit of the marking that I experience on account of my body. This point leads me to the concept of “passing” that I find myself continually returning to mostly because I have passed on many occasions for numerous people. Passing is how I navigate the world I live in because it occasionally allows me to either squeeze past conflict, or to manipulate conflict. This has been

the source for the majority of the splits in my self that I have experienced and that I have actively separated. Evelyn Alsutany (2002) speaks effectively to the logic that shapes such splinters:

My identity fractures as I experience differing dislocations in multiple contexts. Sometimes people otherize me, sometimes they identify with me. Both situations can be equally problematic. Those who otherize me fail to see a shared humanity and those who identify with me fail to see difference (p. 107).

The “either/or” option is unacceptable because it is both false and limiting as a dichotomy and because it excludes the multi-faceted variety that composes my subjectivity. Another issue is that I have been forced to respond to others according to the response that my body and my being provoke from them. I am never the one that raises the issue of identity politics within a conversation; typically I skirt around it. Because of this, my response has not been an active one; my response has been “passive” similar to the way that I have “passed” through life, through expectations, through society. I have grown tired of this feeling. It is exhausting to be required to justify my very existence and to locate myself so that others know how to interact with me. As a result of this common experience, what has become clear is that fluidity is something desirable, a skill to be developed rather than denied. A willingness to adapt or to adjust behavior in accordance with one’s environment is an ability that is demanded of most people of color, commonly understood as a “double consciousness” as defined by Frantz Fanon (1967) in his expansion of W. E. B. DuBois’ work on race and society. DuBois (1903) explains that having a double consciousness for an African-American male is “this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 4). While DuBois was speaking specifically to the division that he perceived between being Black, male, and American, Fanon focuses that idea by suggesting that “the black man has two dimensions: one with his fellows, the other with the white man” (p. 17). Fanon goes on to remark that mastering language affords remarkable power (p. 18). Imagine then

how much more extensive and complicated this process of fracturing identity and self can be for those of us who embody and exist on multiple ethnic and sexual planes at once. The fractures that Alsutany (2002) designates are a result of succumbing to and perpetuating the illusion that Brookes (1992) titled as a deadly lie. Coping to survive may keep us in motion and it seems that performance supplies us with tools to explore the cracks of our composure.

Similar to Chloe's earlier example, Joseph also used spoken word as a way to move between the multitudes of subject positions that he acknowledges. His lesson on fluidity and fracturing also stems from the item he brought to share for the Treasure Chest activity. The story behind Joseph's item, like Chloe's, centers on a lesson he has learned from an influential family member.

Joseph: In 1995, my Uncle Tony passed away from AIDS—when I was visiting him two days before he died I was telling him ‘I need a wallet.’ He was like ‘what you need a wallet for? You young, you ain’t got no money.’ [laughter from the whole group] and I was like, I do have money. He said, ‘alright, well, when you go back to your grandma’s house, look in this drawer next to my bed and there’s a wallet in there you can have that one.’ I said, ‘cool’. So I went to grandma’s house that same night, opened up his drawer and inside was this really cool wallet but there was a crisp really clean one dollar bill inside. I looked at the dollar and thought why is this random one dollar bill in here. So the next day I went back to the hospital and I said, ‘Uncle Tony,’ except I used to call him UT for short. So I said, ‘UT, I found this one dollar bill in your wallet’. He said, ‘good, you should keep that cuz although on the surface it says ‘one’ the dollar bill is four quarters, and it’s also twenty nickels, and it’s also ten dimes and its also one hundred pennies. He said no matter what people always look at you like

you're just a dollar but there is so much more. Like, so many more pieces to you. Like, never just defining yourself by what's on your face.' So I've been--so I framed--laminated that one dollar bill; I've never touched it or spent it.

Obviously what I'm learning about myself is that there is so much more to me. And sometimes people just see this [waves dollar]. Um, so that's what I wanted to bring and show...

This snapshot of Joseph's life is almost overwhelming in the host of thoughts, questions, and feelings that it reveals. As one of Joseph's closest friends, I have never heard him mention this story, or his uncle, outside of this one incident. During his membership in Collective Energy none of Joseph's poems raised issues dealing with HIV/AIDS. The lesson being taught here is clear: you are more than your surface, or in poststructural terms, you are more than the subjectivities you are assigned or choose to take up. His uncle was also teaching him about interpellation and recognition—some folks “look at you like you're just a dollar” and Joseph has since worked to refuse “just defining yourself by what's on your face.” As a young African-American male, this wisdom passed on by his older uncle is instruction that is particularly salient. Spoken word poetry has functioned for Joseph as a way to measure and recognize himself as a subscriber to various discourses; it creates a space and opportunity for him to demonstrate “that there is so much more” to him, even when others only glimpse his surface. On a larger scale, performing as a unit full of divergent subjectivities and a criss-cross of experiences in each show was good practice in switching places for Collective Energy.

Another theme present here is the various combinations of coins that can work together to equal an entire dollar. It's possible that Joseph's uncle was using this example to refer not only to the many parts of Joseph as an individual, but also to remind him that his family members had

each contributed in some way to Joseph's overall worth. If a dollar is missing even a penny, then it is not as valuable. Joseph represents for his family a first-generation college student, a performer, and he has successfully completed a graduate degree at a major university. In a not so subtle way, Joseph's dollar was a reminder to him that the appearance of wholeness that a single dollar gives is an illusion. By climbing the ranks of higher education and working steadily to earn respect through his academic work, Joseph has sought the mobility and power that can be afforded by "mastering the language" as Fanon said (1967, p. 18). Joseph has performed as a college student and an employee, operating in traditional discourses of success and he has at the same time disrupted the social ideals that fuel the definition of those same discourses by writing his own. He is aware that he is not one cohesive whole entity but can be made whole through many different combinations that have been assigned differing values by the society in which he lives. He uses spoken word to resist the value assignments placed upon his experience, his family, and himself. Spoken word poetry performance has served him in this way as a method to subversively rebel against those assignments, at the same time affirming his experience and perspective. Spoken word has provided Joseph with a way to challenge those who would judge him just by "what's on his face" while he also has actively participated in the practices (such as attending graduate school) that previously excluded African-American men. By constructing his own performances to create new combinations of roles to participate in, Joseph has effectively recognized himself and worked to rearrange what he wants to change. Joseph sometimes uses his performance as a way to explicitly confront and boldly challenge how others see him and the way that the matrix of domination has organized his life (Collins, 1991). Highly intelligent word play, references to overlooked historical facts, and dynamic delivery are skills that Tony calls upon during his performance. Illusion disintegrates with each line that he pronounces on stage. He energizes stagnant possibilities for hope and charges those who witness his performance to take action.

Black Man's Call to Action**by Joseph**

“Words have power

Letters are electrically charged and when bounded together create enough energy to cause massive explosions

Blowing massive mountain tops in to tiny metaphorical erosions

And it is I that stands atop one of those mounds

With words, phrases, vowels, syllables and sounds, and I'm screaming:

THIS IS FOR ALL OF YA'LL STILL DREAMING!

Those of you whose hue starts off as Black until you've been beaten down to blue

Don't know who the f*ck you are cuz you're busy letting society define you

Aint got a pot to piss in, a window to throw it out of or no food to chew

And so you're starving

Starving for knowledge

Not cuz you can't grasp the language but cuz no one took the time to teach you

They claim you're too stubborn to listen to

Your heads too thick to even get a brick through

That you're noting but a no good, pants sagging, baby making, juvenile delinquent

All that you're capable to do is eat, sleep, shyt and screw

BUT BROTHERS I HAVE SOMETHING DIFFERENT TO TELL YOU!

And I invoke in my self the spirit of everything African within me

From my forehead to my collarbone

From my bloodstream to my skin tone

From my strong back to my humble knees

From my shinbone to my callused feet

AND I DECLARE YOU FREE!

No longer property

No longer a weapon for society to continue to arm you with massive missiles of
misguided perceptions of manhood in to your looking glasses

So F*CK sitting in the back writing R.I.P. to your friends on that dirty desk you're now in
the front teaching classes

So F*CK being afraid to use slang; I'm granting you the right to use the language of your
people to move the masses

And F*CK waiting in the back of the line to get to the front; I'm giving you a lifetime supply of free V.I.P. back stage passes

And if I someone says you didn't pay your way, say F*CK you, it's already being deducted from my taxes

And if they need some proof, tell them they can find it printed on the receipts of paper made from trees once used to whip the back of slave's asses

And if they still have questions tell them you can call up the Black Men's Headquarters and have them send that shyt out through smoke signals or Morse Code dashes

And if they still have questions tell them to take a pin, and prick your skin and check your deoxyribonucleic acid – better known as your D.N.A.

BECAUSE THEY DON'T NEED ANSWERS

THEY DON'T NEED ANYTHING

And if they do – tell them to come see me cuz Brothers I got you

I'm holding ya'll up on my shoulders to give you a higher view

And I'm carrying ya'll through mountain tops and through muddy waters, and don't worry, cuz historically, I've been know to split that shyt in two..."

This piece symbolized a sort of breakthrough for Joseph. This was one of the very first poems he wrote and delivered in an aggressive unapologetic style. Joseph's performance prior to

this poem was very diplomatic. He took a risk in this piece by boldly pointing out the illusions confirming their existence and then offering an alternative. Spoken word poetry functions for Joseph here as a method of recognizing himself as an autonomous, authoritative young Black man. He names himself author of freedom for the young Black men listening to him. He begins by listing the traits often ascribed to young Black men such as “lazy” and “stubborn” “juvenile delinquents” whose sole ability lies in their practice of consumption, production of waste, and careless baby-making. Then, he boldly denies each and every one of these categories on his own authority. He calls upon his cultural heritage and stands upon nothing except his birthright as an African-American to rebuke the negative stereotypes projected onto young men of color. He invites them to participate in other subjectivities that share in the authority he has taken as a way to resist “the misguided perceptions of manhood” that are made available. Joseph used “Black Man’s Call to Action” as a way to confront his frustrations with the view of the “surface” that he once identified with and, as Althusser (1971) reminds us, answered to. Joseph’s poem calls up sameness by addressing a broad yet varied category of people unified only by an racial thread which signifies home and a sense of familiarity of experience. At the same time, he also works to establish difference by otherizing his participation in the subjecthood of “Black men” by subverting the ways he is expected to enact his role. In other words, he makes use of the “surface,” of “what’s on his face,” to gather his audience under one banner and then disrupt that unity by isolating the smaller units that create the whole. In this way, Joseph uses spoken word poetry to effectively rebel against the same discourses he willingly takes part in so they will be overlapped with new and different discourses that provide better options for his objectives. Joseph works to counter the very culture he participates in by singing his own melody throughout the illusion of harmony.

In my experience, confronting the illusion of harmony outside of performing spoken word poetry has consistently sustained feelings of loneliness and isolation for me. It has been

dangerous as well, occasionally resulting in physical altercations. I subscribe to the capacity for social change that is opened up through performing because of the reflexive critiques that take place during and after performance that refuse oversimplified questions such as “What Are You?” and demands instead that the audience and artist alike dissolve essentialist frameworks by posing questions such as “Who Are You?” In this way, performing can make room for the imagination and enactment of new identities and cultural practices that explode oppressive historical dictates regarding cultural identity. Alsutany continues:

Identification signifies belonging or home, and I pretend to be that home for a person. The bridge becomes my back as I feign belonging, and I become that vehicle for others, which I desire for myself. Although it is illusory, I do identify with the humanity of the situation—the desire to belong in this world, to be understood (p. 107).

The desire to be recognized by others as something familiar, as human, is not new or childish, nor is it an immature longing to fit in. Regardless of the theories that I learn or the poems that I write, it is a desire that never goes away. It fuels the majority of the work that I do at the cultural center and within my classroom. There are those that find comfort in the solidarity that can be found as a result of same race identification. I understand the desire to be a member of a cohesive group and I agree that there are times when it is absolutely crucial that a unified front be presented in order to enact social or political institutional changes. Be that as it may, in my personal life, I am working to stop attempting to accurately or appropriately answer questions that are motivated by the desire of others to organize my existence. Appeasing someone else at the sacrifice of my selves does not ease the pain that I carry. I have long existed in a space that the world claims as lost in translation. Spoken word poetry has helped to alleviate the sense of being interpreted falsely in a totalizing way by those for whom “accuracy was never their purpose” (Piper as in Shohat p. 110). Performance is a means of both locating my self within the

illusion of harmony and tipping that same illusion on its head by my rowdy recital of refusal and chaos.

I exclude a part of myself every time I don a costume, I fight with a corset to contain the areas within me that defy borders or margins that I'm expected to be content with and to name 'home'. I am my home. I have carved up the land of my insides similar to the way the English carved up America. Each territory within has a different loyalty and they do not agree to a peace treaty.

Of Tricksters and Chameleons

One of the positions I have taken on and attempted to perform has been the role of a researcher, and I would like to isolate that role for a moment to better flesh out its complications and characteristics. Kamala Visweswaran (1994) critically analyzes the role of a researcher and names one moment of identity slippage as “trickster.” Author Laura Bohannon (as cited in Visweswaran, 1994, p. 26) offers an example of one such character. She published her anthropological novel *Return To Laughter* that was based on research under a different name, one Elenore Smith Bowen. In deciding to create a different character with which to publish, she practices becoming a trickster by shifting her identities. By choosing a nom de plume, Bohannon is exercising one of the privileges provided by the role of ‘researcher’ and she is telling a partial story of her research in what is arguably an effort to distance herself from the experience of the research and the researched. Whether this is a move made in self-defense or out of instinct is unclear. What Bohannon does gesture to clearly is a change that took place in her self as a subject that she seems to have been unprepared for. The details of what being a trickster includes are fleshed out in the following quote:

Many of my moral dilemmas had sprung from the very nature of my work, which had made me a trickster: one who seems to be what he is not and who professes faith in what he does not believe. But this realization is of little help. It is not

enough to be true to one's self. The self may be bad and need to be changed, or it may change unawares into something strange and new. I had changed.

Bohannon (or Bowen) raises several key points here: first, her research dilemma was that of a moral nature. Morality or principal is a highly contested subject. Conducting ethical research, leading an ethical classroom, and the politics at work within a caring framework are issues that deserve attention but I set aside: for now, I wish to focus upon the second characteristic that is played out above. According to Bohannon, the trickster is a character who is false and deceptive by seeming to be what she is not. Who decides what the trickster is or is not? How do we know when the trickster is signifying each of these faces? Is it possible to tell how the trickster is read by the researched? These are important questions to ask if the roles that the researcher plays are not always to be understood as misgiving and illusory. If a researcher is a trickster because she seems to be what she is not, is it a dilemma of morals after all? How can this be so when the work of participatory action and a/r/tographic research implicates, if not demands, the researcher as a member of multiple discourses holding multiple subject positions within each discourse? I propose that the trickster is not a deceptive or immoral character always. "Seeming" to be something is not necessarily equivalent to "claiming" to be something. It's insulting to the research subjects to suggest that simply because the researcher was invited to engage in a 'native' dance or ritual that the community being studied was duped into reading her as a member of their clan. After all, if they are extending an invitation, it is clear that the researcher is not native but an outsider from their perspective. You don't have to invite someone to come inside a house they own.

Mimi Orner (1992) views our subjectivities as always being contributed to heavily by those around us. "As conscious and unconscious subjects, we can never really know ourselves or others in any definitive way" thus making the proclaimed goals of feminist research rather difficult to manage (p. 84). Knowledge about ourselves and others that is supposedly gained

through the act of research is always going to be partial and fictionalized; however in order to make progress some suspension of a commitment to fully know must be in place. Or as Visweswaran (1994) puts it “full representation on the one hand, full comprehension on the other” cannot be the extent of our choices (p. 100). If we can attempt to first acknowledge, and then agree to suspend such totalizing commitments, then perhaps there is a chance that the researcher can be located within the research without improbable expectations of identifying with and wholly understanding the researched. I’m not convinced that this is a goal even worth attempting; what I do put forward as useful is examining the relationship between knowledge and cultural performance/production as a process by Collective Energy and the subjectivities that became available to us as a result. If I re-connect this idea with my initial concept of Collective Energy, it is clear to see that I was mistaken when I assumed that because I was a member of the group that membership outweighed my position as a leader and organizer. The role I played wasn’t always up to me; often Collective Energy did the casting.

Bohannon’s (1994) quote also suggests that the self is at once “whole” in some way instead of fragmented and performative, yet with a mind of its own, as it may “change unawares into something strange and new.” The implication that the subject could alter without active consent confuses her earlier suggestion that the researcher is a suspicious trickster. If the self is changing without prior preparation and conscious decision, can the researcher be held entirely accountable for all of these changes? And if Orner (1992) is accurate, then the people being researched are just as implicated by the changes in the “self” of the researcher as the researcher is. In other words, the site of research and the population being researched (Collective Energy, our performances and meetings), as well as the product of research (in this case, the text) contribute to the ways that the researcher (read: me) may change. What is at stake is responsibility, accountability, and my authority as leader and researcher to pick and choose the portions of this change I wish to share with you, the reader. It seems for a moment that Bohannon wished briefly

to remain the same throughout the duration of her study and I wonder why. This desire raises several issues for me, namely, what counts as appropriate research behavior? To glance at the research model set forth by a hegemonic patriarchal academic institution we may see attempts for distance, detachment, aloofness, separation, from the researched population as well as neat balanced results. To gaze in a feminist research direction, we might rest our eyes on what may appear to be messy, this direction may exude uneasiness with following the framework we were taught and thus may involve an attempt at engaging on a personal level of connectedness with the communities we study. Still separate, still privileged, but invested. To what end I wonder? These options are unsettling.

I return to the second characteristic Bohannon uses in her description of a trickster: “one who professes faith in what he does not believe”. Faith and belief call up for me images of church services and sermons being delivered to a backdrop of dramatic organ music. The use of the verb ‘professing’ here is one that I find ironic. My end goal is to become a professor and a curriculum of social justice and performance does not always allow for an easy exit or detachment from a statement of belief and values. At the same time, I have often wondered about the various ways I am currently positioned as a graduate student and an authority figure and as a professional in my field. These positions certainly offer a cushion of privilege onto which I gladly tumble whenever I fall; however I have been stretched thin on a day-to-day basis trying to meet an ideological standard that suggests a hand in the separate layers of my worlds is nearly impossible (McRobbie, 1978). There is always pressure to pick a side, if you will. Again, the act of passing has assisted me in maneuvering betwixt the positions of critical activism and a strong desire to follow a path to succeed in a very traditional and materialistic sense. Professing (or teaching) as if I have faith in ideologies or strategies that do not always provide effective intellectual or emotional support (ie: feminist theory, critical pedagogy, socially responsible artistry) mark me as a traitor whenever I do so. Although outwardly appearing to acquiesce by

following a subscribed role, I have been able to re-adjust the requirements of meeting an academic goal to overlap with my concerns and questions as an artist, thus practicing a form of subversion. While reviewing Bohannon's ideas about a trickster, I have to admit that I have been on a mission of opposition, of rebellion against the costume that has been set out for me by the expectations of family, school, and society (Collins, 1991). My faith is accompanied by swift, if reckless, aggressive actions such as the formation of a group like Collective Energy. That movement while minute on the larger scale of how action is perhaps measured has created just enough space to stretch and pull my faith to fit my life and my life to fit my faith. Creating Collective Energy was an effort on my behalf to employ what the authors of *a/r/tography* suggest as a central focus for inquiry and that is "creating the circumstances to produce knowledge" (Irwin and Springgay, 2008, p. xxiv). Action must accompany faith and sometimes faith must make friends with the imagination. I maintain that the researcher as trickster is not deceptive, instead the trickster is mis-interpreted. Inhabiting the trickster as I have in both the role of researcher and leader/member has made me reconsider the term 'trickster' and I substitute it with 'chameleon' instead.

Chameleons work to blend into their surroundings as a method of protection but they remain lizards throughout the process. How come the chameleon is not called a liar when it is mistaken for the leaf upon which it perches—because the motive of the chameleon is self-preservation, or as Brookes (1992) mentioned earlier, survival. There is an appeal to basic humanity wrapped up in the overarching term "survival" even when the methods vary from person to person. If I am to examine the performance of Collective Energy and in so doing seek to point out when our colors change as a form of protection this opens up room for inquiring into previously ignored intersections of privilege and blindness. When do we pass and why? How does spoken word poetry function for us in these moments of recognition, sameness, difference, and alteration? Seeking a lead to these questions is supported by a critical feminist agenda

because they form the basis of an accountable positioning that seeks to locate itself in and against the master discourses of race, class, and sexuality that inscribe it (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 104). Once the oppressive, invisible master discourses are fleshed out perhaps our survival strategies will evolve from the instinct to pass and survive.

In the meantime, I can say that I continue to pass because I have learned that safety and security are temporary conditions, subject to change abruptly with no warning. I have learned to view the act of passing as an artist and as a scholar in an attempt to summon and therefore transgress and rip apart the social constructs that have demanded that I pass. In this way, passing can potentially be used to force class and racial structures into visibility making them targets that are easier to hit. Valerie Smith (2001) reminds that passing is “generally motivated by class considerations (people pass primarily in order to partake of the wider opportunities available to those in power) and constructed in racial terms” (p. 189). The yearnings for equality, peace, and wholeness that motivate my passing do not equate to a desire to be more colored or more white. What these yearnings hint at are a reach for mobility and the discomfort of growing pains. The movement between these subjectivities is a strategy and intensifies the issues that substantiate the need to pass not unlike the struggle for visibility and disguise that was evident in the student artists’ performances.

I present these ideas as a segue way for the section on Goals and Objectives that follows here because at first glance, *Collective Energy*’s performance content and discussion may appear rife with contradiction. I begin with an exploration of the theories that I used to compose my original plan to trace the veins that formed these goals. The connections that I make in the following sections are an attempt to suture together our personal accounts of legitimate knowledge with competing notions of subjectivity, cultural and social production, and the inventive imaginative alternative versions we continue to create.

