COUNTERING DOMINANT NARRATIVES IN COMMUNITY: THE MANY VOICES IN SPOKEN WORD POETRY

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A Project Presented to

The Faculty of California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English: Applied English Studies

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May 2024

ABSTRACT

COUNTERING DOMINANT NARRATIVES IN COMMUNITY: THE MANY VOICES IN SPOKEN WORD POETRY

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In this project I research the counternarratives within spoken word poetry by authors of color (i.e., Rafeef Ziadah, José Olivarez, and Denise Frohman) and how they resist the dominant narratives that are broadcast towards a larger audience. I analyze categories of counterstory through the following paired themes: immigration/citizenship, and joy/trauma. I delve into the heavy importance of community within my project in the realm of spoken word poetry. A lot of poetry is going against dominant narratives, community within this discourse gives a sense of belonging and relatability to the experience of the spoken word performers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Para mi mama, Raquel Gomez Collins, muchísimas gracias. You are the best mom I could have ever asked for and you never stopped believing in me. All the tears, the homesickness, you always knew I could do it. You are a big part of who I am. I'm so lucky I won you as my mom in the raffle we call life.

For my dad, Craig Collins. For challenging me, but also teaching me so much. I don't think this is said enough but you are the smartest person I will ever meet and I'm so grateful to have you in my life. Thank you for encouraging my passions. For attending my poetry readings and despite not liking the content just being proud of me. Love you dad.

For my big brother (big broski). Matt, can you believe I did it? Thank you so much for supporting my decisions and listening to me, for every crazy hurdle that comes, you've been there with me through it all. Thank you.

Para mis abuelitos, David y Lupe Gomez, muchísimas gracias siempre me han enseñado el valor del trabajo duro y honesto. Te quiero mucho.

For my grandparents Tom and Necia Wollenman, thank you so much for your support throughout the years. From moving to a new place, far away from home, to encouraging me to be independent and supporting my decisions.

For Fredd and Ted Snapp, thank you for opening your arms and home to me. You've shown me the beauty of Humboldt County and always reminded me how far I could go.

To Fortunato, thank you so much for your constant support. Thank you for pushing me through this process and carrying me through the parts where I didn't know if I could make it to the finish line. All the little sweet treats, the coffee addiction, playlists by the beach and dreaming of the day we'd finally hit the finish line. We did it!

To my wonderful chair. Dr. Christina Hsu Accomando, thank you so much for having confidence in me and my abilities to complete this project. You've always inspired and challenged my way of thinking and reminded me to never let my passion for spoken word poetry get lost in the bureaucracy of academia. Thank you for reminding me to write honestly and freely.

To Dr. Janelle Adsit, I'm incredibly grateful to you for being a pillar of strength and guidance in my academic career and beyond. From my place as a student to my career in student support services, you have been a role model and I attribute my professionalism to you.

Finally. To my bug, Waylon. This is for you. You can't read but thank you for being an emotional support dog without the credentials.

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How do we[1] begin to encompass a voice? We don't. A voice is meant to be heard; a poem frees the trapped voice through its lines. Spoken word poetry expands the poet's voice to allow the audience new ways of accessing their work. My project works to expand the lens through which we view spoken word poetry as a genre and a community space. By examining the way counterstory is able to take a part of spoken word poetry and the embodied themes of immigrant/citizenship and trauma/joy, the authors are able to counteract dominant narratives and the audience is able to access these pieces on a larger scale. Within my project I conduct an in-depth analysis into how counternarratives are represented within spoken word poetry in communities of People of Color (POC) poets. My project contributes to a larger discussion around the genre of spoken word poetry and the community that surrounds it. I join the discussions of several authors who formulate their own interpretations of spoken word poetry and how it connects with the community. What I bring to this discussion is my experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, where I performed and joined poetry spaces purely online. Doing so means I am able to speak to the rise of community that is possible within online spaces. My project is also focused on the close-reading analysis of poems by contemporary poets Rafeef Ziadah, José Olivarez, and Denice Frohman, and how their poems become a form of counterstory within themes of citizenship/immigration and trauma/joy. In this project I make the claim that spoken

[1] My usage of “we” is in regards to the readers of this project, I do this to build community within this space.

word poetry is a form of counterstory that allows the poets to speak directly against preconceived notions of their identity, experiences, and more. Because of the tradition that spoken word poets are speaking into when they enter the genre and the community of spoken word spoken word poetry offers its speakers a chance to take back narratives surrounding their identity and speak directly to the audience with the intention that they can find commonality with their audiences in these spaces.

Spoken word poetry has always been there for me. The culmination of all the YouTube videos I've spent sobbing over (from Bianca Phipps to Kevin Kantor, Elizabeth Acevedo to Rudy Francisco, I would list them all if I could) is truly endless. Consuming spoken word poetry as a preteen gave me the hope that I could be myself within the space, which speaks to the endless notebooks filled with poems that I couldn't wait to recite to my friends. I've always felt like poetry was meant to be taken off the page in some capacity, we were meant to hear all of the voice breaks and feel how each word glided out of the speaker's mouth, a song without a melody, and within it feel a connectedness with the speaker. Now as I am in this space, completing my MA Project with spoken word poetry at its center, I am encountering the varying ways that spoken word poetry is counterstory. As a lot of poetry is going against dominant narratives, and community within this discourse gives a sense of belonging and relatability to the experience of the spoken word performers. How does spoken word poetry as a genre become counterstory and how does this allow poets to exhibit representation and resistance within their work? In this section of my project, I will begin defining each of the terms that inform my analysis.

Spoken Word Poetry

Spoken word poetry begins with an experience, a memory, a moment in time that has impacted the speaker so thoroughly that they are inspired to write about it, and yet that in itself is still not fully encompassing spoken word poetry. Spoken word poetry as a genre can be defined, in a broader sense, as:

> A broad designation for poetry intended for performance. Though some spoken word poetry may also be published on the page, the genre has its roots in oral traditions and performance. Spoken word can encompass or contain elements of rap, hip-hop, storytelling, theater, and jazz, rock, blues, and folk music. Characterized by rhyme, repetition, improvisation, and word play, spoken word poems frequently refer to issues of social justice, politics, race, and community. Related to slam poetry, spoken word may draw on music, sound, dance, or other kinds of performance to connect with audiences. (PoetryFoundation.org)

I found that this definition of spoken word poetry encompasses my understanding of spoken word poetry. Spoken word poetry exists at the intersection of oral culture, drama, and performance, music, narrative, and more. There is intention behind the flow of words being spoken, with performance being the primary intention that separates this form of poetry from its written counterparts. There is so much that can be said about spoken word poetry. Within this paper I am writing about contemporary poet activists (Rafeef Ziadah, José Olivarez, and Denice Frohman) and there is no current peer reviewed scholarship on

these poets' work at this time. I will contextualize their work by looking at discussions that surround spoken word poetry as a genre. The discourse surrounding spoken word poetry focuses on the legitimacy of the genre, community ties within groups, or lack thereof, and understanding ourselves in our work and how this can act as a counterstory to dominant narratives (in media, systems of power, within our own cultures, etc.). In the context of my project, I am defining spoken word poetry as an umbrella term for poems that are being spoken aloud, whether they are live, recorded, with or without a physical audience, with the intention of the listener/audience finding commonality with the speaker.

Commonality and Community

Finding commonality is a way of acknowledging and respecting our differences but still finding ways of understanding our meanings and intentions. I'm thinking here of Audre Lorde's essay, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in which Lorde says, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences" (1). Understanding commonality isn't about finding exact ways to relate to a person but having the ability to expand your own perspective to see through alternative lenses. Your way isn't the only way, or even the right/wrong way. We are all going through life for the first time and the last thing any of us needs is to question the experiences of others. We often confuse the word understanding with the ability to relate, with that there is an expectancy of uniformity, which contradicts our experiences as a human. You do not have to feel pain to understand

that it isn't good or to empathize with others who are going through pain. Commonality is a way that we begin to respect and acknowledge the differences within ourselves and with each other.

Community plays a deep role within my own definition of spoken word poetry as I am including mediums of accessing spoken word poetry. These commonalities extend towards the content or story of the poem or the embodied presence of the poet. This definition of Spoken word poetry coincides with how poet and Project VOICE founder Sarah Kay defines spoken word poetry in her Ted Talk: "Spoken-word poetry is the art of performance poetry. I tell people it involves creating poetry that doesn't just want to sit on paper, that something about it demands it be heard out loud or witnessed in person" (Kay 2011). I agree with how Sarah Kay defines spoken word poetry and would further what she is saying by adding that part of spoken word poetry is that the author is not taken out of the equation of analysis and we as the audience are able to garner more from the way they interpret their own writing off of the page. It's important to note that while Sarah Kay does describe spoken word poetry as performance poetry, she is also similarly using spoken word poetry as an umbrella term as she adds that it, "demands it be heard out loud or witnessed in person." This definition is broadened by her assertion that spoken word poetry must be witnessed in some capacity, but does not necessitate being witnessed in person. I am taking this definition and further broadening it to include that witnessing it through online modes can have a similar effect. It's vital to include how witnessing spoken word poetry is accessible through online mediums, even outside of social media platforms like YouTube. We have companies that market spoken word

poetry through YouTube and are guided towards the goal of providing an accessible community through spoken word poetry; however, these companies are using the genre for profit. This strays from the origins of spoken word poetry that Dr. Joshua Bennett, spoken word artist, professor, and author of the book, *SPOKEN WORD: A CULTURAL HISTORY,* discusses. This applies to some but not everyone: some poets work nearly exclusively within the spoken word modality than others. And "page poets" don't necessarily have the skillset for spoken word. A printed poem can't necessarily be adapted to the spoken word presence. Spoken word poetry is marketed online with the goal of selling books by the author, however whether or not this is actually an improvement to profit is a whole different conversation[2].

