

A bridge across our fears: understanding spoken word poetry in troubled times

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Abstract

Spoken word poetry encourages youth to engage in identity construction, resist oppression and construct counternarratives. Through participating in community-based slams, school workshops and online events, young people can take part in visible activism through exploring their own identity, power and agency and seeing themselves as change agents. In this article, we share longitudinal case studies of two youth poets based in Sydney, Australia. As young women of colour coming of age in troubled times, we consider how poetry offers them a way to engage in story telling and to create counternarratives. We also explore how spoken word allows them to explore their cultural identities, offer testimony about their lived experiences and participate in activism. We situate our research within the COVID-19 pandemic and critically reflect on how the shift online has offered new opportunities whilst also presenting unexpected challenges for youth poets.

Key words: case study, creativity, critical literacy, identity, poetry, story telling, youth cultures

Constructing counternarratives through spoken word poetry

Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before. (Audre Lorde)

Humans have been described as story telling animals (Gottschall, 2012). We all have stories that we tell about ourselves and the world around us. Whether our stories exist in those quiet, in-between moments, or they roar into existence, they can allow us to carve out our paths in the world. As Facer (2019) argues, “Letting go of old stories and creating an openness to the possibility of new ones is an emotional and affective labour that requires attention to processes of grief and loss, as well as hope and fear” (p. 8). For centuries now, people have gathered to share and to listen to stories in poetic form – there’s something

about the rhythm and the rhyme, and the passion and the performance, that deeply resonates with us.

Drawing on critical theory, a new understanding of literacy has emerged that foregrounds “issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality” and focuses on “how literacy operates vis-à-vis difference, oppression, and marginalisation” (Alim, 2011, p. 133). Because spoken word poetry fosters a culture of listening (Fisher, 2005) among poets and audience members, poetry communities can serve as discursive learning spaces (Jocson, 2006). The speaking and listening inherent in story telling through spoken word communities exist in tandem, encouraging youth poets to engage in reflection, to make connections and to resist oppression. Spoken word can also encourage marginalised youth to participate in visible activism through exploring their own identity, power and agency (Jones and Curwood, 2020) and seeing themselves as change agents (Muhammad and Gonzalez, 2016).

For young people, spoken word poetry has become an increasingly popular form of creative expression that allows them to explore their lifeworlds and experiences (Williams, 2015), offering a “valued opportunity through which to invite interaction” (Blake, 2013, p. 138). Prior research has found that spoken word poetry builds on young people’s strengths (Jocson, 2005), celebrates human difference (Biggs-El, 2012) and supports activist pedagogies through the creation of a third space for literacy development (Jones and Curwood, 2020). Combining the written conventions of poetry with performance, spoken word allows poets to utilise their voices, movements and gestures to tell their stories (Dymoke, 2017) and to ‘talk back’ (Hooks, 1986).

By telling counternarratives through spoken word form, poets can disrupt stories of domination and resist oppression. Counternarratives first identify the elements of the master narratives that are oppressive and serve to misrepresent individuals, situations, beliefs and practices. Next, they “retell the story about the person or the group to which the person belongs in such a way as to make visible the morally relevant details that the master narrative suppressed”

(Lindemann and Nelson, 2001, p. 7). Curwood and Gibbons (2009) argue that poetry can allow youth to craft counternarratives that depict them “fully, accurately, and fairly” and engage in an “ongoing, dialectical, and reflective process” of identity construction (p. 61).

Over the past 5 years, Jen (first author) has conducted research on spoken word poetry in Sydney, Australia. As a literacy researcher and teacher educator, she has cultivated a strong partnership with the Bankstown Poetry Slam, which has allowed her to engage in ethnographic research of community-based slams and school-based spoken word workshops. Katelyn (second author) is a secondary English teacher who led the study of the Real Talk Workshops featured in this article. Through our work, we have witnessed young poets’ resilience and resistance. Whether the Bankstown Poetry Slam was being attacked by a conservative politician for ‘Islamic political ranting’ or being forced to reinvent itself online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, each time the poetry community was able to be responsive and innovative.