* * * * *

Goals

Social Responsibility

When I first invited these student artists to participate in this project, I developed an outline that centered on Maulana Karenga's (2003) theory known as "social artistic responsibility." This outline was the focus of our very first workshop together. His theory states that "socially responsible artistic expression must meet three qualifications: (1) it must be functional, possessing the ability to address social issues particularly affecting oppressed and marginalized communities (2) it must be collective, representing the fullness of the cultural experience of a people and (3) it must be committing, offering forth a motivation for the realization of a people's true potential and an active work against social limitations" (Karenga, 2003). While Karenga's ideas drove the foundation for Collective Energy, throughout the year there was also ongoing discussion and debate within Collective Energy about what could be counted as social responsibility. During our first workshop the following discussion ensued after I asked the group what their thoughts were on Karenga's theory.

Rico: I don't think this is the end all be all.

Z: The first thing that came to my head was that it must be something political um, but I guess once you look past what the words are actually saying, he's basically saying to reveal hidden ideologies or just bring forth the truth. And seemingly to me, that's what poetry or artistic expression is about.

Rico: Maybe we should be working towards representing the fullness of a cultural experience. I'm picturing like whoever the artist is, not doing it half-ass. You're going to attempt to

represent the fullness, not that you always are going to be able to do that, or represent everything. But trying to—

Z: I think it means from a personal perspective—represent exactly what you experience—

Z's thoughts on Karenga's guidelines point to a very interesting intersection that the student-artists continued to trouble. She begins by saying social responsibility "must be something political" and elaborates that she interprets it to be an act of revelation, "bring[ing] forth the truth." After a bit more thought she continues to flesh out her idea, suggesting that Karenga is speaking of social responsibility "from a personal perspective" and that this requires artists to "represent exactly what you experience." Her observations are interesting to note for several reasons. Z's first statement "it must be something political" hints at the suggestion that there is a possibility of *not* being political as an artist. In her work on the political effectiveness of popular culture, Marisa Kula (2002) also cautions artists against "assume[ing] work is interpreted in political ways if authors resist placing the work in a definite political context" (p. 59). Z then turns to her personal experience and says that performing about her own experience is a demonstration of social responsibility. What concerned me was the disconnect that seemed to occur when Z defined what counted as "political," she did not give her personal experience that title. While her ideas suggest feminist foundations that the personal is political, I was troubled by the way she delineated the two realms. I was deeply anxious to ensure Z's level of comfort during Collective Energy because she was brand new to writing and performing and she was also a new Women's Studies major during the first semester of Collective Energy. I found myself attempting to protect her, encouraging her to return to her notebook again and again. I was the instructor for her first Women's Studies class and worked to invite her thoughtful contributions to the classroom as well. Z's other major was Criminal Justice which added another texture to her writing and conversation. I wasn't sure Z counted her experience as worthwhile. To me it

sounded as if she didn't think her experience counted as political, when in fact, everything is political. What I realize now is that if Z didn't understand her locations within a variety of contexts that implicated each of her performances as political then I felt responsible. Her cultural production as a Caribbean woman in a Western context inherently offers critical analysis not only about the outcome of her experience but about the factors that make up her experience. Her location within a largely hegemonic environment that values status quo and the disruptions that her positions as a woman and as a "foreigner" can cause locate her at an interesting place. In every performance that she chooses to speak about her personal history, Z invites a powerful cultural critique as she performs.

Returning to Karenga's ideas, Z's insight brought to light another issue. It is extremely difficult and a bit insulting to assume that a single artist is able to, no matter how great the artist, identify with and "represent the fullness of the cultural experience of a people." It is because our aim was to produce art and performances that show a multiplicity of both perspectives and experiences that we were unable to subscribe to the belief that it is our responsibility to generalize the experience of any one of our cultures, and then presume to speak for all of those that may identify themselves as members of our culture. Z suggested that the socially responsible artist might find it possible to "represent exactly what you experience" which is a tall bill to fit and I turn once again to Mimi Orner (1992) to address the false hope of total representation:

If our subject positions, versions of history, and interpretations of experiences are seen as temporary and contingent understandings within an on going process in which any absolute meaning or truth is impossible, then our voicing of our differences ought not be received as if we are speaking some solemn Truth about our lives (p.86).

The ever-changing reality through which we negotiate our subject positions necessitate the meanings we reach as "temporary" and partial. Articulating our differences then does not confine us; instead, these performances zoom in on particular intersections of time and space that

dissipate like smoke. It is clear from her statements that Z values honesty; however, being honest and being expected to tell the Truth are both forms of disclosure but they don't necessarily assume to fulfill the same roles. It's possible that by describing the value of these acts of "revelation" as she puts it, Z is emphasizing that a socially responsible artist will address what they have gone through in "real life" accounts of their experience. Learning about "the ideological frame of reference through which people attempt to deal with the circumstances in which they find themselves" is important to Z because it offers her a chance to explore someone else's tactics for survival and apply them to her own life (Mullings as cited in Collins, 1991, p. 163). Z also listed "exposing hidden ideologies" as part of the requirements of a socially responsible artist. Z's hunger for a "real" story of "real" experience speaks to the shortage of examples and role models for what a socially responsible feminist or activist artist looks like and the sorts of stories a socially responsible artist may tell. The appeal of spoken word poetry for Z is the opportunity it provides for her to share her own examples from her "personal perspective." In this way, performance validates those experiences she wishes to share that may not be readily available through mainstream popular cultures. Such validation is particularly important because such examples are not readily available for a young woman occupying Z's positions. What I came to realize was that Z was not looking for the static Truth as I initially thought—instead she wanted to examine the perspectives of others that were performed honestly and use what others had produced to inspire her production of history. Z's version of history as she chooses to perform it is directly political because it is within performance where her agency lies; there she poses a threat to the "hidden ideologies" that she associates with Karenga's definition. Z's position as a socially responsible agent and artist marks her as dangerous because through performance she has the potential to critically expose the disguised ideologies that work to confine and restrict her movement. Her power is in her resistance and willingness to take that chance, her enthusiasm to utilize her position as "the threat [and] the knowledge of the possibility

that black women can embody and relate a credible version of history” (Martin, p. 91). Z’s engagement with performance was exploratory at this point in our conversations because she was a beginner at writing and sharing her poetry. Her eagerness to grow her skills at composing pieces with precise language is heartening. Z remains one of the most committed student artists of Collective Energy. She is not shy about her goals to improve and explore how spoken word poetry functions in her life.

Rico also voiced specific views in this particular exchange about Karenga’s theories as well, particularly in regards to issues of commitment. He suggested that the socially responsible artist would be consistently “working towards” representing the experiences of a community which implies that there is not necessarily a finishing place or stopping point. Rico elaborates on his expectations of social responsibility as an artist who will “attempt” to achieve the goal of “fullness” while understanding that they may never be capable of doing so. In the broader context of Collective Energy’s experience, what might this effort that is not “half-ass” look like? Rico’s stance was firm regarding the socially responsible artists’ “trying to” which also indicates his expectation that the socially responsible artist be a highly disciplined and self-motivated artist. Rico paints a dynamic picture of the artist here, one that requires endurance and initiative. His portrait doesn’t include the glamorous lifestyle of a performance poet who receives accolades or standing ovations. Rico is imagining an artist that maintains a strong connection with the community whose ‘fullness’ he is constantly trying to represent through performance. Spoken word poetry functions for Rico as a way to cultivate such a connection and the usually soft-spoken jovial jokester is uncompromising in his standpoint on this issue:

Rico: It’s that way with a lot of rappers that are out there running their mouth. They’re not living in the same communities the people listening to them are. They’re saying whatever and they got people, I’m not saying that necessarily it’s their fault if like, someone’s listening to their album and they decide to shoot someone

because they heard it—in a way it's that person's fault because they should have self-control, you should be more responsible for yourself. But at the same time, the rapper should have accountability for what you're saying to the people. Don't just put out all this stuff or this garbage and then when something happens you're like, oh it's not my fault...eventually someone's gonna influence somebody and that's what I hate. Cuz people [rap artists] are out here living in their, in a house, not in the ghetto anymore, not on streets anymore, so they don't care anymore.

For Rico, social responsibility has a direct connection to an individual “be[ing] more responsible for yourself.” Rico is also suggesting that spoken word poetry or performance (in his example, rap music) is a vehicle for a system of checks and balances. The individual should have “self-control” and the rapper “should have accountability for what you're saying to the people.” He continues to describe the typical behavior patterns for Hip Hop music stars that make it big and start earning larger incomes: they move from the ghetto to a suburb distancing themselves from the very people who they are supposed to be speaking with and for. Rico describes these Hip Hop artists as sellouts because “they're not living in the same communities the people listening to them are” the minute they can afford not to. Upward mobility is viewed in a very negative light in this instance. Rico is harsh in his judgment of artists that use their newly acquired affluence to pass upwards. He describes it as an act of desertion which is the highest form of treason whenever the rapper moves out and no longer resides “in the ghetto anymore, not on the streets anymore” because for him, that automatically demonstrates that the artist “don't care anymore.”

The competing desires that surface in Rico's impassioned monologue touched a tender and sensitive spot for most of the members of Collective Energy. Immediately, everyone began

naming famous artists that had acted just the way Rico described. After some thought, several members also mentioned similar instances that occurred within their own families when a particular member would “make it” and then either physically move or simply remove themselves from associating with the family. This point is of interest because of the role that each student artist in Collective Energy played. Let me explain.

While the spoken word and musical performances created and produced by Collective Energy are certainly functional and make an effort to address social issues they perceived as crucial, these performances are also particular to the student artists and their cultural and physical communities at Penn State. By functional, I mean that these student artists have access, ability to perform, and opportunity to engage in and among their communities. The art forms represented in this particular collective are relevant in a very particular moment. The high numbers of the student body in attendance at the programs where Collective Energy performs and the warm reception those students offer are a form of proof that the performances “offer forth motivation.” However, these student artists evolved as did their styles, interests, needs, and the specific social issues they wish to address. The communities and experiences that link them to “the people” when they first arrived at Penn State may not remain relevant as they grow. Already, their enrollment in higher education is separating them from the “oppressed and marginalized communities” that Karenga refers to in his theory, and that some of the members of Collective Energy call home. I ask by whose standards are we to judge what qualifies as “the realization of a people’s true potential?” Is it necessary to monitor which issues get addressed? Does the art work produced have to be experienced directly by the community and if so, how is that to be determined? Also, is it possible for the artist to control how the audience interprets her?

When I raised these questions to the group that night, a heavy silence filled the room. We were each implicated in conducting ourselves as sellouts or making attempts to pass in the way that Rico had described. Passionate performances that pulled on our deeply personal familial

experiences did not excuse us. We were each guilty of striving towards success, even when success meant leaving behind the places that raised us. Our occupation of such conflicted territory stirred Rico to write. I include an excerpt below from a poem that quickly became his signature piece:

Shooter

by Rico

“...I may seem like I’m bragging
But it’s my words that are arrogant
They can’t help it
All they can do is say what they’re saying
They can’t help the way you felt
Shit
All I know is I got my finger on this trigger
And it’s aimed at you, Slick
So when I shoot you better pray you don’t get hit
Even I have to face these clips
In the past I ain’t been no angel
So best believe if I mess up
I got not problems turning this gun on myself
So if you want me with my hands up
I’ll reach for the sky
I’ll tell you my demons
Cuz honest is how I want to go when I die...I’ll tell you the truth
But be careful...I’m a shooter so when I speak I’m gonna shoot...

...When I reach into your pocket it's not to take, but to

Give you change

You may be outside my range but I promise I'll reach you

I know I said earlier I was gonna shoot you but that's just how I teach you

So remember if I shoot it's not just to embarrass you

It's because I see something inside of you worth saving too..."

In this brief soundbite of Rico's poem, he manages to use spoken word poetry performance to meet several of his needs as a socially responsible artist in the way that he defines such a person. Rico uses "Shooter" to address the issues he brought up in the discussion of Karenga's theory. These issues include individual accountability, his role as a socially responsible artist for his audience, and the ongoing conflict that takes place as a result.

Rico begins by placing the responsibility first upon his words, giving them the adjectives of "arrogant" but disclaiming repercussions that may result from that attribute by saying "they can't help it" because "all they can do is say what they're saying." It's as if his words have a life of their own, as if he is attempting to disengage with the political or social consequences of his words. Yet Rico almost immediately follows up by implicating himself in the situation saying "even I have to face these clips" meaning that he is holding himself to the same stringent standard, if not a higher one than he is holding his audience to. He is even willing to offer the personal disclosure that Z insisted was a vital characteristic that marked an artist as socially responsible. Rico is professing a willingness to "tell you my demons" which exhibits his readiness to participate equally with the audience in the practice of responsibility and accountability. This removes any previous allusion that "Shooter" was a poem aimed only preaching or pointing out the wrong in others—Rico readily admits to his own mistakes in an

effort to lend authenticity and sincerity to his piece. His attempt to become intimate with his audience signals a desire for connection and relatability with them.

Rico continues to develop his role for the audience by speaking to those members of the audience or community that may be just beyond his reach. When he confesses “you may be outside my range but I promise I’ll reach you” Rico bravely owns up to the fact that his spoken word poetry may not reach or relate to every listening ear. By acknowledging this shortcoming and by promising to continue to work in order to grow his reach, Rico is holding himself accountable by vocalizing this to his audience. Spoken word poetry morphs from a vehicle that simply works to deliver a message into the message itself; Rico recognizes that the spoken word gives him leave to enter and refuses him access all at once. This disconnect to his audience parallels the distance that arises from his separation from the streets of Philadelphia because of his enrollment at Penn State. By declaring this struggle boldly he is also making a commitment to continue to work towards that unattainable goal of “representing fullness” that he mentioned earlier. For a student artist like Rico, such a goal requires work on both the plane of school and for his membership at home. Spoken word then works to hold Rico accountable and at the same time permits him to fall short of his goal. Liability and forgiveness are both necessary because spoken word poetry performance is a process focused on relationship rather than a final product that halts at the drop of the stage curtain.

Rico ends this portion by reminding his audience that despite the overarching violence that is described by the title “Shooter” and the analogy of his words to bullets and his poetry to a gun, he is not there to hurt them or himself: for Rico the socially responsible artist, to harm self *is* to harm the community. Instead he uses this analogy to grab the attention of an audience that is accustomed to hearing young men of color speak of violence. What makes this poem stand out is that his use of the images of a reckless gunman place demands on his audience to utilize a certain

amount of accountability for themselves—he isn't going to spell it out for them. As he mentioned in the earlier discussion,

Rico: I'm not saying that necessarily it's their fault if like, someone's listening to their album and they decide to shoot someone because they heard it—in a way it's that person's fault because they should have self-control, you should be more responsible for yourself.

Rico deliberately delivers a disturbing image of violence along with an expectation of his audience's participation in his performance. He expects them to contribute to this exchange of performance by marshalling their own sense of "self-control." He ends by seeking to communicate the value and worth they each possess and to uncover that he "sees something inside of you worth saving too." While salvation may be a large bill to fit for a rising performer, what I want to emphasize is his recognition of the precious significance that Rico attributes to the wildly varied audiences that hear his poem. No matter which community they came from, he used "Shooter" to bury his hands inside their hearts or as Chloe put it "that deep, deep place" and to command their attention to their own treasure chests. However they are defined, social relationships are the core of social responsibility and those relations were central to Collective Energy's function and form.

Section 3: Navigating Meaning in the World

Previously, I looked at several examples of moments when spoken word poetry functioned as a form of recognition of self and subjectivity for the student artists in Collective Energy. Often as an art form, spoken word poetry is viewed as a therapeutic practice; a tell-all forum that is cathartic in nature with no rules or standards of excellence. While spoken word and most forms of creative expression often relieve us emotionally and serve as a means to turn inside out the private in public, it is for these very same reasons that I argue there are always

repercussions for the language that we use. Therapy is meant to remove the filter of the patient allowing them to 'get things off their chest' while spoken word poetry is a tool for becoming critical of the filter, the patient, and the things. Also, based upon the meaning of artistic social responsibility that was continuously negotiated by Collective Energy, liability must be considered by the artist and the audience for every part of a performance including language and delivery. From this perspective, spoken word poetry is not a free-for-all, allowing the artist to glide above intersections of performance and accountability for the message in the art; instead it is a critical process of meaning construction. Because of these junctures, spoken word poetry is always political. In these meeting points, its meaning is created not only by the artist but by the audience who bears witness to the performance as well. In this section, I will further explore the ways that spoken word poetry functions as an instrument for the members of Collective Energy as we struggle to navigate and negotiate meaning in the world.

Approaching spoken word poetry and performance from a functional perspective requires that several questions are raised. If spoken word poetry and performance are indeed assistants in our attempts at charting a course through the world we must ask first, what did the members of Collective Energy consider as "the world"? More specifically, what did they consider to be their "community"? How did performance stretch or strengthen these definitions? What sorts of landscapes did the group seek to steer through as artists and students? What sorts of landscapes constructed the terrain we discovered during this experience together? How did these discoveries contribute to an awareness of the complex identities and borders that shaped our experience? Below I tease apart moments when we worked to make these borders and thus our world as acceptable to ourselves as we could while at the same time seeking out alternatives that appeared to offer improvement on the conditions we live in. I quickly found that spoken word poetry, song and performance offered pockets of peace and cracks of frustration often simultaneously.

Collaboration & Community

The idea of an artist collective where collaborative performances were developed appealed to me, and forming these collabos ranked high on my list of goals for Collective Energy as well. Mind you, I had never once written a poem with another poet. The closest work with other artists I had done was in the recording studio, which is different from constructing a performance with another artist. I had zero experience in this area and that is why it was a goal for me. Group work has always made me nervous. One can never be certain that other members of the group will pull their weight when it comes time to work. Although the assignment appears ironic because of the cooperative based structure behind Collective Energy, I was attempting to create an experience based on what I thought was beneficial for those of us involved and not limited to what I understood how to do. I also wanted to demonstrate that I was engaging in each of the activities that the rest of the members were; I did not hold myself exempt from participating just because of my role as leader/researcher.

Part of my hesitation behind writing a piece with someone else stems from my experiences in traditional classrooms where being silenced or excluded when working with others had been the norm for me. Sometimes my tendency is to overcompensate and be the most dominant leader in a group. I knew that working together and structuring Collective Energy so that we would have to create collab pieces would be a learning experience for us all. Not so surprisingly, by the end of the year I had not completed a single poem with another artist in the group, although several of them had paired up and worked together to create new work. However, I drew the conclusion that our hour long show counted as collaboration because it featured the concurrence of many different perspectives through a cohesive performance. Though the show did offer one conclusion, it was no final answer at all, because it pointed to yet another question: did this mean that collaboration and collectivity was equivalent to a group consensus or a feeling of unity? In my search for what collaboration and collective work could

mean, I turn to Ewa Kuryluk (1994) whose words trouble the ideas behind “collectivity” by insisting “collective standards must be questioned, not confirmed by art, and artists must fight for *autonomy*: their right to explore and express whatever they find important or interesting” (p. 13-14). According to Kuryluk, we are supposed to cultivate and separate individual voices and opinions that manifest in our artwork. She determines that self-representation leads to self-sufficiency, which in turn strengthens any collective made up of artists who do so. Practically speaking, the academy is not always geared toward cultivating a sense of self efficacy, particularly for artists. From Kuryluk’s perspective, participating in a group membership does not mean giving up one’s standpoint or specific point of view. Instead, the specificity of an artists’ viewpoint is to be valued, even when the expression of such a perception may first appear to disrupt the cohesiveness of the community the artist is joined with. Being a member of a collective in no way abolishes the personal voice, rather as Linda Alcoff (1995) comments, part of the reward of work that “engages collectively with others” is that “aspects of our own location less obvious to us might be revealed” (p. 112). The very performance of the juxtaposition of our autonomous viewpoints demands that the performers and audience members make space for multiple voices to get heard. When a performance becomes an investigation, new concepts must be envisioned in order to make sense of contradictory positions, and this is how transformation might take place. It is only through an investment in Kuryluk’s (1994) autonomy that an effective collective can begin to be formed. Spoken word poetry functions as an expression of that autonomy as well as a skill that links each member, no matter how diverse in their particular experience. Understanding how community might have been perceived by Collective Energy is the next step in determining how the idea of community was utilized throughout our process together. I asked each member how they defined community and I focus on responses from Amelie and Z below.

Amelie: I have, I have a lot of different . . . I don't . . . that's been one of the things that has been like hard is being able to identify community because I'm . . . I think it's supposed to be one thing but then you learn that you can have multiple communities and I consider myself have, having multiple art, artistry talent. And I don't know if I've ever actually identified what those are. I know there's like different values within each collective that may affect what art comes out...but Collective Energy has provided me with a community that I have not . . . you know how some things are just kind of like meant to go together. Collective Energy is like on a different scale than everything else. For me it's just a little bit more . . . it provides that, that space for critical thinking that people don't want to touch.

Amelie gestures to the ways that multiple memberships in different communities are often sites of competing values. How does an artist choose which values are priorities? How do these choices impact the type of artwork that is performed? Amelie also references Collective Energy as a community that “provides space for critical thinking that people don't want to touch.” Critical thinking is a necessary part of the process of embracing individual values and exploring the contending values of others who are members of the community. When a strategy for critical thinking practice is taught and then applied from an artistic standpoint then it can be digested and re-hearsed through a performance. The sharing and re-mixing that result when critical analyses are discussed by a group of people demand several qualities: trust, intimacy, and openness. The stage is not the only place where pedagogy through performance takes place. For Collective Energy, our weekly group meetings were integral to the building of our community, yet these meetings were not without impediments. The meetings were lengthy and took place every

Tuesday evening. Zanna and I were often exhausted. There were workshops full of silence and at other points we were constantly talking over each other and experiencing multiple interruptions.