Button Poetry, a company based in Minneapolis, describes their vision, “We seek to showcase the power and diversity of voices in our community. By encouraging and broadcasting the best and brightest performance poets of today, we hope to broaden poetry’s audience, to expand its reach and develop a greater level of cultural appreciation for the art form” (“About Us - Button Poetry”). Through this we can see that the inclusion of social media or “poetry media” as Button Poetry would say, is meant to expand the audience of spoken word poetry and allow its community to access it through their own screens. This is a great way to help poets get their name out and let a wider

[2] Button Poetry is monetized for their audience whether or not you buy the performers book. YouTubers get something (if they are successful at getting clicks and hosting ads) whether or not we buy books. This online monetization is part of the underside of the online “community” of spoken word – the profit can be far from the poets themselves, and viewers might click and share and never even realize they have a book. (If you go to a live event, on the other hand, a poet with a book will have copies for sale.)

range of audience reach their work. The term “performance poetry” also reads as more inclusive due to the fact that it is less hearing/oral centered. The usage of “performance poetry” rather than “spoken word” is intentional here as it takes the stance that it is less hearing/oral centered which is something that is commonly associated with spoken word poetry and I would like to venture deeper into this in the future but I found that I overlooked this point.

Dr. Joshua Bennett provides an in-depth perspective on the history of spoken word poetry, its historical influences and his personal perspective as a spoken word poet. Bennett’s definition of spoken word centers the notion of community:

> This central, defining characteristic of spoken word – that work is written to be read aloud, rather than to exist primarily on the page– is, I think, a critical component of its popularity. At its heart, spoken word is a social form. It demands engagement and requires an audience of listeners in order to function. (Bennett 17)

While Bennett notes in this passage that spoken word poetry demands “engagement” and “an audience of listeners” in order to function, I wonder in what ways he meant this.

For the purposes of my own research, I will further this definition by adding that the engagement can be through multiple modes of participation that extend beyond in-person recognition. One of the points I will be expanding on is how accessible spoken word poetry is through social media. The way we view community has been shifted by

the realities that we've faced through the COVID-19 pandemic. We were all[3] shuttered inside of our homes and it would be expected as humans we are social creatures, therefore, we would find community within online spaces. The pandemic forced us to forgo in-person interaction for the safety of ourselves and our loved-ones. We were forced to expand communication through technology and that is why so many spaces are still carried on through online platforms (i.e. Zoom). What was originally intended to be used as a necessary tool in a pandemic shutdown, is now continually used as an accessible resource in building community. Engagement and active listening are not solely in person, and through social media, we are able to reach a global audience and connect on a larger scale. In this sense, social media is offering more community by being able to expand outreach that goes past being within the same room. This is one of the experiences I had during the COVID-19 shutdown. I was invited to participate with a poetry group every Thursday called Canyon Poets, in which we had a featured poet invited into the space and we also would have open mic sessions and be able to participate as though we were in person.

A central component of this notion of community within the context of spoken word is the bond that is created between artist and audience. For Bennett, that bond is a visceral and embodied connection that happens in a physical space before the poet speaks. He writes:

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[3] I would like to acknowledge that not "all" were shuttered inside - "essential" (but often expendable) workers were not able to stay at home.

> As a friend's former mentor used to say, "Your poem starts before you touch the stage"--by which she meant that the process of communicating who you are, what you are about, begins the moment the audience first sees you, before you have even opened your mouth. (Bennett, 27)

This particular passage speaks to the need we have to relate amongst one another which happens in poetry. As humans we are likely to relate to people coming from different walks of life, there is diversity and through this we are able to still find connections. Spoken word poetry can be especially powerful both when we identify with the articulated point of view and when we are hit with something that is unfamiliar to us. Spoken word poetry shifts the point of view of the audience. We see aspects of ourselves in one another. Commonality can be miniscule or giant. I related to that fear whenever I competed or featured as a poet, I was so frightened that no one would care, but the audience hears the love and care put towards not just the poem but the force behind the poem. We crave relatability and I wanted to find aspects of myself in other spaces where I often didn't see others like me. Spoken word poetry is realizing that the room is full of people and some people might not have gone through exactly what you did but they understand pain, they understand joy, and the room is sometimes a screen, a window, a place where you will always feel at home. Kay recalls this story of the lightning made possible by connecting with a live audience:

> The first time that I performed, the audience of teenagers hooted and hollered their sympathy, and when I came off the stage, I was shaking. I felt this tap on my shoulder, and I turned around to see this giant girl in a

> hoodie sweatshirt emerge from the crowd. She was maybe eight feet tall and looked like she could beat me up with one hand, but instead she just nodded at me and said, 'Hey, I really felt that. Thanks.' And lightning struck. I was hooked. (Sarah Kay)

Finding commonality with the audience was vital to my first experience performing a poem at an open mic night. I was shaking, I don't even recall what poem I did, what I was wearing, but I remember the applause. An older couple who had come to the poetry night for their preteen grandkids approached me and with teary eyes thanked me for sharing a part of myself. I was obsessed, where I used to think I wrote for me, I learned that I also wrote for others. The intention of it all was that I wanted others to hear me speak and feel like they could feel my words as their own. I wanted others to view me as a safe space, someone who not only understood but also experienced the same hurts and joys that came from life. This extended beyond in-person competitions, and during the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown I was able to feature as an established spoken word poet and still feel in touch with the same community through a Zoom room. I found a safe space within the confines of a screen. The bond that occurs in a virtual live space or via recordings is integral to spoken word poetry and allows the audience to extend past the scope of a room. My experience as an online spoken word poet opened doors for me and allowed me to pursue my dreams while a pandemic was occurring just outside.

Representation

Within spoken word poetry is a concept that I feel connects spoken word poetry and critical race theory, and that is, representation. Spoken word poets are able to connect through social media and find a global community with their audience and other poets through their poems and the stories that drive it. Stuart Hall in his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* defines representation as, "the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning" (Hall 45). Within this excerpt, Hall is discussing the ways that "members of a culture use language," and this is important to my research because of how it connects to spoken word poets and the way that they use their voices to extend the meaning of their poems. By combining their embodied presence and poetry, the poet, poem, and audience are able to produce new meaning with the words that are being said and how their crafted narratives go against dominant narratives. Representation plays a large part of what the performance of spoken word poetry can do, as opposed to, say, writing an academic article in a journal.

Spoken word poetry extends to not only academia but also everyday spaces. Hall assembles a broader definition of representation, one that sets the tone and allows individuals like myself to use it within their discipline. Crystal Leigh Endsley's book, *The Fifth Element Social Justice Pedagogy Through Spoken Word Poetry,* makes a clear connection with how representation and spoken word poetry are connected. Endsley

points to how spoken word poetry serves as a tool to convey diverse representations within a diverse audience:

> The practices of hip hop and spoken word poetry are powerful traditions that make social issues accessible, changeable, and dialogical to those most vulnerable among us. As a communicative tool and as a large vehicle for diverse lived experiences of people of color often told by people of color, spoken word poetry has created space to project and rehearse multiple representations and signifiers. (xx-xxi).

My project is supported by this definition that Endsley crafts. Through the way that Endsley fills the unspoken gaps of Hall's definition and by incorporating spoken word poetry specifically, I am able to see the clear framing of how representation is illustrated within spoken word poetry and in extension how it will be framed within my project. Representation is a passenger in Endsley's vehicle of spoken word poetry, and brings forth the intention of spoken word poetry which is providing representation and relatability for the audience. Endsley utilizes Hall's definition of representation in order to draw the connection of meaning making to his concept of signifiers. His overarching definition in the field of cultural studies is broadened enough that it can traverse disciplines to provide support, even in spoken word poetry. Endsley's reference to "experiences of people of color often told by people of color" (Endsley xx-xxi) is exactly what Hall is referring to when discussing who in those cultures and, as a byproduct: communities, conducts meaning-making. That in itself is representation, allowing Endsley to build upon Hall's definition by noting the space that has been carved out to

take note of that meaning but also: who it is representing and what, and what that indicates to those who are being embodied, portrayed and rehearsed.