In this article, we share longitudinal case studies of two youth poets. As we explore the lives and stories of these young women of colour who are coming of age in troubled times, we ask:

- How does poetry offer young people an opportunity to engage in story telling and to create counternarratives?
- In what ways does spoken word poetry allow youth to explore their cultural identities, offer testimony about their lived experiences and participate in activism?

Real talk: authenticity and vulnerability within spoken word poetry workshops

Founded in 2013, the Bankstown Poetry Slam hosts monthly community-based slams and a number of initiatives, including the Real Talk programme, which is a 6-week spoken word poetry workshop in local schools with a significant number of students from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bankstown Poetry Slam had to move online in 2020 through ‘viral slams’ before returning to the stage in 2021.

The present case studies build upon our prior multi-case embedded research study that investigated how the Real Talk workshops created a space that used culturally sustaining pedagogies to develop high school students’ critical literacy skills (see Jones and Curwood, 2020). In the Real Talk programme, student writing is developed in weekly workshops that

explore relevant topics such as identity, racism and gender. Such topics allowed for students to develop their personal voice and use spoken word as a way to express themselves and comment on issues prevalent in their world. In the final week of the workshops, students performed their poetry at a competitive heat that was held at their schools and judged by poets from Bankstown Poetry Slam. These heat winners then competed against each other in a finale at a major theatre in Sydney.

The weekly school workshops are facilitated by experienced spoken word poets, who act as mentors and often created a ‘third space’ (Gutiérrez, 2008) for critical literacy development through exhibiting a sense of vulnerability. The role of the mentor poets was essential to the success of these workshops, as the poets demonstrated their craft by demonstrating both the writing process and performance techniques. By modelling such practices, the mentor poets were able to showcase how openness and sensitivity are necessary to completely experience the cathartic nature of spoken word. This level of vulnerability from the mentor poets, through sharing their own personal stories and counternarratives, allowed for students to move away from the rigid nature of assessment that often impacts their writing in English classrooms. Moreover, it prompted students to immerse themselves in the writing process and delve deeply into developing a personal voice.

By valuing culturally sustaining pedagogy and critical literacy, the spoken word workshops resulted in authentic writing pieces from each student, as well as the realisation that writing has the power to allow individuals to express their emotions. Furthermore, the creation of the third space allowed for classroom teachers to participate alongside their students, consequently privileging student knowledge. This altered classroom dynamic provided students with the confidence to understand the relationship between texts and the world, whilst also developing the skills to purposefully use language and consider their rhetorical intentions to create meaning (Woodard and Coppola, 2018).

Our research

Tejasvi and Ifeoma: Australian youth poets

In this article, we focus on two young women of colour who were introduced to slam poetry in high school through the 2018 Real Talk workshops. By following up with them 3 years later, we are able to offer longitudinal case studies of Tejasvi Singh (pseudonym used at her request) and Ifeoma Obiegbu (real name used with her permission). Although the students participated in

the Real Talk workshops at different government school sites, Tejasvi and Ifeoma, both now 18 years old, connected over their shared love for spoken word and its ability to allow individuals to share their stories. Both students were originally mentored by the same mentor poet, Andrew Cox (real name used with his permission).

Vulnerability was valued in Andrew's workshops; he modelled this process through sharing both personal stories and slam poetry, which disclosed his own battles with mental health and growing up as a child of an Indonesian immigrant. This created a safe space within which Andrew could open up the conversation for students to comment on his work and connect through the sharing of personal anecdotes about their own unique qualities. This modelling allowed for both young women to feel comfortable expressing personal aspects of their identity and connect through a sharing of stories at the final competition. In this competition, they tied in first place, allowing for a special bond between the two to blossom. At Bankstown Poetry Slam's annual finale in 2018, Ifeoma and Tejasvi performed a collaborative poem that interrogated racial stereotypes in our society.

