

Read This Book Out Loud:

A Review of Young Adult Works by Artists from the Poetry Slam Community

Whenever I find myself standing in front of a cafeteria or gymnasium filled with hundreds of secondary students, my arms spread wide like I'm suspended on a high dive, I always think about how badly I needed a good poet in my life when I was 14. Instead, I learned to write by carving on my arm with twisted staples. I learned to speak by shrieking obscenities at my teachers. The first day I can remember not wanting to die came a couple years later when I was introduced to a book called *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poet's Café* (Algarín & Holman, 1994). For many spoken-word enthusiasts around the world, the phonebook-sized tome of poems was the first glimpse at a radical new vehicle for performance art called *poetry slam*. Emotional and raw, with content ranging anywhere between confessional testimonials, political assaults, raunchy stand-up comedy, and hip-hop holler-if-you-hear-me flows, the poetry chronicled in *Aloud* reinvigorated a public interest in performed verse (Kaufman, 1999). A large part of that public interest was reflected in kids like me (Weiss & Herndon, 2001). When I was 16, I stopped writing drafts of my suicide note and I started writing poems.

Those are the memories I think about now, 15 years later, when I'm rapid-fire whipping words at crowds of school kids. I became the poet that a young me needed, a move similarly made by hundreds of artists who've transitioned from the slam scene to the classroom (as educators, academics, guest performers, and mentors). Moreover, the poetry I heard from the

slam community was influential in helping me develop a moral compass as a young person. Slam was my first introduction to multiculturalism and cultural competency. It was also one of my first experiences with critical citizenship because poetry let me imagine the various ways I could change the world. Most important, slam reinforced a notion in me that the language I use has an impact on others and consequences for myself.

Since *Aloud's* publication in 1994, numerous educators have recognized the immediate benefits of introducing performance poetry in the classroom (Holbrook & Salinger, 2006), particularly noting the medium's ability to engage reluctant readers (Low, 2011). Despite the increased desire to use the spoken word in classroom settings, many educators outside the slam community are uncertain how to introduce poetry into their lesson plans beyond playing a short video or inviting a practitioner like myself to class for a one-time performance. The blame need not rest solely on the shoulders of uninformed secondary teachers; although slam academics have approached spoken word as a writing pedagogy (Fisher, 2007) and a performance pedagogy (Sibley, 2001), there has been relatively little discussion on how slam as a reading pedagogy fits into the holistic trifecta known as *spoken word pedagogy*.

In the forward of *Aloud*, coeditor Bob Holman declares, "DO NOT READ THIS BOOK. You don't have to. *This book reads you*. This book is a SHOUT for all those who have heard the poem's direct flight from mouth

to ear. Hear this book with your eyes! When the Mouth marries the Eye, the Ear officiates” (p. 1). This self-professed “invocation” points to spoken word’s ability to transcend the page. While many slammers record their work on audio or video in lieu of the traditional print medium, educators would be surprised to learn how many notable artists have published their poems in literary journals, anthologies, and as collected works on small and large presses (Somers-Willett, 2009). And although proponents of New Literacy Studies commonly use the audiovisual work of slammers to meet newly imposed digital literacy standards (Brawley, 1994; Harlan, 2008), nearly every practitioner from the slam community with whom I have collaborated insistently uses textual analysis as part of his or her spoken word pedagogy. Just because the works are multimodal does not mean that the print form needs to be excluded (Michael, 2001).

Understandably, this textual barrier has resulted in a low number of opportunities for slammers to create age-appropriate literature ideal for use in classroom reading instruction. By reviewing a few examples of print-based literature from the slam community written specifically for young adult audiences, this article hopes to serve as an initial effort to discuss how the reading component of spoken word pedagogy connects with writing and discussion. In an attempt to create a familiar ground for instructors of literacy, I draw comparisons between poetry from the slam circuit and common conventions found in young adult literature. By identifying the similarities between spoken word pedagogy and pedagogies typically associated with young adult literature, I hope to give literacy educators a foothold for approaching slam through typical means, such as textual analysis, group discussion, and short written responses.

