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Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016: A Critical Performance Ethnography of Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam

Joshua Hamzehee

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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***BATON ROUGE SLAM!: AN OBITUARY FOR SUMMER 2016: A CRITICAL
PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY OF ECLECTIC TRUTH POETRY SLAM***

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agriculture and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

In

The Department of Communication Studies

by

Joshua Hamzehee

A.A., Mt. San Antonio College, 2007

B.A., California State University, Fullerton, 2008

M.A., California State University, Long Beach, 2010

May 2020

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Joshua Hamzehee

For	Kaiya. I	know
we	never met—but	
I am	better for having	known
you	through people you	knew.

For	Donney & Desireé & Jazmyne & Melissa & Toiryan &	
		for
		Baton Rouge & <i>Eclectic Truth</i> & summer 2016 & before &

after—

Recomposition through art functions as a kind of mourning—an obituary
that completes the life-death cycle
and restores a sense of wholeness to the community.
But recomposition is also a disavowal:
the dead do not come back to life
except as icons.

--Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*

(Also, this quotation was presented as the opening visual projection for *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My final course as a Louisiana State University graduate student was taken during spring 2018. This was about eighteen months after beginning my ethnographic journey with the *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* community and five of its core members. In the course, *A Social History of Spoken Word Poetry*, Dr. Susan Weinstein exposed my classmates and me to Audre Lorde's 1985 essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury." In poignant poetic prose, Lorde exclaims poetry helps manifest that which has not happened. I interpret this to mean, first, that poetry is a canvass to explore possibilities. And second, poetry shows that the labor of societal progress begins with inspiration. Inspired educators like Dr. Weinstein, critical scholarship like Lorde's, and performance communities like those in Baton Rouge show we are defined as people by what we hope for, and how that affects others. Lorde also writes "poetry is not only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives." Progress is only possible because of the time, energy, and heart contributed by other fleshy-skeletons. We are bone and muscle; performing for and with *another* is sinew. As a *tendonic* ethnographer, I acknowledge this three-year exploration incorporates countless hours of combined fieldwork from multiple angles and people. For example, this fieldwork originated with the slam poets who shared their perspectives. After being filtered through my ethnographic lens, their narratives were given new life by a passionate cast, supported by a dedicated crew, and guided by mentors who laid the foundation for the paths of each project participant to merge in this city at this specific time in our lives. Performance ethnography, like slam, is not created or presented in a vacuum.

First and foremost, this Baton Rouge-based project is possible because *Eclectic Truth* poets shared their lived and lyrical experiences with me. *Snaps* all the way to the mic for

Donney Rose, Desireé Dallagiacamo, Toiryan Milligan, Jazmyne Smith, and Melissa Hutchinson! I encourage you, the *reader* of this dissertation, to type their names and “Baton Rouge” into Google or YouTube and follow Alice down the slam poetry rabbit-hole. This document draws primarily from the voices of these five aforementioned star groupers, a term coined by Victor Turner to refer to members of a culture that deeply identify with and sacrifice their time for that culture. I also had the privilege of interacting and being inspired by several other community members. First, Petrouchka Moïse—thank you for sitting with me and sharing the story of your daughter, Kaiya, your art and goals, Kaiya’s poetry and passions, and bringing yourself and your son to support the show. Your presence there mattered more than you can imagine! Next, more *snaps* for Xero Skidmore, SK Groll, Anna West, William Brian Sain, Toi Sibley, and so many others I had the pleasure of befriending through attending *Eclectic Truth* and living in Baton Rouge. Your dedication to community, growth, and equity is contagious, and the clearest example of why inspiration, performance, and mentorship matters beyond pages and stages. Through observing essential and inspired Baton Rouge creative- and youth-oriented organizations like *The Poetry Alliance*, *Forward Arts*, and *Humanities Amped*, I learned progress is a chain forever linked to those who came before.

Deepest thanks to my dissertation advisor and graduate school mentor, Dr. Tracy Stephenson Shaffer. *Snaps* for guiding me through performance ethnography’s “primordial world.” Janis Joplin’s “Me & Bobby McGee” was part of the show’s soundtrack because of you! Next, my dissertation committee: Dr. David Terry, Dr. Sue Weinstein, and Dean’s Representative, Dr. Deborah Goldgaber. From my initial graduate course in performance ethnography, to completing coursework, to guiding my comprehensive exams, to office visits in

between and during productions, to a pleasant doctoral defense, your consistent support is integral to my growth as a scholar, practitioner, and human being.

Essential to *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* is the dedication of the cast. *Snaps* to Lexus Jordan, Laura Oliver, Montana Smith, and Jordan Smith! Thank you for your trust, talents, time, and spirits. I am grateful for the DMX sessions before shows, your commitment to the cause, our workdays that became playdays, and your engraved wooden gift of “Artistic Journalist” after our first production run. Emblematic of my experience with *Eclectic Truth* is how we performed the last minute of the script during each performance of the show. Following the heaviest moment of the production, as a collective we huddled around the lighted-microphone hung from the ceiling. Framed by a taped-outline of Louisiana, we each touched and turned a page of the sacred “Question of the Day!” slam journal. This journal contained star grouper poems that were hand-written by us, featured audience signatures and responses to the question of the day, and stood in as a call back to the texts and traditions of performance scholarship and slam culture that shaped *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. As such, to open this dissertation, I offer this final section of the final scene of our show as my *sacrificial poem*:

DONNEY	We’re not gonna stay in the aesthetic of sorrow forever. There’s a beauty that comes from creating from despair. It pushes you toward joy.
TOIRYAN	Donney said it best when he went to represent us in Flagstaff. He put Baton Rouge on the stage. He put the flood poems, Alton Sterling, Kaiya, on the stage.
DONNEY	Whether you talk about natives or transplants, we are by and large a resilient community.
ALL	We are people who shake back from hurricanes and floods.
JAZMYNE	Katrina,
MELISSA	Gustav,
DESIREÉ	BP oil spill.

TOIRYAN I'm afraid of lightning!
DONNEY We are also a joyous people.
MELISSA There's layers. Makes me think about Shrek.
DESIREÉ When we want to flatten we don't do the work we need to do.
DONNEY We're also a community of festivals, food, and letting the good times roll.
MELISSA And drinking.
DONNEY And that spirit of resiliency resonates with people who move here, who live here.
TOIRYAN But, is there a deeper layer?

[They think. TOI opens journal, showing the original poems, colorfully handwritten.]

JAZMYNE The experience.

[JAZ turns a page.]

DESIREÉ I got to be in this space with these people.

[DES turns a page.]

MELISSA An immediate validation.

[MEL turns a page.]

TOIRYAN I got to share my truth.

[TOI turns a page.]

DONNEY We got three minutes to get on stage and

[DON turns the page to "Timeline Trauma."]

ALL Make a piece of urgent art that will stick with the community after they leave the—

[ALL look at journal, touching the journal. Then, together, ALL look up to the sky above the mic.]

Often overlooked in performance scholarship is the show crew that becomes the backbone of black box theatre productions. *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*

was binded by the labor and support of a dedicated crew, so *snaps* for Assistant Director Patrick McElearney, HopKins Black Box Manager and Technical Consultant Chris Collins, Lighting Designer Greg Langner, Projection and Technical Consultant Naomi Bennett, Stage Manager and QLab Operator Shanna Lambert, Props Manager Taylor Dawson, Voiceover Consultant Hal Lambert, Video Consultant and QLab Operator Gabi Vigueria, and the LSU performance studies community that provided their time, bodies, and energies. We are only as strong as our communities-of-choice.

Others who helped develop, conceive, workshop, and respond to various stages of this process include Dr. Patricia Suchy, Dr. Jonny Gray, Dr. Jake Simmons, Dr. Stephen Finley, Dr. Graham Bodie, Dr. George Judy and our Directing II class, Dr. Shaffer's Performance Ethnography class, and Dr. Angeletta Gourdine and our Graduate Coaching cohort. I would be remiss without acknowledging the web of mentors, colleagues, and communities-of-choice who helped develop my performance pedagogy, guiding me to become a fuller person eager to advocate for equity: Nazi B., Jonathan H., Vanessa S., Arik B., Casey G., Shae H., James S., Karen M., Danielle M., Paul S., James Manseau Saucedo, Liesel R., Steve S., Manuel and Lucille S., Ryan R., Scott B., and the LSU, UNI, CSULB, and Mt. SAC Communication Studies Departments. Also, thank you to the performance space that sheltered this show, LSU's HopKins Black Box theatre. The HBB acted as the skin of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, reminding me that spaces are dead until people bring them to life.

Baton Rouge's slam community's response to a tragic summer 2016 showed me that we are the sum of what we choose to do and with who we spend our time. This *slamnographic* account is useful research because, embedded within the words and flow of these passionate

poets is the labor of the past and the hope for a better future. I hope the essence of how *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* star groupers and I experienced Baton Rouge following summer 2016 is gleaned from the cartography of this typed text. The reflections, poetry, and lived experiences of this valiant, passionate, and responsive community of artistic journalists are worth performing and re-performing, de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing. Slam poetry and slam poets spit back to the power of the academy and the canon, political climates rooted in systematic inequity, and gatekeepers of authentic lived experience. The poetry slam provides a space for community members to share and validate experiences, struggles, and growth. This archival document celebrates *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam's* artistic anatomy of community, performance, process, poetry, time, talent, energy, and heart. These narratives by these people in this place in this space during this period of time matter.

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ABSTRACT

This critical performance ethnography presents the theory, methodology, and practice surrounding the fieldwork, scripting, and performance of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. As participant-observer, director, and co-performer, I unpack social drama, performance ethnography, and slam culture by employing a lens rooted in critical race theory. Local poets permitted me to de- and re-contextualize their interviews into ensemble scenes and theatricalize their slam poems about the recent summer's charged events. One year later, this involved and embodied process of ethnographic bricolage became the ensemble cast performance of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. Community members and live audiences in Louisiana and Georgia were invited to reflect on a capital divided. A performance-based analysis of this *slamnography* reveals why local slam communities matter as modes of redress following times of crises, and how the neoliberal nature of the slam form can be revealed and transcended by its members.

CHAPTER ONE

SENSE-MAKING WITH SLAMNOGRAPHY

Sense-Making with a Community of Artistic Journalists following Times of Crises

This dissertation reveals how I, Josh Hamzehee, identify with a specific place at a particular point of time; how I make sense of my three years living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; how *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* acted as a center for me on community and scholarly levels. This dissertation echoes the inspiration I felt from the poets around me, how perplexed I became by the city surrounding me, and how we are all products of contextual genealogies and community identities. This performance ethnography of *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam*—a southern slam poetry community in Baton Rouge, LA—and its response to a summer of sorrow, is a microcosm of how systems perpetuate marginalization, what this signifies to marginalized publics, and how creative communities like *Eclectic Truth* spit back to power structures. In this “Red Stick” round-up, I thickly detail my summer 2016 arrival in Louisiana’s capital city of *le Bâton Rouge*. Here, I acknowledge how a community and their fall 2016 slam poetry about tragedy found me. Here, I share observations that can be transported past these pages and beyond slam stages. In this dissertation, I contend slam poetry communities are worthy of and deserve further performative exploration, community investment, and attention from dominant publics.

During the fall 2016 portion of the 2016-17 slam poetry competition season, Baton Rouge’s *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* exhibited the conditions necessary for a dedicated community of slam poets to reveal and momentarily transcend the form of the poetry slam. Following a crisis-filled summer 2016, members of *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* employed the vehicle of slam as method, practice, theory, and performance to collectively interrogate and re-

imagine power hierarchies. This study shows how a slam poetry community can flirt with the utopic when revealing the neoliberal nature of the poetry slam form. In competitive slam, a creative pursuit of systemic equity can sometimes clash with neoliberal devices of scoring objectivity and unbiased competition. I utilize critical ethnographic detail, local poet insights, and thematic performance scripting to explore this contention. By placing ethnographic experiences, interviews with core *Eclectic Truth* members, and their slam poems in conversation with theories of social drama, performance, and critical ethnography, I paint a portrait of *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* and Baton Rouge, LA, during fall 2016. This ethnographic expedition indicates how communities of artistic adults use poetry and ritual to make sense of their lives following times of crises, and how I created the performance of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* to share the sense I made of their sense-making. Make sense?

During fall 2016, I observed *Eclectic Truth* model how local slam communities can serve as a redressive action within Victor Turner's explanatory frame of social drama. Essentially, social dramas are inherent to the theater of everyday life, and our lives are ordered around a processual ritual of breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism. Ritualistically, every Tuesday, Baton Rouge's artistic journalists share their confessional commentaries at downtown's *Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge*. During the first eight weeks of *Eclectic Truth's* competitive slam poetry season—from September to November—over half of all poems performed echoed tragedies of the recent summer. To me, this southern slam community seemed to be using their solo slam poems, and two decades of service to the community, to collectively—and maybe unconsciously—respond to a crisis-filled summer 2016.

That summer, an extraordinary amount of disasters struck the “Red Stick,” beginning with the murder of Alton Sterling on June 5, 2016. National and local news outlets memorialized those three months as a “summer of slaughter” (“Baton Rouge”) and a “summer of pain” (Kunzelman et al.). In a November 2016 in-person interview with me, *Eclectic Truth* star grouper Desireé Dallagiacamo invoked elemental metaphors to discuss the unnamed flood that capped the end of August. *Star grouper* is a term coined by Victor Turner to refer to members of a culture that deeply identify with and sacrifice their time for that culture (118). Desireé told me, “With fire there are some things you can do and you can continue to work and work and work, but with the water there was literally nowhere for it to go.” *Eclectic Truth* poets used slam to give their experiences a place to go following this intense, concentrated time of crisis. Many poets in slam spaces are marginalized in dominant public discourse due to constructs of race, gender, upbringing, class, and ability. The presence of diverse experiences in slam spaces, and the encouragement to tackle issues of the day through performance poetry, confirms that the ritual act of performing slam poetry is a necessary outlet of expression. The ritual of publicly vocalizing critiques of societal fissures is why communities like *Eclectic Truth* can function as effective redress within the frame of social drama. Our need to connect is intensified in moments of struggle. Redressive actions like *Eclectic Truth* show how adults can adapt the slam form to function as support group, collective sense-maker, and even survival mechanism.

Close proximity to summer 2016 crises provided Baton Rouge poets a timely opportunity to redressively confront and expose breaches behind the crises. Summer 2016’s chain-linked calamities demonstrate what happens when centuries of unaddressed racial tensions and political strife collide with natural disasters and a shaky infrastructure. To help

address my gap in local knowledge (since I am not from Baton Rouge), I turned to Baton Rouge's local slam poets for their crafted and confessional insights. These "Red Stick" residents have a stake in what happens in *our* city, and their poems are consequential. In a November 2016 phone interview with me, Baton Rouge-born slam veteran, Donney Rose, stamped his fellow poets as "artistic journalists." Donney invokes artistic journalism because these creative commentators ritualistically catalog and craft their lived experiences for and with their neighbors. Slam poets are not just artistic journalists, they are often primary sources due to circumstance, geography, and experience. Using critical performance ethnography as a lens, these local slam poets help me argue that slam is method, practice, theory, and performance. *And a wonderfully useful way to spend an hour and a half of your Tuesday evening!*

There is also evidence that a regular poetry slam ritual can function as rehearsal for the world outside the stage. In a December 2016 in-person interview, Baton Rouge-native Melissa Hutchinson told me *Eclectic Truth* trained members "to go out and make more functional change, and do more within the community, which then in turn affected our writing, which then in turn affected the space." As Melissa's reflection demonstrates, in this weekly performance ritual, some community members commit to world building through collective sense-making. Much value lies in unpacking how adult slam communities navigate traumatic moments during heightened moments of crisis. Performance-oriented research of slam communities like *Eclectic Truth* provide insights other forms of research cannot because performance can heighten tension, stretch insight, and emote empathy. Ethnographic explorations of these concepts are minimal within performance studies, however, and none published have re-contextualized ethnographic findings into a community performance. In

Betwixt, Between, or Beyond?: Negotiating 'Trans' Formations from the Liminal Sphere of Contemporary Black Performance Poetry, Birgit Bauridl writes:

The currently available works mainly either focus only on the slam or do not incorporate the slam at all. The poetry slam still needs to be examined as a part and as a motor (not trigger) of contemporary performance poetry; or, more importantly, contemporary performance poetry needs to be studied as a field including the poetry slam (62).

This dissertation addresses a need for more performance research about performance poetry communities. Because of slam's performative nature, live performance is an optimal vehicle for ethnographic representation and public reach. To identify how slam spaces benefit marginalized publics is to understand *who* slams, who does not, and why that is.

In discussing slam popularity in urban areas following the September 11, 2001, World Trade Center attacks, slam veteran and performance scholar Javon Johnson asks, "what is it about these highly political moments that give rise to such openly political art forms" (125)? This critical performance ethnography zooms in on the months following a devastating summer 2016 in Baton Rouge. That fall, local poets mapped out how they individually made sense of the heavy time period. In *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam*, Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz recounts how the 9/11 attacks impacted the NYC Urbana and Nuyorican slam communities:

The events of 9/11 left everyone speechless. No one knew what to do, what to say, how to react. Being poets, many of us retreated to our rooms, took out a pen and paper and tried to make sense of it... It was part therapy and part journalism; our way of trying to record things much bigger than voices... Many poets barely remember writing their poems from this time. The words they wrote came from a place of genuine shock, a time when people were desperate to process the tragedy in some way (249-255).

Aptowicz notes the need for slam poets to counter the barrage of images that filled the media and their surroundings, visuals of “fire, twisted steel, and the faces of the missing” (255). Like this dissertation, Aptowicz integrates poetry and narrative accounts from community members about 9/11. I am careful not to equate 9/11 to Baton Rouge’s “summer of sorrow” because they are different experiences in different places that impact people in unique ways. My fieldwork accounts, however, do parallel some of Aptowicz’s observations. Specifically, crisis conditions can supersede slam’s competitive nature, allowing for the possibility of revealing and transcending the genre’s form. By revealing the genre’s form I mean being honest about the seams that undergird its structure, like exposing the potential impacts of competition on artistic practice. By transcending the genre’s form I mean stretching slam’s limits and using slam as a vehicle to do something it was not necessarily designed for, like communities using slam poems to collectively respond to crisis situations.

This project of critical performance ethnography underscores that slam spaces have the potential to be generative performance outlets where transformative moments crystallize, hope becomes tangible, and experience palpable. This co-creative process is a compilation of the work, lives, and input of dozens of people and countless hours of combined labor. I could not begin to accomplish the objectives of this project without including the voices, interviews, and poetry of *Eclectic Truth* star groupers, Donney, Toiryan, Jazmyne, Desireé, and Melissa. To highlight their time, trust, and talent, chapter twelve of this dissertation is devoted to their poetry and our co-created discourses. These texts served as the base for the script and performances of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. In that concluding chapter, I provide context into our informant<->ethnographer relationships, their unedited

slam poems, and our full interview transcripts. Traditionally, dissertations utilize an appendix for full interview transcripts. Like a human body, however, an appendix is not essential to a dissertation. Showcasing our live dialogic texts as an individual chapter is one way to emphasize this artifact's co-created ontology. Critical scholarship urges researchers to provide space for people to make-meaning of their own lives, to speak for themselves. My ethical stance requires me to present expressions of these individuals in full and as part of the primary text of this dissertation for three primary reasons. First, by offering full transcripts, interviewees can maintain textual agency of their experiences. Second, I hold myself accountable by enabling you, the reader, to cross-check my ethnographic observations and subsequent performance choices. Third, this structural and conceptual choice is my attempt to emphasize that I in no way speak *for* Donney Rose, Toiryan Milligan, Jazmyne Smith, Desireé Dallagiacamo, Melissa Hutchinson, *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* or Baton Rouge, LA. Instead, at the heart of this critical performance ethnography lies my intention to listen and speak *with* and *behind*.

Slamnography: Considering Why People Do This, Together

As an ethnographer, I ask myself: Why do people do *this*, together? If I had to explain ethnography to a young me, using those six words might be clear enough to get me interested. In a November 2016 in-person interview, Baton Rouge-native Jazmyne Smith talked to me about using her writing to bestow wisdom upon her younger self. Jazmyne said much of her post-summer 2016 writing reflects how “I want to explain myself to be to a younger me, if that makes sense?” To get a sense of what makes this slam community special, I befriended slam poets, Baton Rouge residents, and *Poetry Alliance* members like Jazmyne and Melissa and

Donney and Desireé and Toiryan. *The Poetry Alliance* is the local collective of poets that hosts the weekly slam and other local events. With their permission, I filtered their narratives and slam poems through my experiential insights to provide a foundation for this *slamnography*.

To me, the *slamnography* category includes, broadly, any ethnographic-style research related to slam culture. I imagine the term becoming a searchable way to access both interdisciplinary and real-world slam research. I keep the “n” in *slamnography* to maintain roots in ethnography and researching culture associated with the slam form. *Slamnography* explores why people do *slam*, together. When researching slam literature for this project, I had a tough time navigating the wealth of different areas it falls into. A searchable cubbyhole like *slamnography* would have made this research process much more efficient! In this cubbyhole, room exists for ethnographic dissertations regarding slam culture *and* experiential slam-focused projects that are not ethnographies. I use this term not to colonize linguistic or cultural territory but, instead, create categorization for the sake of uniting the wealth of slam research that presently exists across disciplinary borders. Slam research spans performance studies to sociology to English to insights outside academia to *being* a slam poet. Allowing space for unconventional methodological approaches and categorizations is not unprecedented. Look to “proto-anthropology,” a term created to classify near-anthropological works (Eriksen and Neilson 1013). *Slamnographic* research incorporates components of slam culture, ethnography, and highlighting experiences of individuals within slam communities.

Therefore, my research of Baton Rouge’s *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* response to summer 2016 contributes to this ethnographic cubbyhole, *slamnography*. This *slamnographic* account explores what is at stake in writing and performing about lived experiences for members of

Eclectic Truth, and what it means to be an artistic journalist following a time of crisis. In his critical ethnographic project, *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*, Javon Johnson defines what it means to be a poetic journalist. Johnson quips, “with our witty and often heartbreaking three-minute lectures, we “combine intellectual rigor with artistic excellence that is critically engaged” (89). Are these three facets not also a methodological hallmark of useful ethnography? Are these criteria not also indicative of credible voices that should be considered in times of crises? *Slamnographies* should highlight slam culture. In interviews, *Eclectic Truth* star groupers, like Toiryan, vocalize their desire for their crafted narratives to gain exposure with dominant publics. The time they spent with me is invaluable to my conceptualization of Baton Rouge’s political and social divides. In *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*, Richard Bauman examines interrelationships in Texan oral narratives. Bauman expresses his work was made possible because southern individuals were willing to share their stories and their time. Bauman admits, “my greatest debt is to the storytellers whose verbal artistry provided the substance” for both his research and personal growth (vii). With poet permission, I de- and re-contextualized my ethnographic fieldwork, their slam poems, and our interviews to script an alternative performative vessel for their performance poetry. By demystifying poets, we demystify poetry, and who can be a poet, and why poetry matters, and the cultural critiques slam poets make every time their bodies take their place behind the microphone. We demystify motives and experience and art and a culture critiqued for its capitalist and competitive leanings to show that slam poems matter even when removed from being ranked by off-the-street *randos*!

Existing slam explorations largely focus on unraveling the poetry slam form, impacts on youth participants, and the national slam scene. This *slamnography* isolates the form's effect on *adults* who attended *Eclectic Truth's* weekly poetry ritual. Little performance scholarship exists in regards to slam cultures. Little performance studies research exists that disentangles the complexities of performance poetry communities. Almost no published research on slam communities during or after intense periods of crises exist. I have found no attempts of re-creating ethnographic findings into alternative slam-inspired performance formats. And little academic scholarship exists in regards to the form's impact on adult communities of poets. This *little* research is not due to a lack of substance in slam communities. *Au contraire, mon ami*. In *Feel These Words: Writing in the Lives of Urban Youth*, Susan Weinstein argues, "such poetry demands of its critic a new, interdisciplinary language that takes into account the complex set of literary, performance, and cultural issues that such work brings to the fore" (134). In *How to Read an Oral Poem*, John Miles Foley notes, "no one approach can ever be as enlightening or fulfilling as a combination of approaches, any more than a single photograph can offer as full a visual representation as can multiple shots from different angles" (81). By bringing slam-related research beneath an umbrella like *slamnography*, I hope to emphasize slam culture's interdisciplinary strength, as well as what the form can offer participants beyond competition.

This critical performance ethnography presents the theory, methodology, and practice surrounding the fieldwork, scripting, and performance of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. The structure of this dissertation is laid out to unpack theory, method, and practice, in that order. If you are most interested in the sausage in this gumbo (as my dissertation advisor put it), you have the option of first flipping to chapter three's ethnographic

account of *Eclectic Truth* during fall 2016, and chapter eight's performance script of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*! Otherwise, in this dissertation, as participant-observer, director, and co-performer, I unpack critical performance ethnography (chapter two and three), social drama (chapter four), and slam culture (chapter five) by employing a lens rooted in critical race theory. I outline how local poets permitted me to de- and re-contextualize their interviews into ensemble scenes and theatricalize their slam poems about the recent summer's charged events (chapter six, with full transcripts of poems and interviews provided in chapter twelve). Then, I describe how, one year after my research began, this involved and embodied process of ethnographic bricolage became the script and ensemble cast performance of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* (chapters seven, eight, and nine). Then, community members and live audiences in Louisiana and Georgia were invited to the ensemble performance to reflect on a capital divided (chapter ten). In chapter eleven, I take a look back at this project, three years later, with a series of epilogues. Ultimately, a performance-based analysis of this *slamnography* reveals why local slam communities matter as modes of redress following times of crises, how the neoliberal nature of the slam form can be revealed and transcended by its members, and how sense-making of lived experience heavily relies on the sense-maker.

CHAPTER TWO

CRITICAL PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY AS THEORY, METHOD, AND PRACTICE FOR RESEARCHING CULTURAL PERFORMANCE

The Personal Stakes Associated with Ethnographic Entanglements

In chapter two I unearth why and how critical performance ethnography is useful as theory, method, and practice in researching weekly rituals like *Eclectic Truth's* weekly poetry slam. Culture works to meet the needs of individuals, not the societies that necessitate their existence. Meaning, culture is often a result of unmet societal needs, so groups of people with commonalities co-create culture. Ethnographers must practice hyperawareness of our influence upon the characteristics, motivations, and spirit we ascribe to cultures. In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (often considered the first modern ethnography), early 20th century Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski writes, “besides the data of daily life and ordinary behavior, which are, so to speak, its flesh and blood, there is still to be recorded the spirit” of people that comprise cultures (22). Recording and presenting spirit is a tall task! In terms of tales, it may be the tallest to re-tell due to impacts of representation on real people. If those who have the privilege of time tell stories, then the re-telling of those stories derives from a body of non-native origin. Malinowski's form of participant-observation ran into ethnocentric ethical issues, including his pre-disposed racist and erotic feelings toward the people he researched. These attitudes are detailed in his fieldwork notes—*A Diary in the Strictest Sense*—published in 1967, 25 years after his death (Cowell and Medeiros). His diary paints an uneven snapshot of his anthropological work from 1922, and is an ethnographic fire alarm. We must admit the personal stakes associated with our ethnographic entanglements to provide a more honest research perspective. Critical ethnography requires researchers sacrifice their

positionality as an ethical condition of reporting their findings. Before we can begin to describe another's spirit, we must offer a calibration of our own.