Throughout 2019 and 2020, both young women continued writing spoken word regularly and have performed at many esteemed community slams and events around Sydney, including the Sydney Writers Festival. As recent high school graduates, they now participate in community slam events as part of Bankstown Poetry Slams' collective of spoken word poets. Player (2021) suggests that writing and performing can allow young women of colour to "create counternarratives that explore their brilliance and intellect and, in turn, construct critiques of intersecting racial and gendered injustices" (p. 217). As such, spoken word has allowed both youth poets to share their experiences and reclaim the power held within their cultural identities.

Our first case study, Tejasvi, is known for her use of humour and often poses thought-provoking questions throughout her performances. Tejasvi realised the power of spoken word when she experienced the affirmation of her peers at school-based slams. That was back in 2018, and although Tejasvi admits that she initially 'questioned' the purpose of the workshops, she now claims that spoken word is "ingrained into [her] life." Spoken word poetry is a creative outlet that allows Tejasvi to "process her emotions" and experiences. In fact, Tejasvi mentioned that she will often cry directly after a performance. It is this intense flow of emotions and vulnerability that drives Tejasvi to perform in front of an audience.

As a Gujarati woman who migrated from India to Australia at 6 years old, Tejasvi utilises spoken word

to discern the gender and racial stereotypes that impact the experiences of herself and her family. In 2020, Tejasvi created a podcast that emulated a slam poetry event for her Year 12 Extension English major work. However, the pressure of assessment combined with the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that Tejasvi struggled to find the inspiration to write throughout most of the last year. In our interviews with her, Tejasvi noted that having an in-person space to perform is fundamental to her motivation and success as a spoken word poet.

Our second case study, Ifeoma, is a passionate youth poet who thrives when performing protest pieces. A daughter of Nigerian immigrants to Australia, Ifeoma captivates her audience through her intense variations in volume, pace and tone. Much like Tejasvi, Ifeoma was 'nervous' and reluctant to attend the Real Talk workshops but now claims that spoken word has "changed [her] life." When asked to define spoken word, Ifeoma mentioned that it's inherently 'expressive', 'emotional' and a place to share stories 'without judgement'. Her love for spoken word grew when she realised she could 'help others' through the connections formed when sharing stories.

Spoken word poetry has been particularly important in allowing Ifeoma to share her struggles with body image and eating disorders. Additionally, her story telling explores the impact that both gender and race have on forming our perceptions of ourselves. Throughout 2020, Ifeoma also experienced some writers' block with a lack of live performance opportunities. However, the conversations surrounding movements such as Black Lives Matter in both the United States and Australia became inspiration for Ifeoma to begin sharing stories again.

"Performance is central to the nature of spoken word poetry," argues Call-Cummings et al. (2020, p. 198). Designed to be embodied rather than simply read (Dooley, 2014; Endsley, 2014), performance is central to both Tejasvi and Ifeoma's creative process, and both young women were eager to be back on stage again. In 2021, they were invited to share their stories at an event celebrating cultural and gender diversity. Unlike other slam poetry events, this space was designed for and by women of colour. This event presented a unique opportunity for both women to return to the stage, reclaim their power and use their voices to inspire others with similar experiences. Tejasvi and Ifeoma were incredibly passionate about this project and wish to continue creating spaces and performing at events that encourage young people of colour to have a voice and connect through story telling.

Data collection and analysis

Our original qualitative multi-case study of Real Talk collected primary data from multiple sources including interviews and focus groups with 39 students and seven mentor poets, interviews with three English teachers, extensive observational field notes from the three of the 14 school sites over the duration of the 6-week programme and artefacts such as the curriculum and students' poems (see Jones and Curwood, 2020). In our follow-up study, we built on these robust data to conduct multiple in-depth interviews with Ifeoma and Tejasvi, where we asked them to reflect on their evolving identity as a poet and how their craft has been shaped by their personal writing, their decision to pursue advanced study of spoken word in Year 12 and their participation in competitive community-based slams and invited performances. As part of the interviews, both poets shared several recent poems, which we used as stimuli in the interviews to encourage them to consider how this form of story telling shaped their sense of self and their place in the world.