All of these unpredictable elements of the environment are directly related to the level of vocal participation the student artists would commit to at any given time. bell hooks' (1989) work on the issues of finding voice and community speaks aptly to the difficulties we experienced by interpreting the act of coming to voice as an act of resistance (p. 12). Pulling examples from her own experiences, hooks continues to illustrate what she considers to be the challenges of choosing to speak out from a personal experience that may not be shared by others, even those who stand in 'community' with you. She states:

“it becomes easy to speak about what the group wants to hear, to describe and define experience in a language compatible with existing images and ways of knowing, constructed within social frameworks that reinforce domination” (p. 14).

Here hooks considers the extensive social pressure and training that institutions of education, popular culture, and the media have used to construct the ways in which it is socially acceptable to speak and listen. These constructions do not magically evaporate simply because a community is based around social change. Each member of Collective Energy had to work at re-learning what it means to listen and speak from a critical place. Thoughtful time and careful word choice became priorities which were doubly important because of the weight that we all agreed words carry. As poets and song writers especially, we strove to exercise caution with our words because as Joseph reminded us in his poem, “words have power.” To change the way we speak is to alter our lifestyle and even more substantially, it's about shifting subjectivities. It is always difficult to break a habit, particularly one that we are trained in from childhood. hooks suggests we learn to speak and listen in a new way, and this implies that in doing so, we can

reconstruct the social frameworks that form the support structure for domination. Oddly enough, this practice is easier said than done.

Amelie confirmed hooks' suspicion that it takes hard work to maintain a sense of personal integrity even when that means not saying what the group "wants to hear" (p. 14). Amelie acknowledged that "different values" existed within "each collective that may affect what art comes out" thus also affecting the process by which that art is produced. Group, collective, and community work is perilous. Just as the researcher strives to be aware of all the existing underlying and forming relationships that shape what is being researched, the community member must plot a route through and among relationships and priorities and, as an artist, make a personal decision that affects the greater public. However, the goal here is not to necessarily align every single value of the artist with every value of the community, but to simply provide the space and tools with which to think, communicate, investigate and explore those values on a deep analytical level. The work of a community and a collaborative artistic project is to make room for the expression of the ongoing results of those explorations. Ensuring the continuation of this work is a rigorous challenge for even the most experienced researcher or teacher. Constant momentum and a willingness to re-examine and revisit a performance is also a continuing challenge for the budding artist and so creating spoken word poetry and original songs function as challenge.

Z chimes in here with her view on how participating, performing and identifying herself within a group like Collective Energy functioned to challenge her.

Z: Because in all actuality like, like I said you have a lot of people surrounding you but everybody is not going to think like you. And not necessarily saying that everybody in Collective Energy agrees with you but they can challenge your perspective on a different level that makes

you either think more by like adding to, to your thought or understanding why it may not work all the time. You know what I mean? And sometimes you just need that . . . sometimes you need something off the general level of being in Penn State and this is what I encounter. You know what I mean? And I believe that the people who were willing to participate in that...I don't know. There's just something about this group of people that we have now. It's just like they want to be there for the reason of like challenging their minds and, and that's what you need around you sometimes. Like you—and not all the times but that's what people need around them you know.

According to this excerpt of her interview, Z's visions of community involved being challenged by having to “think more” or by asking that another person “understand why it may not work like that all the time.” Z also characterizes “willingness” as a way to describe the members of such a community—one that supports you in spite of their objections or oppositions to what you may value. Communication becomes vital for the community as well, so that the contesting viewpoints are productively expressed.

Z also mentions Collective Energy was “off the general level of being in Penn State” and from this statement I deduce that she is referring to the very specific and unaddressed population that, while very small in numbers, Collective Energy was made up of. Z also mentions that the other student-artists were “like [her]—and not all the times” meaning that she recognized they shared similar values such as a desire to grow artistically, to do well in school, to speak forthrightly and politically, yet they weren't identical; the shared values weren't necessarily consistent across the board. Two important points surface here. First, Z recognizes that the consistency and “likeness” she shares with her peers is valuable: they are striving towards the

same goals. Secondly, and perhaps most interesting of all, Z does not express a need or desire to “necessarily agree with” or assimilate to the other members of the group. This means that Z can appreciate what they share without feeling required to adapt or adjust herself in the areas that mark her as different from everyone else. Her difference does not mark her as an outsider of the community, instead, what Z finds essential is the *challenge* of working in those differences. In fact, the differences excite her. She is pleased because the other members of her community “want to be there for the reason of like challenging their minds.” Their commitment to tackling that challenge earns them Z’s respect and serves as her connection with them.

It is this same sense of challenge that marked a group like Collective Energy as, in Amelie’s words, a space that “people don’t want to touch.” When I probed her further she said she didn’t “feel that intellectual connection so much [with others] because they are aware of different things, or aren’t aware of things.” Amelie’s perspective supports Z’s earlier statement that community entails a willingness to enter into conversation and engage with others on an intimate level even when such close contact infers personal discomfort. This sense of connection Amelie felt as a result of her artistic endeavors with Collective Energy is a point of individual interest because when I first invited her to join the project, she was excited but there was some apparent hesitation. When I reminded her of that moment during our one-on-one interview she responded as follows.

Amelie: Well as an artist you know it’s funny because I don’t think I actually always thought of myself as an artist. I guess I did—technically I was a performing artist. But it never was so visible to me until Collective Energy I think when it was like that group of artists like so many different talents I was just like wow. Like I do have something to give and I think first coming in to Collective Energy I was like you know

what's my place here? I don't even know. I don't really know what I'm supposed to do or what is going to happen. But then finally it just kind of clicked and I just kind of, like, it was probably the beginning... of me seeing like through an artists' lens...

At first glance, this bit of text may appear as if it belongs in the previous section because it nods to how performance assists Amelie in recognizing herself as an artist. However, it wasn't until Amelie performed with a group of artists striving for similar goals but using a variety of tactics that her role as an artist became "so visible" to her. Her participation within the Collective Energy community designated for her "the beginning" of her viewpoint being shaped intentionally through her production of performance art within a context of other artists. Amelie's location within Collective Energy enabled her to operate in old discourses through a new way.

Raphael said his community included the place that he "came from" as well as his "audience." When I asked him who his audience was composed of he told me "I want my audience to be anybody who will listen." Amelie repeated Raphael's reply word for word and extended the thought by saying part of her work as an artist was "to connect to [her] audience." Amelie and Raphael's desire to be heard and thus recognized connotes singing as a way to bond with more than one community at a time and therefore be considered a resident of many communities at once. Both Amelie and Raphael were using performance as a platform to increase the range of their community; it was a way to expand the numbers of those in membership that could relate to their work and would signify that this relation was so, thus bearing witness to their testimony. As a result, the two singers would also gain admittance to communities to which they would not otherwise be attached, forging "transformative alliances across mythical categories" (Underiner, p. 1295). Performance then becomes a means to align

with parties and people that their other community memberships “distinguish” them from. At the same time, it allows them to separate completely from the parts of society where there is no perceived magnetism or reason to connect. In terms of community, performance provides mobility, or a method of ‘passing’ between and among a mixture of populations. Community is also modified by performance, molded into something different during each act, fluctuating the terrain of meaning that is being negotiated.

The community that I intended for Collective Energy to form was distinguished from the surrounding communities of Penn State and central Pennsylvania because of its focus on producing socially responsible performances. The common characteristics and interests that bound each member to the next was simply an investment in growing as an artist. Collective Energy was perceived as distinct by the rest of the student body because it was the only group of its kind on campus that was united centrally by a focus on arts for social action. While there was certainly overlap in a variety of shared commonalities amongst the group such as ethnicity or spirituality, our driving similarity and main purpose was to grow as socially responsible artists. Framing what counts as community is also important in order to better locate the ways that my own understandings of the practical implications of feminist theory complicated and challenged my personal motives in the midst of the Collective Energy experience.

Notions of community including those that were set forth by Collective Energy are not without appropriate feminist criticism. In her work on feminism and borders, Chandra Mohanty (2003) raises important questions around the idea of community. Similar to hooks’ work, she interrogates the authority with which boundaries are drawn and the economic, cultural, and ideological processes that establish relations of rule which “naturalize the dominant values” (Mohanty, p. 189). These are important interrogations into borders that are often naturalized and left undisturbed by field work that focuses on particular demographics and yet claims to be liberatory or progressive. Mohanty demands that contextual accountability and responsibility be

claimed by those that build a foundation upon concepts of community. Her investigation certainly caused me to question my stance and motivation—what sort of community was I, as an organizer and leader of this project trying to create and for whom? I was obligated to consider the other artists as well as my employer and the university where I worked. On this plane, my personal context shaped everyone's sense of community because I initially was responsible to some degree for orchestrating and directing the connections that I had made among them. Who would not be granted citizenship in this community? Issues of exclusion and inclusion seemed to problematize this project from the very beginning. In other words, I based my invitations on the concept of challenge that Z spoke of. I used my prior knowledge to make a decision and it was a task I was honored to complete. I wanted to build a very specific kind of community and I chose those student artists who I felt would take full advantage of sharing in the privilege that my position could potentially afford to all of us. Because of my own familiarity with being scribed as a subject that was illegitimate and unimportant, I was driven to extend an opportunity to students who I knew had at some point felt that same rejection. I wanted to create a space where the most important issues were *our* issues and by talking about our own lives, those issues became legitimate and valid in whichever way they were experienced. Talking about the issues wasn't enough and so I worked to cultivate their spoken word skills, and we set about sharpening one another. Our obstacles included individual and group activities as well as the test that it always is to work with other people in any setting. It was my prediction that we would all be better equipped to face ourselves, one another, and our world with a tool such as performance that may prove effective. So to answer Mohanty's questions "who are the insiders and outsiders?" and "what notions of legitimacy and gendered and racialized citizenship are being actively constructed within this community," I consider my own motivations and exercises of power. In so doing, I labor to thoughtfully employ feminist research strategies as suggested by Wendy Luttrell (1997) which "tell us to attend to our own experiences in the field and to be conscious of

the research process as a relationship” (p. 12). Part of navigating this relationship is determining which role a member plays for the community.

On the other hand, Michelle Fine (1992) asserts that it is imperative for feminist researchers to view themselves as activists situated within a community. She continues, “feminist researchers have little choice and much responsibility to shape our research through activist stance in collaboration with community based political women” (p. 205). Thus, it is impossible to present research done for an academic purpose as somehow separated from the context that birthed it. The research is in turn held accountable by the relationship between researcher and community. For Fine, this community collaboration obligates the researcher to “press, provoke, and unbalance social inequity and to remember that such scholarship has serious consequences” (p. i). Such consequences have direct implications for the community that is partnered with the researcher as well as the artist and for the researcher/artist herself. Once the inside issues of a community are made public, the community is vulnerable to attack, open to criticism, and in jeopardy of being misunderstood. Even more intensely is the artist that performs as a member of a community (whether they choose to or are assigned to a community by the audience) in a hazardous position because they are one target made very easy by a spotlight. I am troubled by community but embrace the concept at the same time: there is power in numbers. Numbers provide support and support can assist in sustaining a purpose, a mission, and most fundamentally perhaps, encouragement. Solidarity is one benefit that standing in community and bearing witness can offer to those that join together. Collective Energy was created for this reason too.

The reference to balance made by Fine is an interesting one for me as I remember the first year of Collective Energy. The reason this scholarship is serious and a gamble is because it is so personal to me. My very performance of the research assumes to communicate a message to you, the reader, on behalf of Collective Energy, the researched. Definitively reporting on this research, no matter how creative the method of dissemination still threatens me with a certain

sense of the ordinary and does not at first glance honor the confusing, disruptive, world-rocking and electric sensation that working with Collective Energy continues to be. One part of this deeply emotional impact is evident in the internal reflexive direction that I continuously find myself circling as I write. While I can't help but seek out "some sort of closure" to the process, and previous qualitative study on the subject of emotions in research suggests that there is a structure complete with a very tidy ending, I am not confident that there ever is a finish to this process (Gilbert, 2001, p. 13). Neither do I think that closure is the point or even possible: I believe part of the seriousness that Fine was referring to is the emotional costs charged to my account for conducting a study around something meaningful to me. I did not factor this expense in whenever I began working with people and a project that I care about so deeply. Part of the power of this topic is its immediate relevance to several of my own communities and that is also what makes this research moment sobering. My own memberships in several sorts of communities do not protect me from the consequences that may result from belonging in this one. To belong to a community increases the chance that another member of that community may speak or act on my behalf. Another person's assumption and action in my place appears to defeat the philosophy that suggests no one person should speak for another. My motive for endeavoring to explicitly link and promote a sense of connection with and among the members of Collective Energy is by no means absent of selfishness—I clearly wanted it because I thought it would benefit me as well as the group. The management of emotion or involvement that most qualitative researchers strive for I quickly abandoned (if I ever attempted it at all) for a raw and vulnerable position that did not implicitly equal a significant and meaningful connection with each member of the community that was Collective Energy. However it was a connection that I was in search of.

I was not the only one on such a search. A sense of connection was expressly named by other student artists as a goal.

Amelie: And I, I, I always strive to make that connection cause I don't want to ever be a performer on stage that people are just like watching and they're like oh she sounds good. I want to be, I want to be more than that...and I feel like it's me on stage and I want people to feel that. I don't want to be distant.

Z: It's like putting yourself out there and taking that risk of being rejected or accepted—

Raphael: You can, you can see people's intentions shining through even though you know like they, they—it means something to them. So, therefore, it means something to everybody else, you know?

Rico mentioned his search for connection when he spoke of the socially responsible artist and referenced his home. Chloe and Joseph brought it up indirectly whenever they referenced their family stories as starting points for writing. I am bringing it up here and it is partially a result of a displacement that I felt upon my physical departure from the community that raised and nurtured me prior to my arrival at graduate school. Speaking effectively on behalf of the artist and activist of color that has been isolated from her home community, James Baldwin (1985) suggests that for the artist

“to continue to grow, to remain in touch with herself, she needs the support of that community from which, however, all of the pressures of American life incessantly conspire to remove her. And when she is effectively removed, she falls silent—and the people have lost another hope” (p. xviii).

The absence of crucial support that Baldwin speaks of was largely felt by me when I moved to this tiny college town. Hope was indeed evaporating until Zanna hired me to work at the PRCC and we developed Collective Energy. When I first met with each student artist to extend the invitation to join Collective Energy, they were excited, not just to have a chance to perform, but as Z put it, “to have a sort of artsy family.” I was both relieved that I was not the only person having this intensely lonely time and disturbed that so many of my students and peers expressed this destabilizing sensation of unbelonging and isolation while at school and then again upon their return to their home communities. There are few cultural venues where we live and hardly any formal conversations about the effect this has on student artists. There were no initiatives resembling Collective Energy that worked toward effectively fostering artistic and socially minded development on our campus. There is a certain cost and sacrifice involved in choosing to pursue higher education that seems to require this division. In our one-on-one interviews, I also asked each student artist what they felt was the best aspect of the Collective Energy experience. Five out of six of the members said that it was the weekly group meetings. I was floored. These three hour meetings were the source of so much complaining during the course of the year that I did not know what to do. Everyone was exhausted at the end of each meeting and couldn’t wait to depart, their minds already filled with the tasks they had yet to complete before the night was out. Cell phones vibrated incessantly during our meetings and almost drove me crazy. What I found at the end of the year was that these same obligatory but very regular meetings were the crucial core of the community building that took place during Collective Energy. It was not only the product of our performances, but the process of our rehearsal that knit together the bond of our group that may otherwise seem random and uncoordinated. I have also found the term “community” is often used interchangeably with the word “collective” in reference to a group of people that work together or that “represent” a certain demographic. For the purposes of this study and as a basic definition of community I view it as

“a social, religious, occupational, or other group sharing common characteristics or interests and perceived or perceiving itself as distinct in some respect from the larger society within which it exists” (dictionary.com). It was obvious to us that we were different from most of the surrounding society in which we operated. And this community building, while certainly necessary and beneficial, is not without its traps.

It is often said that one can still be lonely even when one is not alone; this proverb succinctly describes a catch in my plan for Collective Energy that I overlooked as I continued to re-organize of the experience. Both of our singers, Raphael and Amelie expressed a feeling of being out of place throughout in their evaluation of Collective Energy. During the year, they may have hinted at their detachment from the community I was so intent upon building; however, neither of them spoke up very adamantly until their interviews. I will return to Amelie in the next chapter and focus on Raphael now. The first time I really observed this crack in the composure of our community was one night during a group meeting when Joseph, Rico and Raphael first shared their collaborative effort. They were the first to debut their collab and the content of the song and the dialogue that followed made me realize what was happening:

Crystal: Soooo, how did the collab work go?

Joseph: *(speaking directly into the camera)* Jonathan is the one that syssed [slang: to hype or brag about] it all up—

Zanna: Mmhmm! Whatever!

Rico: Miss 3 am in the morning and giving me the wrong number—

Chloe: What did *I* do?

(there is struggle with setting up Raphael's keyboard)

Crystal: Can ya'll set up silently?

Z: Crys, that girl in class was crying for no reason...

Chloe: I didn't mean to laugh at her—

Raphael: Okay, we ready with the hot collab! The collab of the century!

Joseph: We got this together in an hour—

Z: Don't make excuses!

Crystal: No disclaimers!

Zanna: Don't be disclaiming it—

Raphael: We don't even have a beginning...

Rico: Yeah, it's really only half a song—

Raphael: Hold up, let me turn the beat on—

(The whole exchange has been had in a joking atmosphere and there is even more laughter as Raphael turns on the pre-programmed beat to keep time on his keyboard. The sounds of the tinny bass trying be taken seriously couldn't be more comedic in their timing. Raphael begins to play the chords of the song over the rhythm and it catches the group's enthusiasm)

Raphael: *(counting off)* 1 and 2, 3 and 4

Rico: *(reading from his notebook)* One of ya'll got my lyrics...

(The group erupts with "Oooooohhs!" and exclamations of "What!!" because Chloe had mentioned this idea for a poem during an interlude while we were all talking the week before. Everyone immediately recognized the use and metamorphosis of her idea and was excited to hear the outcome. This moment was truly exciting; not only were the fellas working together to produce some music, but they had also incorporated and thus paid homage to Chloe's idea. Eventually, another of

Chloe's lines became the official call and response for Collective Energy. There was an ongoing joke that if any of the student artists had writer's block they would simply 'borrow' one of Chloe's lines and start their own piece. On the other hand, there is something interesting around gender taking place because all of the male members of the group used Chloe's idea for their own piece. She seemed pleased that they used it and still wrote her own poem with the line included; however, issues of ownership and silencing might need to be addressed. It is also ironic because the line they borrowed was "one of ya'll got my lyrics" and in this case, all three of the males literally had Chloe's lyric.)

Fly Away (an excerpt)

Lyrics by: Raphael, Joseph, Chloe, and Rico

Music by: Raphael

Rico: One of ya'll got my lyrics, I said one of ya'll got my lyrics
 So why doesn't anyone speak to me
 Nothing speaks to me anymore so neither do I
 I look for sound waves that can change my brain waves and help me see light
 waves to help light the way

Raphael: Lately my mind is wrapped up in deep contemplation
 (singing) Is this a dream or is this my imagination
 I'm using maps for words that lead to no location
 Struggling inside my mind to find articulation
 Trying to find my voice, when all I can hear is yours
 Who I really am is lost inside of your discourse

Is it you or is it me who's really in control
Swimming in your oceans I can't find my shore
Words give me wings to fly
Metaphorical carpet rides
If I don't get away, my lyrics will die

Chorus: Ready to fly away, ready to fly away

Ready to fly away from here (2x)

Joseph: I will find my way

Nothing more that you can say

I'm writing my own words now, grabbing ownership of my own lyrics now

Piecing words to melodies just so my soul can hear it now

So no more ghost writers or behind the scenes song biters

No more fixed battles or paid prize fighters

All bets are on me and I got the best odds

It's something like all of them against me

Asking for lyrics to cover me and sheets of music become armor for my body

So I dare you to hit me

Punch me and play notes on my chin

Squeeze my treble clef and strangle my violin

But no matter the number of lashes my lyrics remain despite the number of
bashes

So you can sit there as I fly away and watch my dust to dust and ashes to ashes

Raphael: Lately my mind is wrapped up in deep contemplation

(singing) Is this a dream or is this my imagination

I'm using maps for words that lead to no location
 Struggling inside my mind to find articulation
 Trying to find my voice, when all I can hear is yours
 Who I really am is lost inside of your discourse
 Is it you or is it me who's really in control
 Swimming in your oceans I can't find my shore
 Words give me wings to fly
 Metaphorical carpet rides
 If I don't get away, my lyrics will die

Chorus: Ready to fly away, ready to fly away
 Ready to fly away from here (2x)

(The group erupts with wild applause at the boys' performance. General question such as "how long did it take you?" and comments of "that was so great!" are overlapping so much so that they are not discernable.)

Joseph: It was an interesting process cause I was all hype like, 'let's do it!' and we were sitting at Jonathan's house and he was like, "sooooo..." and then he just started playing and then I don't know, it just—

Rico: We just started writing separately and then—

Joseph: They all seemed to match—

Rico: Yeah—

Raphael: Eh...

Raphael's attitude about the working process and rough draft of the collaboration was interesting to note. Knowing him as a perfectionist and a very talented individual led me to believe that those were the causes of his frustration with the initial challenge of working together with other artists. I made a mental note to inquire about what it was like for them to work collaborating with other writers—as I said before I had little experience with this area myself. However, as I began to think about it and even question him regarding the most rewarding and challenging moments of the experience, his responses were mixed. I couldn't quite nail down what the expectation was surrounding collaboration. During the discussion that Joseph, Rico and Raphael had with us the day they previewed their song during the group meeting, they registered surprise at how smoothly their piece had come together. Saying their individual pieces “all seemed to match” complimenting the music Raphael was composing naturalized the process of collaboration. This struck me as contrary to what I had experienced while working with others, particularly when it came to developing performance which tends to be sensitive and very personal for most artists. While the process was roundly seconded by Joseph and Rico, all Raphael responded with was an uncertain “Eh...” At first I chalked this attitude of nonchalant discontent with the fact that he was a new songwriter and perhaps lacked confidence in his work, which always provoked an impressed response from his audience. When I asked him to describe for me what Collective Energy was in his one-on-one interview he said

Raphael: Collective Energy, what is it? It's a, it's a group of artists I would suppose for the most part social justice minded in some sense. Socially, socially conscious I guess we could say. Just, yeah just a group of artists who get together and do stuff—perform for the people. Spoken word. There are a couple of us that sing that's you're kind of lost in the mix sometimes.