Some may think ethnographers go into the field without theory. I argue we *always* go in with theory. We bring our baggage and our -ologies and -isms on our field trips. Our experiences are the bones of our approach, much like how community constitution is the skeleton of culture. Meaning, how a community is formed and shaped is the backbone of their commonality. In *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*, Javon Johnson iterates, ethnography is "rife with complexities that reveal as much about the ethnographer as they do about the community itself" (65). When ethnographers exclude pertinent information about their positionalities and biases, ethnographic research becomes distorted and possibly disingenuous. In "Toward Performative Research: Embodied Listening to the Self/Other," Helena Oikarinen-Jabai notes the importance of negotiating identities and otherness in one's self: "As a performative researcher, I expose myself in order to be able to place myself at a distance again" (578). This space provides room for us to dance with what Oikarinen-Jabai refers to as "our shadows." Our shadows are our biases and blindspots, our previous decisions that influence our future actions. The theoretical tools we carry into fieldwork influence our data interests. For example, this dissertation on *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* and summer 2016 is geared toward live theatrical performance because I am a performer. My predispositions shape my focus on those studied and how I study with them. This is why ethnographers must keep in contact with the communities inviting us in—to make sure the stories being told are not solely researcher conjecture.

Norman Denzin writes in *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*, “the storied nature of epiphanic experiences continually raises the following questions: Whose story is being told (and made) here? Who is doing the telling? Who has the authority to make the telling stick?” (35). To peel back the skin of this text and address Denzin’s questions, I offer a description of my positionality which influences my fieldwork perceptions and instincts. I was born and raised in Southern California for the first 24 years of my life. I am half-Persian, the son of an Iranian immigrant who moved here during the Iranian Revolution, and also taught me how *not* to treat people for whom you care. I moved out of his house when I was 16. I am half-white, and I spent one weekend a month with a mother who taught me first-hand about the poverty disease. I have not talked to either of them since, so I struggle with familial ties. My childhood taught me a favor by teaching me to *unlearn* my past in order to survive and thrive as an adult. As such, as a *tendonic* performance ethnographer, I go into the field aware of how we are all shaped by our experiences, and hyper-aware of how I have been formed by my own.

After being involved with athletics for most of my life, I fell in love with performance through high school theater involvement and finding forensics speech during my undergraduate time at Mt. San Antonio College and California State University, Fullerton. After receiving my Master’s from California State University, Long Beach, I moved to the more homogenous Midwest from 2010-2016. There, in Cedar Falls, Iowa, I taught college Communication Studies courses and co-directed a nationally-ranked and social justice-oriented forensics speech team. Even with our team’s national successes and notoriety, I learned I had little room for career growth at a four-year institution because I only had a master’s degree. So,

in 2016, I left Cedar Falls, IA, to earn my doctorate in performance studies at Louisiana State University and live in Baton Rouge.

Over the past decade, I have toured self-written advocacy-oriented performances relating to the intersections of self and oppressive power structures. A sampling of these shows include: exploring narratives of Guantanamo Bay prisoners in *The Worst of the Worst: GTMO*; unpacking injustices within our prison industrial complex in *CONVICT*; collaborating on *The Deported: A "Reality Show!"*, a performance that implicates audiences by giving them the right to vote on who is allowed to be American; and, recently, comparing domestic abuse at home to the impacts homelands have on citizens in *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show*. Two questions emerge from my performance-related research: 1) What are our responsibilities to one another within our communications, through ethical representation of on-stage performance, and for advocating toward equitable social progress? and 2) How can we reflexively grow out of past traumas inflicted by dominant others, systems, and structures? Because of my own lens, I keyed in on similarities with *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* star groupers. These slam poets tackle similar questions regarding the constitution of their creative community as well as how their identities intersect with the struggles of summer 2016.

As an atheist from very early on, I subscribe to Jacques Lacan's notions of failed unicity and feigned unicity (Lundberg 2). As humans, we attempt to simulate being a united entity, and sometimes moments of transcendence, or *communitas*, occur. *Communitas* is a brief moment of sensual utopic unicity that can be felt and accessed by a group of people sharing space (I expand on this concept in chapter four). Our expectation of societal wholeness is a false construct, though, because that feeling does not last. The rituals we undertake are

compensating for our inevitable failed unicity. Our search for oneness is what allows *communitas* to develop from the anti-structure of our ritual structures. I believe this gap compels our search for meaning and justice even though (non-digital) death is inevitable. This lens combined with my upbringing in churches, synagogues, and mosques, helps me appreciate the religious, sacred, and spiritual even as much of it fails to make emotional sense to me.

In “A De/colonizing Approach to Performance Ethnography,” Kakali Bhattacharya admits, “I cannot know everything, nor do I have a right to” (1077). I accept I cannot fully understand the impact social drama has on *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* community members because I do not inhabit their lived experiences. I also recognize, in writing about Black experiences, as many *Eclectic Truth* poets are Black, I am not an expert in the Black experience. Therefore, in documenting my perspective of this community of artistic journalists during a particularly turbulent time period, I offer two notes: First, I acknowledge I have the option of opting-in to the group, which affords me certain opportunities and limits the risks on my behalf. Second, I also have the option of opting-out. To hold myself visually accountable to the ethnographic research I planned to share, and to place my own body on the line, I cast myself as Desiree in *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* (I explore this in chapter nine). Since this community offered me the opportunity to share their sensitive stories, I felt I must sacrifice my time and embodiment as a means of accountability to the community’s trust.

Critical is Complicated

A metatheory is an umbrella hovering over a project that describes, prescribes, and informs every aspect under a common set of assumptions. Metatheoretical assumptions of

epistemology, ontology, and axiology cannot be separated when discussing communication as they are inherently intersectional, influential, and intertwined (K. Miller 30). We can better understand interpretive metatheory by contrasting it with objectivity-based theories that assume scholars work toward simplicity, prediction, and empirical evidence. In contrast, interpretive metatheory begins with the assumption that multiple truths exist in any phenomenon. The metatheory that hovers over my project is interpretive. While not everything is knowable, we gain knowledge through subjective experience. In this ethnography, I employ two lenses under the interpretive metatheory umbrella: critical theory and symbolic interactionism. Slippage between related theories demonstrates the fluid, ever-shifting discursive nature of communication. Situated within axioms, theories function as frameworks for prediction and reflection. Theory leads to propositions, which begets hypotheses and assumptions, explanations and rationalizations, and how we transport knowledge.

A critical lens navigates how our worlds are constructed through interaction, and how we behave and live within this socially constructed world (K. Miller 51). Critical theories like critical race theory (CRT) offer frameworks to analyze complexities and contradictions of marginalization and power within existing systems. Critical theory motivates toward equitable progress of subaltern populations and emphasizes lived experience as knowledge. CRT's roots are embedded in "the creative and intellectual discourse of racial minorities in Western society (particularly African Americans) that has expressed and interpreted their ongoing experience of discrimination" (Lindlof and Taylor 63). Critical performance theorists are interested in performances of discourse and materiality surrounding oppression and resistance. Critical theory begins with the contention that white supremacy and marginalization are maintained

over time and through law. CRT-based research explores the intersectional nature of identity markers and social categorizations like race, gender, origin, ability, and social class.

Intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” Essentially, intersectionality is the interconnectivity and overlapping of our social categorizations. In that seminal text, Crenshaw argues scholarship needs to take intersectionality into account if we are to address marginalization (140). Qualitative researchers who employ CRT challenge neoliberal views of a post-racial and color-blind America because the consequences for those pushed to the margins are always magnified.

In *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, Susan Somers-Willett argues, critical performance ethnography of local slam cultures can provide insights into “what slam poetry can tell us about race and identity in American culture” in the twenty-first century (8). Slam cultures often embrace diversity of identity in their memberships and their slam material. In Baton Rouge’s *Eclectic Truth* slam community, I noticed textures of CRT integral to the community co-constructed by observers, participants, and star groupers. CRT is exemplified in what and how star groupers *do* the poetry they produce, and through a supportive community encouraging wounds to lyrically air out. In my fieldwork, *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* core members practiced critical reflexiveness and seemed aware of the intersectionality at play in their performances regarding how summer 2016 tragedies impacted Baton Rouge. A few community members even included the term *intersectionality* in their slam poems! While namedropping terms does not make a culture critical, embracing the existence of these concepts allows for the possibility of criticalness by star groupers and slam cultures.

CRT is also a tool that can inform community responses to the murder of Alton Sterling. Sterling's murder *should* have been avoided and is part of a greater pattern of police misconduct. Some narratives surrounding this killing, though, do not mention that Sterling had previously been found guilty of "carnal knowledge of a teenager (whom he impregnated)" as well as failing to register as a sex offender (Bishop). Other narratives focus solely on that past crime. This contrast of victim in a current event and perpetrator in a past event points out the complicated nature of retroactive narrative tellings. The details show how repurposing the story of someone who has moved on from this world becomes loaded with meaning imbued by the teller of the narrative. Posthumous stereotypical descriptions reify the fallacy of Sterling being a victim of himself. Un-critical media coverage of these depictions have been found to "play a significant role in opinions surrounding the incident and criminal proceedings" (Dukes). While the contrasting incidents have nothing to do with one another, their juxtaposition complicates attempts to address the breach that underlies this specific summer 2016 crisis. In *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, Desireé ends scene "III. An Obituary for the Summer" with the following gem:

DESIREÉ	And it's complicated. And when we want to flatten, we don't do the work we need to do. He also has a son. Alton Sterling also went to prison because of child molestation. But police didn't kill him because of that. It's not as simple as a Tweet. It's way more complicated than a three-minute poem.
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As a critical performance ethnographer, I ask how does having this knowledge, combined with my ties to the community, impact my re-telling and comprehension of this experience? How much should I reveal and how should I share it? Whose stories should I tell? How can both the community and myself feel ethical about the telling?

Choices I made throughout my performance ethnography process address these questions. For example, during the process, Desireé asked me not to perform the poem, “For Kaiya, Hallelujah.” Kaiya Smith was a local youth poet who died amid the summer tragedies, right after returning from *Brave New Voices* nationals in Washington D.C. The rawness of the experience was why I found it compelling as an outsider, and also why Desireé was reluctant to have me share it in full with a wider audience. I did not secondguess Desireé’s request. In *Baton Rouge SLAM: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, we did not perform the poem. Instead, I received verbal permission from Desireé at a slam to create an intimate silent moment where the audience reads the first two lines together. To let Desireé’s words speak for themselves:

My friend Anna says we cannot write someone’s life into something as simple as a poem.

I say, I cannot write you into a poem, because you always have been one—

Even more complicated than the circumstances of Sterling’s life and death, for me, was if and how I should include Kaiya’s story. A complicated issue in writing about the departed is that they cannot respond. Her recent apolitical passing was a central focus of *Eclectic Truth’s* slam season. I use the term *apolitical* not to claim that there was nothing political about her passing, as our lives are impacted by and marked by politics at all times. I use *apolitical* because Kaiya’s death was not politicized by community members, dominant publics, or the media in the same way as other summer tragedies. At least from my experience at *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam*, Kaiya’s passing was not used as a tool to make a broader claim about society. Rather, commentary and poetry presented about Kaiya focused primarily on the personal connection community members had with her. In order to include Kaiya’s connection to *Eclectic Truth’s* fall experience, and before I could consider *how* I could present Desireé’s tribute poem, I knew I

needed to connect with Kaiya's mother, Petrouchka. I knew I needed to receive verbal consent from Petrouchka before allowing myself to tell this part of Kaiya's story (I expand on this in chapter three). Without a counter-balance to ethnographic decision-making and sense-making, ethnographic research can easily become a victim of its own gaze.

A Performance Ethnography Ethic that Does "Good"

This section identifies the best performance ethnographies as emergent, urgent, sensuous, experiential, more-than-representational, polyvocal, and rooted in an ethic of doing good. In the *New Ethnography*, H.L. Goodall echoes this ethic. Opposing ethnography's past of being a one-way street where researchers take and do not reciprocate in return, Goodall proposed a "new" ethnography that is critical and reflexive, and includes a "self-examining narrator" (23). For the self-reflexive narrator, "context replaces text, verbs replace nouns, structures become processes" (Denzin 16). The self-reflexive narrator seeks to understand what influences the status quo. Performance ethnographies study the *doing* of culture through deep hanging out. Only by deep hanging out can researchers begin to de-tangle textures that support taken-for-granted structures. This is more than just visiting for the weekend. It is like being invited to move in and praying the arrangements works out for all parties. If parties agree to share the results with academic *and* public audiences, then a performance ethnography reaches a broader public. When ethnography goes public, on-page and/or on-stage, an ethic of doing good matters because material consequences emerge from the ripples we create.

How can ethnographers do good? Johnson notes, "good ethnographers should always be politically committed to doing the work of deconstructing oppressive power structures by

telling difficult but always necessary truths” (25). I take this to mean honesty, vulnerability, and positionality are core values of good performance ethnography. For example, Johnson reveals he had to conquer his “own ethnographic arrogance;” that he already knew enough about the *Da Poetry Lounge* slam scene he was studying because he began his process as a star grouper of that culture. He admitted his arrogance left him “both unable and unwilling to see and hear the power dynamics at play within slam and spoken word spaces” (25). Before finding *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam*, I had considered other sites for ethnographic research. My ethnographic arrogance blinded me into thinking a weekly slam might not be the most fruitful root for my personal growth. My rationalization was that I had been a member of various performance collectives in the past, so I had a general idea of what to expect. Not until I experienced this slam space inhabited by passionate performers did I have to confront this pre-conceived notion. This arrogant notion stemmed from my generalized view of slam spaces, and was heightened by my own recent geographical separation from two performance collectives. This separation was necessitated by my summer 2016 relocation to Baton Rouge. I was not prepared to be reminded that the real value in slam communities is not the competition or the craft. The real value is tied to the people that make them up. That understanding opened up space for me to research as part of, and not above, the community.

How people are represented results in how they are treated. Therefore, cultures should have a say in their ethnographic representation. Multivocality is vital to critical ethnography because it offers a multitude of perspectives to slam up against one another and spark insight. For example, in “Performance and Ethnography, Performing Ethnography, Performance Ethnography,” Omi Osun Joni L. Jones reminds, “women and people of color have been

relegated to the object position in ethnography rather than occupying the space of contributing subjects who shape their own representations” (344). One can aim to do good, but not realize until too late that their intentions do not matter as much as their impacts. This is why concepts like being a white savior or an ally are problematic, even if well-intentioned. While ally’s support, by virtue of being an ally and not the allied, they have the option to keep an arms-distance to struggles of others. Accomplices, on the other hand, put themselves on the line, eschewing the option of space between themselves and experiences of another. Like that old meme says, “allies will bail you out of jail; accomplices will sit right beside you in that cell.” Good ethnography, then, demands multivocality, requires reciprocity, and participation must outweigh the cost of observation. Meaning, if researcher presence is culturally burdensome, the researcher must dramatically re-assess their relationship with that group. In *Doing Public Ethnography*, Phillip Vannini advocates for “a more-than-representational view of the lifeworld” that “does more than just ‘report’” (30). Meaning, ethnographers should strive for ethical commitments that center the culture studied, address narrative filters, and assure a researcher’s presence is outweighed by their contributions to and for the culture studied.

Ethnographers should also be careful about representing cultures in ways that invite spectacular consumption. This is *not* a hallmark of good performance ethnography—see 1980s Italian horror film *Cannibal Holocaust* for a lesson in what researchers should *not* do! Or, take Diana Taylor’s words at face value: in *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War,”* Taylor states, spectacles are powerful because they “transmit the specific plotline that a population identifies with: dramas of origin, individuation, and destiny, among others” (76). However, being careful does not mean *not* representing. As Taylor argues:

We have no choice. *Not* representing real political violence and atrocity only contributes to its legitimization and perpetuation. Rather than *whether* we should attempt such an undertaking, the question is *how* to represent this violence, how to think, and write about these bodies? What do these invisible bodies *mean*? Who determines that meaning? How are we being asked to respond to these representations that make conflicting tugs on us as witnesses, spectators, artists, activists, and scholars? How do we hold onto the significance of the “real” body even as it slips into the symbolic realm through representational practices? (147).

Performance ethnographers must be critical of our interpretations and what we select to perform, how we represent people, what we reveal, and what we attribute to the cultures we step into (Stucky 176). Rather than consumption of culture, then, good performance ethnography should emphasize conversation with culture. In *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*, Dwight Conquergood describes “dialogical” performance, or co-performative witnessing, which aims “to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another” (9). A critical performance ethnographer works to mediate this conversation. Bernstein writes, poetry “is among the most social and socially responsive—dialogic—of contemporary art forms” (23). Bernstein adds, “the reading remains one of the most participatory forms in American cultural life” and “*it is a measure of its significance that it is ignored*” (23). A good performance ethnography brings out aesthetically what might be ignored everyday by not only outsiders, but by the studied culture as well. Good performance ethnography becomes a valuable tool to share lived experiences of subaltern groups as it pushes everyone touched into considering our “beliefs and behavior” (Jones 344). Good performance ethnography “gives life to people in context, makes embodied practices meaningful, and generates analysis for seeing the conditions that make the socially taken-for-granted visible” (Warren 318). Good performance

ethnography disrupts what we *know* by examining how experiences shape realities. Good performance ethnography is attune to the goals of the culture studied, as well. For example, a culture might not want their stories shared with outsiders, or for broader publics, and that is their right. Some members of other cultures, like several star groupers of *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam*, specifically espouse that they would like their messages to be consumed by more publics.

Public ethnography is part of a broader paradigmatic shift in ethnography and qualitative research toward reflexive, sensuous, interpretive, narrative, arts-informed, more-than-representational, and reciprocal cultural work. Vannini states performance ethnography travels the public ethnography tightrope when “it uses the aesthetic, the performative, to foreground the intersection of politics, institutional sites, and embodied experience” (9). Although public ethnography is not the same as performance ethnography, performance ethnographies can be public ethnographies once performance research is made accessible to non-academic audiences. Academic settings can limit public reach. Public ethnographies acknowledge there are multiple publics, and ethnographies need to be strategically and ethically shared. Vannini argues ethnographers can benefit the public by moving from a “do-no-harm ethic to a do-something-good ethic” (17). One may begin to move in that direction by listening to the culture studied and becoming a participatory researcher who works “to understand and address issues *identified* by the people” (20). *Doing* good is an action, and its foundation requires ethnographers to forefront reciprocity. In interviews and at the slam, *Eclectic Truth* slam poets repeatedly identified a desire for their messages to reach publics beyond the walls of the slam space. Therefore, I sought permission of star groupers to ethically

craft a community performance based on their 2016 poetry and insights in order to reach publics that might not typically attend the weekly slam ritual.

Performance Possibilities Grounded in Morality, Ethical Injunctions, and Hope

I approach critical ethnography as rooted in critical race theory and an ethic of doing something good for/with the studied culture. When lives are involved, neutrality and objectivity become false constructs that create barriers between researcher and researched. I developed my ethical ethnographic foundation from studying the scholarship of Dwight Conquergood, Norman Denzin, and D. Soyini Madison. Their texts teach me that deep care reflexivity about researcher subjectivity is one way to strive for ethnographic unicity. Triangulating Conquergood's "Moral Map," Denzin's "Ethical Injunctions," and Madison's "Performance of Possibilities" allows me to solidify my ethnographic epistemology in an ethic of doing something good rather than doing no harm. Harm, of course, is relative to the harmed and harming, and representational impacts magnify when findings are performed for live audiences.

First, Conquergood's moral map informs my approach. Conquergood understood bodies harvest knowledge about culture. He also understood that performance exchanges experiences across bodies. "Life in Big Red," a wonderfully impressionistic ethnography about his time in Chicago's Albany Park, serves as an example. Conquergood lived in a dilapidated building that mirrored global displacement as it grouped ethnically diverse working-class people under one busted tenement. Reading about Big Red showed me vulnerability does not equate to passivity. Having a stated stance admits positionality. The four ethical pitfalls of Conquergood's moral map—first published in "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of

Performance”—are a useful guide for ethnographic research ethics. The map features two continuums on an x/y axis: identity to difference and detachment to commitment; dialogic performance is in the optimal center position. If one shifts too far on any side of the axis, their approach can become problematic, resulting in: the custodian’s rip-off (selfishness), the enthusiast’s infatuation (superficiality), the skeptic’s cop out (choosing to opt-out), and/or the curator’s exhibitionism (sensationalization). If our performances enact a moral stance, how we perform research enacts a moral claim. At the center of these four problematic quadrants is dialogic performance. Here, the researcher shows vulnerability and struggle, resists conclusions, and, instead of speaking *about* the other, Conquergood advocates speaking *with*. Resting in the middle, however, is problematic as well, because neutrality does not often fall in line with a marginalized community’s needs. For example, a neutral stance on the existence of climate change does nothing to advance the goal of its resolve! The moral map, then, should not be seen as a way to avoid those continuums, but used as an ethnographic teeter-totter that continually re-assesses a researcher’s relationship to what they are studying. In further research, Conquergood alters the term dialogical performance to co-performative witnessing in order to emphasize that community members need to be thoroughly considered throughout ethnographic processes. He also suggests performances be attended by the communities, and that a researcher’s body should be co-temporally present when dialogically meeting with the other. These conditions should allow for a mutually beneficial and ethical study that is embraced by the studied culture and useful for those with which it will be shared.

Next, I draw on Denzin’s critical pedagogy of ethical injunctions, which argues research should and can be rooted in the community from which it emerges. This can only occur by

beginning with a respect for differences. The ethic “predicated on *a pedagogy of hope*” (329) is based on values shared by the community and practiced by its star groupers; this ethic:

Seeks narratives that ennoble human experience, performances that facilitate civic transformations in the public and private spheres. This ethic ratifies the dignities of the self and honors personal struggle. It understands cultural criticism to be a form of empowerment, arguing that empowerment begins in that ethical moment when individuals are led into troubling spaces occupied by others (331).

In “The Politics and Ethics of Performance Pedagogy: Toward a Pedagogy of Hope,” Denzin writes about the 2001 World Trade Center terrorist attacks. He asks, “how can we use the aftermath of the crisis of 9/11 as a platform for rethinking what is meant by democracy and freedom in America today?” (325). Similarly, I use performance ethnography to explore how *Eclectic Truth* star groupers utilized the aftermath of summer 2016 as a platform for redressive action (chapter four expands on this). By slamming interviews against one another and re-contextualizing *Eclectic Truth* slam poems, I ask how can we use the aftermath of that summer to better understand the community it impacted? Performance ethnography holds the promise of liberatory causes because performance texts open “up concrete situations that are being transformed through acts of resistance” (331). Claiming accountability for the worlds in which one is involved is essential to an ethic of care and goodnes. As such, Denzin offers six questions performance ethnographers must consider. Does this Performance: 1) Nurture critical race consciousness? 2) Use historical re-stagings and traditional texts to subvert and critique official ideology? 3) Heal? Empower? 4) Avoid Conquergood’s pitfalls? 5) Enact a feminist and communitarian ethic? 6) Present *a pedagogy of hope*? I made sure to attend to each of these questions through my performance ethnography process. By striving for an ethic of equity over equality, I hoped to nurture critical race and intersectional consciousnesses. I de- and re-

contextualized interviews and slam poems to excavate motivations. Regarding Conquergood's moral map, I did my best to rest in the optimal center position, while reflexively pushing and pulling on my motivations utilizing the four pitfalls. And to confront fear of further crises, I maintained that *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* was actually about resilience and hope because, as Denzin writes, "hope works from rage to love" (331).

Madison's text, *Critical Performance Ethnography*, shepherded my ethnographic research process. A student of Conquergood and an advisor of Johnson's, Madison's critical ethnographic scholarship serves as a bridge for my own work. Madison notes performance ethnography is entrenched in politics of representation and is always moral and political, so researchers must have this on our mind at all times. Through fieldwork and (re)performance, we legitimize marginalized stories, whether or not legitimization is our intention. For example, Xero Skidmore, a member of the Baton Rouge's poetry community and Executive Director of *Forward Arts*, messaged me saying the show we performed for the community "validates" their organization and causes. These words meant a lot to me. They signaled a recognition for the care the cast and myself put into this project. As a critical scholar, however, I must also acknowledge the possible issues with taking this type of statement entirely at face value, as well as casting myself in a position to validate or legitimize others. How willfully obtuse would I have to be toward another's expertise of their own experience?! An ethnographer must be careful with a statement like this, as it causes the dialogic pinball to bounce from custodian's rip-off to enthusiast's infatuation to skeptic's cop-out to curator's exhibitionism all at the same time! On a positive note, a comment like this can send a signal that ethnographic research undertaken is lining up with community objectives. Performing subaltern and subversive voices

proclaims existence, life, and the potential for change through vocalization. Madison echoes Augusto Boal in that, as researchers, we cannot go into communities to help. That's oppression. "Their" problems are *our* problems. Neutrality toward the experiences of others is not critical, as the pure center position embraces the status quo and keeps an arms-distance toward the issues a culture studied faces.

An ethnographer must strive to be ethical and do good. During fall 2016, *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* operated as a redressive action to the multiple crises of summer 2016 by embracing Madison's "performance of possibilities." At the weekly slam ritual, community members literally performed about alternate possibilities and lifeworlds in order to counter and address the onslaught of summer crises. Their performances show that utopian performatives are not about the idea that one performance can change the world. Rather, they infer change can begin by amplifying worlds and ideas of those who desire the change. Ethnographers enter the field to find stories. As my time in Baton Rouge has taught me, the ethic we bring into the field also determines what kinds of stories find us.

CHAPTER THREE

BATON ROUGE PERFORMS TRAGEDY AT THE POETRY SLAM: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF *ECLECTIC TRUTH* AFTER SUMMER 2016

Baton Rouge, Summer 2016: A Play-by-Play Breakdown

Play.

Local residents remember summer 2016 in Louisiana's capital city of Baton Rouge as an imperfect storm of death, violence, and protests juxtaposed against a backdrop of unprecedented flooding.

Pause. Before we dive into the summer, we must acknowledge centuries of tension that have manifested in the city's demographic distribution as well as its political divide. Summer 2016's tragedies do not occur in a bubble *because* of these unresolved racial tensions. Holding a mirror toward the "Red Stick," many of Baton Rouge's marginalized citizens see shadows of segregation hover over their present-day doorsteps, their classrooms, and in the parish's architecture (Hennessy-Fiske). Notably, Dustin Cable's "Racial Dot Map" uses demographic data derived from the 2010 United States Census to provide a color-coded snapshot of the infrastructure of Baton Rouge's 230,000 person geographic distribution. This dynamic map clearly shows a massive divide in where people live. According to the map, Black residents reside predominately to the north of parallel-running roads, Florida Boulevard and Government Street, and white people predominately live to the south of those parallel roads. Southern University and A & M College, an HBCU (historically Black college and university), rests well north of this infrastructural divide. Louisiana State University, a PWI (predominately white institution), is below Baton Rouge's equator. Government St. and Florida Blvd. serve as Baton Rouge's Mason-Dixon line, splitting the city from the west, starting downtown at the Mississippi

River levee. Many North Baton Rouge residents report “they feel ignored by their leaders” due to the massive disparities in resources, healthy food options, and public investment compared to the rest of the parish (R. Allen). *Two roads diverged in* Baton Rouge—

Fast forward. On June 5, 2016, bystander footage showed local law enforcement killing Alton Sterling, 37, outside the Triple S convenience store parking lot on South Foster Ave., where he regularly sold CDs. Sterling was just one of over 250 Black people killed in the United States by police in 2016 (Craven). In 2016, Black males between the ages of 15 and 34 were killed 900% more often than other United States citizens (Swaine and McCarthy). Two white officers shot Sterling—a Black man, Baton Rouge-native, and father to five children—multiple times, at close range, while Sterling was restrained, face-to-pavement. Police said Sterling reached for a gun; bystander footage showed that to be untrue. Witness video showed Salamoni—who shot a restrained Sterling six times... *six*—draw his gun and order, “don’t fucking move, or I’ll shoot you in your fucking head.” Charges were never brought against Salamoni, and the other officer at the scene received a three-day suspension, with the Louisiana Attorney General stating they “acted as reasonable officers under existing law and were justified in their use of force” (Hanna). After being fired from the Baton Rouge Police Department in 2018 due to his history of problematic behavior, Salamoni credited God with saving his life, and justified his actions because he was “so mad at Sterling for making him kill him” (Mustian). *Making* him. On March 30, 2018, police released bodycam footage. That same day, Salamoni was fired for firing those six shots on camera. For agreeing not to appeal his termination, in July 2019, the Baton Rouge Police Department and Salamoni agreed to an undisclosed settlement (Skene and Toohey).