The multiple sources of qualitative data were analysed through a socio-cultural theoretical lens, utilising descriptive codes in the first cycle. The second cycle of coding involved focused coding methods, which involved in vivo codes and categorised the data into more salient themes (Saldaña, 2012). We focused on how both young women described their intersectional identities and how their poems constituted counternarratives. In the interviews shared here, we asked them to read and reflect on self-selected poems in order to gain insight into their purpose and craft as poets.

Spoken word poetry in troubled times: storytelling, testimony and identity

Whilst "these are troubled times, they are also times of creativity, generosity, and exploration" (Facer, 2019, p. 4). For youth spoken word poets, the present times offer an opportunity for them to explore, honour and problematise their lived experiences and the world around them. In our case studies of Tejasvi and Ifeoma, we have sought to understand how their story telling across school workshops, community events and online slams has shaped their identities, their connections with others and their construction of counternarratives.

Testimony and witness within spoken word poetry

For young people today, the present often seems fraught at best, unbearably oppressive at worst. Do they dare hope for a future where they will be

physically safe, emotionally secure and culturally celebrated? For Tejasvi and Ifeoma, spoken word has become an integral part of how they both problematise and evolve their identities (Paris and Alim, 2014) in a world that is increasingly unstable and uncertain. Blake (2013) considers "poetry as a matter of spokenness" (p. 138) and argues that an ethical stance towards poetry values what youth have to say about their lifeworlds and experiences. For that reason, it is crucial to consider how the act of saying through the means of story telling engages both poets and audience members.

We argue that spoken word poetry involves both giving testimony and bearing witness, and this reciprocal process is instrumental in resisting oppression, driving social change and offering hope through the construction of counternarratives. Through telling their stories, whether onstage or online, youth can become agents of resistance who strive not only to survive in the face of adversity but also to embrace self-empowerment and self-determination (Somers-Willett, 2009). Spoken word poetry is democratic in nature – unlike other institutions or communities where participation is restricted or leadership is exclusive, poetry slams typically allow anyone in the room to perform or judge. In this way, it dismantles the traditional power dynamic of a poetry reading that both elevates the poet and enforces the passivity of the audience (Somers-Willett, 2009). The cultural norms of poetry slams encourage active audience engagement, such as through snapping fingers or calling out, thereby constituting a live dialogue between the poet and the audience.

For Ifeoma and Tejasvi, spoken word provides an opportunity to tell the stories of their lives and to give testimony of their experiences as young women of colour. When they first met through the Real Talk workshops, they bonded over the common threads in their cultural experiences as daughters of immigrants from India and Nigeria. As Ifeoma explained, "There's a lot of misogyny in both of our communities. We want that to change, or at least, in our homes." Through writing and sharing their poetry, they realised that so many other young people had similar lived experiences. "I noticed that it's not just me," Ifeoma shared. She added that she felt her poetry helped others understand that they were not alone, which in turn helped her understand that "you don't really have to worry about your problems as much because you know people have gone through this before". Freire (1996) argues that "constant, humble, and courageous witness" (p. 157) emerges from cooperation in a shared effort, and Dutro (2013) adds that productive witnessing is inherently shared and reciprocal, and consequently, "the two positions [of testifier and witness] are enmeshed" (p. 310). Poetry slams, in this regard, can

cultivate productive witnessing and encourage the sharing of counternarratives, particularly related to intersectional identities.

Ifeoma felt profoundly impacted by the Black Lives Matter movement, which encouraged her to critically consider her identity as a Black girl and to give testimony about the “microaggressions and casual racism faced by Black women in our society.” She shared one poem, *I’m a Black Girl*, written in the aftermath of Breonna Taylor’s death, which includes the lines:

I’m a black girl I’m a black girl I’m a black girl
 You love to compare death and demise to darkness,
 until you see me
 I’m a black girl I’m a black girl I’m black girl
 I’m taught not to call myself a black girl too many
 times, because I’m taught I’m insignificant

No one wants to hear you wolf and bark,
 Another one of these black girl poems, besides other
 black bitches
 I’m a black girl I’m a black girl I’m a black girl

Caruth (1996) argues that the act of witnessing involves a sharing, a taking in, of others’ stories. As Ifeoma witnessed the Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd and the related demonstrations in Australia, she wanted to “tell it how it is”. Spoken word poetry gave her both a tool to process the stories she was witnessing from other Black people and a means to offer testimony about her own experiences as a Black girl.