Crystal: That's a good way to put it. That's a nice way to put it. What, okay so how do you fit into that would you say?

Raphael: I don't know. I wonder about that a lot actually cause I don't know if I do fit into that. And you and Toby assured me that I do somehow. But I'm not . . . I don't know cause I really just think of myself as a singer.

Getting "lost in the mix" and not knowing "if I do fit into that" because he thought of himself "just...as a singer" were troubling thoughts for me to hear at the end of the year. I was disturbed for two reasons, the first being that I hadn't paid enough attention to Raphael's experience as a whole. I was concerned that he had somehow been neglected or denied some sort of connection due to my own oversight. Underneath that layer lay the central issue: what had Raphael been expecting to gain from this experience? It was clear that performance had functioned for him as a tool of recognition of himself "just...as a singer" and as a means to navigate his world. However, it is what his world consisted of that draws my focus. If Raphael only felt included during certain parts of Collective Energy, what was the difference? How was I to know or to measure those moments and how could I endeavor to increase their occurrence? At the same time I consider questions about the student artists taking responsibility for their own experience by understanding that what they sowed in effort and energy was what they would reap. The isolation that Baldwin warned of was still happening in the hallowed space of 'community' and in moments of collaboration in spite of our efforts.

As a matter of fact, Raphael registered surprise about the reactions that his performance incited. When I questioned him about his motivation for music, he said that "singing just makes [him] happy...I just love...I love to sing. I love performing" and was content to leave his answer at that. When I asked him about a connection with his audience, Raphael seemed baffled by the way that the crowd would respond to him.

Raphael: I don't know. I mean I don't know. I go back and forth between whether I think I'm good and . . . I don't know. Sometimes I think I'm good, sometimes I think I think I'm not. A lot of times I probably think I'm not. So I get up sing and I'll just, I'll just be praying like Lord don't let me forget no words. I mean jut do all right and like everybody is singing and people are like saying that's the most amazing thing they ever heard or anything. A couple of people have told me they cried, which I didn't believe. But they reiterated it so much that I don't know, maybe they weren't lying. I don't know. That boggles my mind cause I don't know. I never cried over anybody singing. Maybe I haven't heard the right person. But so it's just . . . it's kind of weird. Like I get, I get kind of taken aback when people say things like that.

While connection with his audience wasn't a focus, I couldn't figure out why he seemed unhappy with the collaboration or the connection with the other members of Collective Energy. Particularly because his response in the one-on-one interview emphasized that his favorite part was the group meetings as well.

Crystal: So what was your favorite . . . what do you think was your favorite about Collective Energy? Or your favorite part of, of the experience?

Raphael: Being oh I just think it was being around people who loved doing that type of stuff too with like performing or writing or, or anything like that—any aspect of the art I just love doing it and that kind of motivates you to do it too. And then we had meetings all the time so we were like it made me like do stuff. Like it

made me like write a little more, think about music a little more than I think about it. And so I, I don't know, I just like that—the consistency of it.

In retrospect for Raphael, he seemed to appreciate the challenge that Z insisted was a part of what it means to participate in a community membership. His affinity for “consistency” in this particular vocal response again caught me off guard until I realized that it was *my* expectation for a certain type of reply or affirmation during the year that made me doubt his full engagement with the process. While Raphael's feelings of being on the margins of Collective Energy weren't expressed during the experience so that I could address them as an organizer, I was frustrated by what I perceived to be his lack of involvement or interest. What I mistook for distance and a lack of thoughtfulness was really Raphael wanting to learn but resisting any demonstration of that desire. For him, attendance at the meetings and completion of new songs *was* active involvement—he saw no need to articulate that to me. His actions were what I should have paid attention to, but I was busy trying to figure out what I was doing wrong because he wasn't responding the way I thought he should. Or perhaps I did achieve my goal and *he* simply remained frustrated. Raphael did not respond with much verbal input and he didn't vocalize much during the workshop meetings. However, he maintained regular attendance at the meetings. He also continued to write original songs which was a task he had completed only once prior to joining the group. Raphael also created and cultivated opportunities for solo performances outside of Collective Energy that took place as a result of his performances with Collective Energy.

Raphael found Collective Energy to be a home base of sorts—as a space to refuel and recharge—it provided the support that a community is expected to provide and yet freed him to participate at his discretion. Raphael joined the group during his first year in graduate school and during his first year at Penn State. I posit that he used what he learned in Collective Energy to begin to identify himself as he navigated campus and worked to understand himself as a person

and as an artist. It is precisely because participating and holding membership in a community meant something so different to Raphael that he was invaluable to us all during this experience. Raphael's proficient talent and stubbornness to do something that he didn't enjoy was a lesson on having a commitment to himself that was a priority even while maintaining an active concern for the broader community. Interestingly enough, when I asked what he wanted to see more of in order to improve Collective Energy Raphael mentioned more emphasis on collaboration and more group meetings. The lesson to be learned here is that community building takes a variety of autonomous forms. Performance can function in this way on multiple levels in ways that cannot be measured or predicted, and often does.

In the previous chapter, the function of performance begins as a thread that has been knotted up by my reflections on the various subject positions I inhabited throughout Collective Energy. I examined the ways in which the student artists' and I are recognized as subjects and how envisioning ourselves as artists allows us to enact what we conceive. Through the analysis of Joseph's work and an exploration of Rico's ideas about what it means to be socially responsible, it's clear that the Collective Energy experience taught us about the context of our performances. We understand how our external context molds our performance content. In this way, performance assists us with our navigation of the world. In the following chapter I return to Amelie's feelings of disconnection and inquire into the resistant angles from which renderings of activism emerged throughout our performances.

Chapter 3

Renderings of Activism

Here I aim to situate a broad understanding of activism and approach that understanding from two angles: first, as it relates to the spoken word performances of Collective Energy. Previously, I touched on the ways that performance assisted our members in navigating the world, and now I will consider the ways in which performance functioned for members of Collective Energy as a means of re-producing their experiences in the world thus resisting and changing them. I preface the student artists' perceptions of activism with the responses and reactions I received after inviting students from a class I taught to attend Bed: A Spoken Word Lounge. In this way, I hope to connect the inner-workings of this small integrated arts group to the larger context in which they carried out a majority of their daily activity. After being introduced to the internal dynamics of the group, it is helpful to query into the external relationship of the greater societal context and to explore the complexities of doing the critical work intended by Collective Energy.

As time passed, Collective Energy continued to work through the ways that spoken word poetry and performance functioned in our own lives on an individual and relational level within our community. For us, spoken word materialized the ways that our subject-hoods were constructed through performance and what has become clear is that spoken word is at once the process and the product of transformation. Norman K. Denzin (2003) defines performance as “determined by culture and controlled by language...it at once reproduces and re-institutes behavior or action that has already taken place yet through the very re-enactment creates an original, prospectively disruptive event” (p. 10). It is within this re-production and re-enactment that comprises performance that the poststructuralist theory that supports the negotiation of subjectivities is revealed. If language is a political site of negotiation, then there is the potential

for disruption in the language of performance. Bronwyn Davies (2000) agrees “the power feminists have found in poststructuralist theorizing is precisely in its opening up of possibilities for undermining the inevitability of particular oppressive forms of subjection. They have done this by making the constitutive force of discourse visible and thus revisable” (p. 180). What better way to make aspects of life often hushed out of the mainstream visible than in the three-dimensional realm of theater and performance? By refusing the illusion of invisibility to the “constitutive forces” that shape discourse, the student artists take up and take on the work of subverting oppression.

Together, we reviewed Karenga’s (2003) theory on social responsibility and his theory provided a starting point for Collective Energy. The creation of performances stimulated by that exploration was the application of that theory. My interest in the relationship between theory and practice raised questions for me regarding what forms activism may take and the ways in which the spoken word poetry performances resulting from Collective Energy’s workshops might be considered activist. Social responsibility requires a system of checks and balances on behalf of the communities represented by the artists and vice versa. Art as activism entails action: an application of social responsibility through actions that translate the values (cultural, spiritual, or otherwise) of the artist in their performance content and delivery. Collective Energy’s performances are based mostly on content that may be marked as self-portraiture or autobiographical in nature. How does the personal translate both to the public and to the political? The more intimately we explored ourselves and one another through our work, the more urgent it became to understand our audience and the role they played during performance. How did performance function as a form of pedagogy, particularly socially responsible pedagogy? These questions are addressed through another examination of dialogue within Collective Energy and the poetry that was produced. These pieces are threaded together by my

own standpoint as a teacher for the student-audience members and as a leader/member of Collective Energy.

Now you see her, now you don't...

In her essay that details the disaster of invisibility for Asian American women, Mitsuye Yamada (1981) explores what it means to operate in a society where one is treated as invisible. She asserts that “invisibility is not a natural state for anyone” and by highlighting her personal experiences as an Asian American woman (ie: demure, geisha stereotypes), she contributes to the larger conversation around the oppressive silencing often experienced by women and women of color in particular (p. 40). Yamada continues to effectively explore how being forced into invisibility and silence often contributes to cultivating an “underground culture of survival” as a tool of resistance (p. 37). This underground survival culture operates through and within the greater context of the same society that intentionally neglects it; the very existence of the culture is resistant. Although it is underground, meaning that the culture functions stealthily below the surface, it pulses with life despite the negligence or disregard of the mainstream. In a similar vein, Patricia Hill Collins (1999) agrees that “Black women may overtly conform to the societal roles laid out for them, yet covertly oppose these roles in numerous spheres” (p. 165). What appears as submission and subscription to the part designated for Black women through their outward actions can actually function as manipulations of those roles in order to undermine the societal structure they are meant to operate in. Destabilizing this structure is a form of subversion that shifts the power relations working to oppress and restrict social or class movement for women of color. Sabotaging this status quo in small ways, even while living in it, is a form of activism. Although neither Yamada (1981) nor Collins (1999) directly label the construction of these alternative underground cultures as a subversive performance, it is important to understand and appreciate the ways that these constructs feed into subaltern movements of resistance and the ways that such movements are acted out. When a person is treated as invisible she is often

rendered ineffectual. Although these two theories focus primarily upon women of color and Collective Energy's members were also male and white, the principals that govern these theories can be usefully applied to the group. Even when the social issues being presented did not apply to their lives in an obvious or direct way, because each student artist claimed membership in Collective Energy they aligned themselves with the social issues being performed.

Augusto Boal's (1979) ground-breaking work in *Theater of the Oppressed* provides a connection between these ideas on visibility and offer ways that performance can be used as a revolutionary and transformative experience for invisible people. Using theater techniques to raise awareness and expose the underground culture of the oppressed to the surface, Boal's work can be situated in support of the post-structuralist ideas that suggest performance could entail disruption, producing new concepts in the process. He elaborates on what exactly the "new concepts" might be by describing a poetics of the oppressed, one whose goal is to transform the spectator into an actor, that is, an active participant in the drama production. Boal states that revolutionary theater must allow the spectator to work out new endings and meanings of their own (p. 122). By intentionally engaging with the audience and provoking them to probe their own experiences as they relate to a particular performance around a topic of oppression, an actor or poet employs the language of performance to open up conversations around how that particular oppression might be challenged. If a student can "understand, see, and feel to what point his body is governed by his work" or social location, then they become aware of the ways in which another student's body, in a different line of work, culture, or social location could be positioned (Boal, 1979, p. 128). In this way the embodiment of theories and the physical acting out that theater performance demands creates awareness and understanding that may not have otherwise existed. Performance thus lends visibility to underground cultures of survival raising awareness and perhaps even recruiting others to join in the action. Through performance, selected discourses that each performer and audience member participates in are forced to the forefront, or

at the very least can be brought to the attention of those engaging with the performance. Once the discourses that are in competition are made visible then action can be taken to further question and trace the concrete histories and value systems that are rivaling. Making meaning by taking action and not only using words or traditional texts highlights in a concrete visual manner the ideologies and psychologies of the students involved.

The performances of Collective Energy often showcase difference and refuse an easily swallowed illusion of wholeness or sameness even amongst the group of student-artists. While identifying with one another as belonging to the same group, the student-artists also presented inconsistencies within their performances. The spoken word performances thus opened a space which firstly, engaged a group of the student-artists' peers whose privilege often afforded them a cushion of ignorance to the experiences of those outside their immediate social circles. This is not to say that these performances somehow guarantee mutual understanding or agreement, but they assist in providing a potential means of engagement in a difficult conversation that centers upon difference, which is a priority for most forms of critical pedagogy. I've learned that critiquing one's life and choices is a bit more bearable when it's clear that there are other choices, options, and various forms of representation that are available. Performance assists in showcasing some of those possibilities, thus offering ideas toward a solution and not solely a reflection of the problem.

Part of the appeal of using these spoken word performances as a means of activism is most tangible when imagining these new resistant practices, the performer and the participatory audience member can also act out ways the new practices can be implemented in daily life. The powers that lie within the performances that are shared by Collective Energy at open mics such as Bed: A Spoken Word Lounge are a result of the authority and autonomy that these students are taking and manipulating through their performances. Their performances are a new text for them; they use these performances to communicate to their peers from the immediate location that the

performer and the audience share in the performance space. The students call upon their shared experiences with one another to create the dialogue they perform. During their performances, they translate events, memories, and seemingly non-consequential daily happenings into moments of transformation, into “sites of power in everyday life” (Denzin, 2003, p. 23). The students who sign up to perform at Bed are signing up to be cultural workers, vocal signifiers of the student body that they represent. Through discussing, describing and pointing to the social problems that the artist observes, spoken word poetry becomes an effective tool to confront social problems and perhaps imagine a solution. Not that a resolution is always the goal. Instead, Henry Giroux (2006) suggests that performance pedagogy is a space “in which occurs a critical questioning of the omissions and tensions that exist between the master narratives and hegemonic discourses that make up the official curriculum and the self-representations of subordinate groups as they might appear”(p. 60). After a performance at Bed, whether or not the student artists and audience members agree, both begin to raise critical questions regarding the contradictions and intersections between their personal representation of history and the history that they are taught.

Collective Energy was created in order to provide student artists the resources to move their social issues and concerns from the spaces of the subaltern and private toward an intentional public delivery. In order to better situate the student artists of Collective Energy, I will contextualize them within the university setting in which we operate and live. One of the primary outlets for the performances of Collective Energy was a spoken word program which was designed as part of my duty as an event programmer at the Cultural Center on campus. This program was titled “Bed: A Spoken Word Lounge.” As the only consistently supported open mic on Penn State’s University Park campus, the Bed cultural initiative seeks to provide an opportunity for students to perform and showcase various art forms with an emphasis on spoken word poetry. Students who arrive late are often turned away at the door as a result of a packed house and numbers that exceed room capacity. While the program is marketed for all students

and faculty/staff at the University, constituents often identify with communities of color. That is to say, most of the students are African-American, Latino, Asian, or any combination of the three. To put this in perspective, consider that the campus we are living and working on is a predominantly white institution where enrollment exceeds 40,000; however, students of color comprise only 12.9 percent of that student body. Needless to say, there are classes where only one, two, or no students of color are enrolled. Transitioning to a large-scale campus where there is a fresh history of racial tension and violence proves difficult and unfortunately dangerous for many of the students. Many of the students move from an urban setting to a rural town where many of the population have never had any personal interaction with a person of color. The PRCC's main function is to provide spaces for the cultural education, engagement, and development and that is why the spoken word lounge program Bed, was created.

Most of the student artists outside of Collective Energy that sign up to perform on the open mic at Bed are student artists of color. Anyone that is present is welcome to participate. Collective Energy served as featured performers at each of the Bed programs held during the semester. The content of their songs, poetry, and monologues are uncensored, raw, and often center on themes of racism, the results of growing up in poverty, social injustice and love gone graphically right and wrong. The performances are intense in delivery though the styles range from slam poetry, to ballads being accompanied by the piano, to pieces that are read calmly while sitting on a stool. The open mic represents to these student artists an opportunity to voice their discontent with their current surroundings and environment, a chance to declare how they see themselves and their roles despite images portrayed by history books or popular culture. The opportunity for creative expression surrounding social justice issues is also particularly salient as there is a tense history of racial conflict on our campus. The tumultuous atmosphere has resulted in violence against students of color, vandalism, and even threats of death. I am not suggesting that a single cultural program, even one as fantastic and necessary as Bed will miraculously

dissipate racial tension, but what it does is allow a space to create and re-create cultural meanings making difference and friction visible and therefore recognizable requiring that everyone present contribute and extract, becoming aware of their choices. Bed was a stage and opportunity for Collective Energy to do just that every time we performed as headliners that featured at the end of the open mic session.

I want to point out that the transference into the view of the public did not require the student artists to give up or deny the private and subaltern spaces. In fact, through the small, closed group meetings, workshops and rehearsals we had on a regular basis, these subaltern spaces were maintained and cultivated along with the public performance events. Collective Energy intended to allow student artists a chance to become visible while simultaneously providing and nurturing their development in a secure environment. The weekly meetings also provided time and attention for the group to process their performances. This component of the meetings was vital to the beneficial effects and the learning process by each member involved. Collective Energy is a cultural program that intentionally communicated the deliberate inclusion of both the intimate and revealing performance experiences for the specific purposes that such experiences served. Thus, the student artists learned to value both spaces. The overall Collective Energy experience became a demonstration that it is equally crucial to engage in deep reflection and decompressing as well as a broad performance event or experience.

By taking advantage of the performance opportunities Zanna and I created for them, the student artists had a chance to be “seen” and “heard” and could potentially reverse the ways they were socially trained to view themselves as feeble, incompetent or illegitimate cultural producers. On the other hand, being visible assumes that one is “knowable” or “recognizable” by others. There is an external versus internal dichotomy that is implicated through a discussion of what counts as visible and invisible. While there are clearly different indications of what is considered external and what is considered internal, to set them up as binaries is a mistake. In the search to

be recognized as a viable subject, and thus be taken seriously, the student artist again battles with issues of representation (see Butler, 1993). What happens if the visible does not fairly represent the invisible? Can there be a guarantee that what is made visible will be duly and justly recognized by others? Since performance draws on the contributions of both performer and audience member this means that the identity of the artist is also negotiated by the audience member and vice versa. The possibilities for recognizing the visible and invisible or the external and internal subject are bargained for by both the self and the “other.” How do these concepts of visibility and voice affect the way that activism is understood? How are these categories of visible and invisible manufactured and maintained and to what end? What is at stake when an artist claims to be an activist? In what ways did Collective Energy’s performances disrupt and resist or reproduce these limited subject recognitions?

Maria Lugones (2005) makes a connection between the internal (or processes that occur individually and are based out of individual experience), the external (how those processes and experiences are shared with others) and ideas about occupying resistant spaces. In other words, the personal (or internal) experience must be analyzed separately from the public (or external) and their interpretation *before* the subject will be effective as an activist. In her work that engages with Gloria Anzaldua’s feminist theories about identity, Lugones argues that activism or the concept of social transformation cannot be conceptualized through a sense of individual responsibility. Instead, she suggests that using internally focused activity, such as writing and performing from the inside of the self creates agency that can then be inhabited and used to combat or resist the external. For Lugones, making choices and making sense of the self must not happen within the domain of domination that we experience (p. 86). This means that the internal, or invisible, understanding and recognition of the self as a multiple subject begins with

changes that are directed inward first. To better contextualize these thoughts, consider the experience Lugones describes as occurring prior to or in the midst of the action as outlined by Collins (1999) and Yamada (1981). Coming to recognize the self as a subject can produce unconventional strategies for defying the systems of meaning that work to encase through limitations of subjectivity. Performance then offers a way to showcase or teach those internally based conceptualized strategies to an external audience that may consist of stakeholders in the very status quo that the artist seeks to turn on its head. Combined with the environment and the context of the performance venue “the different patterns of action represent not chance occurrence but the sincere, visual expression of the ideology and psychology of the participants” (Boal, 1979, p. 137). Boal’s quote addresses the relations that exist between audience member and artist but shouldn’t be mis-read as though the relationship consists only of a smooth absorption of an intended message deposited neatly from artist to audience and back again. Most folks are passionately and even materially invested in their personal and political ideologies. This can make their “sincere expression” a very concentrated and heated exchange. However, once this ideology is translated physically in a visible way that the artist and audience can feel, see, and hear, there is the possibility for them to critically examine their ideas as represented through performance. The physical translation and performance of their beliefs and values also exposes them to the varied and diverse interpretations of those same texts by their peers.

Jennifer Drake (2002) addresses the tension that arises inevitably in any sort of pedagogy or art by asking artists and audiences “to understand how both images and words contribute to oppressive and/or liberating construction of self and other” (p. 215). The fact of the matter is that

the images and words used are not necessarily going to be emancipatory for all audience members or students. Realistically, this partnership between audience and performer, or students and teacher, is not a dependable, steady relation. The balance of equality in a performance and classroom setting is uneasy and tilts off balance in a matter of seconds. Power relations shift, as do discourses, and while unstable and precarious it should not be surprising. While the audience and the performer are both exposed to the ethics and creeds of others, the interpretation of those values is dependent upon the subject positions that individuals inhabit within the community discourses constituted by those in attendance. This exposure is provoking in a challenging and powerful way; however, I'm not to suggesting that the transaction is assumed to be a smooth or unifying experience; quite the opposite in fact. While activist performance may effectively communicate these strategies, it is not guaranteed that such tactics will be taken up nor is it safe. Meaning and recognition are still bargained for during performance pedagogy, no matter how sound the foundation of internal agency and activity may be. The attempt to make visible those alternate meanings sets the stage for a competition with the discourses that have legacies of privilege invested in the maintenance of oppressive categories and conditions. Such territory is not ceded willingly or quickly. During my first teaching experience as a graduate student I was an instructor in the Language and Literacy Education (LLED) block where my main duty was to teach Language Arts methods to pre-service teachers. My section was the writing emphasis, which means that most assignments and readings focus on how to teach elementary school students how to write. In the meantime, we discussed context, intertextuality, and the ways that our own beliefs and values shape our classrooms. My students are generally at a level equivalent to a junior in their undergraduate studies. I thought it would be a great practical application of what we were learning in the classroom if I offered extra credit to my LLED students if they attended Bed: A Spoken Word Lounge where Collective Energy would be performing. To provide more specific context for my classroom, I am the only identified person of color and I am

often asked by my LLED students to speak on issues of diversity both inside and outside of the classroom context.