Resistance

Understanding the connection Endsley makes between representation and spoken word poetry allows me to feed into my next concept which is resistance and how it navigates within spoken word poetry. Spoken word poetry creates a relationship between resistance and social transformation in this passage as she explains that:

> Social transformation, then, begins to take place when the performers or student artists are able to negotiate a way of making meaning that no longer situates them in a victimized state. Rather, their reposition or realignment of their position, even if imagined, changes the social and material narratives that have scribed them at least within a certain time and space. (20)

While Endsley is not explicitly defining resistance, she emphasizes a key piece which supports my project in assessing how spoken word poetry can allow for forms of counterstory. Endsley is describing the way that spoken word artists are resisting the dominant narratives that seek to diminish them by taking control of the narrative and telling their stories with their own words and experiences in mind. Resistance here is defined within Endsley's description of how students and spoken word artists are countering narratives that have labeled them and how they use spoken word poetry as an

art form that allows them to resist and push away preconceived notions of their place within the world, thus how this dynamic can lead to social transformation.

When Endsley discusses social and material narratives that spoken word performers are able to shift about their own identity, this approaches the topic of counterstories/counternarratives. In the essay "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," Richard Delgado explores the importance of story structure and how counternarratives reframe the way we perceive reality. Delgado defines counternarratives in the context of community building:

> Most who write about storytelling focus on its community-building functions: stories build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and deeper, more vital ethics. Counterstories, which challenge the received wisdom, do that as well. They can open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live. (2414)

I particularly liked how Richard Delgado is framing counterstories as opening the reader's worldview, shifting perception of understanding what we deem as our truth and how it can differ from person to person. I found it interesting that Delgado is using Counterstories[4] to model that there are deeper contexts to a story and how they can shift our understanding based on a multitude of factors. I am in agreement with the definition Delgado supplies about how counterstories are often told through the perspective of

[4] Note that Richard Delgado uses the terms stories and narratives interchangeably; therefore, I will also be doing so as well. Luna and Mateo Castelli in their article "Master and counter narratives: Same facts – different stories" also refer to counter-storytelling as stories and narratives interchangeably.

groups/individuals that are not in a place of power to dominate the narrative. Positionality matters. What we call "spoken word" represents multiple traditions of embodied practice of thinkers, activists, and creators who have resisted and transformed dominant and dominating narratives. Similarly, within the article, “Master and counter narratives: Same facts – different stories,” by Mateo Castelli and Luna Castelli, they assert that counterstory is used to elevate minoritized voices:

> Another example of this can be seen through one of the major tenets of Critical Race Theory called Counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling is used to magnify the stories, experiences, narratives, and truths of underprivileged communities.

I really connected with this definition that Luna Castelli and Mateo Castelli construct as it points out that counter narratives are experiences and stories told from the perspective of underprivileged communities, which aligns closely to the content of my analysis. Many of the poems I am discussing delve into counterstories told through the perspective of underrepresented communities. The stories that they are sharing within the genre of spoken word poetry become a form of counterstory.

My research questions are grounded within critical race theory, primarily the concepts of counterstory, dominant/master narratives, representation and resistance, and how they interact in spoken word poetry, specifically within writers of color, and how within these spaces community is born. At the forefront of using spoken word poets to define and expand upon the way they define spoken word poetry; I also use Endsley and Delgado to connect Critical Race Theory within the genre of spoken word poetry. This is

how I am able to grapple with the ways counterstory, representation, and resistance interact within spoken word poetry through the content and the embodied presence of the authors. I am able to see these framings of my project and how commonality bonds are created within the spoken word community.

While weaving between personal narrative and historical context/analysis to the growth and development of spoken word poetry, Bennett begins sharing the connection he had as a student reciting poetry from well-known poets. He speaks to how it laid the foundation of incorporating civil activism within their poetry and the impact it had on Bennett and his peers:

> This combination of memorization and public performance was an act of both community building and active commemoration. By stepping into the voices of these poets, we were able to make the historical record come alive. We knew that these poems had power, and were meant to reflect our own power, our own possibility, back to us. (Bennett 60)

Within this passage Bennett is emphasizing how reciting poetry from well-known poets allowed for him and his classmates to build community and celebrate these artists and what they stood for. They were able to acknowledge the current relevance of what these artists are saying and how they affected him and his school cohort. Bennett is acknowledging the power of poetry and how doing this activity showed them that they had potential to be as or greater than the poets they recited from. Bennett describes the power of voice, enacting the vision of Langston Hughes and how social transformation

becomes supported as he writes, “Spoken word could become, not unlike it was in Langston Hughes’s vision, a more democratic mode of engaging everyday folks in the work of making and sharing literature. Poetry would be the vehicle for liberatory politics, that which lent power, and texture, to the freedom dreams of Baraka and his entire cohort” (Bennett 70-71). Making and sharing literature, taking away the gate that keeps everyday people out and invites them in. Bennett here is setting the tone in which he views community building within writing, one which opens the doors to everyone and allows them the opportunity to speak up and out. It’s interesting that Bennett names both Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes and Black Arts movement leader Amiri Baraka, as figureheads within this stance. I found it incredible to see how Bennett is using historical analysis to emphasize the roots of spoken word poetry and the lens of how its purpose lends to empowerment. I think one of the points Bennett is framing is how poetry is political and allows its speakers to resist oppressive powers and break the walls that try to restrain a community’s ability to exercise resistance.

Bringing it back to historical context with the inclusion of Amiri Baraka and Langston Hughes which understandably forced me into a rabbit hole of understanding the complexity of underappreciated poets of their time who spoke up and out against oppression and were often maliciously ridiculed for taking stance and openly questioning dynamics of racism and prejudice. These controversial poets really clarified the incorporation of Critical Race Theory within spoken word poetry and how poetry becomes a tool of activism.

> Over and against the forms of mainstream media that might, overtly or otherwise, work to erase much of what he and his cohort contributed to the present literary arts landscape, Algarín demands we remember, through ode and elegy and community vigils, to mourn the dead. We write poems, in the Nuyorican tradition, both to remember where we have been and to map out a vocabulary in direct conflict with the amnesiac influence of our present order. All with the aim of altering the way our society might approach the work of making poems, thinking about poetics, in the broadest possible sense. (Bennett 95).

This is where we begin to see how the genre of spoken word poetry can become a form of counterstory against the enforced amnesia of "the present order." Bennett begins touching on it as he states that poet Miguel Algarín asks we remember our roots, remember those who walked before we could run. The dominant narratives would have us and our cultural and poetic ancestors erased, and Algarín calls for us to trace our steps and I think essentially remembering the work that it took to get us where we are now.

This resistance against the forces of erasure points to a recurring conversation that is brought forth in Javon Johnson's book, *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*, in which he brings up how spoken word poetry is often viewed as an illegitimate form of poetry:

> By suggesting that what the body offers is somehow less relevant than what the mind offers, this move toward "real poetry" erased the brilliant contributions of marginalized poets and championed older, disembodied

> poetic practices that had made slam necessary in the first place. In other words, not all poets and communities are progressive, and the label progressive or radical can disguise the ways in which people fight for the liberation of one group while actively suppressing another. (Johnson 20-21)

I found this concept extremely interesting in the way that Johnson is pointing to the misconception that spoken word poetry is wholly inclusive *and* how we see a separation between spoken word poetry and written form communities. These are different issues that also overlap. Community brought forth within this instance is incredibly insightful in the sense that Johnson is not attempting to question the community within certain groups but he is calling attention to the lack of inclusivity in some spaces which contain these communities. I think this also lends to the misconceptions of what community is within the realm of spoken word poetry. Within the book *Stage a Poetry Slam: Creating Performance Poetry Events Insider Tips, Backstage Advice, and Lots of Examples* by Marc Kelly Smith and Joe Kraynak, they offer this image of the "perfect slam family":

> Visit any national poetry slam competition, and you'll see an astonishing mosaic of diversity. Men and women of all ages, all races and nationalities, all socio-economic brackets, and from every occupational niche of society gather together at these events to share their poetry, their performances, and the joy of creating and being part of the slam family. (Smith and Kraynak, 27)

It's important to note that Smith and Kraynak are providing an extremely distanced and rose-colored glasses way of looking at spoken word poetry. They are looking at the applied way of creating a slam poetry space and while it comes across as persuasive in the way that they are offering this super positive view of a poetry space, it does sound a bit too good to be true, doesn't it? Smith and Kraynak appear to be focusing their "how to" book without thoughtful/political framing which comes across as tone-deaf and colorblind. Smith and Kraynak continue to paint this image of an all-inclusive community of poets and yet fail to acknowledge the issue with the image:

> But for the most part, the slam is a grand (if at times dysfunctional) family of poetry lovers from all walks of life getting along and sharing in the excitement—aging hippies, young Goths, burly construction workers, leather-clad bikers, button-down office types, you name it. (Smith and Kraynak 27-28)

I am making the assertion that Smith and Kraynak are taking a color blinded racist stance and make a point of avoiding spoken word poetry's history that is rooted in resistance and the people of color who founded these very spaces, using spoken word poetry as a political tool in speaking out and against mainstream media power structures. Because Smith and Kraynak are taking more of an "applied" approach there is erasure and appropriation with this aspect of spoken word poetry but I found myself very much disagreeing with this stance. The usage of "family" is also a bit strange to me, I think it's meant to create this welcoming aura of what spoken word poetry can be but I also think it comes off as performative. Javon Johnson's book, *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the*

Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities, directly criticizes Smith and Kraynak's stance:

> … or they romanticize the remarkable diversity of performance communities while failing to account for the performers' underlying racial, gender, class, and sexual dynamics, through which the notion of community becomes contested rather than utopian (see Echlin 2003). (Johnson 8).