Zoom in. On July 17, spurring regional and national controversy over police brutality and structural racism, police-citizen tensions magnified at Hammond Air Plaza on Airline Highway. There, three Baton Rouge police officers—two white and one Black—were murdered, and three others were wounded, by a Black man from Missouri (Visser). This ambush and shootout happened ten days after five police officers were killed and seven others were shot in Dallas, Texas, by a Black man from Dallas (five hours from Baton Rouge). While these two shooters have no relation, these two shootings were the deadliest incidents for law enforcement in 15 years; since September 11, 2001 (Park). Following this tragedy, police supporters posted themselves with signs in high-traffic areas around Baton Rouge. These majority white and male supporters claimed infrastructural territory, like overpasses above the 10 freeway and along the sidewalks of Government St., with #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter signage.

Zoom in. The first weeks of July featured protests inspired by recent tragedies and media coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement. By July 11, police had arrested nearly 200 Baton Rouge protestors (G. Allen), almost all non-violent. These demonstrations flooded Mid-City streets, the capital, and Airline Highway. Just 24 hours after the Dallas police murders, Jonathan Bachman's photograph, *Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge*, was proliferated across local and national media outlets. In this powerful image, Ieshia Evans, a Black woman, stands firmly in a flowing dress, with arms crossed, outside Baton Rouge Police Department headquarters. On the concrete pavement of Florida Blvd., Evans refuses to move despite two of BRPD's militarized riot gear-clad police officers charging toward her, and football teams of armored guards posed mere feet behind those two charging men. The image of Evans recalls the 1989 image of the Tiananmen Square Tank Man confronting four tanks on a Beijing street, the

morning after Chinese military suppressed protests by force. Some called Evans, a mother of one, “a superhero,” “a modern-day Statue of Liberty,” “the calm at the center of the storm;” while others said Evans’ protest broke the law, and she “deserved” jail for blocking a major highway (M. Miller). Stoic, graceful, resolved, Evans did not say anything to the charging police; she did not resist. Evans did not look at the two officers steamrolling toward her, “instead, she seemed to look *beyond* them” (M. Miller). Nevertheless, they arrested her. Demonstrating the lasting resonance of Evans’ stand, at a September 2019 University of Northern Iowa Constitution Day presentation titled, “Separate and Unequal: Considering Modern Day Segregation and the American Constitution,” I had the privilege of witnessing Nikole Hannah-Jones, creator of the *1619 Project*. There, Hannah-Jones deployed the image of Evans as a historical marker connecting this moment to 400 years ago when Black people were first enslaved and shipped to what would become (155 years later) the United States of America. This is where the breach begins—

Zoom out. August brought historic flooding to Southeastern Louisiana, ravaging Baton Rouge to the point that over 100,000 of its 230,000 residents applied for emergency flood assistance (Bacon). The flood was given no name, but it is referred to by some local residents as “the Great Flood.” Thirteen flood-related deaths were recorded (Lau). The unnamed flood ranks among the costliest natural disasters in U.S. history (Farber). This toll takes place just eleven years after Hurricane Katrina crashed into Louisiana, only eight years after Hurricane Gustav collided with Cajun country. Some survivors of Katrina and Gustav took refuge and rebuilt their lives in Baton Rouge. Sadly, some lost everything *again* during the nameless 2016 floods (Brown et al.; Troeh). 31% of the homes within the greater Baton Rouge area were impacted. Nature

did not discriminate, however, as Black and white residents pretty evenly split 94% of those flood-damaged homes (Burris).

Picture-in-picture. Adding a layer of smog to summer 2016's storms, the Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton presidential campaigns dominated news cycles. National news, however, covered Baton Rouge differently than how Baton Rouge covered Baton Rouge (Berman). A column titled "National Media Fiddle as Louisiana Drowns" notes the lack of coverage Baton Rouge received, and that recovery support "is directly commensurate to the number of people who are made aware of the scope of the devastation" (M. Scott). If coverage is lacking, support in times of crisis will be lacking. In *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, Thomas Lindlof and Brian Taylor concur with this assessment, arguing the "degree of news coverage may have little relationship to an event's impact on people's lives—unless the coverage itself creates the impact" (84). In other words, how media covers community issues has impacts on how communities recover and respond. Lindlof and Taylor add, "media often give intense attention to the singularity of an event at the expense of the larger social, political, and historical forces surrounding it" (84). We pay more attention to the crisis than the breach. Sterling happened to be a murdered *Black* man, the floods had no name to identify with, and those summer 2016 crises were stirred by a band-aided breach that has scabbed for hundreds of years. A 2018 *FiveThirtyEight* study identifies a key effect of the underlying breach: Baton Rouge is the third-most politically polarized city in the United States, behind Jackson, MS, and New Orleans, LA, while ahead of Birmingham, AL, and Shreveport, LA. That's three of the five most divided cities in the country within the same state! Additionally, Black and white segregation has been found to correlate with political segregation (Dottle; Burkess). For

example, a 2018 Pew Research Center study notes self-identified Black protestants voted 96% for the 2016 democratic presidential candidate, white mainline protestants voted 37% democratic, and white evangelical protestants voted 16% democratic. Also, race has been found—

Stop.

Moving to Baton Rouge during summer 2016 allowed me to experience the city from an outsider's perspective—

Rewind. Re-record.

Moving to Baton Rouge during summer 2016 allowed me to observe, participate, and admit I knew nothing concrete about what was going on in the city around me! There was much more to process in the state's capital than crawfish and tailgating and Mike the Tiger VI and Stormy Daniels. It is no coincidence, then, for the past two decades, the weekly *Eclectic Truth* poetry slam has functioned as a cathartic, confessional, and creative outlet for citizens of Baton Rouge. During fall 2016, *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* functioned as redressive action for the community in response to the crises of the summer. The weekly ritual is held downtown at the *Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge*. My time spent with these performing poets showed me a community safe space that shares more than compelling poetic narratives and timely artistic analyses. They admit to their neighbors what is going on around them, that the potholes they drive on every day cannot simply be ignored. Unaddressed, potholes evolve into craters. Together, every week (or so) for the past two decades, southern poets in this community choose to collectively confess dreams of change while simultaneously harnessing their artistic

craft. And, starting in September 2016, I chose (and they invited me) to join, listen, perform, and—

Play. Local residents remember summer 2016 in Louisiana’s capital city of Baton Rouge as an imperfect storm of death, violence, and protests juxtaposed against a backdrop of unprecedented flooding. That fall, in response to the constant triage of tragedy, *Eclectic Truth* slam poets shared their narratives and transcended the ritual of their weekly poetry slam. The form’s hallmark of competition faded into the background while narratives of summer 2016 rose to the surface. One year later, after receiving permission from five star groupers, I staged the ensemble production, *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. In this performance of ethnography, I theatricalized local poet interviews and re-contextualized *Eclectic Truth* slam poems, and invited “Red Stick” residents to reflect on a capital divided.

A Performance Ethnographer Immigrating to the “Red Stick”

Ethnographers explore textures of culture. Texture is the layering of norms, rituals, conflict, and community leading to cultural development and discourse. As an ethnographer of performance, I focus on both everyday and aesthetic cultural performances. I seek to complicate texture and messiness by remixing those performances (with permission). Messiness is the spillage created from playing with texts. As a performance ethnographer, I seek to de- and re-contextualize texture and messiness to gain critical insights. Lindlof and Taylor note, “decisions made in the first days and weeks reflect an understanding of, and respect for, the ties that bind the researcher and the participants” (97). Just as I impact the space I enter and record, that space can invoke vastly unique contextual and emotional realities

upon me (Furman, Lietz, and Langer 2). Therefore, mining researcher positionality gives readers background to textually assume my choices. Offering positionality allows researchers to confront biases through exposure. The more upfront ethnographers are about our perspectives, the more we show our work, the more useful our research can become to performance studies, ethnography, and slam poetry communities. By peeling away personal and disciplinary positionalities, ethnographers allow readers to peer behind the ink, exposing vulnerabilities and blindspots. For example, a blindspot I clearly had and *have* is the understanding of what it is like to be a Black person in the south. Therefore, when writing about a southern poetry community that features many Black poets, I must be careful to consider how I present and shape the portrait I paint.

Originally from Los Angeles, California, I received my Master of Arts degree in Communication Studies from California State University, Long Beach. While there, I undertook my first critical performance ethnography project, *Speak Out! Ethnography of Long Beach's LGBTQ...H? Toastmasters Community*. I spent four months in the field with the Toastmasters, constructed an ensemble performance (with their permission), and presented the production for the *Speak Out!* community. In addition to teaching me hyper-awareness of identity, ethics of care, and the power of reciprocity, that vibrant community showed me how knowledge could be gained and tribute paid through re-contextualization and sharing experiences. Following my time at CSULB, I lived in the Midwest for six years. There, I taught at the University of Northern Iowa and Hawkeye Community College, co-directed a top-ten collegiate speech team at UNI, and hosted a monthly performance slam at Octopus Bar for the Cedar Falls community. During this time, I also created advocacy-based solo and ensemble performances

focusing on topics like prison reform, immigration and white supremacy, enemy combatants and treatment of detainees, and other social justice-related issues revolving around marginalized groups of people. While atheist, I recognize the closest thing to spirituality I have ever felt is when in the presence of committed groups of people performing what they are passionate about; when the gaseous exchange of energy becomes palpable through presence and dialogic engagement. As an atheist, I recognize I do feel spiritual in ritual. While this biographical information does not matter to *Eclectic Truth's* story, it matters because I am the one documenting the story. To get to know me is to get to know how this research is weaved.

After spring 2016, I began to pursue my doctorate in performance studies at Louisiana State University, officially resettling in the “Red Stick.” While far from where I grew up, this was definitely not as far a move as my Persian father who immigrated to Los Angeles during the 1979 Iranian Revolution. For me, a SoCal-born adult, the south was uncharted territory. Before the fall semester of 2016 began, I spent two separate weeks in my new home (I often travel during summers as a performance coach and artist). My first week in Baton Rouge was the week of Sterling’s murder, which received extensive national media coverage. I floated through my new pink flamingo and stray cat-filled Spanish Town neighborhood blocks from the capitol building on the night of the killing. I remember feeling as if I had migrated to a city in mourning, a city split in two. I had moved to a place reminding me of my Los Angeles childhood and the aura that hovered over the “City of Angels” during the 1992 Rodney King riots. I was seven, then. Miles away from our one-bedroom apartment, the television coverage compelled me to watch. I was 30 in 2016. Miles from my house, I was compelled to drive by the scenes. A few days after Sterling’s murder, I traveled to Florida for work. On the day of my arrival, word of the

Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, FL, killing 49 and wounding 53, spread. This shooting shifted national media talking points from “*another* murdered Black man and police brutality” to “*another* mass shooting and the gun debate.” These horrific tragedies forced me to recognize the privilege I have in being able to uproot myself out of those communities after my contract was complete. Because of the option to opt in, tragedies do not have the same visceral impact on me as they do for locals. As Desireé reminded me in an in-person interview, when it’s “your community it’s just so different, it’s so different.” Jazmyne told me, “this happened down the street. This could have been any person in my circle.” Arms-distance relationships with tragedy often correlate with proximity toward that exposure. The closer to a crisis or lived experience we are, the more likely we are to care.

During my second week in Baton Rouge, historic floods devastated the city. I remember watching SnapChat videos of vehicles pretending to be boats and even resurrected caskets floating down concrete rivers! Water filled the vacant potholes. They later turned to craters. I drove by decimated areas in East Baton Rouge Parish, where houses invoked episodes of *the Walking Dead*—insides gutted onto front yards. The flood produced a smell I could only describe as rotten cardboard, tobacco, and old Christmas trees. Without hyperbole, everyone in the parish was either negatively impacted or knew someone whose life drastically changed. This breadth of impact was confirmed in newspapers, by word-of-mouth, and even a haunting first few weeks of the LSU semester for my fellow students and the faculty. Our department delayed our graduate school orientation, an aura of hesitancy hovered over interactions with faculty members, and undergraduate students from Louisiana summoned their Hurricane Katrina flashbulb memories. In contrast to the national coverage of Sterling’s murder and the police

killings, national news outlets were criticized for treating the unnamed flood of 2016 as “a secondary story” (Palotta). Politicians—specifically presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump—were critiqued for the timing of their Baton Rouge visits and the utilization of their platforms to advance campaigns during a time of local crisis. Then-President Barack Obama was critiqued for vacationing in Martha’s Vineyard. A few days after the flood began, I returned to Florida, contemplating what type of Baton Rouge home I would return to in August.

From a transplant new to Baton Rouge, the summer’s impacts were visceral in interactions, demeanors, and vocalized struggles of my neighbors. Six months later, flood wreckage continued to litter the city. Three years later, now, the city has not forgotten the impact of the floods, or the footage of Sterling and the police, or the battles between nature and media coverage. Eight blocks from my new home, however, the *Eclectic Truth* slam community showed me more than a city mourning. With open words, they invited me into a resilient culture. These artistic journalists allowed me to spend time with their poems inside the poetry slam at the *Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge*, and listen to their stories outside that space over several coffees and a cigarette (or three). The discourse taking place within this particular community at this particular time resonated with previous communities I have existed within, like competitive forensics speech, theatre, and performance slams. These communities defined and raised me to become a critical artist<->scholar and the performance ethnographer I continue to grow into. As such, I sensed the perspectives of these local poets would be rich from the initial *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* I attended. There, nine of twelve poems performed in the slam competition referenced the summer’s tragedies. They featured an openness to address collective fissures through performance poetry. After receiving

permission from star groupers to ethnographically research the collective, to collect their poetry, and to chat about their perspectives, I remixed their slam poems and interview transcripts into the archival playscript and ensemble performance featured in chapter two, *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*.

When Slam Poetry becomes More than the Poetry Slam

As *Eclectic Truth* is a culture connected through performing poetry, the binding that is the love of performance was a natural bridge between me and this site of study. At the beginning of my fieldwork, however, an ethnographic performance was not my intention. I was trying to find some like-minded creatives unaffiliated with my new and *sweaty* place of work and school, Louisiana State University. I entered the field before I even knew it was the field! While ethnographers attempt to capture and share culture, Baton Rouge's slam culture captured me first. Going into the field without ethnographic purpose allowed the textures of summer 2016 to organically develop in the slam poetry I witnessed.

The "Our Story" portion of *Eclectic Truth's* Facebook page informs audiences of the cost of attendance: "\$5 @ the door OR pay what you can—no one is turned away based on ability to pay." This statement shows this community's willingness to adapt to the needs of its congregation, to remain an accessible resource for those that make the slam possible. Contrary to stereotypes of the slam form, points are not the point of poetry slams, and poetry is not the point of slam poetry. People are the point of both.

Eclectic Truth was founded in 1998 by LSU Communication Studies graduate student Ramon "Ray" Sibley Jr. and *the Poetry Alliance* of Baton Rouge. Sibley's 2001 doctoral

dissertation, *Oral Poetry in a Literate Culture: A Performance Ethnography of Poetry Slam*, provides the first ethnographic account of this arts-based community. Like me, Sibley was a graduate student at LSU while researching and participating at *Eclectic Truth*. Toiryan excitedly gave me an account of how the community has adapted since he started attending in 2015, saying, “back in the day... *Eclectic Truth* was generally thriving on *erotic* poems! That’s what they were doing. If you went on stage with an erotic poem it got everybody *geared up*.” There have been many pivots in their past, all informed by community needs. For example, while the slam had been a significant focus of *Eclectic Truth* up until the fall 2017 season, the years since have seen a larger emphasis on the open-mic portion of the weekly ritual. *Eclectic Truth* is hosted and developed by *The Poetry Alliance*, a local arts collective consisting of between five and twelve community volunteers. *The Poetry Alliance* sponsors other events, as well, such as youth and regional slams, talk-backs and memorial events, and hosts featured poets travelling into town. As Desireé informed me, they “are just a group of community members. It’s comprised of folks that stuck around.” There is value in consistency and presence. Throughout my time in Baton Rouge, starting with the first weeks of the fall 2016-17 slam season, *Eclectic Truth* showed me their weekly ritual embraces malleability, current events, and listening to community needs.

I entered the glass doors of *the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge* on a lukewarm Tuesday evening in September, during the fall semester’s third week. I walked over from my new residence, eight blocks away, near the Spanish Town Market and the 10 freeway. From the moment audiences enter the *the Arts Council* venue, the mood is set by a low-tech iPod-DJ. The DJ shuffles through a playlist of contemporary artists like Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole. The tunes

are played over one giant black speaker a few feet from a poetry slam's most traditional and sacred artifact, the center-stage microphone. Featuring novice-to-veteran community poets ages sixteen-to-75, diversity of age, race, class, and gender is readily embraced, vocalized, and embodied. From my first visit, I regularly read two-thirds of *Eclectic Truth's* 20-40 weekly participants as people of color or, like me, forever checking the mixed-race box of "other."

At *Eclectic Truth*, Baton Rouge community members are invited to dialogue through the performative vehicle of slam poetry in the performative space of the poetry slam. During fall 2017, the slam was typically held in the street-facing *Firehouse Gallery*. The *Firehouse Gallery* is named for its interior aesthetic showcasing three vintage fire trucks, several fire poles, firefighter memorabilia, tributes to community firepeople, is a place they often hold meetings, and is a community event space for rent featuring a museum-like ambiance. Here, every Tuesday, *Eclectic Truth* community members perform hierarchical critiques surrounded by antiques of systemic protection. Upon entering the double wooden doors leading to the first floor *Firehouse Gallery*, poets are invited to sign-up on the slam or open-mic lists, and pay \$5 (or what you can) to enter. The sign-in book is also called the "Question of the Day!" journal. In this journal, poets sign up to perform and provide a short response to the night's prompt. The prompts range from "what are you thankful for" to "what celebrity would you push off a cliff?". The host introduces upcoming poets utilizing their "Question of the Day!" responses as a segue.

The weekly event is split into two acts, the slam, and the open-mic. Six slots are available for the slam and ten for the open-mic. The slam features two rounds in which each of the six poets perform two poems, each under three minutes. Five randomly-selected audience members, or judges, score the performances. Over the thirteen-week season, performers

accumulate points based on their placings at each slam. In the spring, the top four point-earners are chosen to compete for the Baton Rouge Slam Team at the *National Poetry Slam*. To isolate characteristics unique to slam, this account does not focus on the open-mic portion of *Eclectic Truth*. Additionally, while there are unique differences between national and local slams, this ethnographic study focuses on traits unique to *Eclectic Truth* during a concentrated period of time. Also, while team slams and youth slam competitions like *Brave New Voices* also take place, this specific community primarily showcased individual slams and adult poets. As such, the performance of this ethnography aims to privilege their cultural perspectives.

Most slam communities feature similar operational roles. These duties include host, DJ, scorekeeper, timekeeper, drink-tender, set-up and take-down, and merchandise attendant. The host, also called the MC, the emcee, or the Slammaster, is integral to curating an audience's experience. Hosts fill silence with personality. They keep the show moving, fill dead-space with audience-approved banter, and guide audiences in following community norms. For example, they make sure the audience continues applauding poets as they head *all* the way up to the mic and not stop until the poet has sat back down in their seat. In *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present*, Lesley Wheeler notes, the "emcee delivers a short speech describing the slam rules, exhorting the judges to remain consistent in their scoring and not to be swayed by the audience, and exhorting the audience to try to sway the judges" (145). Regular audiences hear versions of this speech so often, like a sermon, the congregation ends up knowing it by heart. Variations of the host's oral recitation occur due to social context, host personality, audience engagement, and community dynamics.

At *Eclectic Truth*, after the host mentions slam poetry competitions originated in Chicago in 1987, the audience is cued to respond with a boisterous, “so what?!” This term originated with Marc Smith in 1987, “for humility’s sake.” Audiences responding with “so what?!” became “a way to declare that everyone in the room was just as important for participating” as Smith was for beginning the slam as we know it today (Merenda). This call-and-response ritual, this two-word performative utterance, uses word-power to question ideas of founding, coining, and colonizing a space with white-centered narratives. After this call-and-response, the night’s host often states *Eclectic Truth* was founded by Sibley. This statement cues the audience to exclaim, “shut the front door!” There is dynamic energy in coded chorals. In addition to oral history-telling, other community norms include snapping fingers, stomping, and hoot-hooting as signs of approval, resonance, and validation. *Hoot-hoot!*

The host is also tasked with introducing the sacrificial poet, “on whom the judges initially tested their scoring impulses” (Wheeler 145). At the beginning of each show, a poet is offered as a sacrifice for audiences to understand slam expectations, for poets to gauge audience and judge reactions, and for judges to utilize as a calibration tool in scoring upcoming performers. For example, if a judge ranks the sacrificial poet as an 8.0 (out of 10), the host then encourages judges to rank subsequent performers they preferred to the sacrifice at a score *above* 8.0. This is a pre-emptive attempt to avoid scorecreeping, or the tendency for scores to inflate as the night progresses. Scorecreeping is a profound example of the stressors capitalism invokes upon lived experiences and art. The sacrificial poet is deployed both ceremoniously and as a regulatory device. As slam often nestles itself in the liminal space between performance poetry, capitalism, and humanity, the concept of sacrifice can become a vehicle to transcend

the tone of a typical poetry slam space. While sacrificial poets function in unique ways depending on the stage they grace, Foley states that invoking the sacrificial poet “is an ‘appeal to tradition’ that links the present proceedings to the historically recent but wide-spread movement of spoken-word poetry in North America” (92). During fall 2016, sacrificial poets at *Eclectic Truth* regularly presented serious, reflexive, and timely material instead of being humorous or playful. This material invoked recent events from summer 2016, systemic inequities and injustices, and the death of young community member, Kaiya Smith.

Since the inception of poetry slams, audiences have played significant roles in shaping atmosphere through vocal responses and poet evaluation (Woods). Most slam communities select novice judges to increase real-world accessibility and hopefully mimic judging variation of national competitions. Audience snapping and verbal responses display collaborative advocacy, and in-between performances audiences are often jovial and supportive (unless a slam poem really brings the crowd down). The act of judging slam, though, can invoke paradigmatic tensions as novice judges navigate community norms. For example, when scoring a slam, judges are advised to rank between 0.0 and 10.0. If a judge gives a score below an audience-approved ranking, spectators are encouraged to heckle (normally, good-naturedly). The permission to heckle is a critique of artistic expertise. During my first visit to *Eclectic Truth*, judges were prompted by Desireé, a regular host, to display scores for the second performer of the evening. While I scored the performance an 8.5, the four other judges all gave scores above 9.0. Subsequently, I was shamed—inclusively; affectionately; boisterously—by the audience *and* the host! Attempting to normalize my paradigm to community standards, out of the next eleven performances, I was (only) heckled three more times.

The poets are performers. The performers are poets. At *Eclectic Truth*, some poets perform memorized pieces, some emote from their phone, some read out of their journals, some even sing opera acapella and go against slam conventions entirely. Some perform “new shit!,” as the crowd in-the-know affectionately blurts out any time poets present new material. And while different performers approach scoring from audiences differently, all performers tend to view scoring “like resenting a God you don’t believe in” (McDaniel 37). Slam poets recognize that judges are simultaneously the most and least influential people. The host regularly reminds audiences of this fact, as well. Similar to politicians that do not experience what they legislate in the same way as their constituents, slam poets face different experiences than judges. While I was heckled as a judge, I was not placed in as vulnerable spot as a stage poet who is heckled. This is why I chose to perform during my first visit to *Eclectic Truth*, to better understand the local slam experience by *doing* slam culture. In “From Page to Stage: The Burden of Proof,” Mary Frances HopKins writes, “the performer remains a primary agent for preserving and passing on the work of literature, which truly dies precisely and only when human beings no longer experience it at all” (6). In essence, the performative poetry experience is always somewhat sacrificial for the performer and for audiences. As performers, when performing, we are sacrificing what we knew for the possibility of what we may learn. As audiences, we are allowing ourselves the possibility of captivation. Both performers and audiences sacrifice time.

Rewind.

Again, I entered the doors of *the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge* on a lukewarm Tuesday evening in September, walking from my new Spanish Town residence eight blocks

away. I was greeted by Toiryan. Right away, Toiryan ran down the local slam scene for me, the competition process for nationals, and minutes later presented the first slam poem I witnessed at *Eclectic Truth*. This introductory poem became a focal point of the 2017 ensemble production of this ethnographic research, *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. Once entering the space, I sat down toward the back of the audience. I met Desireé and we did some small-talk-chit-chat. Desireé asked me to be one of the three judges for the evening. Desireé guided me through the ritual spiel of critic expectations, and then hosted the slam. While hosting, Desireé joked about the art by “dead white guys” in the space surrounding us. Donney and Jazmyne both presented poems that evening, and like Toiryan, invoked the summer’s events in their performances. Melissa worked the door and the “Question of the Day!” journal where poets sign-in to slam. Without realizing it, I had met the five star groupers that would lend me their cameras to zoom in on the city. As the last performance of the night, I introduced myself to the community by presenting a piece of mine, “Underwater Hospital.” I would present this the next day at the Graduate Student and Faculty Performance Showcase in LSU’s Hopkins Black Box theatre. Little did I know, this September Tuesday was the first seed of a three-year relationship between Baton Rouge’s local poetry community and LSU’s performance studies community, and was a call-back to the relationship that began two decades prior. This seed would not have been planted without being in this space with these people at this time doing this thing, together.

During my initial site visit, I witnessed nine poems (out of twelve) spit about a heated summer 2016. These poems touched on Sterling’s murder and police brutality, on the unnamed floods that gutted the parish, on the hope that the summer’s scars are temporary tattoos. The

first poem I observed was energetically presented by a young local poet, proudly wearing a Pikachu hat and Pikachu backpack. Passionately, Toiryan compared the recent floods with memories of his father and grandfather. That same evening, eighteen-year-old poet, Jazmyne, enchantingly vocalized her critique of those who oppose the Black Lives Matter movement yet remain silent when injustices to Black people occur. The following week, veteran lyricist and “slam-pa”, Donney, turned his summer Tweets into a play-by-play microcosm of summer 2016. When I heard Donney’s “Timeline Trauma,” a remix of his summer Tweets, I sensed there was further potential for unearthing texture and messiness through theatricalizing his poem. As Melissa told me, Donney’s Tweet poem resonated with her more each time she was exposed to its performance. Melissa said, “the more I hear it, and maybe he’s living in it more, versus just kind of saying it, the more that poem grows on me.” She added, “it’s like, an obituary. I feel like its really turned into an obituary for the summer.” Weeks later, Melissa—who went to high school with Donney—slammed about the local community’s history of racial tensions through the lens of a white ally. What it *feels* like to perform slam was palpable in these performers. It also felt like competition for points seemed secondary to more immediate needs. Like survival. Like justice. Like loss.