This literature review also serves as a resource for educators who want exposure to more artists from the slam community. I include brief suggestions for Secondary English Language Arts educators and reading specialists about various ways that the featured texts can be incorporated into curricula. It is my hope that the selected YA texts demonstrate various ways that poetry can spawn critical classroom conversations regarding morality, citizenship, and cultural competency.

Themes Shared by Slam and Young Adult Literature

Many educators mistakenly refer to slam as a genre, when in fact it is more of a mechanism. In 1986, a Chicago construction worker named Marc Smith decided to drastically change the way we experience poetry. Academic practices such as New Criticism had alienated casual patrons of performed verse (Gioia, 1991), and Smith fought back by devising a populist contest where competing poets faced off in front of rowdy blue-collar bar patrons (Smith & Kraynak, 2004). Some audience members were given score cards to judge each performance, while others were encouraged to cheer for the poets they loved and boo the poets they did not. Though it began as a quirky game in an Uptown pub, *poetry slam* exploded into a worldwide literary movement in the mid-nineties after it garnered the attention of mainstream entities such as MTV, Lollapalooza, NPR, and HBO (Aptowicz, 2008). More notable, teens around the world came to embrace slam as a powerful avenue for self-expression (Erlich, 1999).

Since scholars are at odds regarding whether slam competitions have spawned an actual genre known as *slam poetry*, many proponents such as myself use the terms *slam*, *spoken word*, and *performance poetry* interchangeably. The mainstream appropriation of the underground art form has spawned some misconceptions about what slam actually is; I will attempt to clarify some misunderstandings in the next section. Regardless, although slam can be difficult to categorize or place into an easy-to-describe box, educators who have used poetry from the slam community in the classroom have found it to be an ideal way for young people to vocalize themes related to character and ethicality (Bruce & Davis, 2000).

Considering that spoken word has reached young readers from countless backgrounds and cultures (Poole, 2007), it is not surprising that poetry used in slam shares numerous conventions with the characteristics of young adult literature. By establishing such

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connections, educators should feel empowered to draw upon familiar aspects of their instructional skill set to form their own unique methodology for reading the poetry of slammers in classroom settings.

First, poetry slam's initial aim was to reject the cryptic nature of academic verse by crafting lyrical content that utilizes "common language" more familiar to everyday audiences (Ellis, Gere, & Lamberton,

2003). In a 1988 *New York Times* article—one of the first major newspapers to cover the then-new *slam* thing—Marc Smith famously quipped "Hifalutin metaphors got no place here" (Johnson, 1988). Bob Holman echoed Smith's cry, claiming that slam began as an attempt to return written verse back to community spaces by "mak[ing] poetry as natural a use for language as ordering a pizza" (Aptowicz, 2008, p. 10). Many slammers accomplish this task in their verse by utilizing colloquial speech, slang, and non-English phrases

spoken in the home (Fisher, 2007). Numerous educators have singled out this characteristic as a vital way to revitalize the stale, antipodal material of traditional poetry units: "We think the problems teachers face with teaching poetry can be addressed by making its oral nature more visible and audible to students" (Ellis, Gere, & Lamberton, 2003, p. 44).

Second, like the underdog main characters in many young adult works, the spoken word medium often showcases protagonists with marginalized identities (Lacatus, 2009). The open format of slam encourages all participants to share their own story, which essentially promotes the voices of traditionally muted groups and allows writers to feature elements of their unique cultures and backgrounds in their attempts to construct a literary identity (Biggs-El, 2012). An ethnographic study of a youth poetry slam team in Ohio revealed that participants referred to themselves as having "outlaw identities" (Rudd, 2012); in another

study, participants in a youth writing group in the Bronx claimed they adopted a "blues singer identity" (Fisher, 2007). In both studies, groups of young learners from diverse backgrounds used identities constructed in the writing process to form a familial bond, thus developing a literacy community.

Third, similar to the many popular "socially aware" young adult novels, a substantive number of slammers use spoken word as a way to address critical issues that affect their local and global communities (Stovall, 2006). Ingalls (2012) explains, "The spoken-word venue becomes a forum in which participants assert and defend the legitimacy of their social and political views, and the audience is a critical component in the exchange of ideas; their responses to the messages they see and hear help to spark and sustain dialogue, and to validate the voices of youth" (p. 101). In their own study, Bruce and Davis noticed a commonality in the background knowledge of their students: teens in the classroom were familiar with both the conventions of hip-hop and the grim realities of systemic violence (2000). By using spoken word as a conscious alternative to hip-hop (Aptowicz, 2008), students can address issues including racism, gun violence, gang warfare, poverty, and drug dependency in a way that allows the spoken word to function as an agent of change (Bruce & Davis, 2000).