This resonated with me while reading through Smith and Kraynak and seeing that way they seem to look at the community of the writers of Slam Poetry through rose-tinted glasses without acknowledging aspects of the poets' identity and the way this perception leads to dissonance amongst the writers. I think one of the things this really points to is the avoidance of identity within spoken word poetry contradicts the history of spoken word and the political tool it serves. Crystal Leigh Endsley discusses this tension within her book, *The Fifth Element Social Justice Pedagogy Through Spoken Word Poetry.* Using examples of her students, she writes:

> 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 Q 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 an immigrant Caribbean woman in a Western academic context offers a critical analysis about the outcome of her experience, including the social institutions that structure her experience. Her physical

> and social location within a largely hegemonic campus environment that values status quo makes her presence as a woman and as a "foreigner" disruptive without any additional verbal contribution. Q's decision to speak up in class discussions and to perform onstage increase the danger she is in for resisting and posing a threat to the dominant narrative of the institution in which she is located. In every performance that she chooses to speak about her personal history, Q invites a powerful cultural critique as she performs. (Ensley 31)

We can see how Endsley is connecting the political nature of to her student's performance of poetry "within a largely hegemonic campus" where Q's identity speaks loudly even if it is not explicitly named. From this, Endsley without expressly naming counterstory is stating that her student Q is going against the dominant institution just with the act of using her poetry to tell her story. This further exemplifies the acts of resistance within spoken word poetry. By Q being able to speak out against the dominant narratives of the institution she is allowing others to relate to her experience, it opens the door for others to feel a sense of belonging and relatability to her experience.

Through the authors above I was able to grasp the conversations which encompassed spoken word poetry and while there was a lot of conversation that surrounds the diverse perspectives of the community and the areas where these spoken word poets diverge and perform their art, I noticed that there didn't seem to be anyone outright discussing counterstory or even the themes that I was introducing within my project. It is important to note that Spoken word poetry in these examples appear to really

focus on the environment of spoken word poetry and not the poem or how the author connects with the poem. Reading these to scope out the genre of spoken word poetry provided me the context of how I was using the word community. Community for me was how the speaker was relating with the audience and how the audience was able to find community with the SWP performers.

METHODOLOGY

I plan on conducting this project by doing content and speech analysis along with literary analysis of specific poems within the themes of joy, trauma, immigration and citizenship. This will be done by analyzing the poetry performance pieces through the critical frameworks of critical race theory and counterstory, with a focus on concepts of resistance, representation, and master narrative. This project is intended for those who are interested in poetry with a focus on themes within spoken word poetry. It is my hope that this project will be accessible to a wider audience outside of academia including spoken word artists and lovers of poetry.The procedure for this project I study the work of multiple contemporary poets' live performances, recordings, and written poems. Through my own experience as a spoken word performer, I write this project through the lens of a participatory scholar.

This project is written with my own positionality as a spoken word poet as well as a person of color, and a cis woman. I will be writing about counter narratives and how they challenge dominant narratives through the paired themes of: immigration/citizenship, trauma/joy. These themes will be chapters within my project but the intention of the paired themes are examples of how spoken word poets resist the dominant narratives that surround the themes. I analyze this by looking at the portrayal of these themes, how the poems go against the stereotype of the theme and the preconceived assumptions surrounding the topic, and how the spoken word performances supply a deeper meaning to what is written on the page.

Positionality

My identity is hard to explain. I've dealt with all the complexities of being Chicana. I was never Mexican enough and my Spanish was exposed by my American accent. I was considered an imposter from all sides of my identity. My primas from Mexico called me "fresa," which is to say that my Spanish was too polished, too snobby. I was never American enough, with my preferred snack coming home from school my abuela's homemade frijoles refritos in a corn tortilla. I was an oddity, too tall to be a girl but forcing femininity. I am in between a shell of expectations of who I should be, what beauty meant to me and how that coincided with what others thought of me. Spanish and English are heavily a part of my identity. My mind is a pendulum of crosses between the languages and it has taken me many years to realize that I am proud of that.

I try to live by looking at people at complex and often contradictory angles, in the hopes that others will give me that same kindness in return. We are not stagnant beings: we shift and change but the message that is said and the feeling it gives doesn't have to. I think it's important to try and understand that as no one is perfect, we are all heavily flawed beings.

As an academic I am a work in progress. I strive to maintain the multiple tongues and keep them in line with each other, but I'm learning that my tongue is not a disadvantage. As I write this, I find myself crawling through a tunnel of imposter syndrome. Something that has kept with me since my days kicking it up on the

playground. I never thought I would find a light at the end of the tunnel and I'm to say that I have reached the end of my academic journey.

As I write this, I recall every moment someone has corrected my grammar, every moment someone ignored the content of what I have said or written in favor of telling me how it should sound. I suppose the poet in me wants to make excuses about the way the flow in how I speak does not account for the grammar. I come into this project as an individual who began my journey as a poet as early as 12 years old. I can attest to the piles of napkins, ripped pieces of paper, and notebooks filled with poems or lines from songs or poems that stayed with me. I loved performing them but I did not know about spoken word poetry until I was 14, I was sent a spoken word video from a friend. It was Shane Koyczan's "To this day." I remember sobbing my heart out. I never realized that poetry could sound so heartbreakingly beautiful and relatable. I felt invigorated and like I could find my people. I joined an open mic and eventually competed in Visalia's Loudmouth Poetry group when I was 19. I felt like my obsessions with flow and rhyme were validated. Like I could tell my stories and truths and feel like a rockstar. Becoming a spoken word poet felt like I was finally coming home after a long time lost.

It's strange to say that I was truly able to feel like a true poet during the pandemic. During the pandemic and through an online fellowship I was fortunate to meet Katerina Canyon, who workshopped a poem with me and gave me the amazing opportunity of featuring as a poet for her poetry reading group, Canyon Poets. Every group gathering felt like a welcomed space and a clear path to being acknowledged as an established poet. I come to this research project as a spoken word poet who has performed, featured, and

competed. I cherish all of the memories I've had listening and interacting in spaces and communities of spoken word artists.

I am truly thrilled and honored to be working on this project because it means that I am validating myself and others who were inspired by voices and stories. The ones who react to the tremble of a sentence and the breaths taken in a line. Those who are able diverge into different meanings in the space of spoken words. We are able to hear the story straight from the author's mouth. There are no walls, no pages, but it is a voice guiding us to understanding the message behind it and we might not even get it but we will still burst into tears. Spoken word poetry delves into how social storytelling can be within a space and how it communicates with individuals.

"WHAT DO IMMIGRATION OFFICERS THINK WE HIDE UNDER OUR SKIN?"

IMMIGRATION/CITIZENSHIP

The conversation that surrounds immigration and citizenship is often riddled with misconceptions and misinformation. Those of us who are US-born citizens have the privilege of not having to worry about what it actually takes to become a citizen. We don't know what it's like to leave our home because of the risk of our family or our own safety. Within this section of my project, we delve into poems that explore the overarching theme of immigration and citizenship. In this section we will discuss how these themes interact with each other in the confines of the poems I've selected. Immigration and citizenship directly coincide with one another but are not always considered the direct result of the other. There's an assumption that one will expectantly receive citizenship if they stay within a country long enough, but this is not true and often, far from the truth. One cannot immigrate to a country and simply acquire citizenship, considering the arduous time it takes to process, the costs, and that's not even considering whatever other requirements there may be in accordance to the specific country.

In this chapter, I will be looking into two spoken word poems and I analyze them within the lens of the themes (immigration/citizenship) and how they become counterstory, through their interactions with representation and resistance. Rafeef Ziadah's poem "Passport" delves into the paradox of feeling as though nothing and yet everything has changed when acquiring her citizenship. Denice Frohman, on the other

hand, in her poem "Borders" does a timelapse of the life of Ana Maria, her experience with crossing the border by foot as a child, the discrimination Ana Maria faces with carrying an accent to the color of her skin, the work her parents do so they can give her a better life in a country where it is not guaranteed because of her citizenship status. Within both of these poems we begin to see the separate treatment between being an immigrant and being a citizen. It's important to dissect the dominant narratives that are formulated on immigration. These dominant narratives influence how the conversation of immigration has negatively affected the citizens already residing in the country. We can't escape hearing the hot button phrases through multiple scopes of media, in which statements like 'build a wall' and 'they're taking our jobs' are tossed around and negatively tied to immigrants and the stereotypes/discrimination/prejudice/racism that follow what it means to search for a new home in another country.