I quickly grew tired of being the only source and contact these students had with a person outside of their own socio economic and racial positions. I also realized how many of them had never attended a cultural program because they did not think the programs applied to them personally. They saw no reason or benefit to participate in such events since they were the majority on campus. As a remedy, I extended the invitation to Bed as a means of earning extra credit and asked that they reflect on their experience as an audience member. Eager for extra credit points, many of my students attended the program and responded with mixed feelings. After receiving their initial reactions and having several class discussions centered on the issues that they raised I became conscious of the effects of the performances from Bed—my LLED students were being effectively taught about important social and cultural issues through the performances of their peers.

There were several students from my LLED course that attended Bed who were deeply disturbed by the performances that they saw. While the line up of performances was one I interpreted as full of frustration with injustice and unequal power relations yet in no way extraordinary in content, my white students viewed them as a series of hostile personal attacks. One LLED student wrote in her reflection, “I feel like there was just so much hate in there. Why would you make us go to an event like that, where we were the only white people and everybody is mad at us? All of the yelling and anger made me uncomfortable.” Her brief experience of discomfort at being the ‘minority’ at a program is a part of the daily lives of the students of color on this campus. Being ostracized based on skin color, being frustrated because she felt she had no chance to defend herself from what she interpreted as a very personal accusation gave her the experience of a brief moment what the students of color on this campus live with every day. This student’s self-conscious reaction states that “everybody was mad at us” which shows that her

experience was de-stablizing at best. I thought it would be a good thing for the LLED students to know what it is to be the minority if only for a moment. Indeed, another student shared that she “didn’t realize it was going to be so cultural. I kind of felt like the minority for once, and it really made me think about things.” I was perturbed by her reflection because of what she implied by stating that she felt the event was “so cultural.” Did she mean that she didn’t realize that there were actually going to be real live black people in the room? And that they would be speaking articulately and demonstrating impressive artistic talent? This LLED student said that attending Bed made her “think about things” but I was worried about her thought process. I had imagined a different conversation that could open up in our class, one that might ask them to reconsider their privilege and position and the values they hold on to. Instead there were LLED students who thought they could claim to understand and relate to the dangerous lived experiences students of color face in the small town we live in. Some of the LLED students thought that because they spent two hours in a “cultural program” and experienced some discomfort that probably evaporated shortly afterward they were suddenly endowed with the ability to intelligently analyze and relate to racial discrimination.

While I understood the performance to entail an active participatory experience, my LLED students were unprepared to engage with the performers on stage. They had arrived that evening expecting to be entertained in a hands off sort of way in which they had no investments, no requirements with the exception of their presence. They did not expect to be implicated in any way. The reason for these negative reactions was due in part to the fact that active participation had been demanded of them and they participated in a performance that was powerful because of its insistence on immediacy and involvement (Denzin, 2003, p. 8). These LLED students were trained through years of school and cinema and traditional theater performance to be spectators in the way that Laura Mulvey (1979) describes them, being allowed a comfortable distance, a “sense of separation” from whatever was taking place on the stage (p. 8). They expected the polite

onlooker etiquette to suffice that night at Bed, and desired nothing more than the typical experience that provides the “spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world” (Mulvey, 1979, p. 8). The illusion was not to be entertained that evening. Suddenly the “private world” that may have amused them but did not *concern* or *involve* them before Bed implicated their sense of responsibility on a very basic level.

The LLED students were responding to a performance that Paulo Freire (1993) defines as a form of pedagogy that occurs when the oppressed make a commitment to not only revealing their oppression but in doing so, sharing citizenship in that oppression with their audience (p. 54). The LLED students did not want to share in that citizenship. In fact, they were angry that they were expected to consider life and language as another might experience it. Another student wrote, “I have never experienced anything like this before. I felt uneasy as I left, like I had just been somewhere I didn’t belong. I felt like I was unwanted, even disliked by a large group of people, but they didn’t even know me. It was a learning experience for me though. I did not realize that people I thought were so alike were actually so different. I grew up in a small white middle class town. I don’t have a lot of experience of having to interact with people that are not just like me. I don’t think I judge anyone who is not like me, but I have not gone out of my way to try and understand them. This is something I will try to do in the future...” Their subject positions had been altered and the power that was invisible to them prior to this experience was suddenly made very plain as it was removed from them and examined in a public setting. They had been sized up and assigned a membership and they were uncomfortable with the fit. It came as a surprise when they discovered that as an audience member that attends Bed they could not be only a passive receptacle of whatever performance takes place on stage, instead, “they engage in a spoken word performance and become part of the performance event” (Denzin, 2003, p. 41). By attending an event such as Bed, these LLED students were committing to acting in a performance of their own. Just as students in a classroom construct a classroom culture they

operate within, when these same students become the audience members at Bed voluntarily accept the responsibility of their role as audience. This role includes: “audience to each other’s performance, witnesses to the experiences reported upon in the story, as therapists and emotional supporters of the storyteller, as cultural critics commenting on the events that produced the story, and as narrative analysts of the systems of discourse embedded in the narrative” (Langellier in Denzin, 2003, p. 42). But many LLED students rejected this employment. So what happens when students would rather maintain the deceptively detached gaze of the spectator despite its unhealthy and unhelpful effects on their experience at a performance? Their resistance was not only a rejection of the position of an active audience member, according to their reflections it was related to race.

I came to understand that the transformative power of performance was not a ‘feel good’ time for the students from whom the power was shifting away. Ill equipped to morph from spectator to participatory audience member, much less understand what was happening, the students resisted. Loudly.

This resistance is not uncommon, according to Jyl Lynn Felman (2001), in fact, she warns of the often violent reaction of students who are unprepared to give up the role they are accustomed to playing. Felman (2001) says that during a performance “a new location of aesthetic excellence and social concern” must be jointly discovered by the performer and the audience member (p. 22). And although I knew that performance pedagogy was supposed to propel “both parties...to someplace different,” I wasn’t sure what to do when that destination wasn’t agreed upon. I was less sure what to do when the new location confronted me with a classroom divided.

At that point, the classroom, much like the performance space, was a construction zone. Norman K. Denzin (2003) considers performance art pedagogy as something that “...happens when conditions of identity construction are made problematic and located in concrete

history...in this moment, performers claim a positive utopian space where a politics of hope is imagined” (p. 17). The space that the performers were claiming contradicted the boundaries that the audience members thought they had a right to occupy with minimum disturbance. I realized that the competing discourses that sounded so good on paper were unsteady terrain to navigate. It seemed difficult for the LLED students to grasp the idea that perhaps there was something useful and solid in the multiplicity of perspectives that they shared when combined with what the performers expressed that night.

A word on feminist poststructuralist theory is needed here, due to the reference to “claiming space” that Denzin makes. I tried to explain to these students that feminist poststructuralist theory, performance art vested toward social justice, and my own insistence that they read and discuss the work of students of color and their experiences, were not asking them to give up how they name themselves. Only that they remember how others are naming them in the discourses that they share, or perhaps don’t share. In other words, we are all playing a multitude of roles whether we accept the position or not. I want these students to understand how “race, class, and gender oppressions limit human agency and the freedom that individuals have to act in given ways” (Denzin, 2003, p. 228). I also want them to understand how spoken word and performance are forms of agency. When they practice this art form, whether by performing or becoming participatory audience members, they have the chance to imagine new possibilities for their futures and new ways to interpret history, beginning with their own. I see evidence of this every time a classroom conversation broadens to include another cultural or socioeconomic perspective that is not necessarily represented in the classroom. I sometimes notice students paying closer attention to the language they choose during a discussion. There are always those few who continue to attend cultural events on campus, even when not being persuaded by the lure of extra credit.

Performance enables social change because the reflexive critiques that take place during and after performance also make room for the imagination and enactment of new identities and cultural practices that explode oppressive historical dictates regarding cultural identity. In the case of my LLED class, the critical discussion we shared after the performance was the space in which they were able to sort out how spoken word poetry can be a powerful agent of change. As for the student-artists, their response was somewhat different. In the midst of their performance, they were experiencing what Mulvey (1975) describes as the “thrill of leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language” (p. 8). This transformation is exciting and all the more satisfying when the student artist and audience member are able to acknowledge what is taking place as a result of their actions and reactions to one another’s performance. While my LLED classroom was in turmoil, the Collective Energy meetings were filled with a different type of energy because they recognized their work had an impact on their audience.

The space Collective Energy created through our weekly workshops and seminars was designed to allow the student artists to become the focal points and to bring their personal knowledge and experiences to the forefront. Our aim was to familiarize them with the tools of performance they could use to become visible and to illustrate social issues they deemed important. Performance of their original art was a method for these student artists to be seen and heard in a climate that worked to mute them and erase their differences and so disarm them. Choosing to perform in public was dangerous for the student artists because in so doing they embodied the controversial issues they addressed, thus taking the risk of becoming a target for heavy criticism at the least. While the spaces created for the performances of Collective Energy were considered “safe” they were always socially and politically constructed and were not free from the repercussions of those dynamics. It is also important to remember that being visible or

being heard is not always an available choice for student artists, particularly to student artists of color or those who name themselves as allies of the disenfranchised.

I juxtapose these ideas of visibility and access within a chapter focused on activism in order to forthrightly declare a deep appreciation for the multitude of locations and levels of activism that can take place. One type of activism is not necessarily more valuable than another. Oftentimes the quiet methods of resistance that take place subtly in daily routines are the birthing place for the creative ways that activism can be performed purposefully and publicly. The “underground culture” often generates the bravery required for individual public action because it provides a network of support. Throughout the Collective Energy experience, particularly during the initial performances we were continually asking ourselves, what are the consequences of activism when it requires that the “underground survival cultures” that are often performed in daily tasks and routines be made public and visible? What is at risk when these underground cultures are exposed to the general public? In this way, performance art functioned as method of re-negotiation of the world, attempting to motivate a different action or reaction from a sometimes unwilling audience around an issue or concern they may not be aware of, or that may or may not affect them directly. Once again, questions of recognition and visibility circled high above our idealist heads like lazy vultures in the heat of the desert. The student artists responded in a variety of ways to the idea of activism and demonstrated those responses through their performance.

Activism & the Audience

Nina Felshin (1995) offers the following definition for activist art: “this cultural form is the culmination of a democratic urge to give voice and visibility to the disenfranchised and to connect art to a wider audience” (p. 10). Her suggestions on ways to connect with a “wider audience” include making “innovative uses of public space to address issues of sociopolitical and cultural significance and to encourage community or public participation as a means of effecting

social change" (p. 9). Felshin's ideas support the belief that art should be accessible and public. What I find interesting is that the role of the audience or the way in which the audience receives the work of the students is not referred to in her definition. In addition, I was curious to note whether or not the student artists would view themselves as activists and if so, how did *they* define activism? In our one-on-one interview Amelie shared her insight.

Amelie: I don't like, I don't like definitions cause I, like, cause maybe activism to me right now is one thing but I feel like later on it's going to be something else.

Crystal: Sure. And it should.

Amelie: Yeah. But for me right now activism is like Z, you know let's do it. And that's . . . cause here I've been like in the classroom studying theory, theory, theory and I've just like wanted to be like okay now let's act. Theory to practice is like, I think that's activism. Activism is . . . oh man I wish I could say things in a eloquent way. But I think you know taking action. But the kind that will, the kind that for me right now isn't expecting change but working for change. Because change is not just something that happens right away. All, all legendary activism it has been a movement, it has been something that takes a really long time and hurts a lot of people and . . . I don't know. I think it's just being part of that movement for change and taking action and trying to make that connection with people. It's really about people. Being, being part of a movement for change for people—not for the man or the system or like, you know, whatever that is. Because under that system there are people and they're like . . . I don't know, it's just like for, for the people I think.

Emergent from Amelie's passionate response are several elements that support Felshin's (1995) definition of activism. Using words such as "practice," "working," "movement," and "connection" to describe her perspective, Amelie is constructing a meaning for activism that demands large social involvement and a "change" to gauge activism's effectiveness. She also expresses the idea that what she counts as activism in the present moment is likely to shift with time and experience. Her hesitation to commit to a solid, singular definition demonstrates her understanding that one must "work for a change" and that "change isn't something that happens right away" and that she herself may change. This point stands out sharply because it indicates that Amelie understands that the results of her performance may not be able to be quantified. The artist who claims social responsibility may never gauge whether or not her words are effective precisely because performance is constantly under construction and the effects may not manifest while the artist is present. There are not always tangible effects of activist art. This can be frustrating, particularly due to Amelie's repeated emphasis on seeking out a deep sense of connection with her broad audience through her performance. Similarly, Felshin (1995) suggests that an important attribute of activist art is "public participation...as a means of effecting social change" which implies a connection with the disenfranchised being made visible (p. 9). The trouble is that there is no guarantee that participation by the public and/or connection with the artists' message will be made. How can we even measure participation? If the public refuses to participate, does that subtract from the activist message? What if the message doesn't kick in until much later?

Amelie continues shaping her definition of activism as "a movement...that takes a really long time and hurts lots of people...it's really about people." Through her acknowledgement of people as the central focus of a broad understanding of activism, what Amelie alludes to is a need for relationship building. One of her beginning statements sums it up best: "theory to practice...that's activism." Psychologist Rhoda Kesler Unger (1981) agrees, "the integration of

activism and scholarship is essential to the emerging feminist consciousness” (as in Reinhartz). I have come to understand that the way in which scholarly work is framed determines its position on an action-based scale. Amelie points out an interesting division in how she defines activism and scholarship and clearly dictates that to her they are separate but related. What Unger is calling for is a deliberate development of scholarly work that is formulated on the premise of feasible transformation, a deliberate action-taking with the purpose of shifting existing power relationships. This translates smoothly to the development of activist performance, stretching the definition of scholarship to include activist performance and in turn, such performance is reflective of scholarship. This standard is exciting because of the possibilities it presents for producing viable, sufficient changes in relationships and interactions between individuals as well as the legacy of an academic tradition that can only exist within an acknowledgement of practical application and constant questioning. As Carol Becker (2001) reminds “Few artist themselves are able to articulate the range of possible roles they might play, and even fewer were trained to see their function as parallel to that of the intellectual—and yet it is and should be.” (p. 110). While I recognize the production of theory is also a form of activism, this is only due to my current studies and exposure to the ways in which higher education can be made to suit the needs of my home community. Meanwhile, Amelie’s particular history of international work which centered on working within a community to provide people with critical, basic needs makes it easy to understand why her emphasis is on physical work and tangible outcomes instead of conversations or statements about social transformation. Her personal accounts of service also explain her hesitancy to identify herself as an activist. Amelie points to a definition of activism that offers substance, or evidence, that action is being taken effectively and she doesn’t seem to recognize her own performance as a singer reflecting those qualities. From her perspective, the title of activism seems to only apply when the individual is directly and overtly involved in altering external social relations. However, it doesn’t seem to acknowledge any “in-between” moments

of activism: the moments that may occur during strategy planning sessions or rehearsals. The shifting that takes place along the spectrum of “theory to practice” doesn’t seem to count for much to Amelie.

What does carry importance is an ethic of hard work and commitment which is evident in Amelie’s admittance that historically, activism has “hurts lots of people.” Performance is not always pretty or safe work to do, even when cradled by a spotlight. Amelie recognized the possibility that she too might be hurt and perhaps had already experienced emotional distress because of her commitment to exploring activism through her performance. Privately, I always questioned if Amelie was disappointed in her experience with Collective Energy because she didn’t express fulfillment nor did she seem quite sure of herself throughout the year. At a later point in our interview she reveals the emotional costs of her personal commitment to performance and to activism. She describes her experiences through layers of relationships, her memories of performance, and her discussion of activism throughout her response which signals a correlation between these three areas of her life.

Amelie: I just like I’m so, so willing to be vulnerable sometimes and just willing to be affected and ...

Crystal: Yeah. That’s what makes you effective...because it’s absent in so many other people.

Amelie: It’s really intense you know when you have that kind of like...or I guess what I feel like when I have that kind of like awareness that’s always making me think which puts me in a vulnerable situation, which other people really don’t want to touch. Really intense.

Crystal: It freaks them out.

Amelie: Yeah, it's intimidating I think...cause I was thinking about it, would I want to?...it's so, for most people satisfying to be simple, which I'm in no way putting down...but you know some people can accept that everything is the way it is and that's how it should be and that's how it's going to be and you know it's narrow and that makes me nervous. But I'm sure me being like that (spreads hands wide) makes other people nervous.

Crystal: Right. Cause they're not, they're not trained to look at it any other—

Amelie: They are satisfied.

Crystal: Yeah.

Amelie: I'm not satisfied.

Feelings of restlessness and a commitment to remaining dissatisfied even at the cost of “making other people uncomfortable” and being misunderstood were undercurrents that moved throughout our conversation that day. Who the “other people” were remains a little vague for me. What is clear, however, is Amelie's strong desire to harness her own focus onto a singular strategy for achieving her activist goals seemed to be in opposition to her decision to remain open and “vulnerable.” Activism for Amelie was complicated because “for most people [it's] satisfying to be simple,” yet at the same time, her final sentence sums up very plainly her view of activism. Amelie's version of activism meant that she was to remain unsatisfied until that slow process of change began to happen. So, activism for Amelie might also be a method for her to distinguish herself from fellow artists or her friends at university who choose to remain out of touch with issues she feels are urgent. Acknowledging her desire to become activist is thus a means to recognize the traits that mark her difference from her peers. Claiming these traits and

the desire for change makes her vulnerable and frustrated but also means that she deems vulnerability as valuable. If this is the case, then activism allows her to create her own community defying boundaries drawn by ethnicity or class. Yet, identifying as an activist from this same standpoint would also require that Amelie concede to the fact *she* makes other people “uncomfortable,” perhaps triggering a negative response from others due to her political performances and associations.

This discomfort is an embodied one causing Amelie to experience her distress on a visceral level because she is a white female who seeks out ways in which she can “be affected.” For Amelie, part of her search included becoming involved with Collective Energy. Her presence as the only white person in Collective Energy excludes her from participating with her white peers at university as they do; as if she engaged with the world by “accept[ing] the way everything is.” On the other hand, her white body also performed for her within the group dynamics of Collective Energy and refused her a secure grasp on her position amongst the members. The shifting sands of discourse made it difficult for her to exercise a sense of ownership or authority in some of our performances and muted her during our group discussions. Although no one in Collective Energy ever vocalized a question of Amelie’s commitment to social change (in fact, they admired her), she described feelings of awkwardness and doubt in regards to her authority or ability to contribute to the group’s performances and weekly discussions. This could be a result of many things—perhaps she was experiencing growing pains because of an increasing awareness of white privilege and the ways in which that privilege was at work even without her consciously taking advantage of it.

I felt that this was a failure on my part as leader/teacher/mentor/friend for not knowing how to press out the prickly bubbles in her mirror so that she could see herself as I did: inspiring and dedicated. I also wondered if her performance counted as activist even if she didn’t qualify

herself as such. Amelie continued to work towards crafting songs that expressed her passionate frustration as she searched for her place during our time in Collective Energy. She was attracted to the critical space for thinking opened up through our workshop meetings and she was compelled to write and sing songs that communicated a similar critical view of her society—even at the expense of her membership in that society and even when that meant being critical of her work. At the same time, it was very obvious that Amelie felt like an outsider despite participating as a student artist in Collective Energy.

Amelie: ...it never was so visible to me until Collective Energy I think when it was like that group of artists like so many different talents I was just like wow. Like I do have something to give and I think first coming in to Collective Energy I was like you know what's my place here? I don't even know. I don't really know what I'm supposed to do or what is going to happen.

Amelie's intense search for connection within Collective Energy as well as with her audience signifies several things to me. First, a pervasive feeling of inadequacy, as though her talent was not a worthwhile contribution. Second, an uncertainty that had a lot to do with race although it was never explicitly stated as such. Not once during any of the transcripts I searched was I able to locate a conversation where I broached the subject of race in our weekly discussions. While ethnicity and culture were often the central themes in the performance pieces, somehow they never found their way into our reflexive conversations when Collective Energy met as a group. Upon this discovery I feel that I have been a coward or a fool; thinking that because we explored it through performance that the issues were adequately covered and clearly addressed. It's as if I assumed that because we all *appeared* different in our bodies and yet produced a cohesive performance that no further processing of how we operated through our difference within the group was necessary. Perhaps I refused the role of leader during these

moments because I figured if it bothered them they would speak up about it. I didn't want to force things. Yet I found myself particularly relishing Amelie's performances because they employed the element of surprise on the audience. The initial shock that registered on many of their faces once Amelie began to sing gave me such pleasure. The reactions to Amelie's voice ranged from confusion to delight that a stylish red-headed girl from a rural area could sing with such soulful conviction. Naming artists such as Nina Simone as one of her influences, Amelie's performances in some ways would appear to contradict and even betray the subjectivities that her white body might be scribed with. As a budding feminist and double major in Women's Studies and Journalism, Amelie was well aware of what it meant to work through difference in a classroom setting. What became important to me was to convince Amelie that her performance was a learning moment for her as an artist and the audience members as well, and because of that her performance was activist.