The following week, as the slam’s sacrificial poet, Desireé delivered a eulogy to eighteen-year-old Kaiya Smith. Kaiya is—was a community poet who died amid the summer tragedies, right after returning from *Brave New Voices* nationals in Washington D.C. At *BNV*, she presented poetry about Sterling. Kaiya was part of Baton Rouge’s youth poetry community. Jazmyne, Kaiya’s *BNV* teammate and friend, told me, “all these people who knew Kaiya from everywhere and were already so broken from all the tragedies that have happened. It seems

like there's nothing else that could be taken away from us. When, when we lost Kaiya—I'm saying when like it's over, you know." Jazmyne added, "not only are we struggling with nature and struggling with man-made conflicts, we're back to something super, supernatural almost." Kaiya's was a story, a living poem I was unprepared for, and is a narrative missing from Baton Rouge's wider summer 2016 discourse. Her story's omission in the play-by-play breakdown of summer 2016 shows that personal tragedies are textures often flattened by more politically charged narratives and normative perspectives. In constructing *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, Kaiya's story stood out as one that deserved further exploration. Before I could feel ethical about presenting her narrative, I knew I would need to do more than small-talk-chit-chat with those who knew her. I would need to reach out to see if they would let me listen and share. I contacted Kaiya's mother, Petrouchka, first.

I met Petrouchka at a celebratory *Forward Arts, Inc.* barbecue I was invited to by Donney and Desireé. The barbecue christened their new Mid-City headquarters, a cute white house located just off Government St. Weeks later, Petrouchka and I met to chat at the local Whole Foods Market on Corporate Blvd. Petrouchka allowed me into her relationship with Kaiya, their Haitian roots, and the spirit of her daughter. Petrouchka showed me their soulful art, fashion, and advocacy projects. We talked about how both of us are pursuing doctorates at LSU (we're almost there!)! Petrouchka also chatted with me about the deep loss that was felt not only by her family, but by all those who had the privilege of Kaiya's presence and ethic of care. This was exemplified at Baton Rouge's 2017 *ALL CITY Teen Poetry Slam Festival*, where half of the festival participants performed about processing the loss of a friend and teammate. The other half wrote poems about living in a city of civil unrest and natural disasters (Rose).

Two hours after beginning our conversation, Petrouchka told me to “not hold back in sharing” her daughter’s posthumous impact on the local community. In that spirit, I include her obituary from August 2016, published in *The Advocate*:

Kaiya Louise Leslie-Anne Smith, age 18, passed away on July 22, 2016. The beloved daughter of Petrouchka L.L. Moise and James L. Goods was raised to value truth and creativity. She was a member of the Institute of Divine Metaphysical Research. Kaiya was a warm, mature, and charismatic young lady that excelled in the Gifted/Talented & Music Program where she received many awards and recognitions for her performances in music, varsity soccer, fashion and spoken-word. She graduated Magna Cum Laude from McKinley Senior HS Class of 2016 with a pre-professional certification in Fashion, Textiles, and Apparel. She was accepted on a full-scholarship to Southern University Honors College and was planning to continue her work to eliminate the insecurity and shaming that our youth and women feel when they are told that they do not measure up to societal expectations. She created a community based body-positive movement named "Bigger Than Fashion" that celebrates how beautiful we are, whatever size we are. Her goals were to be a game changer through her spoken-word (<https://youtu.be/-v-zXe5z7Zo>.) She was selected as runner up in the 2016 First Annual Baton Rouge Poet Laureate competition. She was honored by being one of the students selected to write a poem for President Barack Obama during his visit to Baton Rouge (<https://youtu.be/u6PxeuL2Q5g>). As co-captain of her high school slam team, she lead them to be All-City champions 2 years in a row, winning her a place on the Louisiana team that competed at the International Youth-Slam competition "Brave New Voices" in Washington, DC, this July. The team was ranked 5th in the Nation. She is survived by her parents and biological father Kerry E. Smith of Miami, Florida; brothers Khari Moise-Smith, Kasey Smith, and Keith Smith (Keishara); grandparents Leslie and Louizette Moise, Elton and Rena Smith; aunts Sabina Moise, Tonia Lark, Pictoria Whitehead; uncles Jean-Michel Moise and Kevin Smith; cousins Dominique Moise, Brittany Lark, Shaneque Dunkley Eburne, and Shkiear Whitehead; with a host of other aunts, uncles, cousins and extended family. To celebrate her joy of the arts and the power of the spoken-word, there will be an open-mic and dance on Friday, August 5th at the Art Council of Baton Rouge at 6pm. The viewing and services will be held at Hall Davis & Sons, located on 9348 Scenic Hwy., Baton Rouge, LA 70807, on Saturday, August 6th. The viewing begins at 8 am with services beginning at 10 am. The repast will be held immediately after. In lieu of flowers, we ask that you make a donation to Kaiya's cause at www.biggerthanfashion.squarespace.com, so that we may continue her work on encouraging youth and women to love themselves, their spirit and their body whatever their size.

Before she passed, Kaiya planned a fashion show to honor her mentors, her Haitian heritage, her community, and to advocate for body positivity (Thomas). In April 2017, Petrouchka organized Kaiya's fashion show, "Confident with Curves," and it served as a fundraiser for multiple groups, including *Forward Arts Slam Camp*. Through commiserating with community members, I learned Kaiya was a constant source of inspiration and hope. And while I never met Kaiya, I became a better human for having known her through people she knew and through mentors she admired.

"So What?!"

This chapter has offered an ethnographic account of Baton Rouge's *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* following summer 2016. First, I presented a play-by-play timeline of summer 2016's major events. Next, I described how I found myself in Baton Rouge and at *Eclectic Truth*. Then, I outlined how slam poetry can become more than poetry and the slam. Finally, here, I answer the research question, "so what?!" My ethnographic fieldwork alongside this poetry community inspired questions into areas including critical performance ethnography (chapter two), social drama (chapter four), and slam culture (chapter five). Ultimately, this ethnographic account functioned as the foundation for the script and performances of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*.

Merely attending the slam for two hours every week would not adequately answer these inquiries. Therefore, I interviewed five select star groupers and we co-created a dialogue about summer 2016 and their poetry. The openness of this community allowed my cast and me to create a performance that would both respond to the stated goals of *Eclectic Truth* and its

members, create a deeper awareness of their lived experiences, perspectives, and poetry, and provide an alternate avenue for their material to reach audiences who would not typically be exposed to this type of artistic journalism. I sought to attend to their call of further reaching dominant publics. With their support, we developed the script of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, a snapshot of *Eclectic Truth* as redressive action (chapter eight).

So what? This ethnographic study shows that the impacts of slam communities travel well beyond the poetry slam and the vehicle of slam poetry. The supportive environment and trust *Eclectic Truth* developed from two decades of service to the Baton Rouge community has provided poets opportunities to sculpt individual narratives while simultaneously processing historical, current, and personal tragedies. Members of *Eclectic Truth* state the weekly ritual is a safe space where the community reflects on events that have shaped them and their world. In 2016, with political tensions at a boiling point in a flooded parish, over half of all poems presented during the first eight weeks referenced the summer's tragedies. The moral stance of this community is visible in the social justice and advocacy witnessed through my participant-observation, exclaimed in the voices of its members, and reinforced through their vision of fostering community, creating a safe space, and, as Desireé told me, "a home for Baton Rouge when the world was falling apart."

Play.

CHAPTER FOUR

ECLECTIC TRUTH POETRY SLAM AS REDRESSIVE ACTION

Social Drama and the Sacrificial Poet

Humans are made of stories. We are storytellers. The dramas we find ourselves within are the cells of the lived experiences we share with others. Slam poets use slam poetry as a method of making sense of their stories and exigencies. The poetry slam provides slam poets a form and vehicle in which to share their three-minute poems with others. Victor Turner's theory of social drama can help extrapolate how social contexts motivate slam poetry performances and performers in times of crisis. Essentially, our stories, our poems, our lives are wrapped in a processual frame of social drama. Social dramas arise in circumstances of conflict and can be broken into four ritual layers of breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration or schism. In this chapter, I apply a social drama frame to *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* to show how the weekly ritual functioned as a redressive action during fall 2016. Through utilizing perspectives gathered in informant->ethnographer interviews and from the poetry of *Eclectic Truth* slam poets, several crises of summer 2016 in Baton Rouge rise to the surface, and underlying breaches become visible, necessitating redressive measures.

In "Social Drama and Stories About Them," Turner writes, social drama is "everyone's experience in human society" (1980 149). Social dramas are inherent to the theater of everyday life. Underlying our dramas are faultlines, conflicts, tensions, breaches. For example, in a film, the crisis exists even before audiences press play. In a play, the tensions motivating the performance exist before the show begins. In everyday life, our pasts hover under our choices as subtext. Meaning, the situations we find ourselves in are products of and motivated by what

came before. Geertz writes, social dramas emerge in situations of conflict “and proceed to their denouements through publicly performed conventionalized behavior” (29). Following times of crisis, creative communities often come together to perform rituals like poetry slams. In *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*, Bauman writes, “the first task in the study of performance events is to identify the events themselves in ways consistent with local understandings and relevant to analytical problems at hand” (3). Focusing on perspectives of Baton Rouge slam poets at *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* proves useful in exhuming qualities of social drama. In *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Turner states social drama should lead us “into extended study of complex literate cultures where the most articulate conscious voices of values are the “liminoid” poets” (17). Hidden and coded meaning is only available to those embedded in the community.

I excavate meaning by highlighting star grouper perspectives. Star groupers are the most dedicated group members, and are identified by their dedication to their in-group. Bauridl builds on in-group identification by arguing ritual is the perpetuation “of collective identity” (62). All five members I eventually interviewed were members of *The Poetry Alliance*, the collective that hosts the weekly ritual. These star groupers help set up, attend, perform, and support their fellow performance poets weekly. Slam star groupers have a heavy voice in shaping the weekly ritual. Star groupers are prominent members of a community culture, and performatively argue for spiritual over material. In “Just ‘Slammin!’ Adolescents’ Construction of Identity Through Performance Poetry,” Lynn Rudd writes identity is not fixed within individuals without the influence of people and cultural situations surrounding that individual (683). Being a consistent and dedicated member to *Eclectic Truth* allots star groupers access to

how and what decisions are made. Rituals are not possible without these individuals, as they lead political aspects of communities and “manipulate the machinery of redress” (Turner 118). Because of their involvement, star groupers are also most sensitive to stresses affecting ritual phenomena, like crises. Stressors affecting the ritual can sometimes be star groupers themselves. For example, one local poet I initially identified as a star grouper stopped attending the weekly slam after week seven of the fall 2016 season. They stated on social media that they were not returning, and they had disputes with other community members. This shows that, while star groupers often have a strong grasp of a culture’s identity, their views are not monolithic, they do not always speak for other core members, and they also might not speak for members who only attend occasionally.

Humans participate in rituals to allow for structure to transcend uncertainty. We turn to ritual in times of crisis because that already established structure thinks for us when we are overwhelmed with other factors. While I do not mean to equate the poetry slam to a religious service, there is a reason people often turn to their religious institutions and spaces in times of crisis. The established ritual provides a vehicle for healing. Yet, instead of transporting people to a hospital, ritual delivers participants to worship. Instead of healing through medicine, healing takes place through sharing stories and presence with community. I invoke spirituality in explaining ritual because ritual is a central feature in all religions and cultures. Rituals are strong binding forces all over the world: Mass on Sundays, prayer several times a day, worship of ancestors, regular support group meetings, and even poetry slams for some slam poets. As an atheist, I sometimes feel out-of-place in situations of heightened emotion or collective belief. *Communitas* through performance, however, allows this non-believer momentary

admission into the beyond. I understand *communitas* to be a heightened communal feeling, a spiritual moment, made possible through multiple people buying in to something beyond themselves at the same time and in the presence of one another. When ritual becomes more than formula, it has the potential to invoke *communitas* among its participants. When form is forgotten by a community, for a brief moment, it has the potential to invoke the spiritual, the utopic, and possibilities beyond our experiences due to the presence of antistructure.

Communitas transcends a form's original intention. For example, at key moments in fall 2016, *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* shift its focus from competition for points toward honoring the impacts of recent crises. When a sensuous, spiritual feeling occurs over and through multiple people, the phenomena of *communitas* has occurred. Rituals work to establish *communitas*.

Liminality is the period between what was and what is to come. *Communitas* is most evident in liminality because normative structures are collapsed. Possibility of transcending form resides in the liminal. Without taking liminality into account, ritual is custom. In *communitas*, for a moment, for a moment, utopia is tangible, and hierarchies fade. I felt this happen when Desireé, as sacrificial poet, presented her tribute poem, "For Kaiya, Hallelujah." During that poem, at that moment, the slam competition faded into the *Firehouse*.

Breach and Crises

The four phases of social drama are breach, crisis, redress, and schism or reintegration. Elizabeth Bell's "Social Dramas and Cultural Performances: All the President's Women," provides a quick and potent application of the Turner's theory:

Seven years later, it's difficult to remember the media frenzy, and even harder to grasp our two-year cultural fascination with Bill Clinton's sex life. But I'd like to

imagine Victor Turner—back from the grave—having a hay day with MonicaGate as the textbook case of his theory of the social drama. The antagonists were “star members” of their groups, the breach was sexual and salacious, no group escaped side-taking and meaning-making in the crisis phase, and the drama’s redress, an impeachment trial in the U.S. Senate, was—to say the least—historically monumental. Democrats and Republicans shook hands afterwards in the rotunda of the Capitol Building in a “Kodak moment” for Turner’s notion of “reintegration.”

First, the breach, or social drama’s incubation period. Schechner worked closely with Turner during the 1970s and 80s in bridging social drama and performance studies. In “Performance Studies: An Introduction – Victor Turner’s Social Drama,” Schechner points out that underlying every drama is “some kind of faultline.” Bell’s social drama overview locates this faultline, the breach, over the debate of competing definitions of sexual relations. The social drama occurring in Baton Rouge during summer 2016 finds the breach developing from competing definitions of social citizenship, and the oppressive history built within United States borders through bondage since 1619. 1619 was the year the first enslaved Africans were kidnapped and shipped to Jamestown. In “The 1619 Project,” Hannah-Jones traces the throughline of this horrendous breach to summer 2016 in Baton Rouge, utilizing Bachman’s photograph of Ieshia Evans, *Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge*. As mentioned in chapter three, Evans’ image—a Black woman, standing firmly in a flowing dress, with arms crossed, outside the headquarters of the Baton Rouge Police Department on Florida Blvd. and refusing to move despite two of BRPD’s militarized riot gear-clad police officers charging toward her—functions as a breach flashpoint. A breach manifests as the fissure of a norm, an infraction of the status quo in a public arena. Once these breaches become visible, they cannot be hidden.

Crises are effects of a breach, not causes. The side-taking in the Clinton-Lewinsky sex scandal brought to light breaches in politics, sexuality, and power dynamics. The time capsule

photo of Evans versus BRPD is a symptom of a disease that has been incubating for 400 years.

Disasters make faultlines publicly apparent. The floods of 2016, for example, made the infrastructural leaks in the parish apparent. In times of crisis, our root paradigms float to the top. Root paradigms are similar to metatheories in that they describe, prescribe, and inform our experiences under a common set of assumptions. Root paradigms are at the heart of rituals and stories, as well as the narratives we propagate and the values we ascribe to. In “Religious Paradigms and Political Action,” Turner writes, “root paradigms are the cultural transliterations of genetic codes” (159). Turner adds that root paradigms are religions as “they entail some aspect of self-sacrifice as an evident sign of the ultimate predominance of group survival over individual survival.” Taking sides in response to a crisis demarcates root paradigms regarding an underlying breach. In times of crisis, status quos disrupt, conflict becomes overt, antagonisms are magnified, and the power behind authority appears.

When footage of Alton Sterling’s murder by a BRPD officer went viral, despite the footage, plenty of outspoken individuals stood firmly in support of this country’s history of “negrophobia,” blaming Sterling for his own murder (Devega). A power of this colonially-rooted tool of hate is that it transforms “unarmed black people into bestial villains who strike fear into America’s heavily armed and militarized police. Thus, a moral and ethical perversity: By that logic, black people are always somehow responsible for their own victimization” (Devega). Harmful rhetoric, and microcosmic crisis situations like Sterling’s murder do *not* occur in isolation. Sides taken point out how some seek to rectify the breach, while others attempt to maintain the status quo through deflection. As breach slides into crisis, those critiquing those affected worst and first attempt to maintain order. For example, the dominant public

#AllLivesMatter reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement. “All Lives Matter” became a slogan *because* Black people claimed their lives matter. Occupations are a choice, race is not.

Jazmyne poignantly points this tactic out in “Poem for Alton:”

Why do the words Black Lives Matter offend you
But the idea of black lives cocooned in a black body bag doesn’t

Why do you say we play the victim
when we are the victims

I think you mean you’d rather us play dead

In addition to stakes associated with real lives, agonism is a salient and sensuous characteristic to take note of when addressing the crisis phase of social drama. *Agonism* refers to the potentially positive impacts of political conflict, showing how people can productively channel opposition to status quo injustices. Social dramas infer breaks in stability, in synchronization, impacting all senses. A community seeking to articulate these conflicting feelings for one another is taking the first step in potential breach repair. Therefore, a sensuous, fluid, agonistic, and interdisciplinary methodology like critical performance ethnography can be useful in untangling the stakes and impacts associated with redressive actions undertaken by established creative communities like *Eclectic Truth*.

Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam as Redressive Action

Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam functioned as a redressive action following the tragedies of summer 2016. Redress is like a band-aid. Successful redressive actions provide the conditions necessary for *communitas*, but that feeling does not last. While redress is not a permanent solution, it buys time to heal and brings people together. To limit the effects of a breach, star

groupers employ and motivate redressive actions. This can take the form of a special event honoring a tragedy, or even shifting the types of poems consistently performed at the slam. In redress, norms are questioned, performances probe the breach, and situations are re-calibrated. Bell's example shows the Clinton impeachment hearing to be a redressive action undertaken by government officials. How *Eclectic Truth* poets collectively processed the summer over the fall 2016 slam season is a redressive action.

While rules, customs, and traditions (like the sacrificial poet) frame rituals, that very frame allows communities of individuals to reveal the seams of the form, and to become more than the slam competition as previously constructed. In *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep writes, rituals and ceremonies often accompany transitions from "one cosmic or social world to another" (11). For Turner, rituals have religious and spiritual significance because of the symbols involved, like the notion of sacrifice: "Ritual is, in its most typical cross-cultural expressions, a synchronization of many performative genres and is often ordered by a dramatic structure, a plot, frequently involving an act of sacrifice or self-sacrifice, which energizes and gives emotional coloring" to shared discourse (161). The structure of Baton Rouge's weekly slam was consistent, as was the ritual of opening each slam with a sacrificial poet. Another way sacrifice is performed is through poets vulnerably sharing their stories. Hyperbole is another way sacrifice is performed. Donney described slam as "all things hyperbolic, we have to say we're sacrificing a poet." By pushing the notion of sacrifice to the extreme, to the symbolic, sacrifices increase the potential for communal spirituality.

Redress often involves a "sacrifice" that can be moral or literal. This sacrifice acts as a scapegoat for disruption and violence toward the status quo. It is the Jesus paradox, the

scapegoat retroactively accepts “martyrdom for the sake of an altruistic cause” (Turner 15). In Bell’s example of Clinton’s impeachment, Clinton became a martyr for the projected altruistic importance of telling the truth when under oath. Even though that was what Clinton was charged with, his trial also was repurposed for a host of other partisan goals. Without choice of their own, in their afterlives, the memories of people like Alton Sterling, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Amadou Diallo, Kendra James, Sean Bell, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Freddie Gray, Natasha McKenna, Tamir Rice, Mya Hall, become repurposed. This repurposing of death can provide meaning to community loss. In these moments of liminality, of transcendence, *communitas* becomes tangible through co-presence. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz writes *communitas* is a utopian “moment when the here and now is transcended by a then and a there that could be and indeed should be” (9). The antistructure of *communitas* is not permanent, though. Ritual structure returns. We fall back to earth. The potholes remain. As Toiryan told me, “you gotta leave out that venue” and interact with the real world. Feelings of *communitas* cannot be sustained long because it develops a structure, akin to a high you cannot get back. In *Taking it to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka*, Harry Elam analyzes 1960s and 70s social protest theater. In several of these productions that focus on experiences of people of color, Elam notes how tense political climates and histories of oppression led to a “momentary communion within which context and text achieve synchronicity, thereby stimulating spiritual and secular fervors for change” (Amkpa 199). Elam adds, “ritual acts as a form of ‘symbolic mediation’ that negotiates the spaces between the practical and the spiritual, the sacred and the secular” (12). When a public performance functions as symbolic mediation,

it becomes “more than a theatrical event” (14). It is both spiritual event and secular ceremony. This hybridity allows spiritual and secular to coexist, for hope to become momentarily tangible.

Two decades of community work and mentorship from its members provided the conditions and trust necessary for *Eclectic Truth* to transcend the nature of the poetry slam and function as a mode of redress following multiple summer 2016 crises. Melissa reflected on the cyclical effects of the fall 2016 slam season: “We were able to go out and make more functional change, and do more within the community, which then in turn affected our writing, which then in turn affected the space.” This change is observed in *Eclectic Truth’s* focus on holding memorial events when tragedies occur, like after the 2016 Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, FL, or following the 2019 murder of Baton Rouge African-American History Museum founder, Miss Sadie Roberts-Joseph. Jazmyne told me about *Eclectic Truth’s* summer 2016 gathering that focused on the youth of Baton Rouge following the murder of Alton Sterling: “It was targeted as giving the youth a place to go to where they wouldn’t be out at night protesting and getting assaulted.” And sometimes, it seems, redressive actions are implemented just to get people to the next day.

Rather than viewing redress as succeeding or failing, as leading to reintegration or further schism, what it *does* must be viewed more holistically. Further crisis following redress does not mean that redressive action failed, just that more redressive steps must be taken before an alternative status quo can be charted. Following redress, the relational field of star groupers will have altered, or there will be recognition of an irreparable breach, or both, but to varying degrees. My time spent with *Eclectic Truth* and its community members showed me this final stage is not a *final* anything; it is not an either/or concept, but a both/and. At *Eclectic*

Truth, after the fall 2016-17 slam season, after the victory at *Brave New Voices* nationals by Baton Rouge's youth slam team that featured Jazmyne and other friends of Kaiya's, I observed the slam evolve into a more open-mic-based poetry reading. Since this turbulent time period, slams occur less frequently. Audiences are still attending, but are not signing up to slam as often as in 2016. In this post-redress period, as of 2020, *Eclectic Truth* has shifted from a weekly event to twice a month. Seemingly, the reintegration phase is less about the journey and more about taking stock of the past to prepare for possible futures. Sometimes, it takes a *long* time to assess the impacts of crises on a culture. And it takes a multitude of redressive actions for change to become palpable to a community.

In this analysis of social drama, I learned that resolving crises are like trying to solve problems rather than causes. We are patching up a leaky tire rather than changing the tire *and* repairing the potholes in the street. The real fault lies with the breach. If the breach is not addressed, crises will only magnify over time. Analyzing *Eclectic Truth's* fall 2016 slam season as a redressive action shows a community equipped and willing to produce effective redress in times of crises. Slam sites like *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* deserve more attention from academia, local communities, and from dominant publics because of their ability to garner trust within marginalized communities. When people co-exist in a space of trust, the stories and poems they share can tell us much about the places they live, the struggles they face, and the dreams we share.

CHAPTER FIVE

SLAM POETRY COMMUNITIES AS VEHICLES FOR COUNTERPUBLIC CONFESSIONS

The Skeleton of Slam is Performing Bodies Binded

In Helen Gregory's 2008 *Ethnography and Education* article, "The Quiet Revolution of Poetry Slam: The Sustainability of Cultural Capital in the Light of Changing Artistic Conventions," she declares slam poetry "the most successful poetry movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries" (63). The form's impact on modern consumption of literature is not hyperbolic. In fact, the rise of slam cultures in communities across the United States has shaped American writing by embracing the written word's native origin: the body. Slam insists on embodiment and is altered by who performs and who audiences. The form's urgency has enlivened poetry through length limitations, embracing timely causes, and encouraging off-the-street audiences to serve as arbiters of performer validation while eschewing traditional structures of evaluation. Slam poets spit back to academic power, the canon, tense political climates, and gatekeepers of authentic experience. The grassroots-DIY-punk-rock-hip-hop-poor-theater-social-protest-influenced competitive ritual provides a place for diverse communities to explore issues of the day, to function as what slam-vet Donney Rose calls, "artistic journalists." To show why slam is leading poetry and marginalized voices beyond the twenty-first century, I explore how slam communities use the poetic as a mode of counterpublic confession and describe the form's genealogical relationship with American culture. Then, this chapter traces the roots and trajectory of slam. Finally, I establish how slam can sometimes invoke the beyond.

Slam poets and their poetry propel the poetry slam, its format, and the hosting community. The journey begins in the body and experiences of the poet and travels from page

to stage to audience. Or, from iPhone to coffee shop to viral video immortality! In three minutes-or-less performers confess on topics spanning social *in*justice, gender, representation, oppression, and mundane everyday observations. Poet bodily presence on stage makes identity markers like gender, race, and ability visible. For example, while cis-white-males as a western default position are unremarkable, Others are marked by not occupying this dominant subject position. Audiences tie authenticity to performing bodies, which matters because authenticity functions as currency. Audiences hold slam poets immediately accountable for their views. Knowing this, poets deploy vocal techniques and presence to get to the *point*. Poets paint embodied flip-book portraits using rhythm, speed, humor, persona, suspense, and vulnerability. And beneath the poetic voice lies value systems ranging from everyday attitudes to spiritual contemplations. Because the presence of competition artificially raises the stakes of performance, slam poetry offers poets the opportunity to access and heighten real-life stakes, invoking possibilities beyond current realities. Meaning, having something on the line, even if it is an arbitrary score, pushes many poets to push themselves, their choices, and their attempts at audience engagement further than they might otherwise. When a slam poem succeeds, time stops and communities unite through invisible, palpable, and resonant energy.

In *A Bigger Boat: The Unlikely Success of the Albuquerque Slam Poetry Scene*, Susan McAlister writes that slam poets craft “living poetry” with an “active audience” (29). Axiomatically, poetry slams are about ever-emergent possibilities made tangible through resonance. The potential of a poet’s work to resonate with an audience allows for the potential of new possibilities to emerge. Resonance “occurs when a sound or musical tone is echoed by another body” (Wheeler 165). Poetic resonance is possible because of binding the spectator

with the performer. When performing slam, author and performer are bound together, as are performer and audience. In “From Slam to *Def Poetry Jam*: Spoken Word Poetry and its Counterpublics,” Somers-Willitt argues the slam poem, then, “exists in the discursive space *between*” poet and audience (4). Slam is not told *to* but told *through* binding of entities. Slam is a game with a goal of achieving and affecting intimate and authentic audience connections. As performer, text, and audience are linked, knowledge is gained through performance and re-performance, audiencing and participating, invisible labor, and possibilities of emergence through poet<->audience fusion. Because slam poems are often confessional, the audience’s experience of resonance and realization are “magnified” in slam spaces (Silliman 362). Crisis further amplifies resonance because urgency causes real-life stakes to materialize.

A poetry slam, with call-and-response sensuousness, is the typical container of slam poetry. Events routinely showcase two rounds of competition, followed by a final round. An audience of lay judges score poets from 0.0 to 10.0. Audience participation positions audiences as co-performer and consumer, holding critical power in determining where poems live when called forth. Sometimes, though, performance aspects in excess of the poem are rewarded, like norm accommodation, a judge’s personal connection to content or to the poet, and perceived authenticity. Authenticity is created by repetitions and reception of certain behaviors and characteristics over time. Claims of authenticity are symptoms of larger hegemonic structures. For example, when judges do not resemble those slamming, the form proves problematic as it allows judges to be displaced from being targets of advocative claims. Meaning, because a judge has been deemed an arbiter of artistic value, a poet’s complaints can be cast aside as being about someone else. In *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, Somers-Willett invokes this

citation of difference, writing white audiences “reward a construction of marginalized identity without having to recognize their own complicity in that construction” (84). In *The Room Is on Fire: The History, Pedagogy, and Practice of Youth Spoken Word Poetry*, Susan Weinstein argues, the “competitive nature of slam, which reflects the ideologies of the marketplace and of American individualism, is in tension with the counterpublic nature” of spoken word and its goals of transformation (119). The most sensuous slam communities, then, can pre-empt neoliberal consequences of competition by being transparent about their core values.