Is obtaining citizenship really just a piece of paper? I found myself drawn to the poem "Passport" by Rafeef Ziadah, because it's discussing Ziadah's experience in gaining citizenship in Canada but also because it's sharing a perspective that is not often illustrated. Immigration and citizenship in this instance are melded together and viewed as a paradox as Rafeef Ziadah grapples with understanding that garnering citizenship changed nothing, at the end of the day, she was still herself, and yet she was viewed differently based on a piece of paper. The paradox is understanding that while everything changed, nothing changed at all whether you are a citizen or an immigrant. All of the mistreatment isn't erased with the status on a paper and yet once she garnered citizenship, she was no longer looked at with suspicion but ignored. Racism/xenophobia transcend

citizenship, a brown immigrant is always “othered”, even if she becomes an official citizen. I want to first begin with stating that I am viewing this poem on YouTube, which is primarily where Ziadah’s performances are available. Rafeef Ziadah, in an interview in 2019, provides context on why she has only produced albums and not published the written forms of her poetry, stating, “I couldn't travel freely, and I couldn't get funding to do my poetry either, which is why I only produced albums. I could only apply to become a real artist once I had documents” (Grugeon). Providing this context along with the content of the poem we can begin to see Ziadah’s framing in what her experience has been prior to acquiring citizenship and how this reaches even being an artist. Before even delving into the poem, Ziadah provides us context in how she was not able to get the written version of her poems published without citizenship status, her ability to be seen as a published artist was taken because of her immigrant status.

What would you be willing to do for the right to be treated with basic human decency? And if you did it--would it solve all of your problems? Rafeef Ziadah precedes her poem “Passport” with an anecdote, which creates a lighthearted air in the audience and shares the relatability of speaking English as second language and swearing an oath to the Queen and all of her ‘hairs.’ The wordplay, which Ziadah relays within the video of her performance, states that when you are obtaining citizenship in Canada you must swear an oath to the Queen and all of her heirs, however speaking English as a second language it is easy to confuse “heirs” with “hairs”. Here Ziadah this information uncovers with a smile, whether knowingly or not, the absurdity of this North American oath asking for allegiance to a colonial monarch and everyone who bears her genes. While the

beginning is lighthearted it speaks of the desperation in garnering citizenship which is illustrated as she goes on to say, “And I swear if they asked me to marry Charles today I would” (Ziadah, “Passport”). Ziadah emphasizes the desperation in garnering citizenship by any means necessary, even going so far as to, “...swear an oath to the Queen and all of her mighty, mighty, hairs.” The ridiculousness in this sentiment is understanding how an English as a second language speaker might come across this oath and be told that they need to repeat it and be willing to do whatever it takes to become like “one of you,” as Ziadah says within her poem. Ziadah goes on to emphasize the importance through the usage of repetition. The repetition of “legal” emphasizing fixation, the importance that this is her moment and it’s finally happening. Ziadah pauses briefly to introduce her next line as she says, “He didn’t even look up at me”-what was supposed to be a badge of honor, gaining citizenship means nothing. The significance of her pauses creates the impression that she is emphasizing her point. It creates a sense of disbelief that she is experiencing this moment as she tells it, her pauses are meant to further punctuate the disbelief she feels when the immigration officer doesn’t even acknowledge her presence. This moment that she takes her pause is further emphasized by the introduction to the guitar accompaniment. Ziadah’s poems often contain guitar accompaniment. This accompaniment could be attributed to Ziadah’s style of spoken word poetry: “The form that I use is a mixture that draws upon the Arabic tradition of storytelling, Arabic poetry, a bit of hip hop, and also dub poetry – a form of performance poetry of Jamaican origin. I often explain that my writing is a reflection of my life in exile, because living in exile is always very hard, but it produces interesting things” (Grugeon). The moment Ziadah

shares that she had been anticipating is meaningless to the citizenship officer who it can be assumed is desensitized to this scene. Rafeef Ziadah begins to express disorientation at not being racially profiled in instances where she's grown accustomed to, as she states, "He didn't send me to the back of the line, or to a smaller room, that small room in the back of airports, that you never see." She speaks to the audience under the assumption that they are citizens and have never seen or experienced this, she's expressing confusion to not being questioned in this instance and concern for why she is not being put through this. Ziadah expresses confusion because when she didn't have citizenship status she was profiled and looked at with suspicion and now she is no longer experiencing this as a citizen. Which speaks to the treatment between immigration and citizenship. You are awarded with basic decency as a citizen and as an immigrant you are profiled and viewed with distaste.

Ziadah continues, "What do immigration officers think we hide under our skin?" Ziadah's usage of the word 'we' indicates that she does not consider herself a citizen and is emphasizing the helplessness of being searched for something you clearly do not have and yet are continued to be treated with the same level of suspicion. Ziadah continuing to place herself within the perception of an immigrant furthers her feelings of disbelief, it alludes that she has gone through the act of search and inspection that immigration officers do to people who do not carry citizenship status. Ziadah is making the point that despite her newly acquired citizenship status, she will always be an immigrant at heart because she's experienced the trauma of immigrating. Through surprise as well as confusion Ziadah begins to express feeling the need to reveal herself to the immigration

officer as if to show him that he missed her in his cross examinations, Ziadah appears to exhibit feeling as though she is an imposter with a passport and needs to inform the immigration officer that he's forgotten to suspect her. Ziadah continues as she says, "Machinery that can biometric my fingertips and find my grandmother hiding under the rubble." This line speaks to the concept that if they traced her fingerprints back, they would be able to see that she is not a citizen and does not deserve to be treated as a citizen because she has seen war and it has traumatized generations of her family. This is an example of a counter-story, which differs from the more dominant narratives that speak on immigration. Ziadah is pointing to a moment in which she wishes if the immigration officers who scan her fingerprints could see the history of her family. "Find my grandmother under the rubble" is a direct usage of counterstory as Ziadah is allowing the audience into a part of her personal history and also pointing to the fact that not every immigrant has the same story and there are so many variables that lead to immigrating to a different country. Immigrating to another country can be extremely traumatizing, often for reasons outside of looking for better opportunities, which is a common assumption. While that can be the case for some, it's not always the reason. From UN.org on International Migration, it states, "Some people move in search of work or economic opportunity, to join family, or to study. Others move to escape conflict, persecution or large-scale human rights violations. Still others move in response to the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters or other environmental factors" (United Nations).

Desperation plays a large part in migrating into a new country. Immigrants will often accept lower wages as a result of not having their citizenship (Bohn and Schiff).

Ziadah emphasizes this point as she states, “Machinery that can tell you I’m not here to take your job/ I promise you I’m not here to take your job/ machinery that can tell you that even if i get a job i am never going to ask for minimum wage/, i’m never going to ask for a minimum,” the desperation of this line speaks again towards the desperation of seeking refuge in another area. Machinery offers a powerful image/symbol/metaphor for systems and not just individuals. Ziadah is speaking towards the systems of control at play--laws, policies, and dominant narratives. Ziadah is not simply speaking about the concern of whether or not she will encounter a nice official or a mean one--but the policies at play that guarantee her treatment as an immigrant. Ziadah is also commenting on desperation and willingness to not ask for more than what is offered out of the last-ditch effort to find a semblance of home. Desperation makes us reckless and the need to become as small as possible, this need often borders on self-harm as Rafeef mentions not daring to ask for the minimum and the willingness to live with less of the means of surviving for the sake of having refuge. Your presence does not demand any more as necessary so that they (the country you are seeking to stay in) can’t take away your place at the table.

There is a paradox within the status of immigration to the status of citizenship. We begin to categorize humans in a dehumanizing way. Realistically the only thing that changes is a stamp next to your name, and yet what we begin to see is a separation in how people are treated. We begin to view immigrants as “illegal” and citizens as “human.” Ziadah ends her poem with this line, “You see nothing changed between July 12th and July 13th, absolutely nothing nothing changed between July 12th and July 13th my illegal

skin, my illegal bones, they still carried the same illegal me, I just put my hand up and swore an oath to the queen and all her mighty mighty hairs". The entirety of the poem speaks to how absolutely nothing was different on the day she attained her citizenship and she was still considered illegal, those criminalizing and legitimizing experiences do not just disappear and they don't erase her lived stories, and yet the only difference it made was her swearing an oath to the "mighty hairs" of the Queen. I think the idea of Ziadah circling back on this seemingly silly anecdote speaks to the bitter sweetness of the situation, garnering citizenship did not change her identity; she was still exactly the same person she had been seconds before swearing an oath. I think this also speaks to the counter-story that obtaining citizenship somehow changes the life of the person who is now a citizen, forever.

Individuals carry the trauma and/but also: the state and the (real) citizens and the racist discourses (those hot button phrases cited above) still carry their constructions of immigrants even after they become citizens -- it is not just in the bodies and psyches of the immigrants but also in the structures that shape responses to those who immigrated (or even who look like people who might have immigrated—this extends to US-born citizens getting told to "go back"). This speaks to the way immigration to citizenship can make the difference between life and death, it extends past the idea of wanting better and just wanting to live to see tomorrow, this also speaks to how generational these circumstances become.