Clarifications and Dispelling Some Misconceptions

As mentioned in the previous section, poets and scholars have been arguing for decades about whether an actual genre called "poetry slam" even exists. Canadian slammer Chris Gilpin writes, "At this point, the term *slam poetry* is shorthand for the kind of poetry that happens at a poetry slam, which fails as a definition because it provides no formal parameters that indicate what makes this style of poetry distinct from any other" (2015). Personally, I've seen everything from sestinas to haiku to hip-hop freestyles in competitions. I've seen poems that only exist as sounds, silence, or guttural utterances. My friends once held a "bad poetry slam"—where the goal was to get the worst score—and Atlanta poet Theresa Davis read verbatim from an old telephone book. Ergo, it would be irresponsible of me to claim that a literature review of slam poetry is even possible. Instead, this article

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claims to be a survey of the most notable YA works written by authors who have participated heavily in slams.

This distinction is important for two reasons. First, there are numerous YA books about slam poetry that are not covered in-depth in this article. For example, Patrick Flores-Scott's book *Jumped In* (2014) tells the story of a scoffy teen who is obsessed with Kurt Cobain and discovers his love of writing from a slam poetry unit introduced by his tenth-grade English teacher. And while the book has been embraced by educators, from a poet's perspective, I have trouble viewing it as authentic. Trust me, I had all five of *Nirvana's* albums on cassette (including *Incesticide*), yet besides some ripped jeans and pink hair, I have never met a single slammer that resembles the protagonist Sam. In other words, this does not meet the undoubtedly crucial requirement that teens see accurate representations of themselves in YA literature.

Other novels not addressed here are the numerous (and arguably more genuine) novels in verse that have depicted slam culture, such as Nikki Grimes's *Bronx Masquerade* (2002). The novel-in-verse is told from the point of view of 18 different students who create Open Mike Fridays with their English teacher. However, there are already many accessible reviews and articles written about quality YA novels-in-verse by Grimes and other authors, including Ellen Hopkins and Karen Hesse. This article hopes to highlight authors who come from the very community that has seen its culture represented both successfully and unsuccessfully in YA literature.

The second reason this distinction is important is that some of the works included in this article may defy educators' expectations of what poetry slam is supposed to look like. For example, the novel *Stickboy* (2012) by Shane Koyczan tells the story of a picked-on kid who fights back against his bully, only to later find that he has taken his aggression to the point that he's become a bully himself. Instead of the explosive 3-minute poems we typically see at slam competitions, *Stickboy* is one sprawling 173-page poem. In a different format entirely, Carlos Andrés Gómez's *Man Up: Cracking the Code of Modern Manhood* (Gómez, 2012) explores the dynamics of masculinity and chauvinism in young men. The autobiographical work is told through a collection of essays and poems that demonstrate the various ways spoken word can be scaffolded

with creative nonfiction and informational texts. Perhaps the most notable book written by a former slammer is Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011). The dystopian novel is not written in verse at all; however, the teenage protagonist's love of video games, comic books, and role-playing games are representative of the fan cultures often promoted at events such as The Nerd Slam (Aptowicz, 2009). The fact that Cline's book is being turned into Steven Spielberg's next blockbuster suggests that artists who've cut their teeth at the poetry slam can tell a great story in a multitude of ways.

Although the three aforementioned books contain language and themes that disqualify them from being considered young adult literature, it is difficult to imagine that these texts were created without young readers in mind. Each work functions as a coming-of-age morality narrative, features a school-aged protagonist, promotes the voices of young people, and models ideal behaviors necessary for making the world a better place.