As the daughter of Indian immigrants to Australia, Tejasvi often feels caught between the two cultures. “It’s thousands of years of misogynistic tradition that I’m fighting against,” she explained. Growing up in a family where her grandmother encourages her to use whitening cream and her mother has “zero control in our family decisions”, Tejasvi uses spoken word poetry as a way to process her emotions and experiences, which she says allows her to “see all [her] problems in a line” and allows her to feel catharsis. In *Why I Write*, she shared:

Why do I write?
 I write not because I have to
 Or simply because I can
 I write because I want to
 I write because I have the privilege to write and share
 my story
 And that is something you’ll never take away from me

In offering her testimony as a young Gujarati woman, Tejasvi is conscious about who can and should witness it. She recounted one community event where she was invited to perform in front of a large

audience. At first she was intimidated, but soon realised she felt at home, “There were 500 women there. But half of them were in saris, so I was like, ‘Oh my God, these are all like my aunties’”. The sense of belonging and acceptance moved Tejasvi as a poet, as there was a profound connection between her testimony and her witness’ lived experiences. In contrast, she noted, “If I was reading to a room full of white people, I wouldn’t read my brown people poems.” She elaborated that offering testimony about her race and ethnicity in front of such an audience was intimidating, adding “as humans we crave other human approval”. Because Tejasvi felt like some of her counternarratives would not be met with approval by a primarily white audience, she chose to not offer it.

In this respect, testimony through spoken word poetry involves agency, offers catharsis and is inextricably linked to the real or perceived audience who serve as witnesses. Miller and Tougaw (2002) posit, “Recounting the extreme, we believe, sometimes has the power to form a community entangled together through the act of listening” (p. 19). Spoken word poets may find themselves moving within and across various communities, only some of whom are familiar with the genre and its conventions, and only some of whom shared their lived experiences and intersectional identities. LaCapra (2001) writes of the precarious balance between full identification and pure objectification and describes it as “trying to work out some very delicate, at times tense, relationship between empathy and critical distance” (p. 147). As young spoken word poets, Ifeoma and Tejasvi have had to navigate the relationships between testifiers and witnesses, which are forged through creating and sharing counternarratives. In turn, this has encouraged them to explore their own identities and engage in collective critique.

Intersectional identities and conversations of collective critique

An integral part of the journey into adulthood for every adolescent is discovering themselves. Through every experience, unique aspects of their identities are explored, uncovered and realised. In times of global crisis, this journey can feel unsurmountable with turbulent global events causing individuals to reconsider their values and beliefs. With an emphasis on personal voice, spoken word poetry offers youth a platform to assess these ideas, control their identity narratives and construct counternarratives that resist oppression and marginalisation.

Both Tejasvi and Ifeoma have found spoken word empowering in the determination of their evolving intersectional identities. Over the last 3 years, they

have worked tirelessly to reinscribe cultural narratives and prompt conversations about the lives of young women of colour. In this way, Tejasvi and Ifeoma have capitalised on the 'counter-cultural tone' (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 59) of poetry slams where audiences seek 'problematised ideas' to provoke discourse (Muhammad and Gonzalez, 2016, p. 451).

In troubled times, the story telling of complex identities is necessary for audiences and performers alike to witness a sense of hope and desire for a better future. We argue that the testimony of evolving cultural identities is a product of vulnerable conversations. In turn, these raw live performances incite witnesses to engage in conversations of collective critique that encourage counternarratives of cultural identity. It is these reflective conversations that drive spoken word as a form of artistic resistance, which motivates unprecedented social change one poem at a time (Fiore, 2015).