Poetry slam is a method to explore lived experiences and how groups of people with common ideologies articulate lived experiences together. Embedded within that poetry are values, beliefs, tensions, and histories. Slam features broad appeal to younger and marginalized demographics due to the form’s entertaining and political style. In “Slam This: Understanding Language Choice and Delivery in Argument Using Slam Poetry,” Heather Carmack explores how slam poetry teaches adolescents to construct clear arguments, writing slam “differs from traditional forms of poetry in that it is meant to be performed” (19). With active engagement in one’s own writing, no wonder the form has broad appeal with youth living near urban areas. In “‘Slambiguité’? Youth Culture and the Positioning Of ‘Le Slam’ In France,” Sara Poole argues, slam acts as a voice for communities repeatedly denied vocalization (340). In “Performance Poetry as a Method to Understand Disability” Lee-Ann Fenge, Caroline Hodges, and Wendy Cutts show how poetry illuminates experiences of young people with physical impairments. Many slamnographers are making connections regarding impacts of performance poetry on youth poets. Few performance researchers, though, are exploring adult communities of poets. *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* offers a performative response to the

question: How does a community of adult slam poets make sense of the world when tragedies strike?

A Genealogy of the Slam Movement as a Confessional Counterpublic

In “Professing Performance: Disciplinary Genealogies,” Shannon Jackson defines genealogies as “maps operating simultaneously” (92). Placing a stipulation on length and adding competition to poetry fundamentally altered the twenty-first century’s western consumption of literature. A useful genealogy of the United States poetry slam movement cannot be told in a vacuum concentrating simply on the competitive form. A holistic accounting of slam’s impact must include how the ritual form is a way counterpublics make sense of society. Slam poems performed at poetry slams show resistance to dominant publics by “critiquing white suburban culture, jingoism, conservatism, or corporate interests” (Somers-Willitt 6). Live interactions between performer<->audience and audience<->audience enact counterpublic textures. Counterpublics theory offers a lens for understanding slam collectivity and redressive action as it highlights ways communities utilize space and form to address issues of power. This bricolage is one genealogical account of slam’s roots. I acknowledge these pages alone cannot fully encompass the movement’s reach nor the impact it has had on its counterpublic communities.

Slam is counterpublic theory, method, and practice for those who live within, create, and research its culture. Slam’s counterpublic features allow the form to become a generative site for the study of social dramas. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Jürgen Habermas coins the public sphere as a discursive space created when citizens engage in public performance. Dominant publics often

control the narrative and medium of these types of political theatre due to historical power. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner writes, counterpublics rely on the tension that maintains awareness of their subordinate status, and often “depend more heavily on performance spaces than in print” (123). In these spaces counterpublic members aim to transform paradigms of dominant culture, not replicate subordination to the dominant culture. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins adds that marginalized voices have historically drawn on artistic and poetic practices to extrapolate meaning and claim their experiences. Slam is a direct descendent of these oral traditions.

Counterpublics can be further nuanced. In “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” Nancy Fraser claims that subaltern publics, like *Eclectic Truth*, consider problematically mediatized public spheres as transformational opportunities for marginalized voices. In “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres,” Catherine Squires notes, the term counterpublics covers a too-broad range of subgroups. Squires argues for an intersectionalizing and nuanced understanding of counterpublics to consider how resources available stimulate their responses, and to identify discrepancies in sanctions from dominant groups. For example, a creative counterpublic like *Eclectic Truth* ritualistically stays in their space, the Greater Arts Council of Baton Rouge. So, they are at much less of a threat for dominant sanctions than if they held the slam out in the open. Enclave counterpublics like *Eclectic Truth* work to redefine stigmatization through slamming their stories. While academic research has been conducted on how specific

slam communities function and how adolescent identity construction is affected by slam poetry, slam counterpublics response to turbulent time periods has not been explored.

Slam's counterpublic roots run deep. Performance poetry has roots in resisting oppression and is an organic art to communities of color. In *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance*, Catherine Ugwu shows, "performances by artists of colour in the US takes place against the historical backdrop of the subjection of subaltern cultures to centuries of regulation and economic exploitation by outsiders" (160). This backdrop Ugwu mentions is also a breach underlying Baton Rouge's crises of summer 2016. Ugwu theorizes, "from the late nineteenth century onward, these attempts at subaltern social control coincided with the commodification of black and native performance for white mass entertainment" (160). Counterpublics are more likely to be sanctioned by dominant publics if they do not resemble entertainment, or if they are deemed threatening. In "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures," E. Patrick Johnson extrapolates upon the marginalization of Black communities:

Institutionalized racism is one culprit, but another one is the inability of academic institutions and individuals to read and value the discreet and nuanced performances and theorizing of African Americans. Outside the purview of what many scholars would hardly recognize as a legitimate object of inquiry, black expressive culture has, until recently, been illegible and unintelligible to the undiscerning eyes and ears, and perhaps minds, of some scholars. The subjugated knowledge embedded within black expressive culture, therefore, is not always ameliorated by those who lack the cultural capital to read it or who are altogether disinterested in these forms (449).

Poetry slams often embody and embrace Black expressive culture. While slams are not *only* a Black performance space, they are often spaces maintained through Black performance and the labor of Black performers. While there are not *only* Black performers at *Eclectic Truth*, Black performers make up a large number of those regularly attending the *Firehouse Gallery*. Voices

of Black lived experience frequently inhabit the content of Baton Rouge slam poems. If a culture's poetry is what that culture says is poetry (Weinstein 95), then Black culture seems to claim slam poetry as one of its own.

Many social justice performances are possible only because of social *injustice*. The contexts of slam's growth into its current popularity are riddled with human rights battles. Western performances by artists of color are marked by a backdrop of bodily exploitation. Since western colonization of the Americas, rhetoric behind "proper" elocution has subjugated the proletariat class, making voice a currency. Through slam, voices may express anger toward systematically ignored and created breaches. Women and folx-of-color have not historically been afforded the freedom of vocal expression when around dominant publics, though. This currency has been withheld for these demographics through bourgeoisie focus on legibility, body discipline, and vocal discrimination. This focus historically maintains and exacerbates dominant public power dynamics. In *Performing the Word: African American Poetry as Vernacular Culture*, Fahamisha Patricia Brown writes, the earliest practitioners of African American poetry "had as one of their goals the demonstration of the literary capabilities of the race" (1). 400 years after America began, slam continues this lineage by challenging "dominant literary conventions and thus to the cultural capital of those who rely upon such conventions" (Gregory 63). Slam counterpublicity is an announcement that Black expression—and marginalized communities—deserve more space than historically granted by dominant publics and arbiters of knowledge.

The Roots of Slam Stretch toward the 1980s

In its native shape, “slam reestablishes in the audience the way of listening that was gradually lost when writing was invented” (Holman 21). The slam draws from its ancestral performance heritage, a call-back to when oral storytelling transferred culture from generation to generation. The ontological nature of spoken word poetry is acapella, and meaning is negotiated in the space between performer and audience. Slam’s nod to Aristotelian epideictic oratory (speech or writing that specifically praises or assigns blame), its roots in non-western and indigenous communal performance, and its structural resemblance to forensics high school and collegiate speech competitions (which occasionally feature slam as a competitive event) are notable features of the form. While slam as we know it today began in the 1980s, its performance roots reach further back.

As a slamnographer, I recognize slam’s lineage in non-western creative competition. A short list of these examples include signifyin’ word battles in Africa, Basho Japanese Haiku contests, Japanese Kojiki poets, and epic poets in Greece who gave laurel crowns at the Olympics (Glazner 11). I also acknowledge social justice and theatrically-inspired arts movements that paved a path for the form’s emergence. These movements include the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, the Beat poets of the 1950s, 1960s feminist poetics, the 1970s Black Arts Movement, and hip-hop in the 1980s. In *The Fifth Element: Social Justice Pedagogy through Spoken Word Poetry*, Crystal Leigh Endsley isolates an overlapping tenet of social responsibility as being a connective tissue between hip-hop and slam poetry. In *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, Charles Bernstein points out, locational adapting was willed down by 1970s Black Arts poets, who extended “ their performances beyond storefront

theaters to neighborhood community centers, church basements, taverns, and to the streets” (309). Bernstein notes that the dominant mode of effective poetry in these settings “drew upon the rhetorical conventions of the black church, which is the matrix of African American culture.” Slam invokes spirituality and the beyond to call upon utopic possibilities. Slam poets, like the generations of oral artists and storytellers before them, often do this as a means of coping with a non-ideal present,

The further back in time we go, the harder it is to locate documentation on competitive artistic practices by marginalized publics. Luckily, many who document slam’s recent lineage are closely involved with local and national slam communities as performers, slammasters, ethnographers, educators, mentors, and volunteers. Taking a trip through the communities where slam flourishes provides a unique thread of its urban evolution. In 1984—at the *Get Me High Lounge* in Chicago, later moving to *Green Mill Cocktail Lounge* in 1986—Marc Smith developed the first poetry slam with a desire to take “evaluative power away from academic critics” and give it to common audiences (Somers-Willett 6). Smith was motivated to do this because “he felt poetry didn’t want to have anything to do with him or his friends” (Aptowicz 382). In *Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam, and the Spoken Word*, Smith defined slam’s five tenets: poetry, performance, competition, interaction, and embracing community (5). Slam is a play on tennis’ Grand Slam, and draws on baseball and bridge terms. Slam is meant to invoke a noteworthy happening. Often an exclamation point is added, denoting its punch. *SLAM!*

Authors like Somers-Willett and Aptowicz write Smith “invented” the form. Johnson clarifies, writing Smith “coined the term *poetry slam*” (5) to avoid Columbusing. This aversive

nature toward Smith as Slam discoverer reflects national conversations regarding historical remembrance and colonization. Youth poets at national slams have echoed this critique at Smith. While performing! At the 2017 *College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational* in Chicago, IL, poets “staged a demonstration of protest, turning their backs to Marc Kelly Smith, their hands crossed” (Anand). This protest was a response to what they considered Smith’s problematic poetry and legacy. Smith responded, saying, “This is beautiful. Are you done yet?,” then leaving. After he left, poets at *CUPSI* eliminated the competition element of the 2017 tournament, choosing not to let poets be ranked in a time the community vocally identified as raw. Here, the youth poets collaborated to transcend slam’s ontological form, showing they can still slam even if they are not being scored. Smith’s presence was a catalyst.

In 1989, 1000 miles away from Chicago, Bob Holman imported slam to New York’s Nuyorican Poets Café. Similar to Smith, Holman faced criticism with colonization of the Nuyorican cultural space. This was because he was not Puerto Rican, yet he received much of the credit. Features of Nuyorican performance poetry include bilinguality, music and song as cultural flashpoints, integrated breathing, and anti-“higher” forms of language. Here, poets like Paul Beatty, Maggie Estep, Willie Perdomo, Joel Francois, Mahogany Browne, Beau Sia, and Saul Williams (I recommend typing in “Coded Language” on Youtube) gained notoriety. Two decades later, the Puerto Rican poetic response following the 2017 Puerto Rico humanitarian crisis was palpable, as well. This collective cultural response is currently being researched by Melinda González in her ethnographic project, “Rhyming thru Disaster: Community Organizing in Puerto Rican Poetic Spaces after Hurricane Maria.”

A Timeline of the First Three Waves of Slam

In *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour through Twenty Years of the New York Poetry Slam*, Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz categorizes New York Slam as riding three waves. These waves are apt demarcations of the form’s overall evolution. The late 1980s and early 1990s pre-wave used slam to build an audience, publish, and provide poets opportunities to hone their craft. The National Poetry Slam, organized by Gary Glazner, started in 1990 with three teams and nine poets in San Francisco (Patricia Smith won; search for “Skinhead” on YouTube). In contrast, the 2018 NPS tournament in Chicago showcased teams from 72 cities! Counter to its anti-academic foundations, Somers-Willett remarks, because slam is organized and features a national festival it “constitutes an alternate literary institution to academia, and may be better suited to scholarly treatment than other spoken word scenes” (144). The first wave established that national and local slam formats can vary on rules, themes, and be performed individually or by groups, cementing slam’s potential malleability.

During the late 1990s second wave, slam blossomed in urban communities, poets sought careers through touring, and 1998 featured the films *SlamNation* and *Slam*. It was much more difficult to get a movie made in those days, so seeing your art on film was a huge deal! Poets gaining notoriety included Taylor Mali, Anis Mojgani, and Rives (check out “Sign Language”). During the second wave, slam spread all over the country, and poets sought slam careers by booking college readings. In 1997, Holman left the Nuyorican Café to start a new team in Urbana, which gave the region three prominent squads. This franchising of slam formats across the New York region signaled growth to come.

Aptowicz demarcates the third wave beginning with the flashbulb event of the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attacks in New York. As a firsthand account, Aptowicz notes the impact on the poetry and the New York slam environment (248). Like this dissertation, Aptowicz offers a unique collection of 9/11-related poetry by New York poets. She observes people in New York slam communities binding together under a collective tragedy. In *Betwixt, Between, or Beyond?: Negotiating Transformations from the Liminal Sphere of Contemporary Black Performance Poetry*, Birgit Bauridl sheds light on 9/11's impact on slam poetry, stating, "although it may be disputable and hard to measure whether 9/11 brought about a change in style or poetics—if a poetics of a blurry genre like slam poetry exists at all-- Aptowicz's classification undoubtedly recognizes and emphasizes" (34) performance poetry's close links with politics, society, and the community.

The third wave saw slam's popularity (and opportunities) soar with 2002's *Def Poetry Jam* television series on HBO (Sarah Kay, Jill Scott, Big Poppa E, and Shihan have high YouTube views, for reference of the key poets during this period), a 2003 Tony award for *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway*, 2004's inaugural Individual World Poetry Slam (Buddy Wakefield won; check out "Hurling Crowbirds at Mockingbars"), and 2008's Women of the World Poetry Slam (Andrea Gibson was victorious; search for "Living Proof"). The third wave featured slam being embraced as a valuable learning tool by many high schools and universities, as well as being featured in disciplinary curriculum. As a personal example, I took courses in high school and college that required me to develop slam poetry, and some of my collegiate forensics speech events required me to research, perform, and develop arguments with previously performed slam poems.

Poetry slam “rules give poems a form” (Glazner 13), and the form helps give each slam its shape. When stakes are not solely generated by form, though, slam cultures have been shown to adapt accordingly. During tragic moments, competition fades into the background. Taking its place are more immediate concerns. In *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep notes, rituals typically “accompany transitions from one situation to another and from one cosmic or social world to another” (13). The death of a community poet, for example, adds a cultural stressor. *A Bigger Boat: The Unlikely Success of the Albuquerque Slam Poetry Scene* describes how the 2006 death of Albuquerque slam poet, Trinidad Sanchez, Jr., affected their community. “His laugh, like a waterfall right when it breaks over the crest;” “His warm spirit drew you close no matter how grave the times;” “His life and work left an indelible mark on each of the communities he lived in” (76). McAllister writes, “again and again, the magic of a particular poet, a certain poem, in that specific place on that day created a moment that was remembered and talked about for years” (57). Epiphanic moments connect communities, influence future poetry, and become shared memories. While slam eras share chronologies of crises, they also share hope.

The Post-Slam Wave

In democratizing critique, the slam form foreshadowed our digital rating culture! Digital proliferation allows slam to exist beyond ephemerality through accessibility and adaptability. Thus, poetry has entered into a post-slam wave. This wave critiques what slam has been, who has formed it, acknowledges the bodies in the space, and attempts to go beyond the competitive poetry reading as currently established. In this era, slam evolves through digital

proliferation and poets publishing in multimodal avenues. In addition, we slam things other than poetry. Critical reflexivity is a post-slam tenet. Community and social advocacy are key focuses for poets and researchers.

In *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*, Javon Johnson (search for “cuz he’s black” on YouTube) critiques Black masculine performativity in Los Angeles’ slam spaces, exemplifying slam’s critically reflexive contribution to American literature. Johnson examines Black masculine performativity in *Da Poetry Lounge* and *Leimert Park*, two poetry spaces in the Los Angeles slam poetry scene. In “Manning Up: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Los Angeles’ Slam and Spoken Word Poetry Communities,” Johnson writes, “I may have used *DPL* as the site with which to launch this discussion, but it is by no means the only place that expresses homophobia. My research in venues in New York, Chicago, and elsewhere have led me to question” slam’s cultural politics (415). Slam’s current critically reflexive aims are refreshing, valuable, and useful to growth. From my review of slam research, however, I notice scholarship about slam is not always as reflexive as slam poems themselves. Many texts showcase the diversity of the form and how diversity is embraced in slam communities, but do not confront race, gender, or accessibility concerns directly. This is a key issue, specifically, with white documenters, who seemingly keep themselves at a mic’s-distance, focusing on aesthetic dimensions over messy cultural conflicts. Close enough to shake a hand, but not enough to hug.

In 2010, Johnson challenged assumptions of slam communities as radically democratic and completely diverse (401). In 2017, Johnson notes, “the slam family includes everybody” who has an interest in performance poetry (81). One should question the assertion that a

family can include “everybody.” When considering who slam poems resonate with, we must consider the inverse, or who chooses not to be exposed to slam voices. McAllister states, “at its root, stem, and flower, slam is inclusive in a way that is unique among modern performance” in that it “is resoundingly absent in the audience found at opera, hip-hop concerts, repertory theatre, traditional poetry readings, and other performing other arts events” (19). Yes, slam is inclusive, and embraces equity, but the post-slam era recognizes that this inclusivity is a specific-type needed because of the enclave nature of slam communities. While anyone can slam, what types of people do not participate? This notion calls into question the true diversity of a space if a diversity excludes, even if you do not agree with who it excludes. I am not saying slam *must* include everyone, but I am saying an honest interpretation of diversity and inclusion should account for those not necessarily excluded, but not included, and what that means. Does slam scholar usage of diversity reflect “a version of white liberalism that pretends to operate as if we are all equal but does not do the work needed to get there” (Johnson 281)? We are often defined by who we are not. What would happen if alt-right supporters attend a slam? What would happen if they had their own slams? What would they slam about? By even mentioning them, I may be de-centering marginalized experiences. By excluding their potential presence, I overlook the elephant *not* in the room, and I run the danger of over-curating my ethnographic observations. Oh, the humanities!

While some slams are social justice-oriented meeting-grounds for like-minded members, critics note, sometimes, they can have deep-rooted issues. Somers-Willett reminds of influential scholars like Amiri Baraka, who has critiqued slam’s “carnavalesque atmosphere” as a “strong-man act” (“Can Slam Poetry Matter?”). Other critiques include slam’s often rowdy

audience participation that breaks formal decorum, how audiences can get caught up in poetic rhythm over textual content, slam's reputation as the Facebook-like immediate gratification of literature, and how the form can problematically embrace the gamification of trauma. These are fallouts of binding audience and performer with a neoliberal, competitive value system that rewards perceived-authenticity and struggle. Weinstein writes, "it is worth discussing the role of competition in the poetry slam context, as, intuitively, one might believe that the presence of competitiveness among poets is counter-active to building solidarity within that group. However, in my experience, the opposite is true" (110). Slam is not "a butchered form of poetic prostitution," as an English professor told me once. Slam poems are political tools for social justice. Slam poems are "important cultural work" (Hoffman 62). Slam communities must recognize what they reify so as to not propagate systems they hope to dismantle.

In the post-slam era, limits of liveness, embodiment, and borders are tested through virality and views (watch *Button Poetry*, *Write About Now*, Neil Hilborn's "OCD," or final rounds from national youth festivals like *Brave New Voices*, *Louder than a Bomb*, and *CUPSI*). A poetry slam hosted by Twitch or through holograms is not too far away! In terms of slamming other things, the post-slam era shows the form transcends poetry. Slam's structure is competitive. We can think of the poetry slam as fantasy poetry, like live fantasy football, to borrow further from Smith's sports metaphor (and RuPaul's Drag Race, of course). The post-slam era has brought other slam fantasies to fruition. For example, "Slam That #Ethnography!" was a 2016 University of Amsterdam event meant to energize academic presentations by utilizing length limitations to enhance creativity. The slam-inspired Ph.D. workshop featured researchers slamming ethnographic projects in 2-5 minutes. Many reported the fusion of forms to be

“transformative” (Ahlin et al.). In 2017, I judged a haiku slam in Baton Rouge’s University School filled with 7th graders slammin’ syllables! I will never forget the haiku in semifinals about “Tide Pods.” In addition, there are “deaf” slams, Moth StorySlams, performance variety slams like *INK!* in Cedar Falls, IA, forensics speech competitions, and a rise of youth-based slam communities outside the United States (including the United Kingdom, Johannesburg, Montreal, Norway, Spain, and France). The post-slam era asks: What else can we *slam*, and to what effects? How can we imagine beyond the slam space? If we remove the competition, what else can we do with the malleability of its poems and lessons? Imagining beyond, dreaming post-, is a radical and revolutionary attempt at progress.

Slamming into the Great Beyond

Slam is honest and transparent in its gamesmanship. Slam admits to capitalist origins. This transparency allows for subversive and revolutionary tactics to emerge in poignant contexts. Ugwu writes, “public performance and witnessing of personal stories, honouring friends and lovers, family and ancestors allows us to grieve losses, validate our condition and invoke alternative histories which look to a future with hope” (1995 61). Dreaming utopia and invoking the beyond are keys to slam. Johnson notes, “radicalism of slam and spoken word communities is located in our ability not to speak back to power but to imagine beyond traditional power structures even when we are caught up in them” (21). Concentrated intensity allows for utopian performatives to emerge. In *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope in the Theater*, Jill Dolan defines utopian performatives as “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the

present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (5). This is how *communitas* develops, and why slam communities like *Eclectic Truth* are fruitful sites for redressive research following times of crises. In “Stages: Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative, José Esteban Muñoz claims, “utopia is an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward” (9). There is a danger, however, toward following too far into the utopic. The slam ends. We walk outside. Real lives are at stake beyond the safe space unicity of the weekly poetry slam ritual. Essentially, if we look too far ahead too often, we risk missing the effects of clear and present dangers.

Identity construction through performance is a predominant trait of slam communities. Individual identity is positioned as part of greater community identity. The sacrifice of time and presence is the price of cultural membership. By featuring the sharing of personal poetry, slam allows communities to construct collective knowledge and experience. The slam melds and pops into its community, resembling the values of the people that make it up. Slam’s ritual can be spiritual, invoking memories of those no longer in our presences. Johnson writes, “slam and spoken word communities employ death, one space beyond, as a metaphor or a catalyst for thinking about and working toward spaces and modes of living beyond our existing systems and structures” (19). They “seek the help of the dead to disturb and reject existing boundaries and borders and to imagine new possibilities in the current modes of living” (18). Again, I am struck by the question of sacrifice. What do performers sacrifice on stage? How do we make better sense of the sacrificial poet? Are our sacrifices retroactively inscribed, because those who remain say it was a sacrifice?

Slams function as supportive spaces of urgency, sensuousness, emergence, resonance, and empowerment. *Southern Fried Poetry Slam* founder Allan Wolf famously stated the oft-repeated phrase, “the points are not the point, the point is poetry” (Wickes). The poetry is not the point, though. Slam is a proclamation that *people* are the point. If the people are the point, then the question should not be what is slam, but rather *who* is slam. Like a body, the slam is alive, too. Live moments in shared spaces let performer and audience know they can still make sense of the world. Slam is a proclamation of existence and mortality. It is not the “death of art,” as infamously dubbed by literary critic Harold Bloom (Barber). Nor is it the death of poetry. For many communities, the slam is the voice of marginalized life, a remnant of ancestral oral storytelling. It enables participants to cope with the present through creativity and transferable energy.

Of course, the only way to *feel* what slam is all about is to go to a slam and hear the pauses, smell the snaps, taste its rhythms. *To* slam—not for the points, or the poetry. For you. All you need is a space, some people, and three minutes (and ten seconds) of magic.

“Go in, poet!”

CHAPTER SIX

A TEN-STEP ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY FOR DATA COLLECTION, IN PREPARATION FOR PERFORMANCE PRESENTATION

Following a Ten-Step Ethnographic Methodology

Ethnographic insight is dependent on informant<->ethnographer relationships. Informant<->ethnographer relationships based on trust and mutually beneficial rapport provides researchers the foundation to enter other cultures (if invited) in an ethical way. Research relationships that expand beyond the site of cultural ritual offer deeper insight into systems influencing cultures and how star groupers identify within their communities-of-choice. By acting as a consistent attendee of the *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* community beginning in September 2016, I planted seeds for future relationships with group members. Showing a mutual appreciation for the craft and advocative potentials of performance, star groupers invited me to host performance workshops with youth they mentor and present ethnographic lectures with students in classes they instruct. We also worked together to foster a relationship with *Forward Arts, Inc.* and the HopKins Black Box theatre space at Louisiana State University. During summers 2017 and 2018, youth slam poets performed in the HBB laboratory more than anyone else, even those affiliated with the performance studies program! Similar to the theatricalizing of slam poems in *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, these Desireé Dallagiacamo-coached youth poets theatricalized *their* confessional poems in HBB productions, *WordCrew's All the Space Between* and *Lost Words: Found a Poem*, and *Magic and the Secrets We Keep*. My early instincts to theatricalize *Eclectic Truth* slam poems as a method of sharing knowledge fell in line with a way star groupers chose to construct performances with their own students. Some of these youth poets then attended LSU, and they used the HBB as a

rehearsal space for the *CUPSI* Slam Team as well as performing in performance studies showcases. After leaving Baton Rouge in 2019, I collaborated with Donney Rose on an artist talk and performance at University of Northern Iowa's Interpreters Theatre, *Tales from that Bayou: An Evening with Donney Rose* (an epilogue about the trip is included in chapter eighteen).

To create research focused on an ethic of care and goodness, we must invest in the lives of communities beyond what they provide for our research. In *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, and Performance*, D. Soyini Madison echoes qualitative methodological foundations outlined by Corinne Glesne in 1999, and James Spradley in 1979. Madison writes critical ethnographic researchers tend to follow similar knowledge-generation formats (21). This chapter focuses on my process of ethnographic data collection and the fieldwork that inspired *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. Reducing the process to an approachable ten steps, this chapter focuses on: *I. Determining Interest and Finding Purpose; II. Researching Relevant Literature to Inform Research Methodology; III. Defining Research Populations and Creating a Time Frame; IV. Gaining Access and Permissions from Star Groupers; V. Mining Researcher Positionality; VI. Undertaking Fieldwork and Composing Fieldnotes; VII. Collecting and Analyzing Data: Interviewing as an Ethnographic Privilege; VIII. Sharing and Member-Checking; IX. Presenting Research and Reflecting on the Process; and X. Aiming for Useful Reciprocity*. This methodological breakdown made sense to me based on my performance ethnography experience, Madison's *Critical Ethnography*, and insights provided by star groupers in their interviews and through ethnographic interactions at the weekly poetry slam.

Determining Interest and Finding Purpose.