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Young Adult Literature from Slam's First Wave

Although slam has thrived in underground bars and coffee shops since its inception in the mid-eighties, a market where slam artists could make a living never really appeared until 1996 when corporate media outlets like MTV gave their attention to the booming literary scenes popping up in cities such as New York and San Francisco. Poet and slam scholar Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz refers to this pre-professional era as slam's First Wave (2008). One such pioneer from this time is a poet named Allan Wolf, whose organizational efforts were vital in helping establish slam as the sustainable grassroots community we know today (Abbott, 2008). Like many poets from the First Wave who viewed slam as a temporary stepping stone for writers

(Aptowicz, 2009), Wolf eventually left the competitive slam circuit to pursue a career as a full-time author and educator. What sets Wolf apart from most of his peers from that era is that his efforts as an artist have focused almost entirely on crafting poetry for children and young adults.

Wolf is the author of two middle grade historical fiction novels: *New Found Land* (2004), which details

Lewis and Clark's epic journey to find America's rumored Northwest Passage to the Pacific Ocean, and *The Watch That Ends the Night* (2011), which documents the maiden voyage and final moments of the RMS Titanic. Meticulously researched and accompanied by lengthy appendices, both collections (over 450 pages each) follow a similar template of one or two page-

length poems told from the first-person perspective of witnesses to each historical event. A common writing convention in the slam scene is the use of the persona poem; slam icon Patricia Smith (2000) explains, "In a persona poem, the writer eliminates the middle man and actually becomes the subject of his or her poem. The voice is both immediate, and immediately engaging. In the best cases, the poem's audience is drawn into a lyrical narrative by someone they want to know better—a taxi driver, Little Richard, an undertaker" (p. 71). Wolf answers Smith's challenge literally by ending each chapter with a poem from the perspective of Jon Snow, the undertaker tasked with identifying the bodies of those from the Titanic who died in the Atlantic Ocean. While space in the books is dedicated to notable characters like Sacagawea and the Unsinkable Molly Brown, Wolf spoke in an interview about his authorial intent: "I wanted to know what the story was from all the people behind the scenes. The ones that are in the background" (Wolf, 2012). In *New Found Land*, we are privy to the thoughts of William Clark's slave York, who observes how Clark goes to great lengths to ensure no "family men" enlist for the voyage as he simultaneously forces York to leave his wife and children behind.

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Slammers often approach the exercise of the persona poem in a unique way by giving anthropomorphic voice to animals and inanimate objects (Smith, 2000). The title *New Found Land* is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Newfoundland dog owned by Meriweather Lewis; the shaggy pup's internal monologue serves as the dominant narrative thread that ties the collection of poems together. In fact, Wolf juxtaposes the dog's observations of being property owned by a master with York and Sacagawea's own critiques of bondage, which could serve as a catalyst for in-depth issue-based classroom discussion on America's history of slavery and colonialism.

Wolf's historical books of verse present unique opportunities for classroom activities. First, by juxtaposing Wolf's poems with the information from the appendix, educators can model ways for students to write creatively about historical documents. For example, in *The Watch That Ends the Night*, Morse code messages are used in an imaginative way: as the ship begins to sink, the ink of the SOS messages becomes more and more faded. Second, by using Wolf's persona poems as quality samples, students can recontextualize historical narratives by telling stories from unique perspectives. One of the most outstanding sequences from the Titanic book is voiced by the actual iceberg itself: *I am the ice. I see tides ebb and flow. / I've watched civilizations come and go, / give birth, destroy, restore, be gone, begin* (Wolf, 2012, p. 7). Finally, some of the poems suggest opportunities for constructive group-writing activities, perhaps giving classmates a chance to practice spatial literacy by creating poems on graffiti boards. As the hulking ship slips into the Atlantic, the reader turns the page to discover a sucker punch of a concrete poem: a thrashing pile of italic phrases such as *god help us* and *you'll kill us all* pools around the center of the page, peppered with words like *frío*, *kälte*, and *cold* to represent the frigid cries of the immigrant third-class passengers. The books produce numerous possibilities for cross-curricular activities with history and social studies.