Grappling with an evolving and emerging identity is confronting and requires youth to have sensitive conversations with themselves. The Real Talk mentors encouraged vulnerability from students by creating a safe environment (Jones and Curwood, 2020). Mentor poet Andrew emphasised, "If they are honest, they are vulnerable" and encouraged a willingness to "share [their] story." Throughout the workshops, Andrew intentionally cultivated a safe space for students and ensured that conversations about identity poetry were student directed. It was this student-centred pedagogy that allowed for the development of a strong personal voice and testimony for both Tejasvi and Ifeoma. Tejasvi noted that Andrew's personal approach and modelling of vulnerability allowed her to view poetry as a platform to voice opinions that are "controversial or so close to you, without judgement." Ifeoma explained that the workshops "helped me talk about my identity" in a way that she could not achieve prior, which left her feeling like problems were "bubbling up inside." It was this freedom to voice personal stories that prompted both Tejasvi and Ifeoma to continue interrogating their cultural identities through spoken word long after the initial workshops.

Spoken word empowers youth to view their cultural identity critically, inviting poets to produce personal testimonies that reinscribe cultural narratives with greater complexity. As a mentor, Andrew employed what Player (2021) calls critical celebratory pedagogy to encourage these counternarratives. In our observations of the Real Talk workshops, we heard Andrew ask students, "How can you reclaim your power and authority here?" This allowed them to engage in conversations that optimistically interrogated their identity and prompted counternarratives that emboldened action (Call-Cummings et al., 2020; Player, 2021).

The impact of this writing technique for both young poets was ongoing and can be seen in Ifeoma's aforementioned poem, titled *I Am a Black Girl*. The repetition of the title throughout asserts her culture and mirrors the reclaiming of this identity after years of fighting it. Furthermore, the line "I used to beg my mother to strip the kinky coils out of my head with chemicals" employs noxious imagery through the connotations of 'stripped' and 'chemicals' to emulate her attempts at eradicating her identity. In interviews, Ifeoma expressed that being the 'first daughter' in a family from a West African country is 'very overwhelming.' This poem sought to interrogate these pressures and stereotypes. The poem ends with lines such as "I am ... more than just a grain dropped in colonisation's pot." This metaphor is powerful in interrogating the systemic racism that contributes to the oppression of her identity, whilst asserting her identity as more complex than the narratives imposed upon her.

Ifeoma is passionate about the power of personal story telling and works to rewrite her narrative throughout her entire body of work. When asked about the poem, *Say My Name*, Ifeoma explained, "This one is very close to my heart" and was written "for me and by me." Ifeoma's assertion of personal pronouns in these statements reveals how spoken word allows a celebration of self, something that she shared previous struggles with. This poem includes the lines:

My name has a meaning.
 My name means happiness.
 My name gets laughed at behind my back for the way
 it's spelled.
 My name is not meant to be easy for you.
 Did you forget how the stories go?
 ...
 I know how the story goes.

My name is Ifeoma.
 Say my name.

The cyclical structure used in this poem repeatedly reframes "how the stories go," emphasising Ifeoma's experience of having others define her based on stereotypes. Concurrently, the anaphoric repetition of 'my name' and a shift from the pronoun 'you' to 'I' later in the poem empower Ifeoma as the owner of her name and the author of her story. More broadly, this symbolises a reclaiming of the authority attached to her cultural identity (Muhammad and Gonzalez, 2016).

A similar reinscription of cultural narratives is seen in Tejasvi's *My Angry Poem*. Tejasvi explained that this poem testimonies "how brown women live in Australia" and criticises the stereotypes inflicted upon her as a child. Tejasvi's migrant experience meant she often felt torn between two worlds. Conversations

with her grandmother prompting her to 'be more white' inspired this poem, which includes the lines:

This is my Angry poem
 Anger because I always say the wrong thing
 Because whether I'm speaking English or Gujarati
 I always seem to have an accent
 Anger for never reaching perfection
 ...
 And honey, anger is not unattractive
 Anger is the burn that heals your wounds until they
 become faded scars
 Feel it.