Producing her specific version of history and experience aggravates the social status quo that campus environments like Penn State perpetuate. Her choice to actively participate in a community of student artists that created performances designed to magnify their sense of social inequity was activist. Amelie struggled to clearly articulate the trouble she seemed to experience in the form of an intense internal desire to "feel a powerful connection" and her external responsibility to "be an artist so that what I do reflects who I am." Yet in a poststructuralist world view her wish is not possible because who she is always depends upon who others are not. I strove to make explicit for her how those performances constitute a feminist sensibility that would continue to bear the consequences of such performance in, out, and around the classroom and community. Her musical performances were transformative because they refused an easy denial of the complex overlap of her privileges and her beliefs. Her choice to address and disrupt the privilege associated with her appearance as a white female through her performances that

centralized such privilege was difficult emotional territory to navigate. I wasn't positive that I was equipped to guide her through it.

Amelie: I want to, I want to feel a connection. I, I'm going to be honest. I feel like an outsider . . .because I come from a rural area from . . . I grew up in . . . this is like in the middle of nowhere and like . . . So but I, I feel like an outsider but at the same time it feels very cool and I feel very . . . I feel welcomed and I feel like this is a nice group and I definitely want to get more into it and that because it's like I don't know. Something about having that urban setting in the middle of nowhere is like really cool cause I've always been... And then it's . . . so I'm glad that we have that here. And but I need to . . . I can't pretend like I come from that setting cause I don't. So I need to spend more time living it, spend more time in it you know like really feel that and then I think I might really make the connection that I'm looking for. I think that will come later on.

However, Amelie's journey for substance, for a practical strategy, and for a way to connect as an activist artist peaked during a particular moment. One night during a meeting, Amelie shared a beautiful song entitled "Water" originally written and sung by Grace Potter. Although the lyrics weren't hers, Amelie's delivery of the song was haunting and powerful. The song was so beautiful that Zanna immediately jumped at the chance to collaborate with Amelie on this particular piece. They scheduled time outside of our usual meetings to work on the piece. Because of Zanna's additions to the piece, Amelie seemed to discover deeper meaning in words she had sung many times before. Revising her performance assisted Amelie by reinforcing the power she had even if she still viewed herself as a small drop in the bucket of a social change movement. Just as Collins (1999) lauded the daily refusal and resistance of black women,

through her partnership with Zanna on this performance, Amelie began to re-view and value more highly her own individual steps toward turning the status quo on its head no matter how small they seemed. Both artists effectively captured the audience because of the content of the piece; however their physical presence on the stage layered further meaning to an already potent performance. The change in Amelie's self-confidence and sense of belonging to Collective Energy shifted remarkably after she and Zanna first performed this piece, even without the content or presentation being polished. It was as if Amelie's performance was a testimony to her self and although I didn't notice a perceptible shift in the way other members of Collective Energy interacted with her, Amelie transmitted a new sense of ownership of her performances after the debut of "Water".

The initial revision of "Water" was performed during a meeting, then later introduced to a broader audience at our campus open mic, and finally was chosen as part of the repertoire that composed the culminating show Collective Energy presented at the University of West Indies in St. Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago. Audiences of no fewer than 250 students, staff and faculty were in attendance at each performance of "Water" on campus. International and local travel has exposed hundreds more to its message of reconciliation and revival of hope. Imagine what would happen if that performance were recorded, mass marketed, and made available for a larger audience. "Water" would then achieve another aspect of activist art according to Felshin (1995) because an even larger public would be invited to participate in the performance. Each performance of "Water" offered a new rendering of what it means to be an activist, what it means for women to work together and what it means to engage in the work of social relations across differences of race and privilege. Together, we bore witness to the power that lies in collaborative activist work.

Water

Original Song Lyrics by: Grace Potter

Sung by: Amelie

Original Poetry by: Zanna

Amelie (sung)

I have seen what man can do
 When the evil lives inside of you
 Many are the weak the strong are few
 But with the water, there is hope again

Zanna

We got

Black is beautiful black power black liberation

Afros, cornrows, closed fists

We got

Macaroni and cheese, oxtail, collard greens

Low country cuisine

We got flashy cars and no sense of self

Designer clothes and no real wealth

We got

The latest dance, the hottest catch phrase

Like “holla,” “that’s gangsta,” “respect the god”

We got a mother, sister, or uncle with no job

We got sex

America raping our minds

The satisfaction of a societal quickie then being left behind

Like a cheap ho

We had Martin, Malcolm, Garvey, Thoroughgood and Mandela

We got young people that think life can't get no better

what we got is grabbing at straws and nothing to drink

Amelie (sung)

Take me down to the levee

Zanna

We've got to think and learn, work and yearn for nourishment

That can't fit through a straw

Amelie (sung)

Take me down to the stream

Zanna

We've got to push and shake, and bend and break

Social laws that leave us behind

That encourages us to confine our hopes and dreams into narrow

And dry streams

Amelie (sung)

We're gonna wash our souls clean

Zanna

Cause I'm trying to fill pails of opportunity for my people to drink

Amelie (sung)

Take me down to the river

Take me down to the lake

Zanna

Going down to the river, going in deep

Willing to sink trying to quench your thirst

Amelie (sung)

Do it for the good Lord's sake

Zanna (Amelie hums behind Zanna's words)

And I'll roll up these sleeves and I'll hike up this skirt

And I'll wade through waters of hard work to show you what you're worth

And I'll go in again, and again, giving and giving

And I'll come out of rough seas battered and cold

And damn near shivering

And I'll hold up that pail

And I'll tell you to

Drink self confidence

Drink spiritual repentance

Drink these skills that I'll help you to build
Drink and be educated
And even when you're full I'm going to pour the water on you
Because I can't stop until you're saturated
Until you drown in a future that runs as long and deep as the Nile
Until you're able to put boats on your river and be a guide to ghetto civilians
Until you're able to give a ride to one or a million
Until you're able to take my place and deliver
The hopes and dreams of living up the river
And even if you live in a city or suburb that makes it hard for you to envision my words
Cause you don't see any oceans
There aren't any rivers around you
The wells of opportunity have run dry
Then we'll just have to try this in the kitchen sink
It's not a lot of water but it's enough to drink
And we'll explore and seek opportunity anywhere we can
And we'll forget cups and pails
I'll catch it in my hand and I'll tell you to
Drink knowledge
Drink peace
Drink love
You've got permission to close your eyes and drink possibilities that are fresh and new
Because you've got me
And I got you
I got you

Amelie (sung forcefully)

Tried my hand at the Bible

Tried my hand at prayer

Oh, but nothing but the water is gonna bring my soul to rest

Oh, but nothing but the water

Is gonna bring my soul to rest

Zanna and Amelie began the piece seated in the center of the stage with their backs to one another, each facing either the left or right of the stage. Neither really looked at the audience. As the energy and momentum of the piece begins to crescendo, so does their emotion and volume. By Amelie's line "Do it for the good Lord's sake" both performers are standing, but still facing opposite directions. During Zanna's final stanza, the two women slowly move toward the center of the stage until they meet, facing one another. It becomes clear that they have been addressing one another throughout the piece, Amelie calling for help and Zanna assuring her that she is there to do just that.

Off the stage, the relationship Zanna and Amelie shared was that of mentor and mentee; Zanna held a position of authority as Director of the Cultural Center and an instructor and Amelie was one of her students and a frequent participant in many of the cultural programs Zanna orchestrated. Their relationship is of particular significance because Zanna is an African American woman and Amelie is young and white. Their bodies contrast in appearance but their performance was a compliment of desire that charged this piece with a racial current that was not directly addressed in the words. Because of the racial dynamic, "Water" was instrumental in developing alternative discourses and opening new apertures for Amelie to interact as a member

of Collective Energy. On a larger scale, the unified front they presented on stage did not compromise either of their locations in regards to class, race or background, and neither did it offer the audience an easy reading of their performance. Their artistic collaboration was centered on a mutual respect for the talent and commitment of one another, and also for their shared activist goals. bell hooks (2002) writes about how love and solidarity are necessary components of sisterhood. She states,

“Part of the process of becoming a feminist was to critique and change our sexist ways of seeing one another. Sisterhood wasn’t just about what we shared in common—things like periods, obsessive concern with our looks, or bitching about men—it was about women learning how to care for one another and be in solidarity, not just when we have complaints or when we feel victimized” (p. 130).

Although it would appear that Amelie and Zanna do not have much in common, since their life experiences have been vastly different simply based upon their physical appearances, their performance demonstrated an intense determination to use their differences and positions in order to further their political activist goals. Because Amelie sang the lines that communicated her weariness due to searching and seeking for a strategy to “bring her soul to rest” this marked her as a young woman in need of guidance. Zanna, on the other hand, played the role of a woman who was leading the way, imparting her experience-based wisdom to a younger person. On an even deeper level, Zanna expressed her willingness to commit to the success of the young person by working hard to quench their thirst and then teach them how to find their own opportunities so that they can become self-sufficient. On the other hand, the performance of “Water” could be recast from an angle that forms a twisted shadow: consider the history in America of Black women sacrificing themselves on behalf of White women, inhabiting the roles of caretaker and “mammy” which serve to deny rather than attribute power to the woman of color. Performance, however, does not shy away from these contradictory readings. They are all accurate even as they compete which is why performance is a useful method for exploring the convergence of relationship building, privilege, and power between Zanna and Amelie. While the historical context would

appear at first glance to forfeit Zanna's clout her choice to school young Amelie and the rest of her audience about her own life and successes is indicative of her subversive occupation within that context. What I'm sharing here is the positive adjustments that I observed in Amelie after the piece had been performed several times which is the outcome that Zanna's poem claims to desire. Although Zanna, as an African American woman, is socially restricted her liberation is revealed in the line where she gives permission to a young White woman to have confidence in herself and have peace of mind. Giving permission or allowing Amelie the tools and fortitude to continue on her search for rest is Zanna's strategy in this piece. Side by side they explore a landscape of discomfort together on a stage in a way that invited the other student artists and audiences to reconsider their own assumptions about race, gender and power. It's also possible that this performance could be read as Amelie simply singing background to Zanna's poem, making Zanna the prominent figure of focus. Such a reading would again re-cast the target(s) of Zanna's poem which might raise questions about the journey that she took in order to be a deliverer, a leader, a teacher. Who taught her how and what are the values that drive this impassioned vision? Is Zanna calling us to action as well?

If activism demands that attention be paid to the relationship that Amelie was so intent upon building with her audience, and even more so with the other members of Collective Energy, then her performance of this piece with Zanna highlighted their activist strategy. Amelie's earlier focus on practicality and action-taking was outlined by Zanna's words. It was interesting to note that the distractions Zanna addressed in her opening lines particularly apply to young black people and yet Amelie does not fit that description. Perhaps one of the lessons here is that Zanna was sharing information that would be valuable for *any* young person, no matter how they culturally identified themselves. Understanding how broadly Zanna's message can be applied is important because often in a university setting a person of color, especially a woman, does not hold a position of authority, and even if she does it doesn't guarantee that her work or instruction

is always taken seriously by her students. In this case, however, I would venture to say that most students at our performances were well aware of Zanna's position as Director of the Cultural Center and those who know her personally look up to her because she is such a rare role model to have. The point here is that Amelie's search for direction signifies that Zanna is equipped and qualified to lead white students as well.

Zanna's opening lines point out specific manifestations that appear to be symbols of success or arrival. She ends the first stanza by calling attention to the emptiness of "catch phrases" and "flashy cars" or "designer clothes" and suggests that people are lacking "sense of self." Amelie's song introduces the piece with a sense of longing, acknowledging the terrible things she has witnessed "when the evil lives inside of you" yet she's asking for leadership and guidance. At this prompting, Zanna calls for the hard work of "learning" and "yearning" that will aid in their efforts for satisfaction. But she makes it clear that opportunities don't simply appear, instead, "we've got to push and shake, and bend and break/ the social laws that leave us behind." Zanna again acknowledges that no one else is making an effort to remember or include "us" and that it will be a struggle to catch up with the rest of society. However, she continues to lay out her plan of action while Amelie interrupts with lines asking to be brought to the water.

Amelie's imploring words are met with Zanna's urging to find water no matter the location that Amelie may be in and to 'drink' of the intangible yet very necessary offerings. Zanna encourages her audience to drink qualities such as "peace," "love," "spiritual repentance," and "self confidence." These characteristics are in stark contrast to the introduction of the poem where material goods defined success. However, she continues to list "education," "skills," and "knowledge" which once developed can *lead* to material success and the ability to be self-sufficient. Zanna is demanding that the quality of the listener's life be improved on both a spiritual/mental/emotional level and on a visceral/physical/financial level as well. She does not

neglect the practical necessities of life and neither does she ignore the needs of the soul. Zanna's reasoning behind naming these specific qualities are to develop autonomy and self-efficacy so that the listener will be capable of replacing Zanna by "taking my place [to] deliver the hopes and dreams of living up the river." Zanna acknowledges her role as a mentor and embraces the label of teacher. Because Zanna performs these lines directly to Amelie on the stage, she is committing herself to guiding and training Amelie until the day Amelie will "be saturated in a future that runs as long and deep as the Nile," leading others to the water when Zanna is no longer able to, ensuring that the next generation will have access to "drink possibilities that are fresh and new."

Amelie closes the piece with a strong finish, listing the various other methods she has tried to find "rest" for her soul. It is not until she receives Zanna's help that she is able to draw the conclusion that "nothing but the water" will give her peace. Zanna's assurance that "you got me and I got you" works to reinforce the collaborative relationship that is necessary for achieving their goal of enabling others to "explore and seek opportunity anywhere we can" so that "knowledge," "peace," and "love" are being consumed and shared. The choreography of their performance on the stage further emphasized how powerful it can be and how necessary it is to be taught and trained and to be receptive of the guidance offered by those who demonstrate support through their work with another person. This type of relationship requires an experienced mentor willing to share what they know, be generous with what they have, and be humble enough to allow someone else to take the lead. It also demands a student willing to learn, and to be disciplined in order to become masterful, and to surrender their gifts and energy for a purpose they may not fully comprehend. It seems to me that this is often the case when one must learn something new. This relationship, this poem, this entire project is about sacrifice. And through this performance, activism became something relatable, attainable, and practical. Activism was performed in a relevant way, provoking questions about who is qualified to lead and what it

means to be responsible through interracial social relations and addressing desires for financial stability and well-being and emotional fulfillment while suggesting a strategy for achieving them.

Another important aspect of “Water” was the explicit connection made between activism and political action. What makes this connection extraordinary was the direct correlation between self, family and politics. Basically, Zanna suggested that helping one’s family and helping oneself are political actions. Drawing on the feminist slogan that the personal is political Zanna and Amelie have performed a version of feminism that places the family and a holistic sense of self-sufficiency at the forefront of conversation. Part of what makes “Water” so strong is that it pulls on difficult individual and familial experiences and makes those experiences available to an audience while presenting the social and political forces that have contributed to the negative effects caused by those experiences. Because Zanna and Amelie not only address those experiences but construct and commit to a plan that will actively alter the state of being “thirsty,” the difficult situations are brought to light and awareness of the factors causing those conditions is made apparent to the audience. In this way, “Water” is intentionally designed as a political performance of oppression as well as a plan for subverting the negative through solidarity.

Peggy Phelan (1993) writes of the benefit and downfall of performance art saying that its resistance to mass reproduction is its greatest political strength (p. 149). While it is easy to understand Phelan’s connection between the political potency of performance art and her reasoning that a “mass reproduction” of such work would water down the political effectiveness of an organic experience, this assumption raises several issues. If a goal of feminist activist art is to expose and involve the public at large, then what are the consequences of resisting large numbers of duplication of these performances? In fact, I question if performance can be reproduced at all—especially if it is based upon the premise that each performance is a new

rendering and a reconstruction whose content depends upon the actual moment that performance takes place, the audience that is present, the way in which that audience participates and the location of the performer. In addition, the particular audience that has access to performance art constitutes a significant portion of its political nature. There is an all too familiar gleam of exclusivity that lies beneath the surface of valuing that only a handful of folks may be invited to participate in the potentially powerful and specific political-ness that performance art can offer up. This restriction on who will indeed have access to performing as an artist and, more to my point here, participating as an audience member calls up images of our educational and governmental systems rooted in a tradition of elitist principals and unjust gatekeepers.

I would argue that an artist invested in social change would be inclined to subscribe to the contrary: accessibility by the community/audience/masses is of the utmost importance. A large chunk of my motivation for teaching and raising awareness is to grow the level of criticism to match the level of consumption of popular culture and the media in our students. The example that comes to my mind immediately is the political movement that birthed the music of Hip Hop and I shake my head in sadness and disgust at the watered down versions that I hear now; however, this is not due to mass reproduction as Phelan suggests; it is due to a lack of critical cultural understanding, production, and consumption on the part of the artist and on the part of the community as well as capitalist interests of the recording industry (Bynoe, 2004). Another aspect of the political disconnect circles back to the previous section on the student artists' struggle to explore social responsibility. Values are emerging that conflict with the roots of the music and art form that we practice. Besides that, oppressed groups value different things and social issues are not prioritized uniformly across the board. Also begging to be considered is the evolution of what it means for students today to be politically strong. I offer that working dedicatedly honing the skill and craft of creating and performing potent spoken word as a method of cultural development, social criticism, and expression is a viable practice. Negotiating cultural

development through performances allows the broad public a strategy and an educated opportunity to try and recreate for themselves the source of authority and sense of autonomy that performance art appears to provide. I find it more politically useful to expose and educate many on the method and technique; ask them to try it and to think about it rather than to maintain its elite and exclusive VIP status.

Carol Becker (1994) continues to comment on the effectiveness of art as a form of activism and why it is important that art fulfill its role by presenting reality as a problem. She goes on to state that art becomes "problematic precisely because reality has become non-problematic. The more that is hidden and suppressed, the more simplistic the representation of daily life, the more one-dimensional and caught in the dominant ideology the society is, the more art must reveal" (p. xiii). Becker's quote links back to Amelie's definition of activism and her frustration that "other people" (perhaps in this case, non-artists or non-performers) were satisfied to remain "simple." What Becker is asking of activist art is that it acts as an exposure. Activist art cannot be afraid of the dark or what is in plain view but denied. Activist art must make the invisible seen and *felt*. There is no disguise left, no smoothness. This level of vulnerability is quite terrifying--imagining the world with no make up, no costume. Activist art demands that the artist digests reality and that the audience watches and participates. Cherrie Moraga (1981) explains the motivation that fuels the efforts that go into presenting reality as one-dimensional: fear.

She says,

"...for each of us has in some way been both oppressed and the oppressor. We are afraid to look at how we have failed each other. We are afraid to see how we have taken the values of our oppressor into our hearts and turned them against our selves and one another" (p. 32).

According to Becker (1994), providing and demanding vision of reality is one of the most important functions of art with an activist intention. The student artists who participated in

composing and performing their original poetry exposed their participation as both oppressor and oppressed and the way such participation impacted their reality for an audience made up of both strangers and friends. Working to make visible and perform the contradiction of values that we occupy is risky business for the student-artists and for the audience. However dangerous, this risk is necessary. Performing the contradiction is the only way to uncover and explore the ways we are connected. Moraga's (1981) quote points out how essential visibility is for recognizing the ways in which multiple subjectivities can be performed at one time from the same source even when they contradict. Performance poetry served Collective Energy as a way to embody and play out the consequences of employing the "values of the oppressor." The composition of spoken word and song provides an avenue for recognizing how we have hurt ourselves and one another, a way to read the multiple discourses of the self and also provides access to imagine another way to exist by honing in on the overlaps. What a heavy load of responsibility. As Amelie admitted earlier, activism as she recognized it "hurts a lot of people" and perhaps her hesitancy in labeling her art as activist is related to her desire to protect others as well as herself. Maybe she wants to refuse the label of activist and thus refuse to expose and potentially embarrass anyone as a result of her performance. Perhaps this is a gendered issue as well.

In my earlier mention of Rico's work with "Shooter" and his employment of violent metaphors to position himself as socially responsible, he didn't seem to have a problem with the fact that he or his audience may be wounded. He even spoke of his expectation that his spoken word would unleash his own demons marring himself in the process. Amelie, on the other hand, seems to seek healing through her performance and is riveted upon the idea of connections and relationship that are holistic and full of forgiveness and reflection. How was I to design an experience to take into account an employment of performance techniques and content that had space enough for the discursive conditions that were being participated in by both Rico and Amelie and for the transcendence and alterations of reality or gendered construction that

performance can offer? Was the stage and space we set large and liberated enough to meet the criteria for both of these perspectives? I learned that performance is elastic and can be stretched around awkward positions. Collective Energy accommodated both perspectives because each of them were performed at some point throughout the experience; the contradiction, the friction was performed without necessarily being identified, labeled and reviewed in our discussions at the precise moment they were performed. I have also learned that the junctures of activism and art demand flexibility. I discovered that my own existing ideas of activist art and the ways activism can be employed and taught were troubled from the outset because I did not account for difference—in the performances or in the workshops—nor could I have predicted the parts of the performances or the workshops that might be met with resistance from audience or student artists. There is no way to control the outcome and that is not easy for me to deal with. However, this disturbance is productive because it serves now to highlight the gaps and omissions in the original design of the Collective Energy experience. Reflecting on the way the experience was constructed is also helpful because I realize that no matter the changes that might be made in the curriculum, the members who participate in Collective Energy will always determine the outcome. So while I can expand and narrow the focus, it is the student-artists and their audiences that will ultimately decide what the tone and content of the program should be. Although the standpoints and performances of Rico and Amelie are marked by the labels of male and female perhaps they cannot be mapped as contradictions. Both are in pursuit of responsibility and community uplift. Both seek to create a bridge between their experience and that of the audience. Each also reflects the other: sometimes violent, constantly implicating the self. Both value and respect a sense of justice and equity, although they reconfigure these ideologies for the audience as well. Both are denied access by the world because of the values and experiences that drive their performances.