A departure from Wolf's creative-nonfiction poesy is his young adult novel *Zane's Trace* (2007). A heroic epic in the style of a stream-of-conscious road-trip novel, the book-length poem reads like the sequential entries of a poetry journal penned by a teenage boy driving cross-country to the gravesite of his mother. Coming to grips with his mother's recent suicide, pro-

tagonist Zane uses written verse to formally question the rigidity of his own fleeting mental state—a warranted assessment considering the impulsive exodus, stolen car, and loaded gun he’s stashed in the glove box. The short chapters (1–5 pages) are labeled as mile markers along the historic Zane’s Trace highway, which serves as an allegory for Zane’s transcendental search to trace the origins of his identity. Zane’s own exploration of his ethnicity and heritage could serve as a stark catalyst for students to discuss and write about their own identities as well.

Zane’s Trace incorporates common language through pattern and repetition by visually representing Zane’s synesthesia—a neurological condition of the senses where individuals may, for example, ascribe a taste to a certain word or see a sound represented as a color (Spasic, Lukic, Bisevac, & Peric, 2010). Zane’s synesthesia takes the form of spatial mantras that weave in and out of the narrative almost like the reprise of a piece of music: *Give my mother back her mind. / Calm the demons in her head. / Leave the darkness far behind. / If need be, take me instead* (Wolf, 2007, p. 6). The closer our protagonist gets to Zanesville, the more his internal monologue touches on the topic of suicide. Recent high-profile incidents have begged the need to discuss suicide and mental illness with young learners in our schools, and the relatable anti-hero of *Zane’s Trace* could provide an effective way to start a complex classroom conversation on the topics of mental health and self-esteem. Teachers might challenge students to create a mural of words taken from *Zane’s Trace*, perhaps by cutting out sentences or using colored markers.

Closing out Allan Wolf’s YA catalogue is a 64-page novella titled *More Than Friends: Poems from Him and Her* (Holbrook & Wolf, 2008), coauthored with Sara Holbrook, another poet from slam’s First Wave era. Holbrook’s path differs from Wolf’s in that she was an established children’s book author before she transitioned into the slam community. If nothing else, Holbrook’s success in both the slam and young adult literary circuits suggests that the two have many shared conventions.

As the subtitle of the book implies, *More Than Friends* uses a dueling narrative to tell the story of two high school students’ first romantic relationship (Holbrook authored the point of view of the girl, and Wolf wrote the point of view of the boy). The shuf-

fling efforts of the two unlearned adolescents in the book are made instantly relatable by our access to the characters’ inner monologue. In a tanka called *Foolish* (Holbrook & Wolf, 2008), Wolf writes: *My fly was open. / Spilled our popcorn on the floor. / Stepped on your foot—twice. / Yet the more the night went wrong, / The more you and I felt right* (p. 26). The dueling author approach forces readers to stretch their empathetic reasoning, as the young couple’s relationship waxes in poems like “Making the First Move” and wanes in poems like “Do Not Bolt Screaming, Clutching All Your Stuff.”

The multi-voiced poems beg to be read out loud—readings that could be enhanced by engaging readers’ theatre exercises in the classroom. The poems in the book could also serve as templates for how groups of 2 or 3 students could write poetry that dialogues and debates across pieces. Many of the poems are written in traditional forms like sonnets and villanelles, with a short instructional appendix to assist young writers who want to learn the conventions of traditional verse forms. The book could serve as a catalyst for form-based writing responses about sex, young love, consent, and the heartache involved with breakups. An author’s note from Holbrook and Wolf concedes that they cannot speak for the feelings of all young men and women, which suggests that the authors would be open to instructors using their text to spark a conversation about gender roles and nontraditional relationships.

In addition to a lengthy catalogue of picturebooks and collections of children’s poetry, Sara Holbrook is also the author of one tween-aged book of verse called *Walking on the Boundaries of Change* (1998). Subtitled as a collection of *Poems of Transition*, the cover of the book depicts a pair of legs—familarly clad in rolled blue jeans and Chuck Taylor All-Star sneakers—pensively walking a tightrope in the foreground of swollen storm clouds. Lending authentic voice to the anxious uncertainties with which many adolescent readers can identify, Holbrook uses a common

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convention in stand-up poetry called confessionalism. Authors of confessional verse typically give voice to issues plaguing their personal lives, as popularized by Sylvia Plath's poems on suicide and Robert Lowell's poems about his deteriorating marriage (Rosenthal, 1991). In the poem "A Different Fit," Holbrook (1998) uses first-person narrative to articulate the awkward feelings of preteens experiencing physical changes

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brought on by puberty: *Today / I want to fit in / another speck in the sparrow crowd. / Not be perched like ostrich in hiding / with embarrassing parts sticking out* (p. 8). Holbrook cleverly uses metaphor to open up dialogue about life experiences that can be uncomfortable to discuss in classroom settings. Topics in the book could be coupled with journaling exercises, which could give students a chance to make

sense of growing pains and formative discoveries in creative ways.