This was my Angry poem
 Now all I feel is rage to those that forced this poem's
 existence

In this piece, Tejasvi has used a cyclical structure to reframe her anger towards stereotypes into an uplifting testimony, celebrating her identity (Facer, 2019; Player, 2021). The poem begins with the anaphoric repetition of 'anger' towards her "boring brown eyes" and 'accent', which misaligns with the expectations dominating mainstream media. Later, the poem shifts to a reinscribing of her identity, reframing with "our brown eyes are gorgeous." Furthermore, she uses the metaphor "my accents are my parents' journey" to encapsulate the migrant experience, whilst simultaneously accepting the cultures forming her unique identity. The subtle change in the verb to be from present tense to past tense accentuates a shift in her perspective towards an acclamation of her evolved identity. For both Ifeoma and Tejasvi, spoken word poetry is a tool to converse and critique the stereotypes imposed upon them, whilst concurrently embracing the complexities of their own identities.

For both young poets, the reflective conversations with the audience witnesses following these poems are of utmost importance. With community-based events, such conversations happen informally after the poets took the stage, as a way to continue the reciprocity between testifiers and witnesses. Alvarez and Mearns (2014) offer the term 'interconnectedness' (p. 264) to describe the unification achieved between the audience and vulnerable performers as conversations about problematic topics, such as cultural identity, are prompted. In this sense, Ifeoma emphasises spoken word as a tool "to educate and inform people" through testimonies about women of colour. She notes sharing her stories allows people to realise "this is a real problem in our world today." Ifeoma thrives off the conversations with the audience after performing, which allow an offering of different perspectives and critiques (Muhammad and Gonzalez, 2016). Tejasvi enjoys conversing with the

audience as it makes her 'passionate' about taking action. This can be seen in Tejasvi's poem, *Why I Write*:

*I write for the voices that cannot be reached
 I write for those who are lost and in need of help
 I write because all these stories must be heard*

These lines indicate Tejasvi's realisation that her poetry works as a form of activism, and she can spark both revelations and revolutions through her performances.

For this reason, spoken word remains a powerful tool for youth to share narratives of hope and desire for a better future, even in such turbulent times. With race riots dominating the mainstream media, spoken word prevailed and produced counternarratives about the triumph of people of colour. Dutro (2011) claims that "Interpretations of difficult stories are soaked through with the issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality that saturate all narratives of experience" (p. 195). With this, it is crucial that youth have a platform to celebrate their cultures and spark conversations among audiences, which problematise generalised or reductive perceptions of identities. Both Tejasvi and Ifeoma believe that these conversations are essential in helping young women of colour realise that they 'are not alone'.

Viral slams and pandemic poems

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most Australian schools shifted to remote learning from March to June 2020; even when they returned in person, most states implemented restrictions related to public gatherings. Throughout the following year, schools in some areas of Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales reverted to online learning in an effort to contain outbreaks. At the time of this writing, Australia has not been impacted by the pandemic to the same degree as other parts of the world, yet it was significantly disruptive to Ifeoma and Tejasvi as they finished their final year of high school and embarked on university study. Both shared that their poetry writing waned at the onset of the pandemic; as Tejasvi expressed, "Right now, nothing is running, so also right now, why would I bother writing stuff down?"

The organisers of the Bankstown Poetry Slam recognised the vital role their monthly poetry slam and other initiatives played within the community, particularly in the lives of young people. In late March 2020, they offered their first of three viral slams for the year, with poets submitting pre-recorded 2-minute spoken word poems. The 10 selected poems were then streamed via a Facebook Watch Party, where virtual audience members could give commentary.

As spoken word poets, Ifeoma and Tejasvi typically invest a substantial amount of time into refining, memorising and practising their poems. Because the online slam required them to pre-record their poem, however, it impacted both their process and their performance. Tejasvi shared, "I felt like I was faking it ... I made a lot more mistakes while recording because I felt like I could just delete it and start again," unlike during prior slams when she would need to push forward despite any mistakes. She recorded her poem in a household with six other people around, adding, "I couldn't talk as loudly as I normally do, and I couldn't perform the same way." Tejasvi's poems are often about, or addressed to, members of her family, but they are not always the intended witnesses.