First, I admitted I was interested in researching *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam*. Initially, I was enrolled in a graduate course on performance ethnography at LSU, taught by Dr. Tracy Stephenson Shaffer. I was already planning to attend *Eclectic Truth* for my poetic growth and to make community connections. Being enrolled in Dr. Shaffer's graduate course encouraged me to view *Eclectic Truth* as a site ripe for cultural research. After attending for a few weeks, my ethnographic curiosity toward summer 2016-related content of the performed slam poetry emerged. Over half the poems I witnessed referenced the summer's events in some fashion. From my research, I noticed other scholars use the criteria of "more than half of the poems I heard" as a marker developing a research purpose and population (Wheeler 151). After receiving permission from select star groupers, my purpose arrived at producing a performance based on ethnographic fieldwork, and the slam poems and interview narratives of star groupers. I would specifically focus on this time period of summer 2016 as crisis and the fall 2016 poetry slam season as *Eclectic Truth*'s redressive action. I knew I must be aware of narrowing my research scope too fast and too soon. I avoided making a determination on how the performance would develop until I had a chance to acquire feedback from star groupers about their connections to the summer, the summer's relationship to their writings and performances, and *Eclectic Truth*'s connection to the city beyond the weekly ritual that I had experienced and the poems that I had seen, heard, and felt.

Here is a sample of my post-site fieldnotes (following week 2 of the fall 2016 slam season). I note how my interest emerges through being in the presence of passionate poets:

In the mission statement on their official website, the *Arts Council of Baton Rouge* proclaims "to improve the quality of life in our community through the

arts.” Upon initial interactions and observations, *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam & Open-Mic* is following their host site’s objective to the letter, or rather, stanza. Featuring community poets ages 16 to 45, diversity of age, race, class, and gender is readily apparent and embraced. Also evident is the amount of community care and concern cultural members espouse weekly through their poetry and performances. Community poets do not shy away from weaving Baton Rouge-ian tales of summer 2016s Alton Sterling murder, widespread impacts of police shootings and violence, and historic flooding invoking memories of 2005s Hurricane Katrina. Audience members colloquially told one another during my first visit, these performances were “fire.”

After two visits, a pattern of topical subject matter has emerged. In a time of flooding, *Eclectic Truth* is nestled in the *Firehouse Gallery* of the *Arts Council* building. Advocacy and desire for social justice are readily noticeable through verses penned and slammed. However, unspoken advocacy is also apparent in the tone of the weekly event. While recent personal and community struggles are profoundly touched upon during performances, in between performances, banter remains jovial, upbeat, and encouraging. Social justice advocacy seems to be an environmental assumption with *Eclectic Truth*. While community members construct passionate individual performances, their silent collaboration, agreement, and united outlook in regards to shared ideals emphasizes collaborative advocacy. This advocacy aims at the progression of cultural well-being and acceptance over the outdated mantra of tolerance.

However, the “Keep Off” signs placed on each of the three fire trucks inside the *Firehouse Gallery* infer a different story. A symbolic story. A representation of the look-but-do-not-touch and do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do philosophy community members outspokenly project onto injustices that have hit too-close-to-home one-too-many times. I am probably reading into this, though.

From Toiryan poetically comparing the recent floods and still-too-recent Hurricane Katrina with abuse and memories of his father and grandfather, to 18-year-old Jazmyne vocalizing support of the Black Lives Matter movement, to Donney turning his Tweets from the summer into a chronological in-the-moment microcosm of systemic injustice, the spirit and tension of the “Keep Off” signs seem to invade the texts of each poet subtextually. I view this subtext as a collective call to action that, while preaching to a responsive choir, urges for the societal need to reverse course and consider healing scars before they are made permanent through neglect of what caused them.

As I left the *Arts Council* building and walked to my house a few blocks away, feelings of acceptance, encouragement, and progress seemed to waft through the air—against the background of shootings, and shootings, and flooding, and, and, and.

I share these rough and unedited fieldnotes to provide a glimpse of the original inspiration that led to this dissertation and the script for *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*.

We may not know where our interests will take us, but diving into them headfirst can only help performance ethnographers find the purpose in our performance.

Researching Relevant Literature to Inform Research Methodology

Next, I delved into research to comprehend the scope, genealogy, and limitations of my proposed ethnographic project. *Eclectic Truth* is a performance-based community, and primary components of the weekly ritual were the space itself, the people involved, the performed poems, and societal contexts. Therefore, I isolated the areas I needed to develop a stronger foundation in: critical ethnography (chapter two), performance studies and the frame of social drama (chapter four), and slam culture (chapter six). I hoped to create an ethical manner for knowledge generation by working through these different literatures. I hoped to find links between the areas. In *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Emerson, Frets, and Shaw note, “*what the ethnographer finds out is inherently connected with how she finds it out.*” Therefore, I began my literature review process by cataloging as many works as possible that featured strands of all of those components. These are the works most often cited in this document. Then, I looked for works that considered two of these components, then essential areas of each that add to my understanding of their genealogies. I paid attention to works cited repeatedly and across genres, and I made sure to catalog those texts as well. I was also prepared for my research purpose to adapt to the knowledge I gained from my review of literature. This systematic research process helped me understand what I would be able to contribute that

could be of use for ethnographers, performers, and slam communities alike. For example, I hope outlining this ten-step methodological process of data collection add to further *slamnographic* research by acting as template of how one can undertake a project like this.

Defining Research Populations and Creating a Time Frame

Then, I established a research population. A considerable limitation of ethnographic research is that it is impossible for ethnographers to capture everything, let alone share everything. What we omit is just as (and sometimes more) critical to the culture studied as what we include. By narrowing focuses and creating an adaptable timetable for completion, we are also honest with our own level of commitment to the project. Honesty allows for clearer communication with the culture studied regarding intentions and involvement. I learned unless I focused on specific star groupers, and gave myself specific constraints like time limits and deadlines, I would acquire too much information to process thoroughly or present to an audience effectively.

In determining star groupers, I used purposeful sampling combined with convenience sampling. *Purposeful sampling* subjectively identifies key informants, while recognizing limitations like time and resources. *Convenience sampling* pulls from subjects who are accessible and close in proximity to the ethnographer. Luckily, the five members I honed in on as pivotal *Eclectic Truth* participants agreed to chat with me and contribute to this slamnography. I selected those who participated as members of *Eclectic Truth* for at least one year, had performed at least three poems in the weeks I attended, presented at least two poems that clearly referred to summer 2016 events, and regularly helped organize the weekly

ritual. As I focused specifically on adult populations, all star groupers were at least 18 years of age. They verbally agreed to allow me to remix their poems on stage with a cast and to shape their one-on-one interviews into dialogic conversations with five voices.

Researchers Lindlof and Taylor write that “practical necessity sometimes forces the researchers hand” (117). Since I was taking a course in performance ethnography that had specific deadlines associated with it, and since I was on the schedule of a graduate student, I knew I needed to focus in on fall 2016 and structure my goals alongside my semester schedule. Studying the fall after summer 2016, specifically September to November, fit ideally within my constraints. Submitting a show proposal that following spring fit with my timeline, as well. Performing the show one-year-later as a memorial made sense, too. The top of the poster created for the show’s publicity push featured text showcasing this one year later landmark:

“LAST SUMMER: RACIAL TENSIONS, PROTESTS & NATURAL DISASTERS FLOODED
‘THE RED STICK.’

ONE YEAR LATER: WE STAGE LOCAL POET INTERVIEWS & REMIX *ECLECTIC TRUTH*
SLAM POEMS, INVITING THE COMMUNITY TO REFLECT ON A CAPITAL DIVIDED.”

Three years later, I am writing my dissertation about this time period. Circumstances dictate time, and sheer coincidence allowed this specific project with these specific people to make sense alongside my schedule. While time also makes memories fuzzier, it crystallizes experiences we carry with us. Ineffective coordinating can be a deal-breaker in ethnographic relationships with star groupers. The researcher is responsible to be prompt, respect the time star groupers provide, and provide reasonable expectations for possible implications of their involvement. This is our duty to those who privilege us with their time and space.

Gaining Access from Star Groupers

Fourth, to ground my research in the empirical lifeworld of star groupers, I had to gain access to their perspectives. Ethnographers must acquire consent through honest and continuous communication of ethnographic objectives. This began with obtaining permissions and outlining objectives for star groupers. I planned to notify star groupers of my hopes during week 3 of the slam season and my attendance, but, keying into community sensitivities, I felt I needed to wait. I provide a portion of my post-site fieldnotes from that week 3 time period to detail this dilemma:

I intended to speak with group organizers during this week's event to disclose my intentions to research with the *Eclectic Truth* community. However, after arriving at the downtown-based *Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge* on Tuesday night, I inadvertently overheard a portion of an intimate conversation relating to intergroup conflict amongst two *Eclectic Truth* community members. This moment, combined with the personal poetry and experiences touched upon during my initial site visit, as well as an outside informant telling me about a recent death over the summer that affected the community, caused me to reassess my intentions of immediate ethnographic disclosure. I hope this choice will help build trust and develop rapport amongst the community by showing that—while I hope to attend *Eclectic Truth* partially for ethnographic research purposes—I am wholeheartedly attempting to be an active participant in this community and this research site—especially since I live only blocks away from the venue, and especially since I am connecting with their poems emotionally. I will wait until next week.

After week 3, I obtained verbal corroboration of interest from each star grouper. By week 6, I connected with each via social media, and we made a time to meet outside the slam for an informal recorded interview. Before the interviews, I made a list of areas I wanted to make sure I stressed, including accountability, context, truthfulness, community, transparency, remuneration, reciprocity, self-reflexivity, and informed consent. I identified an ethical imperative to preserve their diversity of perspectives. In interest of remaining true to

interviewee positionality, and recognizing the limitations of analyzing performance on page, all identity descriptors in *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* represent interviewee self-identification. I informed them I was not attending *Eclectic Truth* only for research purposes. I wanted to be part of the community, and if I can ever be of use to them to not hesitate to let me know. Additionally, I received a response to my application from the International Review Board at Louisiana State University (see Appendix A). In an e-mail addressed to me, the IRB Coordinator responded that study approval was not needed for my specific application:

“The IRB chair reviewed your application, A Critical Performance Ethnography of "Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016", and determined IRB approval for this specific application (IRB# E11612) is not needed.”

Mining Ethnographer Positionality

Next, reflexive ethnographers must mine our positionalities to demystify findings and observations. The researcher’s role is as vital to ethnographic understanding as those researched due to the researcher’s position as information filterer. I provide a peek into my perspectives and positionalities in chapters two and three. Understanding the researcher as a liminal variable is paramount to good ethnography. Lindlof and Taylor describe participant-observation as “active and involved members of an existing group, adopting roles that other members recognize as appropriate and nonthreatening” (3). My previous experience with performances and slams allowed me to engage in the slam environment actively and rather quickly. Even though I could be a complete participant at *Eclectic Truth* in several ways, including a performer, poet, and activist, I had not been a resident of Baton Rouge so I had to

be a complete observer in other ways. This is where I placed a key focus of my ethnographic intentions, as my experiences were not enough to comment on the crises of summer 2016. Even if I empathize with experiences of residents, their embodied understanding was foreign to my positionality. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz writes, we must remember what we consider data are “our own constructions of other people’s constructions” (9). Therefore, we need to engage with meaning-makers as if we are co-meaning-makers. Our filter is always present, especially when we try to eliminate it, so integrating perspectives of a culture studied is imperative. The concern for ethnographers, then, is not whether we are biased or whether we can remain neutral, but if we are reflexive enough to be honest about the impacts of our biases and brave enough to admit our non-neutrality.

Undertaking Fieldwork and Composing Fieldnotes

Then, I began the process of fieldwork and taking fieldnotes. In the field, “the thing that we study (communication) and the way that we study it (by communicating) converge” (Lindlof and Taylor 136). Like performance, the process of fieldwork is theoretical, methodological, and practice-based. In fieldwork, in addition to the theory we bring into the field, ethnographers experience theory emerge from the site and people studied. Depending on the site and style of ethnography, fieldwork changes. In my experience as a performance ethnographer exploring Baton Rouge’s creative community, fieldwork was the site of *Eclectic Truth*’s weekly meetings where I served as performer, judge, and audience member. Fieldwork was also the one-to-two-hour-long off-site interviews where I served as facilitator and listener. Fieldwork was also the process of scripting the show and de- and re-contextualizing slam poems and interviews.

Fieldwork was also when the cast of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* rehearsed for the show. And, fieldwork was also the show itself where I served as performer and facilitator. In each type of fieldwork opportunity, the central focus was the original texts acquired from my time at the slam, and observations of the slam itself. My reflexive approach made me hyper-aware of what I performed (in both aesthetic and everyday senses) and how that might impact my acceptance into the community. In the field, some critical mini-moments arose including: Should I drink alcohol at the slam—I mean, it *is* served? *After the first few weeks, I decided a glass of wine would be fine!* Should I smoke a cigarette during an interview? *I took my cue from an interviewee and lit up!* When should I perform during the slam, how often, and am I trying to make the slam team? *I performed when I felt moved to share, listened to support others, and I did not have the time commitment necessary to go the slam team route because of my graduate school commitments.* These questions and many more were often negotiated in-the-moment. While the consequences one way or another might not seem integral to this study, how my actions in these mini-moments in the field could shape how community members interact with me. Those mini-moments are often just as important to understanding culture as the more macro moments that catch the ethnographic eye.

Ethnographers process their interpretations via fieldnotes. At the site I tried to remain as actively engaged as possible, so I rarely took fieldnotes in-the-moment. Instead, I might jot a quick note on my phone, on my hand, or I would wait until after the slam concluded to scribble as much as I remembered. While this approach limited hyper-specific details, it allowed me to appreciate my time at *Eclectic Truth*. Features of my fieldnotes included: thick description, interpretation of key artifacts, evaluation of occurrences, and theorization of possibilities.

Fieldnotes allow ethnographers to remember feelings while no longer having those feelings.

Ethnographers must understand observations are not neutral and informed by stimuli beyond that moment in time. When writing fieldnotes, we must pay attention to concerns and needs of people studied, otherwise we fall victim to writing our own story through our gaze.

Here is an unedited sample of my field notes immediately following an evening at *Eclectic Truth*, followed by an unedited reflection created out of those fieldnotes just days later. I provide these to show what is both gained and lost in translation from step-to-step, from experience, to page, to each and every subsequent stage:

Rough Field Notes from Tuesday, September 27, 2016

9/27 Tu

Played King Kunta by Kendrick Lamar

Donney back there

Limelitters-things are getting hard

Packed, special event- Tonight – Alain Ginsburg

-Gender spectrum--galaxy of the audience?

Here 25 minutes before

All spots filled up, one dropped off so I took it last minute, did Anagrams, Space, and Laura Jean Grace

Purple dude—steve, not a poet, he says

Striked up convo with me, there but ive seen him a few times

remembers Donney's poem about tweets over summer x2

steve looked at D's chapbook and saw how the date it said was listed before his tweets rather than after—this changes the timeline for steve

"it's interesting reading off a page vs hearing and how sometimes you can catch more"

downside of slam sometimes as you need process and digest in a short time

Break glass realization of steve:

"Timely things are changing, Baton Rouge can't stay this way forever"

"A lot of pain involved with change sometimes I hope it'll get better"

Relating unrest to the election "no one's gonna be happy"

2nd place cool

Reflecting on Fieldnotes Days after Tuesday, September 27, 2016

On September 27, I took part in the fourth week of *Eclectic Truth's* slam season at the *Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge's* downtown building. Their fourth week conveniently coincided with my fourth visit. After four weeks of participating and observing the community, its members, and their discourse, a thematic thread has stood out to me: How Baton Rouge's recent chaotic history is intertwined with the topics community poets perform. Tonight is a special no-cover evening as Baltimore slam poet Alain Ginsburg is a featured artist scheduled for a 30-minute set in between the slam and open-mic portions. With an agender guest performer comes an extremely gender-fluid audience that happens to have 40 seats filled when I arrived, and the entire night included upwards of 60—the biggest turnout since I began attending Tuesday nights.

I entered the venue to Kendrick Lamar's "King Kunta" played over the one tall black speaker situated to the right of the stage, beside the night's DJ, Donney. Toiryan has normally been in that role. At *Eclectic Truth*, show-roles shift weekly between members of the Poetry Alliance, which is the group that sponsors the weekly event. For example, in addition to performing in both the slam and open-mic portions of the show, I have observed Donney perform roles such as opening the show as the ritualistic sacrificial poet and being the show's emcee during the second week. Tonight, Donney is in the role of soundmaster, playing tracks before, during, and following poets.

About ten minutes before the show is to begin, one of the open-mic performers dropped out. Desireé, another member of *the Poetry Alliance*, asked the crowd for a volunteer to fill the final slot. As I was contemplating performing a new piece on this night, I grabbed the reins, and was selected to go sixth of six poets (later in the night I performed, "Anagrams, Space, and Laura Jean Grace"). Since there is a special guest performer, the slam featured one round instead of the traditional two.

While sitting in the back-row of the *Firehouse Gallery*, Steve—a white man in his 30s who I have seen in the audience before—sits next to me and strikes up a conversation about past works of mine he has witnessed. He tells me, "I've seen you perform here before. I like it, you add a lot of comedy to the serious, it's unique." I say, "thanks, I really appreciate that." My statement of appreciation when given feedback is a concept I have embodied through my countless experiences with competitive performance and critique. To me, it seems to be a way of accepting comments humbly, simultaneously giving agency to both an audience and performer's standpoint, and also shutting down the conversation because I feel uncomfortable when that attention is directed at me, haha.

Then, Steve mentions a powerful poem Donney has performed at *Eclectic Truth* twice since I have been attending. The poem is a compilation of his tweets from the summer that coincided with Baton Rouge's chaotic recent history. Steve says, "when Donney performed it, I assumed the dates he read were before the tweet. But, after I read the poem in his chapbook [that is for sale at the merchandise table], the dates were actually *after* the tweet." He added, "it's interesting reading off a page versus hearing and how sometimes you can catch more."

A noted downside of slam poetry competitions is that the short time limit does not always allow moments to be felt out by performers, and speed and attempts to vary performance levels for dramatic effect can often overshadow content and subtlety. However, the urgency inherent in traditional slam poetry delivery can also be viewed in conjunction with topics about tragedy as a positive marker for political action. As Steve told me in reference to Donney's content, "things are changing, Baton Rouge can't stay this way forever. There's a lot of pain involved with change sometimes. I hope it'll get better." While Steve stated he did not comprehend some of the minutiae inherent in Donney's powerful poem, as he was looking at the poetry "from a white perspective," Donney's call to action seemed to be extremely palpable to him.

While this excerpt did not make the final version of the script, the experience these fieldnotes evoke mattered to my overall conception of *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* and how it can impact its members, especially those who would not fall into Turner's star grouper category. After attending only a few weekly events, Steve began making connections and actively engaging poets, their poetry, and the cultural environment surrounding all of us in the space. Just because ethnographic fieldnotes and fieldwork do not make it into the final product, that does not make them less valuable. Often, what we omit can tell us just as much about a culture, and the researcher, as what we choose to include.

Collecting and Analyzing Data: Interviewing as an Ethnographic Privilege

After gathering fieldwork data and fieldnotes, ethnographers analyze them. The data I gathered regarded site experiences, slam poem content, and interview themes. For the site, I

made sure to take note of crucial features, roles, and rituals (chapter three). For the poems, (with the eventual cast) we extracted what was not said and what we could gain through incorporating more bodies (chapter nine). I also take responsibility for any unintended meanings my cast and I placed onto the slam poems of poets when adapting them for the stage. For the interviews, I categorized the content thematically. While acknowledging their narratives are theirs to tell, I take responsibility with how my questioning style could influence responses. For example, there are a few occasions where I ask leading questions, and produce responses that incorporate components of those questions. For example, when interviewing Melissa, I asked: “Would you say the urgency of the summer’s struggles transcended the urgency of slam?” A few sentences in to her response, she told me,

That was unintentional on our part that that was happening. Where there is this level of transcending slam. And this just being a safe space and a community space and that’s already there. But I think our venue has shifted some with how much of a safe space we are we definitely go beyond that mold. We definitely transcended slam over the summer.

Rather than allowing that observation to emerge, my leading question popped that terminology into our discourse. I am not saying this is not what she was already thinking or that I have the power to put words in someone else’s brain, but I am saying there is a great likelihood that my question influenced the construction of Melissa’s response. In retrospect, I would have asked a more open-ended version of that question that allowed more room for interpretation and response variability. This section further unpacks how I went about interviewing *Eclectic Truth* star groupers and key themes emerging from those interviews.

In *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*, Norman Denzin notes, reflexive interviews are sites “for conversation, a discursive method, and a

communicative format that produces knowledge” (85). With each star grouper, I had the privilege of listening to their understandings of several topics. I aimed to maintain a loose, conversational flow. This side-to-side flow allowed us to engage dialogically, build on our conversation, and retain narrative focus. I had known these poets for a few months before the interviews through conversations at *Eclectic Truth*, observing their performances, and our run-ins around Baton Rouge. Thus, we had built some rapport previously. In chapter twelve, I further outline the contexts surrounding each of our informant<->ethnographer relationships. Years of crafting poetry through and with the culture of Baton Rouge gives Donney, Toiryan, Jazmyne, Desireé, and Melissa a particular lens to their experiences that cannot be replicated in other data collection methods. These interviews were my opportunity to show deep listening, and to make sure I communicate that my “primary responsibility” as a performance ethnographer “is to those studied” (Denzin 129). Ethnographic interviews are a privilege allowing for artifact identification, discourse interrogation, and identity establishment. I knew I wanted to create a performance out of my *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* fieldwork, but I could not commit to a concept before having the opportunity to chat with the culture’s star groupers. Interviewing can be broken down into a three-part structure: preparing for the interview, during the interview, and reflecting on the interview.

Before: Preparing for an Efficient and Non-Rigid Interview

First, preparing for the interview consists of planning a location, preparing topics of discussion, planning for the interview style, considering interviewee perspectives, and time allocation. In preparing for interviews with *Eclectic Truth* star groupers, my primary concern

was how to make our hour-or-so of time together as useful as possible. By useful I mean useful to the star groupers who granted me their time, and useful to my ethnographic research process. The topic areas I planned to ask about involved their backgrounds, current events, perceptions of the influence of summer 2016 on *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam*, and how slam poetry and the poetry slam plays into their processing of those events. Before the interview, I practiced asking questions that would be open-ended and provide room for elaboration, not yes-or-no answers. The interview questions they turned into can be explored in chapter twelve, dedicated to the texts of Donney, Toiryan, Jazmyne, Desireé, and Melissa. I also needed to make sure that the interview did not feel like filling out a form. Rather, I planned to focus on how our live experience together mattered. I wanted interviewees to understand I was prepared, took their time seriously, and would allow for their responses to guide our conversation.

During: Conversational Interviews with Star Groupers

The live interview can be separated into two components: site and engagement. The site for each interview was based on proximity, available time, and star grouper preference. I met Toiryan at a Starbucks, chatted with Donney over the phone while he was grocery shopping, drank coffee with Desireé at Highland Coffees, caught up with Jazmyne at LSU's Middleton Library, and rendezvoused with Melissa in between shifts at her job coaching youth gymnastics. For each, the site and medium influenced some topics of conversation. For example, Toiryan and I faced toward the street, across from a WalMart and an iHop. Both establishments came up in conversation, and both establishments found their way into the

performance script. Melissa and I met at her job, and her profession and guests came up in our discourse. Her profession also inspired Montana's movement decisions when embodying Melissa's words. Interview sites matter because comfortability and surroundings impact conversation. Each interview informs structure and content of subsequent interviews. In our interviews, we tackled oral history, personal narrative, and current events. While I had a list of topics I wanted to tackle, I wanted their narratives to emerge from our live engagement. The areas we chatted about eventually transformed into central themes of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*.

After: Making Sense of Collective Themes through De- and Re-Contextualization

After all five interviews concluded, I made sense of the data by grouping the transcribed texts into recurring themes, or bins. Grouping their texts together allowed me to compartmentalize interview data into manageable morsels, and for their narratives to speak with each other through page proximity. After transcribing each of the interviews myself, I color-coded them. These colors matched the costume themes in *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. Donney was color-coded as red, because of his clothing choices. Toiryan was yellow because of his affinity for Pikachu. Melissa was green because of her earthy vibe. Desireé was blue, because that was Kaiya's favorite color. Jazmyne was orange because, well, I needed another color and, later, Laura had an orange dress she was cool with wearing in the show! Then, I made a list of themes that emerged in our transcripts. Denzin writes, ethnographers should prioritize themes "on which a substantial amount of data has been collected and which reflect recurrent or underlying patterns of activities" at the site (157). I

attended to what members marked as significant and focused their energies toward. Then, I de-contextualized data from the original interviews by placing them into thematic bins mentioned by multiple star groupers. By de-contextualizing interview data, I removed it from its original state and allowed the text to stand on its own. The data not in a bin was placed into a new bin, or discarded. Performance ethnographers cannot keep *everything* in a project, so we have to make hard decisions, and omission is inevitable. With interview narratives being filtered by interviewer prompts, it is clear ethnographic research cannot be separated from an ethnographer. De- and re-contextualizing interview data sparks insights and emergence. For example, how star groupers speak about one another away from each other reveals their commitments.

Madison writes, “the interview is a window to individual subjectivity and collective belonging: I am because we are, and we are because I am” (28). When we are able to separate a window into panes, isolation of thematic areas creates a focus on the pieces rather than the overwhelming totality of the window. Thirteen key themes found their way into *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. First, the poets described their positionality and relationships to Baton Rouge. Second, the poets spoke about fellow *Eclectic Truth* members. Third, the poets commented on Alton Sterling and race relations with the police in Baton Rouge. Fourth, the poets discussed how they and their neighbors were impacted by the unnamed “Great Flood” of 2016. Fifth, the poets negotiated the history of marginalization of their city’s infrastructure. Sixth, the poets talked about how they felt about the political landscape of 2016. Seventh, the poets discussed how they understood slam poetry and the poetry slam. Eighth, the poets reflected on their writings, performances, the power of poetry,

and individual growth. Ninth, the poets talked about *Eclectic Truth*, its goals, and its function as a community support group. Tenth, the poets remembered Kaiya. Eleventh, I asked the poets to reflect on performing in the midst of *the Firehouse Gallery* with flood-related and law enforcement-related poetry. Twelfth, they reflected the need for uncomfortability, and emerging conflicts. The primary conflict that emerging in each interview revolved around the purpose of *Eclectic Truth* regarding its redressive potential to reach dominant publics. Finally, the poets shared how they found hope following the continuous crises of summer 2016, and continue to find hope despite centuries of breaches. Denzin writes, “performance narratives do more than celebrate the lives and struggles of persons who have lived through violence and abuse. They must always be directed back to the structures that shape and produce the violence in question” (239). De- and re-contextualizing interview data through conversational construction is a method of analyzing how culture operates pedagogically, how members inform one another away from each other, and creates a foundation for dramatic staging of narratives rooted in the voices of the community interviewed. Dramatic discourse becomes transferable to the stage due to conflict that arises as we develop shared meaning. Sensualizing interview data from multiple star groupers through thematic conversation construction allows for discourse comparison, motivation exploration, and meaning creation.

Clearly, the dialogic interview is a collaborative performance that cannot be accomplished with only one body. Chapter seven delves further into the scripting of this interview data and its incorporation in *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. Ethnographic interviews argue language is material. It shapes and is shaped by cultural members in relationship with the ethnographer. The interview is an active, intimate site where

meaning is shared and co-created. Interviews are spaces for operationalizing experiences. Being interviewed is a performance. Participants are experts, and interviewers sometimes feign ignorance in order to provoke elaboration. Lindlof and Taylor write, “the ethnographer’s task is not simply to identify member-recognized terms and categories but also to *specify the conditions under which people actually invoke and apply such terms*” (139). Ethnographers need community points of view. Otherwise, we become reporters instead of knowledge co-sharers.