Diving headfirst into a poem that covers topics of immigration and citizenship, it's important to acknowledge that citizenship isn't always the result of immigrating to a

new country. By this, I am referring to people who come to the US and remain undocumented. This is what differentiates Denice Frohman's poem, "Borders" from Ziadah's poem. Within the poem "Borders" Frohman paints a picture of immigrating to the states in which she tells the story of Ana Maria crossing the border and living in the States. Within this poem we see examples of language brokering, racism, and more wrapped into a neat package that is the American experience. Denice Frohman begins with a haunting line, "It starts before she gets here". This line sets the reader up for the metaphorical weightiness of the claim, Frohman is setting up the audience with the understanding that the alienation exceeds that of her own history and sends the message that this treatment of the supposed other is systemic across the board. From the first line of this poem, Frohman is letting the audience know that the story matters -- the back story is still with us. Frohman proceeds by saying,

> Before the stares tell her she's alien to a country that knows her great grandfather's Mexican hands all too well. His fingerprints still echo underneath railroad tracks and cotton fields from Texas to California, where bent knees and bent backs, once picked, plucked, pushed, worked; for more money than he was used to but less than he deserved.

Within these lines we see how Denise Frohman begins carving out the history of Ana Maria's ancestry which is also a history that extends past personal history and reaches towards the foundations of the United States which has been built from the hands of immigrants. By detailing how embedded Ana Maria's family is to the country, the irony of being considered an alien when Ana Maria's family has put the work behind it.

Frohman is showing us how personal histories are not just personal - they are also about law and policy and geopolitics and systems and structures that put her great grandfather here. I think this is a common trope within the Latin American diaspora: relying on the labor of minorities while avidly denying the right for them to exist and be present in a country keen on discriminating against all who do not appear white.

Often, the experience of Latine Americans can vary on a number of things. We are not viewed as fully Americans because we carry aspects of our culture or physical traits of our ancestry and yet we are not viewed wholly as Latine because we are no longer in that country or were born in a different country. As a person of color, born in the States, I was often made fun of for the shape of my nose by kids too young to understand, and I was often punished for daring to speak in Spanish on the playground. I carry my Spanish with me as a source of connection with my family and yet I remember being too young to understand the shame I felt for speaking a language that brought me closer to my grandparents. Frohman emphasizes this experience as she speaks,

> Ana Maria is now 10 years old.
>
> She's learned enough English to translate for her parents, but says that her thick accent is still a problem she tries to fix by leaving it in her locker.
>
> When the teacher calls on her to read she tries to speak proper, like "proper" has a sound.
>
> She pushes her tongue down so she doesn't roll her R's but she trips on the syllables that bounce with too much salsa.
>
> She tries to rattle out the kinks in her speech,

but her tongue is a stubborn dancer.

Here Frohman uses her own voice and thickens her accent to emphasize Ana Maria's struggle, in this instance Frohman is speaking for Ana Maria when she emphasizes the word, "Salsa". Within this passage Frohman is underlining the unfortunate truth; Latine Americans carry the heartbreaking inheritance of internalizing the discrimination that they themselves experience in everyday life. Within this section Frohman is alluding to the fact that Ana Maria has been taught to reject her natural voice and that Ana Maria is attempting to practice her accent away, but struggles because it is not something that just goes away. This is an example of the pressures of assimilation. Here we begin to see how Ana Maria is only 10 years old. Frohman, by beginning with this line, is reminding us that Ana Maria is only a child and is ashamed of something that is already ingrained into her, and she must get rid of it in order to blend in. The usage of "proper" is familiar to the way that SAE (Standard American English) is emphasized as "proper" academic language we must adhere to in classroom settings. Within the classroom, we are told that speaking and writing in Standard American English is considered professional and going outside of that is inappropriate. The result of rejecting the standard often leads to discrimination in professional and classroom settings, by peers and those in power. We begin to feel shame for practicing our heritage speaking and either assimilate or fall through the cracks of a broken educational system that has no way of supporting our undocumented peers. Frohman calling Ana Maria's tongue a stubborn dancer alludes to her own feelings towards Ana Maria's usage of her Spanish. Referring to it as a stubborn dancer could reflect the nature that it won't go away, and also the graceful glide of how

beautiful it is. Frohman is speaking from the stance that Ana Maria has nothing to truly hate about herself. The tone in which Frohman expresses this line expresses almost a familiarity with the situation. Frohman seems to speak with the tone of voice which alludes to the inevitability of Ana Maria's stance on her language, as though it is something she can only watch but not prevent, it's a cycle.

Children often learn behaviors. We were all children once and can attest to at one point mimicking the behaviors of the adults around us. At times the learned behaviors, or phrases that we absorb are damaging and can result in discriminatory behaviors towards people that look different to us. Frohman emphasizes on this through the next lines in which she says:

> The two boys behind her don't know how to do long division, but they know what a wetback is. And that Ana Maria has braids
> and that Ana Maria's hair is thicker than their sisters.
> And they don't know how they know, but they know how to treat difference when they smell it so, they say things like
> "Go back to your country", as if their Irish ancestors never walked through Ellis Island.

Here, Frohman is explaining just how damaging learned behaviors can negatively affect people of color. Frohman speaks to how the two boys, while not knowing the mathematics learned in school, are yet knowledgeable about how to be hateful towards Ana Maria. When Frohman mentions Ana Maria's differences from the boys' sisters, she is illustrating the negative impact of learned discrimination. When Frohman says, "and

they don’t know how they know,” she is referring to negative learned behaviors and how while the boys don’t seem to understand how they’ve reached this decision they’ve learned to equate different with wrong. This is further emphasized as Frohman continues with, “but they know how to treat difference when they smell it so, they say things like ‘Go back to your country’, as if their Irish ancestors never walked through Ellis Island.” Here Frohman is suggesting many things when she states that the boys know how to treat differences when they smell it, this could further point to a learned behavior the boys have absorbed from adults in their lives. It’s interesting how Frohman points out the irony of Ana Maria being told to go back to her country, remarking that these boys don’t seem to understand that their family also migrated to the US as well. The next passage continues on in a flow of Ana Maria’s adversity as Frohman says:

> Her father works 18-hour days as a dishwasher.
>
> Her mother cleans houses she'll never get to live in, so that Ana Maria can sit in a college classroom and say,
>
> "I am here." But her guidance counselor tells her, she can't get financial aid or the in-state tuition rate because of her status.
>
> She says it like an apology.
>
> Ana wonders if her family ever crossed the border, or if they are just stuck inside another one, aggravating it like a sore.
>
> Her guidance counselor stands in front of her with a mouth full of fences.
>
> So if they ask for your papers Ana, show them your skin
>
> Anna, wear your tongue like cape

Throw up your fist like a secret you can't keep any longer.

They can't keep you any longer.

Within each passage Frohman is alluding to how there are so many borders that Ana Maria is forced to encounter. Frohman is illustrating that despite what dominant narratives might suggest, the act of crossing borders to a new country is not the only hardship that undocumented people face. Within Frohman's poem, she emphasizes exactly how and why Ana Maria's family is forced to leave their home for a better (safer) life. The necessity to be away from drug cartels and put food on the table. The hardships that Ana Maria faces start before she even crosses the border with her family. Bringing it back to the first line of the poem, Frohman is queuing the audience to understand the systematic inequalities that hurt generations of undocumented people. Starting with a physical border, in which she is a child and is physically crossing the border to enter the states. Borders become a metaphor for the hardships Ana Maria is forced to face, pointing to outward and internalized racism. Financial inequity, both attributed to her family's undocumented status, her parents are working for less than what they deserve so she can have a better life, but she finds that she is placed in another hardship as she is told her status is attributing to the lack of aid she can receive in college. Frohman is blatantly stating that Ana Maria has the odds stacked against her.

Within Denice Frohman's and Rafeef Ziadah's poems, both are telling different stories of how immigration and citizenship interact with each other. Both frame the complexities of immigrating to a new country and alternative reasons that underline justifications of why they, or the person within their poem, would immigrate in the first

place. Both of the poems imply that the mistreatment that the speakers or characters face coming to a new country is better than the danger they would face staying in their country of birth. These poems show examples of how systems of oppression circulate within the country they've immigrated to. Within these poems we see how spoken word poetry becomes a form of counterstory that contradicts the many implications surrounding immigration and how racism/xenophobia continues even if citizenship is attained. Through this chapter commonality and community can be attained by not only an audience that can relate to the topics but also audience members who can empathize with these hurts that align with this experience, even if it doesn't reflect their own hurt.

“BUT SLOWLY I CAME BACK TO THE WORLD & CARNE ASADA.”

JOY/TRAUMA

Human beings are extremely complex. As a human I can attest to that. I find myself falling through the pitfalls and overarching rising tides of being highly optimistic and then dismissively pessimistic at the slightest mishap. When we hear the words joy and trauma, it’s not often assumed that they can be used within the same context. The way that joy and trauma coincide with one another is expressly human in the sense that we are able to feel so much for more than one thing. What can be seen as a paradox shows the complexity of humanity. Within this chapter I am analyzing two different spoken word poems by two different spoken word poets and how they frame joy and trauma within the context of their poems. What we find in these poems is how these poets grapple with individual losses or trauma involving their grandmothers and how they are able to find joy within the murkiness of grief. When I began the process of figuring out which poets and poems, I could use that would fit into this section, I struggled with my abuela’s steady loss of memories. This particular section became a way for me to find my own joy in what caused me turmoil every single time I spoke with her over the phone. In the poem “Abuela", Denice Frohman grapples with the convoluted nature of living with her abuela who is struggling to remember her. Frohman highlights the joys of meeting a different version of her abuela rather than fixating on the trauma that comes with having a loved one forget themselves. In contrast to this depiction of expressing joy and trauma, José Olivarez, in “I loved the world so I married it,” uses tone and

performance to delve into darker themes such as mortality, the death of loved ones, and how a person can find joy in the aftermath of profound loss. Frohman and Olivarez use point of view and performance to probe beneath the surface of trauma and excavate joy as a tool to combat grief.