Both young women struggled with the format of the viral slam, as the instantaneous audience reaction had fuelled their performances as poets more than they realised. Ifeoma said, "It's very different because you don't get real time reactions like you do with real life poetry slams. You don't really know what anybody is thinking." Ifeoma often relies on humour and comic relief in her poems and thrived on the audience's laughter, adding, "It pushes me to make it even more dramatic". With the online slam, audience members could leave comments as they viewed each poem. Tejasvi "felt like no one cared" since they could not click their fingers in response to particular lines, and Ifeoma felt disconnected as she scrolled through the comments. She reminisced about prior slams where "you just have this sense of belonging". When poetry slams were forced to move online due to the pandemic, the role of the witness became increasingly fraught, as "Response is a pressing issue, and one may feel inadequate or be confused about how to respond and how to put that response into words" (LaCapra, 2001, p. 97). With traditional means of responses no longer available, could comments via a Facebook Watch Party suffice?

Ifeoma chose to share "Say My Name" in the online slam. She wanted to share a personal account of her name and consciously used a rhetorical question to engage her virtual audience from the start. Her poem began:

Parents give you a name at birth
The name that you will identify with your whole
existence,
Do you see where I'm going with this?

She explained, "I wrote a poem about how my name isn't very easy to pronounce for some people, and so they would mock it. What they don't know is that it has a lot of meaning, and it's very significant to me." Ifeoma's name reflects her West African roots, and she drew on colloquial language, imagery and repetition in *Say My Name*:

My name ain't never got a past
Because my name does not believe in the past
My name punch, kicks, and fights
It's real confrontational
My name bites too hard
Must have been caged
Must have been animalistic once

As she recorded her poem multiple times for the online slam, Ifeoma still sought to offer her testimony, and a piece of herself, to her unknown and unseen audience. Kaplan (2005) shares how "accounts of extreme experience set in motion an ambivalent desire to look, to grapple with real suffering, and at the same time to look away" (p. 19). As the world has moved online, it has become easier both to look at and to look away from others' lived experiences, and poetry has flourished in new spaces, such as online communities (Padgett and Curwood, 2016) and Instagram (Kovalik and Curwood, 2019). We can bear witness from the comfort of our homes, offer testimony remotely and anonymously and let our identities remain unknown.

From time to time

Whilst these are troubled times, they are also times of resilience, resistance and hope. As they are coming of age in a world that often seems oppressive, if not profoundly unsafe, Tejasvi and Ifeoma have used spoken word poetry as a way to understand their complex intersectional identities and to express counternarratives, which have in turn led to counter-practices in their lives. Muhammad and Gonzalez (2016) argue:

Activism involves acts aimed toward social change and it is especially important in the current social times, which are saturated with societal ills and oppression. Youth need to understand their complex identities and see themselves as activists as they engage in understanding and improving the world. (p. 443)

Both young women had the opportunity to review this article prior to publication and agreed that they were being represented accurately. They agreed that spoken word poetry has impacted their lives by encouraging them to exercise agency and by offering new perspectives. Ifeoma reflected, "I have most definitely seen more confidence. Being on stage and sharing really vulnerable parts of yourself makes it easier to see how day-to-day conversations and interactions are actually so uncomplicated." Tejasvi echoed this sentiment and shared, "I feel like spoken word has given me confidence to speak up. For example, when I was in primary school, I would hate that I was Indian

and was different from the other kids, but now I love sharing my culture and experiences!"

Teachers must create space for young people to share their stories and their cultures, whilst also reflecting on their own vulnerability, positionality and identity. Only then can the classroom become a "radical space of possibility" (Hooks, 1994, p. 12). As they have worked to confront the racism and misogyny in their homes and communities, both young women have used their personal stories as weapons of resistance. When they take the stage, they have aimed to connect with others, whether it is to help others understand that they are not staring into the abyss alone or to encourage others to challenge injustice through their own counternarratives. Youth have agency, even amidst uncertainty, and their spoken word poetry offers a bridge of hope.

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