Sharing and Member-Checking

I practiced sharing my work through multiple methods, like post-interview check-ins, community member-checking, and collaboratively making decisions throughout the performance ethnography process. By sharing and updating, I found my understanding of *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* grew through having to explain my progress and process. Luckily, my performance ethnography class provided plenty of opportunities to share through writing, performance, and discussion. Throughout documenting, writing, scripting, and performing, I made sure to member-check with star groupers, with the cast embodying the texts, trusted outside sources and individuals I had worked with in the past, and my assistant director, Patrick McElearney. Performance ethnographers prioritize the welfare of their communities first by protecting privacy, asking permission, getting consent, and gaining trust. For example, at key intervals throughout the process, I double-checked choices through conversation with specific community members, showing them visuals of rehearsals with my phone, inviting them to rehearsals and the production, and providing them this document for feedback and approval. Member-checking is not perfect. It brings up questions about how experiences are conveyed

and to what extent research participants can be considered valid judges of the interpretation of the experiences of their own group. At the same time, who better to acknowledge representation than those being represented? Also, when to check, and how much checking is too much are important considerations as these individuals have their own lives to live!

Presenting Research and Reflecting on the Process

The goal of generating and presenting performance research “is to inspire an empathic, emotional reaction, so the consumer of research can develop a deep, personal understanding of the “subject” of the data” (Furman, Lietz, and Langer 2). Good performance ethnography embraces audiences sensuously and as critical consumers. Presenting research as a performance in addition to a paper allowed the research space to sustain multiple voices in multimodal ways. It also allowed us me to reach audiences who do not traditionally read academic scholarship or attend community poetry slams. I did not aspire to present a perfect document or a flawless performance. Instead, I wanted to present a reflexively honest account of findings to show hopes, struggles, and complications. I also wanted to pay attention to aesthetics and craft in order to demonstrate care to the community, and I will unpack this concept further in chapter eleven. In addition to *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, I have presented and reflected on the research process in multiple other public avenues. From these experiences, I learned performance ethnography may focus on performance, but performance is not the end product. Like communities, performance ethnographies are eternal works in progress. If we approach this work from ethics of goodness and curiosity, potentials for knowledge-generation are limitless.

Aiming for Useful Reciprocity

Reciprocity is of utmost importance for performance ethnographers. We ask people to share their lives with us so we can share their stories with others. What can we give back to those who give to us their time? Linda Tuhiwai Smith's articulation of indigenous methodologies includes the sharing of research findings with those who are studied as part of a "principle of reciprocity and feedback" (Fields 15). Following openness and sharing, reciprocity should become an agreement between researchers and researched. The performance of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* aimed for reciprocity with star groupers. On one level, it functioned as a redressive action responding to the redressive action of *Eclectic Truth*. My regular attendance at the slam, publicizing the weekly ritual, and offering a portion of donations received from the show's HopKins Black Box performances moves toward reciprocity on a different level.

Off-site, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I was invited to give workshops at a local high school and summer slam camps for youth poets. Outside the poetry slam, I helped bridge *Eclectic Truth*-linked community organization *Forward Arts* and LSU-linked youth-oriented *CUPSI* slam team with the HopKins Black Box university space to use. I was also invited to attend several rehearsals and provide performance critiques for the poets. After leaving Baton Rouge, I was able to coordinate with Donney Rose on a compensated speaking engagement in the Interpreters Theatre at the University of Northern Iowa, where I serve as production coordinator and interim technical director. In the future, I hope to find further ways to collaborate with the members of this community. There are many ways to provide reciprocity, but making sure it is something useful to the group should be the utmost priority.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MOVING CROSS-COUNTRY: ETHNO-SCRIPTING *BATON ROUGE SLAM!: AN OBITUARY FOR SUMMER 2016*

The Scripting Foundation of Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016

Drama and poetry are inseparable. Poet, playwright, and director Federico García Lorca remarks, “theater is a poetry that rises from the book and becomes human enough to talk and shout, weep and despair” (xiii). Performance poetry stages the page. I conceptualized *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* as a response to my ethnographic study and from community members stating desires to reach more audiences. I framed the show as a performance of Baton Rouge rather than a performance of slam poetry to reach publics that traditionally do not attend slam events. The show script features conversationally-constructed ethnographic interviews, theatricalized slam poetry, and a guiding thread of researcher narrative that includes digital video. Throughout the year-long ethnography-to-performance process, *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* became not just a show about 2016, but any year when artists create art in the face of tragedy. With Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, Charlottesville, tiki torches, and white supremacist uprisings, rampant willful ignorance of historical context, and an urge from popular media and prominent politicians to flatten the world, *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* exposes breaches of the past and crises of today to understand hopes for tomorrow. The construction and subsequent performance of this *slamnographic* script asks (in the spirit of the post-slam era described in chapter five), what happens when performance ethnography turns slam poetry and the poetry slam into something else?

Turning a research presentation into a live performance creates ways of knowing different than statistics, a paper, or film. We watch movies and read papers, but we *feel* live performances. In scripting the words and works of these slam poets, I aimed to remain faithful to the essence of their interviews, poetry, and the *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* site. I acknowledge no script can re-capture reality, and I understand experience and representation are never the same. On-stage performative representations can both convey senses of truth as well as undermine that sense. They are not declarations of what is; they are invitations to “consider this way of seeing the world” (Gergen and Gergen 295). Scripting for live performance challenges the distinctions between science and art, serious and play, truth and imagination, the aesthetic and the everyday. In scripting, performance ethnographers are influenced by past exposures. We are what we consume! We create “original” ideas by juxtaposing concepts together. By slamming ideas against one another.

While there were many scholars and artists I drew upon (including: culture clash, Anna Deveare-Smith, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Danny Hoch, Robin Morgan, San Francisco Mime Troupe, slam poets, and a whole host of other performance artists and writers), Bertolt Brecht’s dialectical theatre and Jerzy Gradowski’s poor theatre were two performance methodologies guiding the construction of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. Brecht writes, “theatre which makes no contact with a public is nonsense” (7). Brecht took a scientific approach to performance construction, believing performance choices and audience response can be deployed as cause/effect relationships. Brecht maintained audiences should be treated as if they are sporting audiences, “smart” observers, spectators who want to be entertained. Epistemological assumptions taken from Brecht include: an opposition toward pure

Stanislavskian naturalism; *Verfrumden*, or an alienation-effect aimed at provoking specific reactions from audience members; and the aim of keeping audiences at a distance so judgments are made from their position as observers. In dialectical theatre, the fourth-wall is often broken, performance choices are economical, and one may utilize any and all tools at one's disposal to create the best performance possible. At the end of a Brechtian-influenced performance, audiences should leave with a lingering feeling of unresolvedness. Alienated not necessarily *because* of the performance, but because of the realization that life is more alienating to some people than others. We begin the final scene of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* by discussing the issue of resolve in regards to Baton Rouge:

DONNEY	A lot of us are writing beyond ourselves. When we talk about Kaiya, there's no resolve. When you talk about the Sterling case—
JAZMYNE	We still haven't found out whether a police officer is going to be indicted.
DONNEY	--no resolve.

To find a solution, we must agree on a cause. Until dominant public perspectives align more closely with the lived experiences of marginalized publics, the impacts of society's breaches cannot be collectively addressed, and resolution is feigned rather than addressed.

Bernstein considers "the poetry reading as radically 'poor theater,' in Jerzy Gratowski's sense" (10). In *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, I attempted a poor theatre approach through the following: Performing in a bare space, having audiences seated on multiple sides of the performance area, acknowledging the value of the actor's body in relation to spectators, and attempting to minimize accoutrements. Of course, I also considered limitations of dialectical theatre and poor theatre. Dialectical theatre might not be as effective or work in times of crisis or urgency due to the audience's role as mainly voyeuristic. When

action is needed, one might not want to create the distance necessary for observation. Poor theatre often requires a suspension of disbelief to be understood by the audience, otherwise the performance is in danger of not connecting. To account for these limitations, the script features key moments attempting to bridge this distance, like audience interactions with set pieces, implicating audiences through several different ways of breaking the fourth wall, and including audiences with call-and-response tactics. In chapter eleven I address audience and respondent feedback to *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*.

In “Playwriting with Data: Ethnographic Performance Texts,” Johnny Saldaña writes, “the artistic function and essential responsibilities of the playwright in theatre are similar to those of the qualitative researcher writing a report: to create a unique, engaging, and insightful text about the human condition” (60). Ethnotheatre employs traditional theatre techniques to mount an event whose characters are research participants embodied by actors. Ethnodrama dramatizes ethnographic data and emphasizes potentials of subversion, education, and validation. Ethnodramas cast communities of origin as owners of narratives, and focus on “crises and moments of epiphany in the culture” (83). In ethnotheatre, artifacts of ethnography, like fieldnotes and interviews, are collected, scripted, and performed for audiences with hopes of enriching cultural comprehension. Principles of ethnotheatre helped me decode, re-code, and performatively share what I learned with audiences in both Baton Rouge, LA, and Kennesaw, GA. In *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, research participants were the star groupers whose interviews and poems were deployed, the performers who embodied the words of star groupers, and the various publics that witnessed the production.

Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016 not only draws from ethnotheatre and ethnodrama, but also ethnopoetry. Vannini writes, ethnopoetics “allows for lifeworlds to progressively unfold through multiple accounts, to emerge as an outcome of action and interaction, of mediation and translation” (51). Ethnopoetry does *not* need to fit poetic conventions; rather, it brings something into being which has not existed before. This notion is ontological to the construction of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. In this script and performance, we turn the slam and the specific texts gathered into something they have not been before, transcending their original forms. Foley writes, ethnopoetics seek “to read or understand oral poetry on its own terms, within the indigenous cultural matrix” (95). *Eclectic Truth* star groupers did not ask me to critique their poetry or experience. Instead, they performatively asked me to engage with their craft and accept their testimony as truth. Turner writes in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, “logic alone is incapable of leading a person to new ideas as grammar alone is incapable of inspiring poems and as theory of harmony alone is incapable of inspiring sonatas” (54). Ethnopoetics shows deep listening toward an audience possibly hearing for the first time. Ethnodrama relates to scripting of ethnographic data. Ethnotheatre is how it all comes together in public view.

Guidelines Grounding the Scripting and Performance Processes

Because of the emotional weight communicated to me during my time at *Eclectic Truth*’s weekly poetry slam ritual, I knew I had to approach the scripting of ethnographic data with care. When beginning the construction of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, I did not know what I wanted the show to look like and I did not want to predetermine its

shape. I allowed the themes that emerged and resonated with my observational experiences to form the ethnographic performance. I trusted that, through narrowing down piles of data, a social drama navigated by the collective's poetry would emerge. My fieldwork, interview sessions, and *Eclectic Truth* slam poems provided rich opportunity to communicate lived experience for performers and audiences alike. Before putting the script together, in the interest of doing good, I made a list of what ethical and aesthetic choices were important to me and why, and what components of slam star groupers offered to me as vital to their identities. As ethnographer, scripter, director, and performer (and *Eclectic Truth* member), I provided myself with five guidelines to draw upon when ethical or aesthetic concerns arose.

The first guideline I gave my scripting and performance processes: no glorification of trauma or tragedy. I wanted to avoid death as dramatic leverage. For example, Sterling's murder does not need to be represented on stage and the murders of police officers do not need to be represented in their graphic realities. In responding to 1967's *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant*, written by Amiri Baraka and directed by Gilbert Moses, Elam comments on their objective to heighten awareness of marginalization without duplicating the experience. This urge to de-sensationalize shows sensitivity to the situated meanings of participants. If I were to stage the horror I would be in dangerous territory, as it destroys "the position of the witness—the one that I'm trying to affirm—turning the "looking" instead into that of the voyeur or morbid onlooker" (Taylor 24). As "all (social and human) dramas require spectators/witnessed" (25), staging audiences as participant of the production gives them co-ownership of the traumatic event through the nature of being a captive audience member. Meaning, audiences can feel like they must remain in a space and witness what is in front of them, even if it is

triggering, due to theatrical conventions. In *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, we worked to answer the question: how can we explore violence inflicted upon people without reproducing it?

Second, I did not want to restage a typical poetry slam. This performance was about the contexts of a poetry slam, it was not *a* poetry slam. My ethnographic objective was to provide audiences with threads beneath the seams of *Eclectic Truth*. As star groupers pointed out, the dominant public does not listen to their narratives by virtue of not attending the weekly slam. I wanted to keep the pieces and textures of the poetry slam, and the spirit and feel of the poetry slam, but arrange those pieces into a whole new puzzle to unearth new insights. If audiences wanted to see a slam, they would have gone to a slam and not a black box theatre that specializes in experimental performance! *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* is a response to the question: how does slam poetry change when transformed into staged theatre and embodied by different bodies?

Third, I wanted to triangulate my fieldwork experiences, perspectives of star groupers derived from interviews and interactions, and re-contextualize their slam poems into ensemble scenes. My fieldwork and positional experiences became a narrative frame for the performance. The interviews became conversational re-creations of our discourse. These dialogic interviews removed me—although, my ethnographic voice did invisibly remain when considering how the interview responses were originally prompted. Instead of my interview questions, the interviews were re-constructed, as if the performers were speaking to one another and the audience, simultaneously. We presented the slam poems as shortened versions at the beginning of the show and later re-contextualized them into individual scenes.

Expanding the possibilities of the slam poem, taking it from one stage just like it was taken off the page, supports further re-purposing the form in our post-slam era. As slam is “for public consumption,” altering the poems for a new public makes sense if undertaken with an ethic of care (Wheeler 141).

Fourth, I was conscious of show length, maximizing spatial opportunities through minimalism, and other practical considerations. I knew I wanted the show’s maximum length to be an hour and fifteen minutes with no intermission. Audiences can only sit so long without a break! I knew the host space would be the HopKins Black Box theatre at Louisiana State University. I also knew of the possibility of transporting the show to different venues, so concepts of poor theatre and malleability informed many of aesthetic decisions. I also wanted to take *Eclectic Truth’s* fall 2016 *Firehouse Gallery* performance space into consideration. Bhattacharya writes, “by juxtaposing the performative spaces against each other, I could “show” instead of tell the reader about the discursive effects of those spaces” (1079). We used tape to re-create a de-constructed mapping of Louisiana and Baton Rouge to create portability and a grid to motivate choices. I also focused on practical considerations like efficiently using rehearsal time, cast bonding, accessible scheduling, energetic warm-ups, and creating an environment that fosters collective dynamism and critique.

Fifth, I wanted to embrace reflexivity through a re-mix nature of breaking and re-making I refer to as *de- and re-contextualization*. Denzin writes, “the reflexive performance text contests the pull of traditional “realist” theater and modernist ethnography, wherein performers and ethnographers reenact and re-create” (36). Realism in performed ethnographies preserves “an artificial unity and rationale that obscures the messy underbelly of

the subject” (Cavanaugh 289). A limitation of documentation or re-construction, though, is inexactness. Inexactness also identifies what makes a culture unique. *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* re-constructs a reality that never existed to explore what exists. This manner of exploration allows for reflexivity through admission of what the script is not, resists mimetic representation, and embraces a postmodern evocative epistemology whose aesthetic travels beyond the “the already-seen and already-heard” (Birringer 196). I describe specific elements of de- and re-contextualization in the next section and in chapter nine when describing my cast’s employment of this methodology to the gathered slam poems.

Moving Cross-Country: Scripting Ethnographic Performance

I moved back to Iowa from Baton Rouge during summer 2019. In the process, I realized moving cross-country is an apt metaphor for scripting ethnographic information and de- and re-contextualizing data. Moving cross-country is a “how-to” metaphor for scripting. While packing to move, we decide what matters most to us and the people we care about, and we place what matters most into bins for transport. In this process of selecting what we will take on our travels, we discard that which is not as useful. Based on guidelines you have for your move regarding destination, space, travel time, and method of transporting what matters, you continue to condense the stuff in your bins into something manageable. Eventually, you take the trip. Along the way, what matters shifts, you maybe even need to re-pack your bins. Once you arrive at your destination, you need to plop all your bins into places. You do not know where all your stuff is going to fit, because you overpacked, of course. You did not need to include that giant thing from that weird place you went that one time, did you? You start

putting stuff in areas it might eventually live, and those areas are defined by infrastructural and time constraints. Slowly, though, the bins become more manageable, and everything starts settling into place. Scripting *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* was a lot like that. I moved cross-country from slam space to script to black box theatre, through participant-observation, data collection, data reduction, initial script, staged readings, rehearsals, performances, and now, here. As I recollect on my scripting process, I am able to isolate three stages of performance script development: the six Cs of script construction, playing, preparing, and praxis, and post-performance adjustments.

The Six Cs of Script Construction

In assembling interview data into conversational scenes, I structured organized play using a process I call the *six Cs of script construction*. It made sense for one frame of the show to be the theatricalized slam poems as it would give star groupers, their poetry, and each cast member equal time to shine. Creating a second frame of conversational interview construction allowed the connections between ethnographic data to develop. Paring down days of data and pages of information is difficult. Having an organized methodology for how to whittle concepts down is useful. Although the *six C's of script construction* process emerged during this ethnographic experience, it is also a product of my previous ethnographic scripting experiences and performance development exposure.

The six C's are chopping, chunking, coding, cutting, checking, and chipping. *Chopping* is the first step to making a project like this manageable. I begin by chopping out everything I know I will not need. *Chunking* means isolating key pieces of information and tensions that I

know will provide visceral performance potential. *Coding* decides and places the data remaining into overflowing thematic bins. Through coding, themes emerge by way of categorizing data into bins. *Cutting* selects what should stay and what should be discarded from those bins. Often, cutting can involve deciding among what to keep when there are duplicates of the same idea, when one member has an unequal amount of content, or when a bin does not have enough information to warrant being a pattern. During *checking*, scripters make hard choices, textual connections are drawn, and aesthetic options begin coming into focus. Decisions about planting ideas at the beginning of the script that will payoff later are often made in this section, and these choices begin shaping the script beyond its primary threads. *Chipping* removes unnecessary repetition, chisels the conversation for efficiency, and tweaks choices to key in on emerging connections and moments of resonance. Chipping as refinement and polishing often occurs up to and including the day of performance presentation.

In *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, I left interviewee words largely unedited, except for a few instances when it was necessary for an aesthetic effect, to avoid duplicating of ideas, or for the sake of brevity. I created the first draft of the interview thread in December 2016 and submitted it as part of a final project for a graduate performance ethnography class taught by Dr. Tracy Stephenson Shaffer. I found it helpful to take a class about performance ethnography while doing performance ethnography! Since not everyone can be in that optimal of an ethnographic position, I offer this dissertation as a means of creating your own knowledge from my experience. In addition to *six Cs of script construction*, the structural frame of highlighting each poet developed during this phase (chapter nine).

Playing, Preparing, and Praxis

Second, I expand on playing, preparing, and praxis. *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* took place during spring 2017. During this process, the interview thread and slam poems were developed into a show proposal, and I added a third narrative combined with a documentary-style video thread to the concept. I workshopped and played with this script and video installation in two separate classes: Installation Art with Dr. Patricia Suchy, and Directing II with Dr. George Judy. In these classes, play became process through readings and experiments with and for live bodies. After the initial script, I wanted to incorporate more of the city and give the show more contextual cues. Installation Art inspired me to play with video design to provide perspective and interactive mapping to implicate audiences. In Directing II, the taped-on Louisiana stage came to light, as did the idea of performing the slam poetry in two different ways. Most importantly, during this process of exposing my research in multiple avenues, I met Jordan Smith, who would agree to embody Donney's words for the show's run. By sheer chance, both of us collaborated with a mutual artist in that Directing II class. This example shows the importance of being around others when workshopping and playing.

Preparing for rehearsals took place over summer 2017. I needed to cast the show before the next draft of the script could progress, and before I could organize a rehearsal schedule. During this stage, I designed my show poster and that artistic process contributed to ideas for the set and staging. The staging and poster also heavily influenced the script, which needed to be adapted to the HopKins Black Box theatre site. I knew I wanted to devise the slam poem scenes with the cast, so I brainstormed activities and methodologies to utilize during rehearsals. I also tightened my interview scenes. During this stage, I focused on creating the narrative-

video thread. Sections I added during preparation included: the deconstructed *Firehouse* as inspiration for a de-constructed Baton Rouge, LA, stage, the inclusion of Robert Frost's "The Road Less Traveled" as a metaphor for the roads that divide Baton Rouge, and the documentary album eight-track show structure. I wanted each scene to feel like the next track on a record you love, so I framed the show with that concept in mind. I also developed the construction of scene I, which introduces what slam poetry is, and scene II, which introduces the individual performers and the poets and poems they are embodying, in this period. In chapter eight, the script of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* showcases these choices.

Praxis occurred with the cast during our six-week show rehearsal period in fall 2017. We spent the first four weeks navigating our collective vision for the performance. After the cast was recruited, I provided them with a template of the script that included all but the developed ensemble slam poems. We would devise these together, and navigate any missing puzzle pieces of the show's construction together. In developing the script, our ensemble became close. We practiced, played games, bonded, had serious life talks, laughs, and shared experiences, like going to *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* together. There, cast members met some of the star groupers whose words they would embody. Some cast members even performed in the open-mic portion and judged the slam! All of these interactions informed how the script developed. Through rehearsal, the interview thread was chiseled toward motivated action and creating a variety of emotional and physical opportunities. We polished the shortened slam poems used in the opening through collective critique, and we devised the theatricalized slam scenes. I wove in the video-narrative and finalized blocking choices. Also, scenic design choices became part of the script, like the microphone that lights up and hangs from the ceiling. The ending of the

show came together last. It resulted from our experiences together and the collective meaning we developed from this process. For the ending of the show, we opted to echo scripted text from the beginning, but with a new tone to emphasize growth; to performatively demonstrate “a deeper layer” evoked by Lexus, performing the words of Toiryan.

Post-Performance Adjustments

Post-performance adjustments to the script, as well as alternative avenues of presentation, are extensions of the scripting process. During spring 2018, the cast and crew took *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* to the Patti Pace Performance Festival in Kennesaw, GA, hosted by Kennesaw State University. As we travelled to a new city, we needed to account for a new audience in a new space and place. During rehearsals for this remount, we adapted staging for a more proscenium audience instead of a split audience, and created new visuals to account for the shakiness of some of the originals. In addition, the microphone stood on a stand instead of hung upside down due to space limitations, we adjusted blocking specifics to meet the needs of a proscenium stage, and we tweaked lines to account for our growth, the show’s evolution, and the new audience.

I also adapted the script for other sites and audiences, including: script revealings at *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam*, showcasing for courses in ethnography and poetry at Louisiana State University, and workshopping components for *Humanities Amped* studies at McKinley High School. Personally, I presented my ethnographic account as the top student paper in performance studies for the 2018 National Communication Association conference, in classrooms and workshops I continue to guide, and years later my castmates and I continue to

quote key lines from the script in casual conversation. This process reiterated in me that a script does not reach its final form until it ceases to be performed. As chapter eight argues before presenting the script of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, when we cease to actively engage our performances post the performance itself, we actively embrace the status quo and maintain an arms-distance toward experiences represented by the script.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SCRIPT: *BATON ROUGE SLAM!: AN OBITUARY FOR SUMMER 2016*

Heightening the Performance Script

This chapter offers the script of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. This theatre vérité-style script shows how the ethnographic research process marks and shares a specific view of history. While I am hesitant to refer to myself as a writer of history, that is what this project is *doing*. By undertaking this project, as Richard Schechner might echo, I am not *not* a performance historian; much like how the performers of *Baton Rouge Slam!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* are not *not* the star groupers whose words they embody. In *Room is on Fire: The History, Pedagogy, and Practice of Youth Spoken Word Poetry*, Weinstein bravely tiptoes through a historical account of youth spoken word, vulnerably sharing, “how daunting it is to construct a narrative that connects dots among living people and real events” (xv). Writing history is intimate, experiential, and by its very design subjective. As an ethnographer, I acknowledge that it is often people who have the privilege of time who tell and shape stories.

This performance script of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* is my best attempt to harness ephemerality, to document connected moment(s) in time that matter, and to fully acknowledge that this time capsule is filtered through me as a researcher. This dissertation, compiled over three years, documents my experience of the experiences of others. The performance script of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* is a product of the first year. When assembling the staged performance, our ensemble gave voice and body to texts in copious ways. The show’s inception, scripting, and rehearsal processes began with sheets of slam poems conceived by local poets and dialogic interview transcripts.

The performance started and ended with a call to the written word located in a “Question of the Day!” journal co-constructed by the cast, narratives of local poets, and audience members. While the written word is an origin story for this project, our nod to the written word is a nod to the body that gives birth to language, written, oral, and embodied. Offering the script tips a cap to the oral interpretation roots of performance studies, and pays homage to the embodied writing roots of slam culture. The performance script *is* valuable research. In *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*, Norman Denzin proclaims performances deconstruct “the scholarly article as the preferred form of presentation (and representation)” (13). Here, I show how I make sense of the many tellers of the story, including the interviewees, the performance space, the city, the political context(s), the cast and their embodiment, the crew and their labor, and the possibilities brought by including an audience.

The more the qualities of performance are enlivened through poetry, through drama, through embodiment, the more potential for knowledge generation exists. Scripting is a variation of “performative writing. Writing performatively” (Pollock 75). Scripting is writing that is intended to be performed and enlivened. Scripts feature a self-awareness of their intended construction for an audience. This self-awareness is similar to slam poets writing poetry for the stage rather than the page. Scripters are often aware it will be interpreted, embodied by other bodies, and transmitted for audiences. In animating the script, rhythms become more apparent, feelings dance off dialogue, and a recognition that we originate from a place before the page emerges. A script’s heightening is labor that must be taken by a reader in order grasp the fullest meaning from the text. A dialogical tension between our body and the text occurs as syntax speeds “up the line, and the line is trying to slow down the syntax” (Pinsky 29). As D.

Soyini Madison pens in *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, “in performative writing, we recognize that the *body* writes” (227). The body reads, the body processes, and the body evolves when actively engaged.

Therefore, I ask of you to give this performance script life! Like studying culture, like writing history, this is difficult, intimate, and takes time and energy and focus. As you have not or cannot experience what these slam poets experienced during summer 2016, I urge you to lend your voice to their symbols and “participate in the life of the text” (Bowman and Bowman 207), to perform the script aloud! In *Verbal Art as Performance*, Bauman argues “a performance-centered conception of verbal art calls for an approach through performance itself” (8). As will be discussed in chapter ten, non-participation and not engaging experiences of others maintains dialogic distance and prevents intimacy and empathy from occurring. As I have learned during my fieldwork with *Eclectic Truth* and through the creation of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, it is too easy to place the experiences of others out of reach. This is especially true when so much of a city’s infrastructure was created to divide. Performing aloud creates vulnerability within the performer. Heightening and re-performing the script of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* is a performative answer to the question: What happens when we choose to put someone else’s words into our bodies?

The following script was originally performed by an ensemble cast of five for a five-show run in Baton Rouge during September 2017 at Louisiana State University’s HopKins Black Box theatre. In February 2018, the cast and crew re-staged this production (with minor variations) at Kennesaw State University’s Stillwell Theater in Kennesaw, GA, as part of the Patti Pace Performance Festival. Before the presentation of the script, a legend is included to help guide

your experience. As suggested, I urge you to *do* more than read the script. I encourage you to vocalize, perform, and embody the words in this script to appreciate the rhythms, the community discourse, and the poetry of lived experience to its fullest potential.