It's not unheard of to find joy during periods of grief or hopelessness. It reminds me of that Dolly Parton quote that says, "In order to get to the rainbow you must be able to deal with the rain." I find myself agreeing with this sentiment. It makes me think of appreciating the time that you have with loved ones. It's not something we all actively do, and usually the reason we even begin to mindfully appreciate the presence of our loved ones is when we are at risk of losing them. We think about the good times, or try to find them in spaces where others would argue they're impossible to find. In "Abuela" Denice Frohman shows us exactly how she is able to find joy within what would otherwise be a difficult time to find any. It's important to mention that this poem is in second person, meaning that Frohman isn't telling us about her abuela - she is speaking directly to her abuela. By doing so, Frohman paints the picture of her relationship with her abuela, and the audience is given a deeper insight into the profound joys of this relationship.

> I decide to wake you.
> Call me selfish, but
> there's something left in you
> that I need to hold on to before you're gone.

Frohman is speaking directly to her abuela, indicating the exact intention she has when waking up and visiting with her abuela. Here Frohman calls herself selfish, as though she's feeling guilt for her need to get to know her abuela. Within this second stanza we can begin to see how Frohman is alluding to getting to know her abuela before her abuela loses the remaining recollection of herself that she still has. This rhetorical choice seems particularly powerful in the context of spoken word, by performing this poem in an audience, we get to listen in to her words directed to this woman who is slipping away but is still a powerful presence in the Frohman's life. When she performs it, she's literally speaking to the audience but rhetorically speaking to her abuela. Frohman is expressing a need of unraveling the remaining memories her abuela still holds, as a means of continuing those stories/passing them on. While seeing a loved one lose their memories is traumatic, Frohman is exhibiting resilience and determination to spend time with her abuela. Frohman is not avoiding trauma but seems to welcome it.

Frohman's poem focuses on the traumatic occurrence of being with a relative as they slowly lose their memories and giving the audience insight into how she's able to view this in a positive light. In this instance, Frohman is refusing to consider that the glass is half empty and reminding the audience that the glass is half full. The counterstory within Frohman's focus of her poem which explores the themes of trauma and joy are seen with how Frohman begins her poem by expressing a need to grasp what she can before she can no longer communicate with her abuela. She continues to explore trauma through a lens of joy. We see this as Frohman says:

As your eyes open, I wait

your face, trying to make sense of mine,

trying to translate me into something you've spoken before

And I know it only takes about 22 seconds,

but I swear, it's long enough for me to fall in love again.

"Abuela, yo soy tu nieta. Recuerda?"

And there your eyes widen like football fields,

as you reach for me in your back pocket, like a crumpled dollar bill

you forgot you had, showing me

that I have always been worth holding onto.

Frohman is not describing the moment her abuela struggles to remember her as a moment of distress, rather, she welcomes it as a state of contentedness that her abuela was able to remember her still. Frohman uses her voice to illustrate the tenderness of the moment in time as she speaks the lines: "your face, trying to make sense of mine, trying to translate me into something you've spoken before". Frohman is recognizing that she realizes her abuela notices their similarities, her abuela knows she's a familiar person and someone who looks like her. It's as though Frohman is on the tip of her grandmother's memory and at the cusp of being recognized and yet it eludes her abuela's memory. These descriptions are not crafted in the lens of the way we'd typically see a painful occurrence or memory. Frohman seems to look at her abuela's memory loss with awe, she feels loved when her abuela is able to remember her and place her in her life. Frohman also uses a lot of physicality within this performance. While describing her abuela's face as trying to make sense of hers, she wiggles her fingers in front of her face and scrunches

her face as she expresses this. The body language within the performance continues as Frohman speaks the lines regarding the dollar bill in the back pocket and being something worth holding onto, the audience lets out an audible reaction to the heartfelt nature of the line. This ties into how spoken word poets are able to build community amongst themselves and their audience. The usage of word "translate" is interesting as, later, Frohman states that she cannot speak Spanish very well, it's as though she is stating the multiple barriers that should restrict her relationship with her abuela but they both persist.

> After we exchange short Spanish greetings,
> I try to keep the conversation going,
> but I'm not fluent,
> this language, your language
> was always a bumpy road.
> So I turn the radio on to fill the potholes in my tongue
> and we dance.

Frohman uses dancing as a form of communication in lieu of verbally speaking with her abuela due to not being able to speak in Spanish fluently. While others would see a language barrier, Frohman expresses an eagerness to use any means at her disposal in order to have some level of communication with her abuela. Here we not only see the way that joy is reflected in the act of dancing, we literally *see* this when she dances at the mic in the live performance. The metaphorical conversation occurring is really through dancing, both metaphorically and through the live performance, which is shown as Frohman says:

Every chorus a question I ask like:

"Abuela, how did you feel when it was illegal to wave your own flag?"

Every melody, a moment to capture your history like:

"Abuela, did you really walk 3 miles to school everyday?"

Joy is not always seen, but can be felt. Frohman describes an entanglement between joy and trauma as she views her interactions with her abuela through a positive lens. Frohman uses musical descriptors and the poem takes on a dance-like quality. Frohman is viewing her interactions with her abuela not through the lens of pain, the knowledge of a loved one forgetting who you are is painful, however, Frohman is focused on gathering. Gathering a new understanding of her abuela, knowledge of who her abuela is, how her abuela remembers her life without the knowledge that she is sharing this story with her granddaughter. Frohman uses questions that allow her abuela to reflect on her memories and not for the purpose of remembering Frohman's place within them, but for the purpose of getting to know her abuela as a person. Frohman expresses this as she says:

I can make you feel like when you were 22,

growing up in a poor Puerto Rican town

too high up to place on the map.

Abuela, do you remember you yet?

Within this excerpt we can see how Frohman is interested in reminding her abuela about who she is. Frohman wants her abuela to remember and reminisce about the memories her abuela has before even building her family. Frohman is interested in getting to the

core of her abuela and as the last line indicates, she's not interested in getting her abuela to remember her as her granddaughter, but reminding her of the life she has lived. Frohman is doing this through physically dancing with her abuela, which is further indicated as Frohman states she can make her abuela feel like when she was 22. This sentiment is furthered by the image of her actually dancing in front of the mic during the live performance, the audience is able to see and experience this moment. She uses this poem, which is addressed to her abuela, as a way of stating what she wishes she could say to her abuela. Frohman reveals her thoughts as she expresses:

> And I know this just amuses you, but the
>
> truth is this was never just dancing.
>
> You represent part of me that people said I could never claim.
>
> You give me the language to speak my identity fluently, for the first time

Frohman expresses the love she has for her abuela as she reveals that there was more intention behind simply dancing with her abuela. Through getting to know her abuela she was able to find the part of herself to express her heritage. The line, "you represent the part of me that people said I could never claim" Frohman expresses how getting to know her abuela as a person has given her pride of her abuela's history, and by extension, her history. This speaks to the disconnectedness 2nd and 3rd generation Latine American humans often feel with their identity. The feeling that you cannot claim a part of your own heritage because you don't speak Spanish. Identity and representation connect here with my argument about commonality. Here Frohman seems to emphasize the importance within learning the histories of your elders and how this has given her control

over her own identity. Here Frohman makes the claim that speaking with her abuela has given her the strength to claim her heritage and fight for her place. She can share forth the stories of getting to know her abuela, here she's given proof of her familial history and it is here where she becomes empowered.

Frohman expresses trauma and joy within her poem without outwardly listing them out. She is not voicing this poem as inherently traumatic or joyful, she is being vulnerable about a very real point in time that she grapples with the complexity of her abuela losing her memories and finding pleasure in being able to get to know her abuela through a different lens. Frohman expresses feeling strength because she's able to extract these parts of her abuela and she's able to also recover parts of herself she didn't think she had access to. She further expresses this as she says:

> Abuela, you make me feel useful.
>
> You make me feel like I come from someplace, so
>
> who needs maps any way, I have you.
>
> So go ahead Abuela, sleep – just not forever.
>
> Because you and I have a lot more dancing left to do.

This ending stanza further explicates this sentiment as Frohman is able to reveal that beneath her eagerness in getting to know her abuela, she was also able to gain something from it. She was able to get to know her abuela as a human being, not just her abuela, and she was able to reclaim her own identity.

In this instance Frohman is claiming that this relationship she's been able to develop with her abuela has positively impacted her as she is able to learn about her

abuela as a person but also find out more about her own history. Frohman shows us the balancing act that happens with joy and trauma, the paradoxical way these themes feed into one another metaphorically and physically in her spoken word performance. Frohman is able to bring pieces of her abuela back, even for a moment, and her abuela is able to remind her that she has claim over her cultural heritage.