"Art refuses to be easy," reminds Becker (p. xiii). Activist art is full of refusal: refusal of labels, refusal of boundaries, and refusal of the reproduction of status quo performances. However, I'm not certain that I communicated to the student artists how and why naming our performance activist had significance. While I clearly understood that discourses operate as constantly in competition and holding a variety of standings within different communities and the ways that this constructs and produces meaning, the student artist hesitated to agree or even engage in this discussion. Instead of refusing the label of "activist art" for what we produced, I worked to challenge them to interrogate their own performances and how they might be received by the audience. Performance functioned as a conveyer vehicle, full to the brim with meaning and emotion that traveled from the camp of student artists to somewhere in the middle of their mainstream and majority. The student artists occasionally voiced a desire to catch a ride with performance to travel to the center of the mainstream as well, so that performance became the strategy of their activism, parking and depositing them and their messages from the outskirts to center stage. However, at the end of the experience, because several of the student artists including Amelie were uncomfortable naming themselves or their art "activist" I felt I had failed this project in some way. We often used the terms "social responsibility" or "social justice" instead of activist but it seemed as if several of the student artists were uncomfortable with any label whatsoever.

Raphael: I don't really have anything social justice—

Zanna: Everything is social justice—

Z: It's what's in your heart.

Raphael: I'm trying to find like, my niche—

Here Raphael gives an example of the rootedness that seemed ever-present in our discussions. The hesitancy he expressed could be a result of the pressure he felt to commit to a

label or category he wasn't sure he fit. I understand this cautionary approach because labels imply limits. The idea that being activist would prevent Raphael from producing art around any topic he was inspired to create around is one that seemed to be engrained in the minds of the student artists. Drawing this boundary seems to indicate is a lack of understanding about the ability to occupy several discourses and subjectivities at once. I helped to design Collective Energy with a mixture of everything: ethnicities, socio-economic statuses, and talents in order to create a space where we were all forced into the awareness that we each inhabited multiple identities simultaneously and that our residence and active participation in these multiple places should be expressed through our art. Doing so would demonstrate the ways that we are connected, the ways we live together and perform together with others and would eventually show how our performances of personal experiences, when contextualized against and in between one another, were indeed activist. What appeared to remain unclear for some of the student artists was the way their performances counted as the transition of theory to practice that Amelie cited in her definition of activism. We spoke frequently of the relationships between people that were affected and cultivated but did not focus on the relationship that existed between words and actions. Performance is both of these things at once, the ultimate culmination of theory meets practice. Zanna and Joseph elaborate:

Joseph: You have to be responsible to some degree for what comes out of your mouth. Not saying don't use bad words or whatever, but for the message, how that comes out...although you can't control how people—

Zanna: Words can motivate action. Being mindful what type of action could occur as a result. Because a lot of people in the past have gotten off on, you know, 'I'm not a role model'...but you still have a responsibility for whatever the hell you write and what you put out there. So owning that responsibility and recognizing that in

some ways, you are responsible for what's in the world when you spit, rap, or whatever.

When Zanna states that the performer is directly “responsible for what's in the world” she suggests that performance is a way of re-creating the world. Adjustments or alterations might be made as a result of a performance and this is a responsibility to be recognized. Joseph agrees that “the message” of the artist always exists and is transferred whether they choose to acknowledge it or not. This idea stands in direct opposition of two things: first, the overabundance of celebrities in Hip Hop and popular culture who vehemently deny any allegations that they are a role model for their listeners and supporters (Kitwana, 2002). Spoken word poetry is frequently associated with Hip Hop culture and with the Hip Hop generation. Lawsuits and efforts to censor music and other types of media demonstrate that there is at the very least a correlation between cultural intake and the formation of ideology and behavior. The larger question is to what degree is the artist or the audience held responsible for what might ensue as a result of a performance? This line of thought returns us to the messy conversation about the socially responsible artist. How does material success factor into the career of an activist artist? Secondly, and most closely related to Collective Energy's experience, is the issue that the student artists did not immediately view themselves as viable cultural producers. Asking them to rethink their performance in terms of implementing social change and through an activist lens was a long leap. At some point during each of their lives, each member had been pointedly told that their views, experiences, and versions of history (and therefore of the future) were illegitimate. How could I expect them to take their work seriously?

Visual artist Elizam Escobar (1994) posits that most “cultural activity is mainly seen as entertainment and is not supposed to be a critical activity—an activity that allows you to think critically about lived relations to the world and especially about immediate relations to society”

(p. 51). Escobar's reference to critical thinking again points in the direction of space that Collective Energy provided through the weekly workshop meetings. These meetings and rehearsal spaces were opportunities for the student artists to rehearse the creation, development, and critical reflection of art focused on their issues. I wanted these students to know that our weekly workshops were constructed to directly respond to their concerns about not being taken seriously, and to the difficulty they have viewing themselves as legitimate cultural producers. Their trouble is no surprise since most of their peers have been trained by the influx of popular culture to expect to be kept entertained and distracted instead of provoked to think and to consider how they might be implicated in the society in which they live. When the performances that the student artists of Collective Energy produce are critical of the lived relations we share they are using art to question a reality presented to them through the media and the history textbooks of their classrooms. This is art that calls up the relations we are situated in with one another and with society at large and interrogates the role that we each play in those relationships.

Creating new subjectivities for themselves as activist artists requires that performance be used as a social interaction through which the student artists can constitute and be re-constituted by their exchanges with the audience (Davies and Harre, 2000, p. 89). The student artists may not have all shared in my politically focused goals for our performances. They also might never be permanently labeled as activist because of the shifty nature of slipping positions and blurred boundaries that mark territories. Activism is a process—just as performance is—something to work through and towards and within. To be seen and heard, to be witnessed and accounted for seemed to gratify the student artists' immediate wish for social transformation. The social context required by activist art granted them the public space to contextualize their internal experiences in order to develop external or visible concepts of social transformation.

Participating in discourses that positioned them as activists is possible only to the extent that they recognize themselves and are recognized by their audience as such. Their level of resistance and

desire to pursue a resistant stance was driven in different ways dependent upon their position once their invisible survival techniques and their sense of politics were exposed. Although not directly addressing performance, Bronwyn Davies (2000) offer a look into the post-structuralist possibilities that can be applied to performance.

“By making visible the ways in which power shifts dramatically, depending on how subjects are positioned by and within the multiple and competing discourses they encounter, they can begin to imagine how to reposition themselves, realign themselves, and use the power of discourse they have to disrupt those of its effects they wish to resist” (as in St. Pierre, 2000, p. 180).

Performance is an invitation to audition those repositionings and re-alignments over and over again. Performance provides a space to stage the disruptions of power on a large and small scale. Performance calls attention to the contradiction of the discursive practices of the audience member while acknowledging how the performer self interprets and self identifies. Meanwhile the audience members are actively sifting and constructing the performer, organizing the performance in a way that makes sense to them and according to the discourses they find themselves positioned in and the combination of discourses they construct collectively as audience members. The performer is also calling attention to the collective discourse in which they are all participating. In this way performance is an invitation to be something besides what you usually see yourself as. It is a chance to do something different. Davies (2000) continues “within poststructuralist theory, language is understood as the most powerful constitutive force shaping what we understand as possible and what we desire within those possibilities” (p. 181). Through understanding their own position as subjects of many different discourses, the performers and audience have the agency to imagine themselves differently.

Imagination is indeed required for the practice of spoken word poetry performance. If we are interested in resisting the ways in which we are told to live and behave then we must create

alternatives. There arose an interesting overlap of the subject of activism or resistance and the subject of love and what that meant to the socially responsible artist during Collective Energy's experience. Chapter 4 examines the tumultuous relationship between love and ethics and highlights some of the student artists' perspectives upon the ways in which love could possibly (or possibly not) be an act of resistance. The chapter closes with my own realization that Collective Energy was for me, in fact, an performance of socially responsible love. As showcased in a poem, I negotiate my own social identity as an act of refusal while claiming my overtly political work as an act of love and expressing the desire to love and be found lovable.

Chapter 4

Acts of Love

“Love helps me know my name”

Seal

Like a moth to a flame I find myself drawn to work that denies me any sound closure. Even the dramatic structure of a play includes an introduction, a climb in intensity, a climax and then plateau. Looking back I wonder where we were supposed to climax, and I check myself for signs of satisfaction: I find few, if any. No layer of my life provides tidy endings. Teaching is a tease, performing is an addictive drug, and my relationships? Well, they tend to be circular. How do we let go? Why do we hold on? At what point do I give the final push to extricate this large project out of my self? Is that even a possibility or a desire? Or am I simply trying to do as I've been trained to do. Do I just want to pass. And you, dear reader. Can you measure what you have just witnessed across these pages? Or, like the magician, have I run out of tricks up my sleeve with which to distract you? The trail we have hiked has been varied in terrain, the weather has been unkind and I worry that I have not properly guided you. At this rate, you will never find your way back. Neither will I. This has been a scrap book of memories that fade in comparison to the vivid experience I have shared with a group of people but it is all I have to offer you here. This is a forensic collection of clues to a case that remains unsolved. This last chapter will require your imagination then.

By performing the structures that have drawn our boundaries Collective Energy has been a menace to our restrictive limits. Although wide in variety it has been the contradictions, competing discourses, and difficult choices that the writing and performances of our group have used as the stuff for the stage. Whether it is the intersection of social responsibility with

accessibility and exposure or the ideal of activism and how that meets resistance and real life, these crossroads are where decisions get made. They are the locations of in-between, of mixture, where the actor chooses the role they will play. This has not been a handbook that will end with clear outlines for best practices or mathematical equations that are certain in their sums. Instead, this is a valley of decision where perspective determines discourse and action. The intersection I leave you in is crowded with lonely artists looking for connection and hustling poets trying to make a living. This is the navy blue sky of dusk. Not quite bright enough to be considered daytime, but not dark as night either. This is the moment at the end of the day when I ask, have I done all I can do? This is the moment when you ask, where do I turn from here?

This work will conclude with a chapter that is by no means to be mis-interpreted as “final.” I have worked thus far in an effort to critique and question an experience that I played a leadership role in and participated in fully as a member. I have been blown away by my time with Collective Energy and have focused on our first year together as a means to learn about the ways that performance and pedagogy go hand in hand with resistance, recognizing our selves as subjects and artists and researchers, and how these moments of intense connection and dis-connection have affected our social relationships. I have worked to locate my presence within this work and although it has not been a painless experience, it is one that I hope contributed in some way to Collective Energy’s betterment--that it in some way complimented and complicated their lives. The fact is, I feel an overwhelming sense of love for each of these students individually and a deep appreciation for the process we went through. It has taken me a dissertation to attempt to organize my thoughts surrounding the experience. And so, working at my best to maintain integrity and to be true to the passionate swelling of love that I feel, I focus these final musings upon a brief discussion of love and ethics and the ways my own performance has served me in teaching and especially learning about the practice of both. I posit that although

the relationship between love and ethics is not always recognized both elements are always present in the discourse about one or the other. The necessarily co-operative existence of love and ethics provide an interesting and, for me, a useful opening through which I can translate the experiences I have had as a leader and performer with Collective Energy. Because of this I suggest that it might also be helpful to make love and ethics the grounding and central motivation behind other theoretical and activist work that takes place within and without the academy. Ethics determines and constructs concepts about love and love is conceptualized and enacted because of how ethics are put into practice. I begin with a discussion on what love might be and the way that ethics serves as an energizing element to those ideas. I continue with an exploration of several conversations on feminist ethics and conclude with an examination of one of my own pieces of writing that was produced and performed during my own time with Collective Energy.

Section 1: What's love got to do with it?

In her body of work aptly titled *all about love*, cultural critic bell hooks' describes love as characterized by possessing qualities of "care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment and trust, as well as honest and open communication" (p. 3). She insists that a feeling of connection is not the same as love; instead love is a willful choice we make. If we have to make a choice to love then that implies two things: first, to love is to accept responsibility. Second, love is not an instinct we inherently have—it is a verb. Love is an action word. According to hooks, "to begin thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling ... automatically assumes accountability and responsibility" (p. 13). This assumption of accountability to others and responsibility for the effects that result from choices we make is an intersection where love and ethics begin to relate to one another. For the duration of our time together, the student artists and continued to struggle with the notion of social responsibility and how overlaying even our love poems with that sense of duty removed the illusion of neutrality.

Consequences, whether positive or negative, result from actions and this contradicts much of what we are socialized to believe about love. Talk of a conscious practice of self-discipline, which is sometimes unpleasant to think about, seems to have no place beside the images the media perpetuates in regards to romantic relationships. Thinking of love as a duty that requires commitment even when it's no longer fun or romantic is not enticing, especially when "popular culture messages declare the meaningless of love, its irrelevance" through movies and fairy tale type endings (hooks, 2000, p. xviii). As with any practice for a healthy lifestyle that might demand self-discipline and conscious habit formation such as a careful diet and regular exercise, so does love. It is not always easy. Think about our classrooms, our work relationships—the majority of the spaces in which most of our time is spent does not allow for the reflective conversations needed to work through new notions of love. Collective Energy's weekly meetings, however, did just that. Additionally, the intentional focus on ethics because of our constant centeredness on the demands for a socially responsible artist insists on a foregrounding of social, racial, and gender issues making the most intimate and personal (and deceptively private) political once again.

We shared much discussion regarding the ways to qualify what counted as socially responsible artistry. There seemed to be a division between what the group counted as political poems and what they considered love poems. I found this tremendously interesting and disturbing at the same time. Uncertainty pervaded the following conversation and I couldn't help but notice that Zanna and I argued adamantly to persuade them otherwise.

Joseph: I think mine is a mix of all things. I do write love poems a lot but I think of that, to some degree, that's socially responsible, maybe?

Rico: Well, that's—

- Joseph: That's a strong emotion that helps uplift people in oppressed groups...but at the same time--
- Crystal: At the same time when we say we want to represent the fullness of a cultural experience of a people, love is a cultural experience.
- Zanna: And I talk about, like how bell hooks talks about how no one brings up "love ethic" anymore, um, and how important that is. Like you said uplifting people or whatever but even just creating a positive vibe, um, in a community, um talking about love and showing love and how important that is. So love is an act of social responsibility.
- Raphael: I don't really have anything 'social justice'—
- Zanna: Everything is social justice—
- Z: It's what's in your heart.
- Raphael: I'm trying to find like, my niche—
- Joseph: Talking about love is social responsibility, and it's you—I hear *you*...
- Chloe: It's something beyond your brain or your heart it's like that tiny deep deep part of your soul. The deepest emotion...it touches places in me...it's supernatural...
- Zanna: It's not trite; it challenges people to understand what Love is. Challenging people to look at things they thought they knew. That's love ethic. And really, that's what love is all about.

It is still unclear whether or not the other members of Collective Energy fully grasped and agreed that a love ethic was the driving force that shaped their experience, however, one thing they did learn that night was that it shaped the way Zanna and I approached leadership. I suspect the hesitation from Raphael, Rico, and initially Joseph to acknowledge love as political territory was in part an effort to avoid marking themselves as overtly political artists. Perhaps it

was fearsome territory for these considerably new performers to immediately choose a side as it were. The careful evasion of being labeled as political or feminist can be looked at in several ways. First, perhaps the boys were making an effort at preventing any label at all drawing an interesting and very apparent gendered line. Rico, for example, said one of the things he loved best about performing was “freedom to express myself.” Most of the student artists expressed their relief at the liberation they found in performing without the perceived hindrance of expectations. While these ideas point to a romantic view of the performance space--desiring carefree performances that outsmart the audience in order to avoid being named into a category or shoved into a “box”—there was some truth to the theory that performance was liberating. I don’t agree that there is any escape from the interpretation of the audience, but I do believe the stage offers a moment of brave courage to face those interpretations, inaccurate though they may be. Such boldness has escaped me personally in other contexts and so it is not hard to understand why the student artists may shy from consciously adding more conflict to the site of the stage where they have felt strong and certain.

Another idea is that perhaps the boys felt as if it was dangerous territory to claim to be political. Prior to any performance that took place during our time together there was already considerable pressure and nervousness about how well they would be received; also, for Raphael and Joseph in particular, they were comfortable writing and performing around tender themes of romantic love. They were accustomed to a certain positive reception by the audience after these performances. Actually auditioning a new performance persona or attempting to purposefully write on a “political” topic was a difficult test. What if the crowd didn’t like their new attempts? What if no one clapped for them? Although these fears went unspoken during our conversation that Tuesday night I had a sneaking suspicion that the boys were somehow trying to ensure that they would not let down their peers or themselves. Lastly, the final concern that may have been woven through their refusal of addressing love as a political issue was their location as they are

situated in a broader conversation. As young male artists of color, Raphael, Joseph and Rico are presented with limited options that would mark “appropriate” participation in conversations, behaviors and responses to both love and politics. They were more familiar with how to address and present socially acceptable versions of love. Besides, politics was for militant brothers who wanted to overthrow the government, right? Although this misconception morphed over the year as we worked and studied and rehearsed together, the young men of Collective Energy were always acutely aware that it was hazardous for them to be overtly political. I showed them examples of other spoken word artists of high reputation (such as Will “Da Real One” Bell, Nathan James, Dwayne Morgan, Heru Ofori, and Amir Sulaiman) who are well-known and highly respected by diverse audiences for their unapologetically explicit portrayal of politics in their work. However, even most of the examples I shared with them had suffered some severe form of legal regulation such as FBI investigation, police brutality, or rejection and acidic criticism from into mainstream popular culture. Given such consequences it is a small wonder that Raphael, Joseph and Rico with their high hopes and vivid dreams of material success and equally lucid determination to groom themselves as writers and performers hesitated at making a blatantly political choice in their artwork early on.

Within this moment of conversation, however, it is interesting to note that Joseph moves from noting the “mixed” content in his poetry and his timid question that “maybe” writing about love was an act of social responsibility to his certain declaration of it. Joseph decidedly claims his territory as both a love poet and a socially responsible artist. Even more interesting is Joseph’s insistence that he authentically recognizes Raphael within his love songs by saying “it’s you—I hear *you*” and therefore identifies Raphael clearly as a socially responsible artist without Raphael’s acquiescence. This is an example of a moment when a subject is located within a discourse they did not choose for themselves.

In another light, this moment represents an interesting convolution of the girls' standpoint on the notion of love and politics. None of the female members of Collective Energy articulated an issue or disagreement with the suggestion that writing or performing pieces focused on love were anything other than a socially responsible act. Z felt so passionately about it that she interrupts Zanna trying to convince Raphael that "it's what's in your heart." For Z, there was no separation of matters of the heart and matters of the state. This is a positive and encouraging statement because it means that Z understands her own feelings and experiences as valid and worthwhile and she also communicates that sharing them with others through her spoken word works to legitimize her own views. At the same time, Chloe, who earlier spoke out about not feeling an emotional attachment to her poetry very eloquently states that love is a feeling "beyond your brain or your heart" meaning that it is not something that is always intellectually stimulated or emotionally supported and hints that love has the ability to "touch" that "deep deep part of your soul" because it is "supernatural." Her statement infers that love is spiritual and therefore more sacred and prevailing than either the brain or the heart. And although experiences or conversations of love have become trivialized because they appear to be the subject or at least side plot in most heteronormative media, Zanna concludes that "it's not trite" reiterating that everyone's contributions to the conversation that night were of high value.

These young women artists often spoke of love within their work and addressed it as such. Sometimes it was sexual in nature, as in Chloe's piece that included a line advising her mate to "get out the handcuffs and the mirror/we're gonna be grown tonight." Sometimes love showed up through the proclamation of a desire to "bring the humility back to love/where it's no longer about him or me/but what we can be...together" as in Zanna's piece entitled *Ride or Die*. At the same time, and often throughout the same poem, these young women also displayed no hesitancy when candidly making references that left little question about their expressly uncensored political beliefs. Z's debut performance at an open mic consisted of a piece entitled

“Love and War” which used the metaphor of a troubled love-relationship and compared that turmoil with the current state of the US government. These young women did not share in the hesitation of their male counterparts in Collective Energy and reveled in the same sense of momentary freedom that Rico pointed out earlier that was made available to them through the medium of performance. And although they did not verbalize the ways they may have paid for that moment of brave artistic release, I’m almost certain they struggled with being forcibly categorized by the audience as well. The subject positions made available to them did not account for the overlap and integration of their lived and performed experiences. Sexual or spiritual; romantic or revolutionary—the familiar Madonna/whore or militant/sellout dichotomy. Serious queries faced us. What if their poems were too sexual and they were called names or mistreated because of it? What if they were in an intimate relationship and their partner felt his privacy jeopardized? What if they were no longer taken seriously as socially responsible artists because they chose to include songs and stories of love in their work? While the girls’ obstacle did not lie in a fear of addressing either love *or* politics, they still faced high stakes for considering the relationship *between* the two subjects. Any time a female artist gambles by dancing on the borders of the in-between of her subjectivity and experiences, she runs the risk of being pushed to either side by a public uncomfortable with traipsing that ambiguous territory along with her. Early on, the girls were in danger of being too political and thus deemed extremists or—heaven forbid—feminists by a crowd who may not appreciate their socially responsible stance and may prefer to have their love and their politics sold separately.

Because of Zanna’s experience and willingness to share her insight, within the layers of this discussion lay the concept of “challenging people” used in a positive light—being critical of relationships, of perspectives and views, of what gets named ‘love’ and the ways that we are recognized. Performing out of an understanding that the artist is a pedagogue and that performance can be motivated by a love ethic requires confrontation with other more common

discourses that state the opposite. Performing out of an ethic of love means being willing to fight through those discourses, challenge them and at the same time challenge others. Indeed, Carol Becker (2001) states “the best art goes so far into the personal that it actually broadens its own particularity and touches the world” (p. 109). Taking such a chance by sharing a love song or poem is a decidedly political move; it is an effort to touch that “deep deep place” in someone other than the self, moving focus in back and forth between the specific and the outside. The constant conflict that challenging others seems rooted in conflict and may not sound hopeful at first, but it is full of possibility. The concept of working at love requires that we re-condition our expectations of what it means to love and the ways in which love is demonstrated through performance.