In her poem "Blown Away," Holbrook (1998) uses street speech to tell the story of a boy named Tony whose dress and slang are the envy of the entire school. Tony joins a gang, which swallows up the individuality his classmates once admired; this turn of events allows Holbrook to address the issue of urban tribalism as it manifests itself through the experiences of young people. Whereas many young adult novels focus on crafting super-characters who exhibit desirable behaviors and execute world-saving decisions, *Walking on the Boundaries of Change* creates a space where young readers can approach life issues therapeutically alongside Holbrook's characters, with little attention paid to formulating strategies for solving life problems.

The poem "My Plan" (Holbrook, 1998) features an adolescent girl vocalizing the insecurities she feels about her physical appearance—detesting her beak nose, big feet, and Minnie Mouse voice. While many young adult authors might feel compelled to teach this protagonist a lesson in self-acceptance, Holbrook instead allows the character to air her grievances in

an environment free from judgment and recourse. Essentially, the poems give students an crucial starting point. If students read and discuss the narratives of imperfect people, they can begin to take steps to rewrite their own stories. Reading and writing about issues like gang violence and body dysmorphia tell students that the negative aspects of their lives don't have to be the final chapter. They can be the first.

The Later Waves and the Rise of the Spoken Word Youth Movement

In 1996, poetry slam exploded into a mainstream global phenomenon, meaning that poets from the Second Wave did not have to leave the slam circuit to make a living as artists (Aptowicz, 2008). Perhaps this is the reason why few slammers have made the transition to the young adult market. However, a major characteristic of slam's Third Wave has been a resurgence of small press publishers that have given a few spoken word practitioners the chance to create texts ideal for reading instruction in secondary schools. Possibly the most successful independent press featuring artists from the slam community, Write Bloody Publishing, was created in 2004 by Second Wave slammer Derrick Brown after he observed that many career poets still relied on Kinkos to personally craft their own self-made chapbooks to sell on tour. Although primarily a publisher of adult market poetry and prose collections, Write Bloody has released collections of poetry for young adults: *Learn Then Burn: A Modern Poetry Anthology for the Classroom* (Stafford & Brown, 2010) and *Courage: Daring Poems for Gutsy Girls* (Finneyfrock, McKibbens, & Nettifee, 2014).

The cover of *Learn Then Burn* depicts a flaming book sitting on top of an empty classroom desk beside the words *A modern poetry anthology for the classroom* inscribed within a sunflower seal. Edited by Chicago teacher and poet Tim Stafford and Write Bloody owner Derrick Brown, *Learn Then Burn* features classroom-friendly poems by dozens of poets in the slam scene—including fan favorites such as Buddy Wakefield and Shira Erlichman. Some poems are original works written specifically for the press; others are popular poems edited for content, such as Anis Mojgani's poem, "For Those Who Can Still Ride an Airplane for the First Time": *I'm 31 years old and I'm trying to figure out most days what being a*

/ man means. / I don't drink fight or love / but these days I find myself wanting to do all three (p. 82). Fans familiar with the poem will recognize that the editors substituted the euphemism "love" for another four-letter word. Vocalizing what many teenage boys may experience as they grow to question societal expectations of manhood, Mojgani's sobering tone could provide an open door for classroom discussion on gender roles and masculinity.