The absence of trauma in joy feels hollow. How can we be expected to make light of the very same issues that have tried tirelessly to tear us down? Within joy and trauma, we see just how complex humanity is. Joy and trauma are expressed in tandem with one another, we are able to shift and free ourselves from our trauma by finding joy. A common phrase I've heard, have even said myself, speaks to the concept of keeping the more positive memories or remembering the good parts. Of course, there's a need to seek joy in spaces where trauma overwhelms and fills a space. In the poem "I loved the world so I married it," José Olivarez focuses on the topic of the death of his grandma; he grapples with mortality and how he struggled finding joy after someone special to him passed away. Olivarez is able to focus on the things that give him joy and acknowledge that even though his grandma is dead, remembering her brings him joy.

So much can be said through interpreting joy and trauma, as we listen to a poem, we are able to hear the conflict occurring from the author's mouth. Even looking at the title of the poem evokes so many different interpretations. Olivarez immediately begins by saying the title of his poem, "I loved the world so I married it." The title of the poem could easily be interpreted as the first line of the poem as it sets the tone of Olivarez's poem. Olivarez jumps directly into stating his trauma, which is a surprising start after he

had just said the title about love and how it has affected him as he speaks the first two lines, “music, even on the day my grandma died / there were mangos though i tasted nothing.” The first line Olivarez is speaking about there being music on the day of his grandma’s death as though he is appalled that something that brings joy to others is occurring on the same day as the death of his grandma. This sentiment indicates how Olivarez feels about how the world kept moving even after his grandmother’s death. The next line, while seeming to not connect with the first line, “there were mangos though i[5] tasted nothing” he seems to speak again to how the world was moved on except for him. He is dealing with the death of his grandmother and even though others can listen or play music on this day, he is in despair. He continues with the lines,

> but slowly i came back to the world & carne asada.
> better than i remembered, smoke off the meat. i could not
>
> contain my happiness even though it felt offensive
> to smile with my grandma buried & getting eaten
>
> by the flowers. & sometimes, i look at my love &
> think i would like to stay, to put a welcome mat

It really goes to show how involved guilt is within this poem, and how it impacted his grief/trauma. In these lines we see Olivarez feeling guilty as he speaks on essentially

[5] In the physical text of the book *Citizen Illegal*, José Olivarez does not capitalize the pronouns in this poem, except for the title of the poem, therefore I will not be as well. This is also shown in the performed version as well.

waking up from his grief, tasting carne asada and feeling happy but feeling it is offensive to feel joy as his grandma is spiritually gone and her body is in the ground. Olivarez experiences a lot of internal conflict within this poem as he struggles with grappling how to move past his grandmother's death and how he is still able to find joy.

The form of the poem often continues one line into the next stanza and so the line and stanza breaking within his format is not the same as he performs this poem. Olivarez's pauses are not placed along the stanza breaks but more so when he's determined the line is over. Olivarez describes his grandmother as being eaten by the flowers, which comes across as gentle, not as harsh as the use of decay. He again jumps towards thoughts of joy as he speaks of seeing his love and understanding why he cannot sink into his grief, that there are people who he couldn't bear to leave, so he feels an urge to stay. Olivarez then moves on to talk about setting out a welcome mat with his love, he is speaking not only about mortality but about the importance of continuing the relationships he has and finding a place to continue building them. Olivarez is speaking about the need to continue working on relationships even if death is inevitable and this is further established as he continues with the next stanza. "on our doorstep with our names hyphenated. /when i was young i believed in forever. then/my uncle died & i knew forever included none/of my family, included no friends". In these lines we see how Olivarez's grief has taken his innocence. He shifts from speaking about having him and his love's name hyphenated on the door mat, and how being young let him believe in the concept of forever. Losing his loved ones has made Olivarez realize that the idea of forever after is not real and he is fearful as it occurs to him that he can lose everyone,

nothing lasts forever. Olivarez ends his poem with a list of his treasured possessions, his memories, as he states, "…their stories/rotting in my head until i lose them again, so/i know i will divorce the world & let it keep/my most treasured possessions: a six piece/with lemon pepper & mild sauce on, all the honey/of a slow kiss, my Apple Music playlists, /the way mi abuelita smiled & called me Lupito./i hated that name except when she said it." These last lines are incredibly insightful as we see how Olivarez is also coming to understand that his existence is also temporary and he will eventually lose the memories of his loved ones, but for now they are still treasured moments and feelings from his life. Olivarez ends his piece as he reflects on his abuela and moments between them. Olivarez is indicating that while he will grieve the loss of his loved ones, he will hold the memories and joy of having them in his life until the moment he is no longer able to. It's important to see how Olivarez's spoken poem have added dimension beyond what you could read from the printed page version. Through listening to the way Olivarez vocally spaces out his own lines and allows the audience to hear the timbre of heartache we are able to experience this poem in a heightened way that we would not have experienced through the printed page.

Olivarez and Frohman's poems reflect on their grandmothers in different ways, they are able to express the impact of their abuelas and inform the audience of their individual relationships with their abuelas. Olivarez and Frohman are choosing to "inform the audience" about a close familial relationship – something larger happens – community is formed not just between grandchild and grandmother but also between poet and audience bearing witness to that relationship. A big difference perhaps is that

Frohman directly addresses a still-alive abuela whereas Olivarez's poem is after his abuela has died. In these performances we are able to see how joy and trauma interact with one another and how they are able to represent the complexity of humanity. This is how we are able to experience counterstory within the way we understand trauma and joy. The braiding of joy and trauma manifests in the performance aspects of these poems in the way we have more than just the words on the page to guide our understanding of these poems and their complex feelings interwoven in them. Representation and community come into play in this chapter from the way that authors like Frohman and Olivarez paint narratives that the audience is able to empathize or relate to. The way we experience hearing the poem, sharing space with the poet, and finding community around the living, embodied text is expressed through the way we hear the authors own interpretation of their piece.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I sought to explore the ways spoken word poetry can become a form of counterstory. I did this by examining spoken word poetry performances by authors of color (i.e. Rafeef Ziadah, José Olivarez, and Denise Frohman) through the lenses of different themes of counterstory: immigration/citizenship and joy/trauma. While doing so, I also explored how community and commonality within this discourse play a large role in the experience within the space of spoken word poetry.

In my literature review, I defined spoken word poetry as an umbrella term for poems that are being spoken aloud, whether they are live, recorded, with or without a physical audience, with the intention of the listener/audience finding commonality with the speaker. What I bring to this discussion is my experience during the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, where I performed and joined poetry spaces online. Through this experience, I was able to see how community was possible within these online spaces, and how we were able to find commonality, representation, and resistance through purely online modes of interaction. My entrance into this discourse began online: having accessible modes of connection, I was able to view a plethora of spoken word performances online. In this paper I make the assertion that through social media, the community of spoken word poetry is able to expand past the confines of a room/venue and extend its presence for a wider outreach towards audiences.

In my literature review I also look at the ongoing conversations that surround the topic of spoken word poetry as a genre which brought me a lot of contexts and shifted my

own understanding of the community of spoken word poetry. I found myself looking at the works of many wonderful authors and poets who discuss the heavy impact of social justice within the history of spoken word poetry/performance poetry and also understanding that my own views of spoken word poetry are framed by my own experiences. This has helped frame my project but also hindered the perspective and experiences of others who entered the discourse in different ways. With this, I was able to acknowledge that while I may view this community as inclusive and welcoming–it's important to acknowledge that this does not speak to the entirety of the community. The way in which I am describing community is more so in the way that the audience members are able to connect with the speakers/performers, rather than the way poets interact amongst themselves.

The significance of this project is meant to build more dialogue into how spoken word poetry is able to counter dominant narratives and allow their audience a deeper understanding that they otherwise would not get through written forms of poems. This is through my close reading of the written form alongside the embodied presence of the poets as they perform their pieces. Doing so allowed me to build a deeper understanding of the poetry, thus asserting how spoken word poetry is able to become a form of counterstory.

If anyone were to build upon my research, I would hope they would build more on incorporating different modes of performance poetry. I think while I discuss the accessibility of online forms of community with spoken word poetry (for the audience to connect with poets), I did not touch on accessibility in the discourse. ASL (American

Sign Language) performance poetry is something that I recently came into contact with and I would have liked to have branched out more into the representation there. I think this could also fall under a counter narrative to the way I have understood spoken word poetry/performance poetry, so this definitely would shift my definition of spoken word performance.

Another way I could imagine continuing this project is also discussing the ways that social media/the internet is killing the community of spoken word poetry. While I truly enjoy the access I have to the performances of so many poets through social media, as a consumer, I think it's also important to understand how marketing spoken word poetry through social media does in fact take away from poets. Poets can only make so much money from the number of views per video and publishers through social media can cut funding for the poet if they aren't able to gain enough traction in a set time.

My ultimate goal was to bring readability to my project. I wanted this project to be digestible to not only the stereotypical white bearded academics, but also to anyone who is interested in spoken word poetry. While I hope I was able to accomplish this, I know that this research is by no means completed, but I hope the readers were able to find community or commonality within this project.

Thank you for giving me the most valuable gift of all. Your time.

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