A Performance of Love

Defining love gets even more complicated and hooks (2000) continues to provide an explanation as to why that may be. She claims that the coexistence of love and abuse is impossible, which is the reason why in the midst of participating in dysfunctional relationships “it is so difficult for most of us to embrace a definition of love that would no longer enable us to see love as present in our families” (p. 4). Investing in the definition of hooks’ love requires honesty so severe that it may be painful. What if our families never taught us how to love because *they* didn’t know how? As a result, love also requires that the capability to forgive be developed. If love is something we learn how to do, does that mean we can re-learn it as well? Nel Noddings (1994) disagrees. In her article that discusses “an ethic of caring” as a classroom practice for instructors, she suggests that while “one who is concerned with behaving ethically strives always to preserve or convert a given relation into a caring relation” she insists that “acting out of caring, one calls on a sense of duty or special obligation only when love or inclination fails” (p. 173-174). In other words, Noddings’ idea about an ethic of caring and love is one that is dependent

on a natural feeling of care that instinctually drives human beings and is focused upon the response of the other party.

While I can appreciate the focus on relationship that Noddings makes central to her arguments, it is assumptive to suggest that everyone is endowed with a certain sense of caring. This poses a particular problem for women as it naturalizes the idea that the emotional responses of caring and love are feminine and maternal in nature and all women are innately designed to exude it. Those that don't are punished (see Walkerdine 1990, Luttrell 1997, Grumet 1988). While this suggests a skewed universal experience for the category of women it is ironic that only the females from Collective Energy had no trouble with acknowledging their performances as both loving and political. Whose definition of caring is being used here? If we all have grown up with a variety of experiences that have been grouped under the umbrella of love and named as acts of "caring" despite their differences or even, as hooks (2000) pointed out earlier, their abusive nature, then the logic that suggests there is no discipline required to practice love or that there is no learning curve to the process of loving is unstable. Perhaps what is needed is a space to discuss what love could mean and what it is to make decisions that are rooted in love. Providing a method to explore love is another function of performance.

Performance provides the site where ideas about love and ethics can be explored in a useful way. Performance can offer us ways to practice a love ethic because it opens up space to cultivate the practice of revelation: exploring and revealing a more honest self and more importantly, exposing the dynamics of relationship that shape the discourses through which we recognize love and are recognized as loving and lovable. It opens us up to practices that enable us to choose our responses maintaining the "capacity to invent our lives...and we practice this shape-shifting to cope with unjust realities that cannot be easily changed" (hooks, 2000, p. 57). Perceiving love in the way hooks describes here means accepting that performance and the concept of love are political. They are acknowledged and recognized as acts of community and

not only an individual self—they are about maximizing moments of connection with self and with other. How we love and how we perform our selves is directly reflected in how we act out love and the performance of our selves in relation to others.

In order to experiment and explore the issues of love and responsibility the practice of “inventing our lives” that hooks (2000) speaks of requires that we imagine how we wish our lives to be. Marnina Gonick (2003) suggests that the space of the imagination “grants a certain license from the constraints of the social, the dictates of censorship, and other normative operations of consciousness. In the realm of the imaginary it may be possible to explore fantasies and fears, enact relations that would otherwise be restricted if not taboo, or temporarily dissolve boundaries, facilitating a loss of distinctiveness of the border between self and other” (p. 182). The motion made permissible by the utilization of the imaginary allows for experimentation so that even if we have not been taught to love by our families or a society that has hurt us and themselves, or one that simply didn’t know how to love, we may still have the space and time to practice and figure out what it means to love. hooks (2000) agrees, “what we cannot imagine cannot come into being” and it is performance that provides the opportunity to explore our imagined relations, desires, and in-between of our imaginations (p. 14). The occasion that performance provides to rehearse these relations allows us to practice meaning what we say and doing what we mean effectively turning our insides out. The safety net in the midst of these risky acrobatics is that we never have to perform the same way twice—in fact, it’s pretty impossible to do so. An exploration of performance as the practice of love ethic and as a site of negotiation which is often overlooked in the mainstream “may make possible the imagining of new modes of life, provoking a disruption of conventional thought and action, inciting desire for and engendering strange possibilities extending the range of identities...others might negotiate” (Gonick, 2003, p. 182). Using performance, we can constantly rehearse and recreate our imagination thus adding to the repertoire of subjectivities and shifts in relationship that are available to us now. Performance

space and the conversation space provided by purposefully structured workshops such as Collective Energy's meetings are crucial to this practice until it becomes an expectation that everyone is subject to change. These moments of meeting and connection become moments of transformation.

hooks (2000) argues that the practice of loving is transformative stating "commitment to a love ethic offers us a new set of values to live by" (p. 88). She continues that "when love is present the desire to dominate and exercise power cannot rule the day" (p. 98). This ethic of love and care is never far from the center of a socially responsible artists' creative push; according to Carol Becker (2001) "artists care about society, enough to put their bodies on the line" (p. 107). Two interesting elements underlie these statements. First, both of those quotes assume that to care is to sacrifice. The artist is risking their body and the lover is deferring power. Secondly, when love informs ethical practices, transformation takes place and is evident through everyday life. The interest of the individual self is displaced or subsumed in service to others and the artist initiates a transaction between self and the audience by giving the self as an offering.

I pause here and think of the students in Collective Energy. I think of the stories they've shared and of the large quantities of time we spent together—that is another vital ingredient in an ethic of love—devotion of time.

Choices always have consequences, especially it seems when choices are made about love, who we love and where and when and why. hooks also spends a great deal of energy exploring the relationship between love and ethics (1984, 1989). Now let's look to a brief discussion of ethics and the feminist possibilities that therein lie.

Feminist Ethics

I turn to a discussion on ethics and feminism is by no means comprehensive. However, it offers a sampling of the diverse perspectives that contribute to understanding the ways in which ethics informs the practice of love under a variety of circumstances. Just as there are a multitude of oftentimes contradictory feminist practices that constitute the feminist movement, there are also many approaches to arriving at a workable theory of ethics. While each path seeks a clearer understanding, broadly speaking these theories concur that ethics is centered upon making the world a more just and hospitable place for all who reside in it (Valdivia, 2002, p. 434). The methods of moving the world towards that better place differ largely due to the starting points or points of departure of the individual.

For example, Christians (1999) suggests that ethics is defined as “an effort to articulate moral obligation within the fallible and irresolute voices of everyday life” (p. 97). From this perspective, ethics is a discussion or a dialogue that is based on the ways “everyday” people, inconsistent and unreliable though we may be; understand their duty to uphold a decent standard of life. In her work exploring bell hooks’ theories on ethics Angharad N. Valdivia (2002) argues that “feminist ethics challenges the principles and universality of mainstream ethics” by working to include “the position of, consequences for, and opportunities for women and therefore for humankind” (p. 433). It seems that Valdivia is interested in a disruptive form of ethics, one that lies outside of “the mainstream” and vocalizes the experiences of women that are located in the margins. These broad definitions are both interested in issues of access, voice, and position. While they offer useful ideas about where a search for ethics begins I am left wondering about how to apply these general suggestions to my own project and practice.

If I pull the above ideas into focus around the year I spent with Collective Energy, the questions become far more specific and turn me as a researcher and practitioner inside out once again. If part of my goal was to create a space in which the art work produced and performed and

the relationships that were developed grew in their level of cultural sensitivity with core issues of gender, race, and class under constant examination, did I provide the appropriate resources to meet the needs of the participants? Did my own ambition and drive inhibit the learning experience of the student artists? Did my own production of spoken word poetry reflect the values I proclaimed? Am I offering enough detail and description within these very pages to fully contextualize the responses and performances of the student artists I've researched? In other words, is loving them enough? At the same time, I also wonder how my own multiple subjectivities interact dynamically with my understandings and practices of ethics. The discourses I'm assigned to and the ones I actively situate myself within are not always clear to even me. Identity and subjectivity are not always mapped directly onto politics (hooks, 1984; Valdivia, 2002).

Valdivia (2002) offers some helpful advice from feminist poststructural ethicists who propose "the ongoing feminist commitment is to a fully contextualized dialogue...that must always ensure that multiple and partial perspectives are in continuous negotiations...that we should acknowledge always the impossibility of fixing that judgment in either time or space" (Shildrick, 1997 as in Valdivia, p. 435).

I am surprised and relieved that the word "judgment" has finally been used here. The reading I've been doing around ethics and morality has been careful to avoid using this word thus far and I found it shocking to see it in print. My guess is that it is currently offensive and something to be avoided, particularly on a quest for feminist ethics which does not leave much room for the claiming of authority that a 'judge' would assume to have. One question is who are we judging? If we are only judging our own actions and choices how can we ensure judgment is fair or accurate? Do we measure how ethical our actions are by the effect they have on others? If so, is this based upon what others say or do? On the other hand, what happens if there is a situation that requires the health, or the good of the individual to be placed above that of another

person (think about the example of a mother here)? There are limitations and expectations of giving and taking that establish a sense of balance in relationships and, as I stated at the introduction, relationships are the core of what nearly everything is about, especially in this study. How does justice operate in the midst of this quandary of ethics? Also, if judging is supposed to be negative then how does engaging in criticism operate? Don't the choices we make communicate our approval, or disapproval, of anyone who makes a different choice? If a practice of ethics is about deciding what is right and wrong at a given moment then it is particularly important to pay attention to the elements of time and space. How does this inform the overarching universality of what it means to be ethical? Is it really ethics if what is right is contingent upon what is immediately happening through, around, and to us?

At first it may seem to appear that Shildrick is suggesting several conflicting ideas. First, that it is possible to (re)present fully an experience and that it is the job of the feminist researcher/writer to include all aspects of opinion on any given subject matter. Instead, I think what Shildrick is getting at is that an ethical feminist poststructuralist project will be presented in such a way that is accessible and works intentionally to invite other perspectives to join the conversation. This deliberate effort works around an assumption that competing discourses and lived experiences are always inhabited and are beneficial because they offer complicated points of engagement for all who choose to participate in the conversation. Complexity should be sought after because ultimately, any story that can be claimed to be known is still only a partial story or experience. To welcome the articulation of alternative outlooks is to receive the articulation of unconventional narratives, plots, and courses of action, thus providing possibilities for resistance to the often internalized oppressive arrangements that traditional social institutions work to sustain (Valdivia, 2002). Seeking fractures in our own ideas about right or wrong should not be paralyzing, as is often the critique of poststructuralist theories. On the contrary, this pursuit of feminist ethics forces a reflexive attitude that can cause us to interrogate our own

patterns of behavior comparing and contrasting, aligning and disturbing the totalizing and widely accepted (and rewarded) discourses made most frequently available to us.

Shildrick (1997) ends her quote with a reference to the impossibility of permanence when it comes to negotiations of meaning as they are always being contested. Part of the reason for this unfeasible (and for my purpose here undesirable) fixture is due to the constant gesticulation and overlap of time and space. To better understand exactly how influential and important the elements of time and space are to a feminist ethic and operation of love, I segue way here into a discussion of a/r/tography and an ethics of embodiment.

Ethics of Embodiment

In her chapter discussing feminist ethics as activism using arts-based research and teaching practices, Stephanie Springgay (2008) pulls from feminist cultural theorist Sara Ahmed (2000) who claims that ethics involves “a being with” (p. 154). Ahmed continues, “ethics is a question of how one encounters others *as* other...and how one can live with what cannot be measured by the regulative force of morality” (as in Springgay, p. 154). Understanding ethics as separate from morals is essential and a study of ethics is most useful when it is “understood through social interaction” that focuses on interfaces and relations rather than a strictly knowledge based sense of duty or learning about the other (p.154). In other words, a feminist ethic that is focused on “being with” is about relationships and how to navigate through them consciously aware of the implications of our actions. The separation of morals from ethics distinguishes Springgay’s approach to an ethics of embodiment because it depends upon an examination of engagement with others through encounters with others.

The embodied approach to ethics centers upon questions of behavior such as “how must I behave and what actions will this entail in order for me to ethically treat Others?” (p. 156). The axis of an ethics of embodiment is bodily encounters and relationships: “each individual body is brought into being through encounters with other bodies” (p. 157). If we agree that the

construction of the self and the Other are always dependent upon each other and thus related, then the way in which we treat others is a direct reflection of the way in which we view ourselves. I cannot ignore the old school Golden Rule: “do unto Others as you would have them do unto you”. It asks us to extend ourselves beyond a simplistic consideration of what life may be like for the Other and to seek out (or research) how we can learn (and teach) about and with the Other thus developing a sincere relationship. Todd (2003 as in Springgay) suggests that it is “our commitment...to be altered, to become someone different than we were before...to the point of transformation” that manages the amount of priority and importance we place on paying careful attention to the encounters we have with others (p. 156). In addition, subscribing to an embodied ethics requires that we commit to a willingness to be brand new. From a performance perspective this insight into ethics raises a particular question of boundaries and the occupation of spaces.

If a performer is not to assume that they could possibly “assimilate” to the other, how does this affect performance (Butler as in Springgay, p. 154)? Indeed, is the work of the performer to assimilate, to fully absorb or adapt to a given character or situation? Most if not all of the spoken word pieces and songs written throughout Collective Energy’s experience were based on personal and immediate experiences. Simply put, “we need this type of writing to connect with others” and to connect with ourselves (Leggo, 2008, p. 4). Leggo continues to explain why such a connection is important: because to study the subject is to study the Other and to develop the subject develops the Other (p. 5). Inserted amidst the subject and the Other is the in between space of relationship that a/r/tography taps in order to explore how meaning is made through encounters with others. Understanding an ethics of embodiment and the practice of love is vital to performance and the composition of spoken word poetry. For although “bodies/selves cannot exist without other bodies/selves” neither are “the two reducible to one another” which means that individual authority is only as powerful and meaningful as the community discourse in which it is employed (Springgay, 2008, p. 157). Further, in her discussion on appropriation, the

act of writing, and racism bell hooks (1989) states “when we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our actions, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination” (p. 43). She continues “scholars who write about an ethnic group to which they do not belong rarely discuss in the introductions to their work the ethical issues of their race privilege or what motivates them, or why they feel their perspective is important” (p. 44). What hooks declares about writing can also be applied to performance and more broadly to relationships with other people. The delicate work of locating the individual autonomous self(s) within the community of humanity and vice versa is all too often clumsily plodded through or simplistically addressed. What this work *requires*, however, is interaction between others and selves, and recognition of the validity of that in-between space where such interaction occurs. Careful attention to this process is the ultimate demand of an ethics of embodiment, for any knowledge produced by a collective body is produced under very particular circumstances. This process requires respect and honesty. Such vigilance also requires a lifestyle commitment. From a practice of embodiment, hooks’ (1989) suggestion that we develop a community of consent is idealistic but not always achievable or necessarily desirable. What about the audience members who are enforcing oppression or with holding power? Should the socially responsible artist be required to ask their consent?

Another question that might be asked, particularly with the interest of artistic creation in mind, is what sorts of boundaries does this version of ethics lay for what is assumed to be a limitless imagination? The imagination is as Gonick (2003) states a traditionally excluded site of discourse that can be used to “challenge normative social and discourse practices—then the work of the imaginary seems a means of accessing and mining these excluded sites and other selves for what they might offer in the way of expansions of human capacity and social forms” (p. 182). Or as Lorri Neilsen (2008) writes, it is “our capacity to imagine gives shape and direction to how we, as a species, learn from one another and transform our experience” (p. xv). If hooks’ (2000) love

ethic is combined with these other versions of imaginative possibility and the careful research and practice of embodiment and *a/r/tography*, then we are looking at an ethical relationship that requires a thorough examination and honest acknowledgment of power operations. Therefore, this ethics must welcome the unknown and be “centered on action aimed at subverting hegemonic relationships” (Jagger as in Springgay, 2008, p. 156). This feminist ethic of love should drive our work with a specific attention to the in-between, or to the gaps in order to better seek out and explore the moments when “there is a gap between the values [we] claim to hold and [our] willingness to do the work of connecting thought and action, theory and practice to realize these values and thus create a more just society” (hooks, 2000, p. 90).

Collective Energy was an invitation to those of us participating as artists to learn new ways to stand up effectively for the first time using arts-based methods. It was also the first time many of us stood up knowing that we had the support if not the agreement of eight others behind us. Performing original work provided this group of artists a way to audition our beliefs so that when we encountered moments of ethical decision making that occurred on or off the stage, we had practice in behaving based out of a love ethic. Further, working to build a community of artists propelled us into intentional relationships with one another. Living through a feminist ethic of love enhances moments of contradictory experience, it “creates lived experiences together” and “nurture[s]...ethical relationality” through challenging and constantly revising those relationships (Springgay, 2008, p. 157). hooks (2000) agrees that “living ethically ensures that relationships in our lives, including encounters with strangers, nurture our spiritual growth” (p. 88). This is the power behind an experience grown from love, invested in social responsibility and intentionally designed to point out and perform difference so that a connection might be noticed. This ethic of love that requires social responsibility and this conscientious attention is paid to our very being: “our subjectivities, identities and ways of living in the world are gestures and situations that struggle with, contest, challenge, provoke, and embody an ethics of

understanding and a responsibility” (Irwin and Springgay, p. xxxii). Research, teaching and performance cannot be siphoned off and acted out separately from one another, from values and ethics, or from the context that surrounds and scribes the artist. Instead, “responsibility itself resides in the in-between,” within and among these relationships we share (p. xxxii). So does love.

My Love Poem

By: Crystal

He told me I was too angry to write a good love poem
He said my accent, my look, and all that hollering
Would drive the audience away
He told me I was too angry to write a good love poem.

This is what I said:

I see things

Sometimes with my eyes open but mostly in my dreams

And I am still searching for that happy medium that supposedly lies somewhere between
the silence I am smothered with daily and these onstage screams

And unless you know what it is to have to struggle to validate your existence

Unless you have cried yourself to sleep because being poor has made your family a
statistic

Unless you wear your heart on your sleeve and wrap your insecurities deep inside your
chest trying to find the strength it takes to keep on resisting

Unless you never let them see you down and know how to smile while you bleeding
distracting the crowd like a magician

Unless you work 3 jobs and go to school full time to stay abreast of the competition

Unless you learn to listen,

Then you will never understand

That every poem I write is a love poem.

The doors I kick down ain't just for me

Spoken word has become more than some cheap form of personal therapy

And you're probably right, I do take myself too seriously

Because if I don't, then nobody else will

So please believe that the words that I speak are serious and I am serious about those

being words of love, being words of proof for the young ladies that have been convinced

to settle for some cheap substitute

For the young men ready to give up on the truth

Every word I speak is spirit made flesh and with my every breath I am striving to give

you something besides an excuse.

Realize that I'm trying to hurry up and do my time on the front lines before my bravery

and my sanity start deserting me

I know what it is to be stuck.

I know what it is to be trapped.

Not knowing what in the world to do when ain't nobody worrying about you

there will come a time when you going to have to know how to encourage yourself

Because most of the time when it comes to love you can't depend on nobody else

And you can't save somebody's soul if you done sold out yourself

See, I do write love poems

But for real, I just want to write

I just want to live

And maybe I don't write about what I live maybe I write about what I want and I just want to love.

It's like the weight of three worlds in the pit of your stomach when you feel like you all alone but you're not

I've been searching for you like a shepherd seeks his sheep

I'm swinging so that you can rest easy, it's your shift to sleep

The doors I kick down ain't just for me

But don't feel obligated because I wouldn't be here if someone had not done the same for me

Even though I get angry

I'm not going to leave you behind and if I get two steps ahead it's to make sure our vision's in line

It's to make certain our supplies get here on time

If I leave while you rest your eyes

If you wake and I happen not to be here,

If you wonder where I go when I promised to stay don't fear I didn't tell you a lie

Remember

I walk ahead to test our steps

I check

The sparkling booby traps they've set
Because even if I stumble you can still learn from my death and
Keep moving

See, I do write love poems
But I love you enough to tell you the things you don't want to hear
I love you enough to stand by your side when you wish that I would leave because then
you wouldn't have to tell your story.

And they can keep they little fame, I'm on the battlefield for the glory
And they can keep they little maps, my arms span this globe
And they can keep they clever raps, my mouth is full translating soul

I do try
I try hard
I try to write things that will help you get lifted
I want to speak in electric currents that will shock you with their friction
But it's cruel to sing songs to a broken heart
And tonight my heart is heavy ya'll
I can only give what I got
Keep that in mind when I
Get loud on stage it's because I'm thinking of the times I should've spoke up but didn't
I'm thinking of the times when pride sealed my lips and I should've begged forgiveness
Every poem I write is a love poem so maybe you should
Pay attention to your convictions
Thought I told you before

This heart has been damaged beyond recognition but this soul was not destroyed
Don't waste your time window shopping for that good stuff you can't afford
You won't find my dignity for sale in the local corner store
I have tasted failure while simultaneously smelling the success on your breath
And I have seen dreams resuscitate life while mine have suffered a horrific death
I am down
But when I need to I know exactly how to lively up myself
When they sound the alarm I know how to strap up my boot, put on my mask and tighten
up my belt
So if the fire I got scares you out of loving me and your first instinct is to start judging me
Please think twice
I don't get up here to make friends
I never learned how to play nice
So remember tonight as the night that I spoke it into existence
If your eardrum feels like it could burst when my future is mentioned
Count yourself blessed
You heard it here first
Every poem I write is a love poem
Even when all I can remember is them laughing at our struggle
And them playing in our trouble
But while they busy pointing and laughing
We'll be sneaking and snatching
And while they sleeping and napping
We'll be plotting and grabbing
We gon reclaim the kingdom before Babylon realizes what happened

We get on stage or behind a pulpit because it's easy to speak truth when folks are paying
and clapping

But personally I'm interested in a little less chatting and a lot more action

We apologize for repeating our mistakes, but that's not the same thing as repenting

Each day, each page, every 'I love you' I say is a chance for a new beginning

And I'm taking mine

But for real, I just want to write

I just want to love

I just want to live

He told me I was too angry to write a good love poem

But that depends on what your definition of love is.

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