Several authors in the anthology adopt the voices of their younger selves in order to address issues important to young adults. Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz's "Benediction for Prom Night" gives voice to a young girl's anxieties as she prepares her hair and makeup for the prom, while Geoff Trenchard's "Pox" depicts a teenage boy's inner monologue as he examines his acne-inflicted complexion in the bathroom mirror. To help bring the poem to life, an audio-recording of a live performance of "Pox" is available on an online site called *IndieFeed*, a performance poetry podcast featuring an archive of thousands of poems. Considering that many of the poets in the book also have videos of poetry on YouTube and Vimeo, there are many opportunities for educators to turn their poetry units into multimodal literacy experiences that combine textual, visual, and oral literacies. With material ranging from hip-hop sonnets to 8-bit Nintendo odes to zombie persona poems, the verses featured in *Learn Then Burn* use digestible language to address topics that kids care about. A separate *Teacher Guide & Workbook Companion* (2010), edited by Stafford and fellow public school teacher and slammer Molly Meacham, is also available as a resource for educators.

Recent release *Courage: Daring Poems for Gutsy Girls* (Finneyfrock, K., McKibbens, R., & Nettifee, M., 2014) is labeled for ages 12 to 21 as "a fierce collection of poems for anyone who is, or has been, or knows a teenage girl." Featuring the work of 33 women, all prominent artists in the slam scene or in periphery literary circles, the anthology contains works original to the publication and selected works from other Write Bloody titles. Edited by an all-women team of Second Wave slam vets, *Courage* showcases poems that tackle issues important to girls, such as body image, gender roles, and motherhood. Many critical educators use the short, fiery poems like the ones found here to serve as classroom warm-up activities. For example, Tara Hardy's poem "My, My, My,

My, My" or Jeanann Verlee's "Swarm" could provide a powerful introduction to a themed unit centered on consent and sexual assault.

Like *Learn Then Burn*, several authors in *Courage* adopt a reflective voice to address topics important to their younger selves: in the poem "Pretty," Shanny Jean Maney uses a humorous tone to reminisce about her awkward attempts to match the "beautificiality" standards of Vanna White and Miss Piggy, while in the poem "A Letter to the Playground Bully, From Andrea, Age 8 ½," Andrea Gibson uses whimsical childhood imagery to create an imaginary confrontation between the author and the third-grade boy who used to torment her. Students could follow suit and write a poem to (or from) their younger selves. In a way, this transforms writing into a reflexive activity regarding morality and character building; through poetry, students can see where they've come from and where they need to head in the future.

Several poets also utilize non-English words spoken in their childhood households. In the poem "What It's Like for a Brown Girl," Jessica Helen Lopez addresses the struggles she faced as a bilingual speaker in a stuffy MFA program. Lopez uses artistic license to vocalize the thoughts she believes her professors had of her: *You slam poets you, with all your hip-hop and speaking in / tongues. I hope you choke on all that alliteration* (p. 133). The work of multicultural, multilingual authors could have an advantageous impact on ESL and EFL classrooms. Like *Learn Then Burn*, work by most of the authors is available via audio and video online, which could give English learners a rich, multifaceted introduction to poetry.

In addition to being a Write Bloody author and editor, poet Karen Finneyfrock achieved success outside the small press market when her first young adult novel, *The Sweet Revenge of Celia Door* (2013), was published by Viking Press (Penguin). The cover art depicts a pigeon-toed girl wearing knee-high black

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boots and black fishnet stockings, with folded arms and a head conveniently cut off by the top of the page. In the classroom, educators could task students with writing a poem about this stark cover image. Celia Door is a friendless 14-year-old girl tasked with navigating catty school politics and her parents' impending divorce. Incessant teasing and bullying has urged Celia to "turn Dark" (p. 7), meaning she's adopted a

Though slam has been commonly documented on audio and video, literacy educators should not feel discouraged from approaching the written work of slammers through conventional textual analysis.

Goth identity with black eyeliner and skull hoodies. While young adult books commonly use toxic tropes to depict members of Goth culture as whiny, cynical, and emotionally unstable, Celia stands in stark contrast as an earnest, relatable, lonely girl whose only wish is to find a friend. She tells readers, *When I say I turned Dark, what I really mean is that I gave up. I gave up on trying to fit in and make everyone like me . . . I realized that, in a field of sun-*

flowers, I'm a black-eyed Susan (Finneyfrock, 2013, p. 7). While a majority of the novel is told through prose, the chapters are peppered with notes and poems that Celia writes to herself in her journal; these could serve as catalysts for themed classroom writing responses. The young protagonist utilizes metaphors to help the reader internalize the emotional implications of plot points in the story, as evidenced by the line, *All you need is one friend and suddenly a weekend looks like a wide-open field* (Finneyfrock, 2013, p. 138). Powerful phrases like this could be plucked out and analyzed on their own. Teachers could write the phrase on a chalkboard or overhead projector and task students with writing a response.

Celia's luck changes when a cool, handsome kid from New York named Drake moves to town and befriends her. Though the relationship begins as a love interest for Celia, Finneyfrock flips the young adult trope on its head when Drake admits to Celia that he is gay. Although she is initially crushed, the well-read Celia helps Drake learn more about LGBTQ culture by taking him to the library to learn about the Stonewall

Riots and the anti-AIDS activist group ACT UP. When Celia attempts to take revenge against her middle school tormentors, her plans backfire, and as a result, Drake's sexuality is outed in front of the entire school. Feeling the brunt of the backlash, Celia learns a valuable lesson about the responsibilities of being an ally. *The Sweet Revenge of Celia Door* tackles the themes of self-esteem and suicide, and Celia's perspective can offer a fresh way to approach classroom conversation about the impacts of bullying.

We can only hope that more large-scale publishers notice these artists from the slam community. Karen Finneyfrock's second book of prose for young adults, *Starbird Murphy and the Outside World*, was released by Viking in June of 2014 and is a testament to her success entering the young adult market. A sequel to *Learn Then Burn*, titled *Learn Then Burn 2: This Time It's Personal: An Awesome Anthology of Modern Poems for the Classroom* (Stafford) was also released in early 2015. Representation in both large and small presses is vital for a healthy arts movement, so it is important that poetry patrons support the young adult efforts of presses like Write Bloody and Viking. If publishers recognize that there is a desire for more young adult works written by slammers, perhaps they will be willing to take risks by giving new authors a chance.

Hear This Book with Your Eyes

This article is an initial attempt to familiarize educators with the conventions of spoken word written for young adult audiences, as well as print titles that might be used in classrooms. Though slam has been commonly documented on audio and video, literacy educators should not feel discouraged from approaching the written work of slammers through conventional textual analysis. The best advice I can give to educators is to turn their reading instruction into a multimodal learning process (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, & et al., 1996; Ong, 1980) by reading poems out loud, listening to audio and watching video along with reading texts, crafting written responses, drawing pictures and text on graffiti boards, discussing the content of poems in small and large groups, and even facilitating a classroom poetry slam that tackles themes discussed in shared work. Although educators should feel encouraged to treat artists from

the community as a resource, it is ethically imperative that teachers avoid quick fixes and familiarize themselves with the arts community they intend to promote and dissect. While this article serves as a review of notable works by slammers marketed as young adult literature, there are thousands and thousands of poems written for general audiences that could also be effective in the classroom. Educators wishing to foster conversations related to moral issues such as war, police brutality, abortion, and environmentalism are encouraged to use the references accompanying this article as a resource to find new poets.

It is also beneficial for young adult publishers to embrace populist movements like slam that are commonly revered for their inclusion of diverse artists (Somers-Willett, 2007). A study of the 2013 *New York Times* Young Adult Best Sellers List (Lo, 2014) revealed that only 15% of main characters were non-White, only 13% of overall characters were LGBTQ, and only 3% of overall characters were disabled (Lo & Pon, 2014). The multicultural artists from the slam community could help meet the public demand for literature that features diverse characters; however, the authors featured in this literature review are a poor representation of slam's overall diversity, which suggests that authors of color from the slam circuit have faced similar barriers in regards to being supported by young adult publishing companies. We have an ethical duty as educators to make sure voices from diverse backgrounds are included in our canon, and promoting queer artists and authors of color from the slam community could be a needed push.

As a spoken word practitioner tasked with assessing my own biases (Peshkin, 1988), I welcome additional research and discourse from academics and educators who are further removed from the community. While other researchers may need convincing, I know that spoken word can save lives because it saved mine when I was 16 years old. I'm sure the teacher who placed that copy of *Aloud* in my hands had no idea how far that book would take me. Those of us who were inspired by the anthology know the power of placing poetry in the palms of a young person, and it is the moral imperative of this poet-that-my-younger-self-needed to ensure that the youth of today do not walk away empty-handed.

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