This script of *Baton Rouge Slam!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* was last updated on February 4, 2018. This performance souvenir was constructed through thematic scripting of ethnographic interviews and re-contextualizing slam poetry artifacts. The re-constructed interviews are meant to bounce from performer to performer, as if they are having a conversation with each other and the audience simultaneously. I have taken minimal reasonable artistic liberties with the division of lines and arranging of roughly ten hours of interview transcripts to form an audience-accessible narrative spine. Lines were kept in the context of original conversations. Minimal text was removed from individual lines. When text was detached from its original form, it was in the service of maintaining a roughly 75-minute show run time, for the sake of indicating rhythm, and to avoid doubling or repetition of ideas. Almost all dialogue following poet names was plucked, verbatim, from the community member to which it is attributed, and alterations were only made when a connection was essential to transitioning, in the service of heightening aesthetic choices, or for the sake of brevity.


In the script of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, slam poems were de- and re-contextualized into shorter one-minute versions *and* into theatrical scenes to form a second spine, complimenting the conversational interview scenes. The entire cast was essential in devising and designing these scenes adapted from summer 2016-related slam poetry. The re-constructed poems are intended to make slam poems do what they do not typically do in the slam space. In these vignettes, we utilize multiple bodies to blow open and artistically stretch

the local source material. For the full transcripts of each interview and each slam poem used in this production, turn to chapter twelve. To watch the original slam poetry of these community members, type their name and “*Eclectic Truth*” or “Baton Rouge” into a search engine, and you will find videos. If you would like to host a production of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* at your venue, re-stage the production, or watch an amateur recording of the show, please contact me, Josh Hamzehee.

Now, “Go in, poet!”

Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016

Script Legend

QLAB 0A	Indicates the program being used for the slides on the projection screen behind the performers, the video displayed, as well as the music showcased between and during scenes. The number and letter following “QLAB” indicate the scene and cue order.
PROJECTION	The projections and video clips.
MUSIC	The soundtrack.
VOICEOVER	Pre-recorded voiceover by the ethnographer. This voiceover overlays the projected video.
[]	Stage directions.
[. . .]	Deletion of text, or a line splice.
	Performer is cued to interact with stage-right wall map of Baton Rouge.
X	Collective stomps to rhythm.
%	Audible breathing to rhythm.

DONNEY	Rose, performed by Jordan Smith.
DESIREÉ	Dallagiacamo, performed by Josh Hamzehee.
JAZMYNE	Smith, performed by Laura Oliver.
MELISSA	Hutchinson, performed by Montana Smith.
TOIRYAN	Milligan, performed by Lexus Jordan.

As Audiences Enter the Theatre

Upon entering the theatre space, each audience member signs into the “Question of the Day!” journal with 1. First name and last initial; and 2. An answer to “What word or emoji describes your summer 2016?” This choice hopefully allows for reflexivity within audience members before the show begins, and to prime them for the de-constructed slam experience. Performers use that same “Question of the Day!” journal throughout the performance.

Then, audiences are given a white-dot sticker and encouraged to walk through a broken road that separates audience seating into two sections. This road represents the mid-section of Baton Rouge, the parallel roads of Government St. and Florida Blvd. The trail leads audiences onto a 15’x15’ taped-on stage shaped like Louisiana, and they place their white-dot sticker onto the back wall located stage-right of a 12’x12’ projection screen.

On this back wall is a taped-on 15’x15’ outline of the city of Baton Rouge, with markings pre-placed where pivotal summer 2016 events occurred. Audiences are directed to place their stickers onto the wall atop an area they live, are from, or place they know, invoking Dustin Cable’s Racial-Dot Map of the 2010 United States Census. This tactile tactic will hopefully allow

for reflexivity within audience members regarding their proximity to critical events of summer 2016. Performers interact with this map throughout the show.

A microphone that (eventually) lights up hangs on a yellow rope from the ceiling, directly above where Baton Rouge is located on the 15'x15' taped-on Louisiana stage. It's a pendulum that reaches for the heavens. That yellow rope then travels across the ceiling, connecting to the top of the stage-right wall map. From there, it trickles down the wall, representing the Mississippi River on the taped-on 15'x15' back wall outline of the city of Baton Rouge.

0. Pre-Show

QLAB 0A: PROJECTION: *Baton Rouge SLAM!* Poster / Question of the Day!

MUSIC: Janis Joplin's "Me & Bobby McGee," Lou Reed's "Baton Rouge," Kendrick Lamar's "Poetic Justice [feat. Drake]," A Tribe Called Quest's "We the People...," Janelle Monáe's "Tightrope [feat. Big Boi]," and Janelle Monáe's "Hell You Talmbout [feat. Wondaland Records]."

PROJECTION (before show starts): "Recomposition through art functions as a kind of mourning—an **obituary**— / that completes the life-death cycle and restores a sense of wholeness to the community. But recomposition is also a disavowal: / the dead do not come back to life except as icons." – Diana Taylor

PROJECTION: Black

Lights up.

I. The Sacrificial Poet

DESIREÉ Welcome Baton Rouge (Kennesaw). Welcome Louisiana (Georgia). Welcome America!—

QLAB 1A: PROJECTION: "Amerikkka" graffiti image from Foster Ave.

DESIREÉ Welcome to Baton Rouge SLAM!

QLAB 1B: PROJECTION: "I. The Sacrificial Poet" / Black screen

TOIRYAN When I first started, when I heard
 ALL Poetry Slam
 TOIRYAN I'm thinking it's a place where people read from a book with no emotion. Really
 Robert Frost the stage.

[DES enters, reading from journal.]

DESIREÉ "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
 And sorry I could not travel both"
 D/M/J 6.6, 7.4, 8.
 TOIRYAN 1—I've seen better.
 DESIREÉ Are you saying I need to practice more?
 TOIRYAN Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying.

[DES drops journal under mic, then exits.]

JAZMYNE That's what I *thought* slam was. But when I got there,
 T/J I saw that competition.
 TOIRYAN I saw
 JAZMYNE You're judging me? On my feelings?
 DONEY Yep!
 MELISSA I don't remember who it was, Da Vinci or some Buddhist monk or some shit, but
 you have to learn the rules before you can break them.
 DONEY Slam poetry is all things hyperbolic.
 TOIRYAN You have this person who does metaphor,
 MELISSA Personification,
 JAZMYNE Allegory and alliteration.
 D/M Written text are exaggerated.
 TOIRYAN Punchlines, creativity.
 DONEY Performances are exaggerated.
 MELISSA Learning words didn't have to convey emotion, cadence could. The p-p-p-p-
 TOIRYAN P-p-p-p
 JAZMYNE P-p-p-pauses, the way I s-s-
 D/L/M Ssssssss-
 JAZMYNE S-said the poem. Slam provides
 ALL Urgency.
 JAZMYNE If something's on the line
 DONEY The poet is making a three-minute sales pitch.
 T/J You perform like something's on the line.

[TOI enters, carefully placing foot within the boundary of the taped-down Louisiana.]

TOIRYAN Because it's a game.

[DON, JAZ, and MEL enter, with similar caution as TOI.]

ALL People love to see a battle.
DONEY No one plays the game to lose.
JAZMYNE By pleasing the audience you get the points.
MELISSA When we pick judges, we tell them
T/D Look! These poets are trying to make our national team, so make them work for
 those 10's. That's why we
D/M/J/T Sacrifice a poet!

[DES enters.]

DESIREÉ "Two roads—Florida and Government—diverged in Baton Rouge
 And sorry, Robert, I could not travel both...
 Because [on our way here] I almost got into a car accident,
 Because no matter which road I take,
 Because no one uses their blinkers,
 Because there are so many damn p-p-p-p-potholes!"
D/M/J 9.2, 9.6, *ohh deep*.
TOIRYAN 2.5—what, I didn't relate.

[DES exits.]

DONEY The sacrificial poet is a staple in all slams. We say sacrificing because it sounds
 more dramatic.
D/M/J/T [pose] The sacrificial poet!

[Circle mic.]

JAZMYNE Allows the judges an opportunity to practice scoring,
MELISSA Gives a barometer for performers,
DONEY A calibration for audiences.
TOIRYAN Wait, is there a deeper layer?

[They think.]

JAZMYNE The experience.
J/M/T I got to be in this space with these people.
MELISSA An immediate validation.
DONEY Hey!
TOIRYAN I got to share my truth.
DONEY Three minutes to get on stage and
ALL Make a piece of urgent art that will stick with the community after they leave
 the

[ALL exit.]

QLAB 1C: PROJECTION: “DESIREÉ” / Chimes St. near LSU / Highland Coffees

MUSIC: Janelle Monáe’s “Tightrope [feat. Big Boi]”

[DES enters.]

VOICEOVER DESIREÉ, 26, moved to Louisiana from California a decade ago, has been slamming with *Eclectic Truth* for six years. Serving as host and sacrificial poet during week five of the fall 2016 season, DESIREÉ’s poem, “For Kaiya, Hallelujah,” received all 10’s from judges. Allowing me to walk in her words, I interviewed DESIREÉ at Highland Coffees on Chimes St.

DESIREÉ The host curates, runs the night. I’ve seen a lot of really good hosts and I try to take what they do. I use to be really bantery. But I’ve realized

QLAB 1D: PROJECTION: *Firehouse Gallery*

it’s a conversation.

[ALL energetically enter, and semi-structured improvisational banter and interaction with audience ensues.]

DONNEY How many y’all been to a slam before? How many have performed in a slam before?

MELISSA Slam poetry competitions originated in 1987 Chicago by Marc Sm—

T/D/J Who cares?! / So what?!

MELISSA *Eclectic Truth* was founded by a former student in this department, Ray Sibley, in 1998—

T/D/J Shut the front door!

MELISSA I already did.

TOIRYAN [Teaches audience how to audiences a slam and simultaneously the rhythm that will be used in the show.] When you hear something you like:

[ALL: Snaps X X X]!

When you hear something you like:

[Stomps X X X]!

When you hear something you like:

[ALL: Cheer! Then, JAZ gets journal.]

JAZMYNE Now, it's time for the question of the day: *What word or emoji describes your summer 2016?* [For Kennesaw: *What do you remember about 2016?* This allows JAZ to prompt responses from individual audience members, then the entire audience.] Wow, summer 2016 seems like it was a lot. [For Kennesaw: *Now, what do you remember about Baton Rouge, summer 2016?*]

[JAZ places journal under mic.]

II. This is All Scenery to a Play

QLAB 2A: PROJECTION: "II. This is All Scenery to a Play" / Triple S Food Mart on Foster Ave. / Alton Sterling Memorial Outside Triple S
MUSIC: Janis Joplin's "Me & Bobby McGee"

VOICEOVER I moved here last July 4, before America was great, again. On July 5, the death of Alton Sterling, 37, at Triple S Food Mart on Foster. Bystander footage showed local law enforcement shooting a restrained Sterling multiple times at close range in a parking lot where he sold CD's.

[Adapted from "**Timeline Trauma**" by Donney Rose.]

DONNEY *A found poem made from Tweets I sent out the summer Baton Rouge left my heart in ruins:*
Jul 23 Dear summer of sorrow, I don't want your grief anymore.
 Give us back what you stole from us.
Jul 5 Baton Rouge police murdered a Black man in cold blood
 who was selling CDs outside of a store he always sold CD's.
 #AltonSterling
Jul 17 I'm black in baton rouge and I just want to survive the
 summer
Jul 10 The police started all of this
Sep 3 Protesting police violence is not protesting the military.
 Not knowing the difference is proof of how militarized the
 police have become.
Aug 7 Today I did not stay woke.
Aug 15 Some truths are inconvenient. No one ever lies about a
 nightmare.
Aug 18 Donald Trump is headed to Baton Rouge tomorrow to add
 to the overcast.
Aug 18 A vacation would be so clutch right now
Jul 24 This poet meant the world to so many.

Sep 9 It is quite the load to carry grief & anger when all you
really want is love. And dope ass breakfasts
Aug 13 Baton Rouge spent July bleeding and is spending the top of
August drowning. What is this summer 2016 curse?

QLAB 2B: PROJECTION: Spanish Town / Streets and Crosswalk near Capital Building /
Capital Building

VOICEOVER On July 5, while exploring my new Spanish Town neighborhood near the
capital—I felt as if I had migrated to a city split; a place reminding me of
my Los Angeles childhood and the schism that hovered over the *twilight*
of 1992.

[Adapted from “**Death**” and “**The Great Flood by Melissa Hutchinson.**”]

MELISSA 1699 French explorers came down the Mississippi
noticed a cypress tree stripped of its bark
marking the hunting boundary between two tribes
covered in blood of bear and fish heads
they called it le baton rouge

now divided by a road named for a state that’s shaped like a gun
whose name means flower
this gun road, death road, don’t cross the thin blue line road
Louisiana boot pressed firmly into your back
is it any wonder our city means red stick

I am a white woman in a river of drowning black bodies
crowned with a red stick, on burial ground banks
making tribes out of citizens, hunting each other
divided by a road, that offers flowers only as condolences
in a bloody city resistant to change
oh we shine in tragedy, but it’s just because we have so much
damn practice

QLAB 2C: PROJECTION: Images of Protests / Hammond Air Plaza / Blue Line Filling
Screen

VOICEOVER Then, on July 17—amidst weeks of protests atop a two century legacy of
unresolved tensions —those tensions magnified at Hammond Air Plaza
on Airline Highway with the killing of three officers and wounding of
three others, by a man from Missouri who was born in Baton Rouge.

[Adapted from “**Poem for Alton**” and “**Post-Flood Free Write**” by Jazmyne Smith.]

JAZMYNE CNN said Alton's shooting sparked outrage
 Well let that spark turn into a wildfire
 Let it serve as competition for this Louisiana heat
 Let the smoke draw people from the comfort Of their homes
 Why do the words Black Lives Matter **X X X** offend you
 But the idea of black lives cocooned in a black body bag doesn't

Even when we're unarmed, when it's caught on camera, when
 we're at our local convenience store
 Whether we are twelve
 Or 37
 Always leaving us as less than the $\frac{3}{4}$ of a person You want us to be

I'm tired of begging my friends
 To be safe
 At protests
 I'm tired of asking them to overcompensate
 For their ethnicity
 To apologize for existing
 I'm tired of being terrified
 That my brother will be next
 That my father will be next
 That I will be—

QLAB 2D: PROJECTION: Images of Floods / Androgynous Black & White Iron Statues
 from the Mississippi River Levee

VOICEOVER Next, August brought historic flooding to Southeastern Louisiana; 13
 deaths were reported, over 100,000 "Red Stick" residents applied for
 emergency flood assistance, 146,000 homes were damaged, thousands of
 businesses, the costliest disaster in the US since Hurricane Sandy. Yet,
 much of the national coverage focused on how Presidential candidates
 inserted the disaster into their campaigns—silencing local narratives.

[Adapted from "**Storm Poem, Draft III**" and "**Squirrels**" by Toiryan Milligan.]

TOIRYAN In 2016 we buried my grandpa I mean we buried a body of water
 In 2016 my grandpa flooded Baton Rouge! An earthquake of bone
 and jawline
 I loved that earthquake, loved his faults, My grandpa's heart was
 at fault
 He treated a pack of cigarettes like a weather report
 He was always high in the upper 70's!

My grandpa's death was a storm
My grandma is a tropical depression
Still depressing, Still surviving
But no one ever taught her surviving also means evacuate!
Have you ever put a tsunami to bed?
Watch your grandma tidal wave herself to sleep? To the wake?
You ever been told don't cry over spilled grandpa?

I guess I'm afraid of things that can kill you just by looking at you
My father is lightning
Hey dad I mean lightning, I'm so ec-ec-ecZzzzzstatic to see you
You only appear during storms
I'm still surviving, I mean evacuating, I mean both

QLAB 2E: PROJECTION: Downtown Baton Rouge / Greater Arts Council / *Firehouse Gallery*

VOICEOVER Last fall, eight blocks from my 8th Street house, the weight of the summer was vocalized at the weekly *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam*. Here, in downtown's Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge, over half the poems performed referenced the summer's tragedies. Here, in the *Firehouse Gallery*...

[TOI enters map of Louisiana, carefully, trying not to step on the borders.]

TOIRYAN This is all scenery to a play. Anytime police are in the area you see fire trucks. We've had a couple come in. I'd love more, more law enforcement, governors, congressman, in these areas where we're talking about this subject matter, rather than hearing this on the news where you can't really get the voice out. A lot of people they kinda fear that—you gotta leave... out that venue.

[TOI exits Louisiana.]

III. An Obituary for the Summer

QLAB 3A: PROJECTION: "III. An Obituary for the Summer"
MUSIC: A Tribe Called Quest's "We the People..."

[DON enters.]

VOICEOVER DONEY, 36, community activist and teacher, performing poetry since

2003. Both DONNEY and DESIRÉE actively mentor and coach Baton Rouge youth poets. DONNEY performed “Timeline Trauma” three times during fall 2016. We chatted on the phone while he was grocery shopping.

QLAB 3B: PROJECTION: *Firehouse Gallery*

DONNEY When you’re up on a stage and talking about current issues, things people see on the news, giving it your creative or poetic interpretation—

[TOI enters, in audience.]

TOIRYAN “I think Donald Trump should be president!”...

DONNEY Wait what?

TOIRYAN Donney said if you open up saying something completely opposite the audience is gonna be like wait what?

DONNEY —Slam poets are functioning as artistic journalists. When art is working at its best its evolving a conversation.

TOIRYAN Donney’s the more seasoned poet, we call him ‘Slam-Pa.’ He’s been in the game soooooo long,

DONNEY I would s—

TOIRYAN soooooo long,

DONNEY I would say I’m a veteran of the scene.

TOIRYAN I won my very first one against Donney.

DONNEY I am not the most dynamic person you will see, but I am going to be the most consistent.

TOIRYAN After that, I started getting like really beat, beat.

[TOI sits. MEL enters.]

DONNEY I am a product of Southern upbringing, black masculinity, who learned the world was bigger than the world I grew up in.

MELISSA Donney and I went to high school and middle school together.

[MEL gets journal.]

DONNEY When you grow up black in the deep south, your marginalization is such a big thing to where you can’t fathom anyone else having it more difficult. Through poetry slam I realized there was such a thing as a poor or working class *white* American.

MELISSA Donney’s Tweet poem, the more the genius of it grew on me the more I heard it. It’s like an obituary for the summer.

[MEL gives journal to DON.]

DONNEY The way the summer shook out for me was that you had Alton Sterling's situation happen, and then you had the black community and white allies that were like, this

[JAZ enters.]

D/T "this is wrong,
D/M something needs to happen,
D/J blah blah blah."

[DES enters.]

DESIREÉ Then, over at Hammond Air Plaza on Airline, we had three police officers that were killed.

DONNEY You had police being killed a week and a half later. And then you had the flood, so you had a literal slash metaphorical washing away of all of the above.

TOIRYAN I never knew the cops were that militarized. The riot gear, rubber bullets...

DONNEY You had people in communities that were at one point being terrorized by the police—then they had to rely on those same police to come on in and rescue them out of their homes.

QLAB 3C: PROJECTION: Images of a red sun over Government St. / Increasing red and black pattern of tripophobia overlays the images

[Adapted from "**Timeline Trauma**" by Donney Rose: *A critique of the gamification of trauma. As if DON lived in a game of human pinball, he must simultaneously navigate the intensifying heat represented by visuals and bodies (MEL, JAZ, and TOI), memories of the protests (JAZ), the impacts of the floods (MEL and TOI), and the presence of law enforcement (DES) before the summer gets too hot to handle.*]

DONNEY [Tweeting, using journal]: I'm black in baton rouge and I just want to survive... [Looks up.] the summer—

QLAB 3D: PROJECTION: Tripophobia intensifies

CHORUS Jul 5

DONNEY *Today I did not stay woke—*

DESIREÉ Baton Rouge police murdered a Black man in cold blood who was selling CDs outside of a store he always sold CD's.

DONNEY The male ego is prevalent everywhere. [*#AltonSterling. The police started all of this.*] We cannot fear speaking out. What more can they take but our—

QLAB 3E: PROJECTION: Tripophobia intensifies

CHORUS Jul 9
 DONEY wanting a fast forward and rewind button for all of this [*Yesterday #BatonRouge youth led the...*] largest and most peaceful demonstration yet.
 JAZMYNE Black women are being terrorized for seeking justice
 CHORUS Jul 19
 ALL They don't love us.
 CHORUS Jul 24
 DONEY This poet meant the world to so many. Dear summer of sorrow, give us back what you stole—.

QLAB 3F: PROJECTION: Tripophobia intensifies

CHORUS Aug 11
 DONEY Asserting my humanity is not minimizing yours.
 TOIRYAN Poverty & classism makes a ppl disposable.
 MELISSA Sometimes Mother Nature assists with negligence that's grandfathered in
 DONEY No one ever lies about a nightmare.
 CHORUS Aug 18
 DONEY Donald Trump is headed to Baton Rouge tomorrow to add to the overcast. If you see glass shattered around me, don't be surprised.

QLAB 3G: PROJECTION: Tripophobia reaches max intensity

CHORUS Aug 23
 DONEY A vacation would be so clutch right now
 CHORUS Sep 8. "How does (injustice) live in 2016?"
 DONEY Because people die & systems don't.
 J/M/T Sep 9
 DONEY It is quite the load to carry grief & anger
 CHORUS when all you really want is love.
 DONEY And dope ass breakfasts

QLAB 3H: PROJECTION: *Firehouse Gallery*

DONEY I probably would have had more optimism if the election had gone differently.

[DON gives book to MEL, then they exit.]

TOIRYAN Seeing it face-to-face. It hit home.
 JAZMYNE We can go to the street. This could have happened to any person in my circle.

TOIRYAN I don't know whether I can just go to a Wal-Mart or an IHop and I'm next.

JAZMYNE The night Alton was murdered, I was at *Eclectic Truth*. It became so surreal. This is happening here, now. It's not us imagining what it was like for Trayvon or Mike Brown.

DESIREÉ Ferguson is theory, Baltimore, those are all talking points.

TOIRYAN It's different when you're looking at it on TV. The community, they really knew Alton. He use to really sell them like down the street and he'll sell you CD's, he'll tell you, he'll give you advice, he'll be like "stay safe out here" or like "pull your pants up," you know?

DESIREÉ And it's complicated. And when we want to flatten, we don't do the work we need to do. He also has a son. Alton Sterling also went to prison because of child molestation. But police didn't kill him because of that. It's not as simple as a Tweet. It's way more complicated than a three-minute poem.

[JAZ, TOI, and DES exit.]

IV. Not the Only Ones in this Battle

QLAB 4A: PROJECTION: "IV. Not the Only Ones in this Battle"

MUSIC: Lou Reed's "Baton Rouge"

[MEL enters, gymnastically, with journal.]

VOICEOVER MELISSA, 36, mother of two, gymnastics coach, has slammed for three years at *Eclectic Truth*. I interviewed MELISSA in-between shifts at a local kids gym.

QLAB 4B: PROJECTION: *Firehouse Gallery*

MELISSA I was born in Baton Rouge, then we moved out to Central, not as far north as Zachary. Written my whole life, read to my children their whole lives. When I met my ex-husband, it was kinda weird, I quit writing within a couple months of us starting to date. I was like eighteen. And a few months before we separated, I started writing again—it was like twelve years. I got into slam because to grow I needed to go outside my comfort zone.

[MEL tightrope walks on platform in front of projection screen, balancing journal on head.]

MELISSA I was in theatre like once in eighth grade, had two lines in a play. I didn't write poems about social justice issues. I didn't know how to approach them.

[DON enters.]

I remember the first poem I wrote that I was like aw shit I wrote a performance piece. When Donney came up to me after the last slam,

[DON catches journal.]

DONNEY for him to be like 'for you to trust us with that,' he's like,
'That's amazing, that you felt you were safe enough here and that you could lay that vulnerability out. And Melissa by you getting up there and doing that poem it means somebody else is gonna go 'well, if she can get up there and talk about that I can get up and say what I need to say.'

[TOI enters. MEL gets journal.]

TOIRYAN Melissa tackles it from a white perspective. To hear poems like that, it makes me feel like we're not the only ones in this battle.
MELISSA This is not about me. Then I'm preaching. I had to make sure anything I put on stage, that it's not being exploited for a score.

[JAZ and DES enter.]

JAZMYNE If you're a privileged white male you can't make an emotional appeal to me why you should continue to be privileged at the expense of someone else. "Aw man, this sucks that I'm not as privileged as I could be."
DESIREÉ It can be problematic when white people slam with poems about race, white privilege.
DONNEY I remember when a poet could get away with making statements we would consider homophobic or transphobic or xenophobic now. As we continue to evolve as human beings there comes a point where certain things just don't work anymore.
DESIREÉ It's hard, because people should be writing about these things, should be processing,
MELISSA 'I am a white woman in a river...'
DESIREÉ And I don't want to police your processing, but if you are in an all-white reading and nobody is talking about their whiteness, there's probably an issue.

[MEL places journal under mic.]

MELISSA 'I am a white woman in a river of drowning black bodies.' I just wrote one day. Then when the flood happened, I literally wrote about what happened a month before it happened.

QLAB 4C: PROJECTION: Textures or the Wall of the Old Arsenal Museum and Floods

[Adapted from "Death" and "The Great Flood" by Melissa Hutchinson: A critique of the overlooked labor women of color have taken on for families, communities, and dominant publics. Through stylized movement and repetition, MEL labors in flood wreckage. Then, TOI and JAZ enter, adding their labor, then adding their embodied histories. DON and DES act as echoes and ambiance, as the flood, as not getting their own hands dirty. The scene culminates in a slowly turning image of the three women in the shape of a crane. After holding that image, TOI and JAZ exit, and MEL remains, frozen, as the head.]

DON/DES (ECHOES)	TOIRYAN	MELISSA	JAZMYNE
		smash out sheet rock rip up floors treat mold [all phrases x2, x1, then silence]	
<i>Follow that smell</i>	gut homes	purge contents	remove rot
	red hands in red stick	hunting each other	ignored too long
<i>Follow that smell</i>	this water is toxic	blame it on mildew	wash again and again
	blame it on bacteria		blame it on bacteria
300 years of bleach		300 years of bleach	
<i>Follow that smell</i>	scrub until hands are raw	wash again and again	wash again and again
	wonder why	wonder why	wonder why
	wonder why	wonder why smell won't go away	wonder why
	wonder why	flood water can't remove blood	wonder why
		we	
<i>Follow that smell</i>		float	tethered
	together.		
<i>Follow that smell—</i>			

QLAB 4D: PROJECTION: Black

MELISSA I write a poem and two months later real shit happens. I need to watch what I write.

[MEL exits.]

V. The Flood Didn't Care

QLAB 5A: PROJECTION "V. The Flood Didn't Care" / Toiryan's Notebook Pages of "Storm Poem"

MUSIC: Kendrick Lamar's "Poetic Justice [feat. Drake]"

[TOI enters.]

VOICEOVER TOIRYAN, 24, made Baton Rouge's Brave New Voices youth slam team in 2011 before slamming at *Eclectic Truth* in 2013. "Storm Poem, Draft III" was the first performance I witnessed. We hung out at Starbucks on College Ave., across the street from a Wal-Mart and an IHop.

TOIRYAN I was born in Scotlandville area. I represent where I'm from, the poverty line, some of the hoods, McKinley, Middleton, I try to show my life and bring it to the stage. And I am proud of that.

QLAB 5B: PROJECTION: Dustin Cable's Racial Dot Map of Baton Rouge from the 2010 U.S. Census

I always define myself as black because, at the end of the day, when I'm on that stage, when I get pulled over, or walk out in public, that's what I'm considered.

[DES enters.]

DESIREÉ When you're in the South, race and class are conflated because it's so infrastructurally present. You don't go to a lot of spaces where there's anybody but white people or black people. Go on the other side of Florida and houses drop by \$100,000.

[TOI slowly traces Florida Blvd. on the stage-right wall map. DON enters.]

DONNEY Within the city limits, majority African-American. When you talk about the parish of EBR you're talking about 47% black and 51% white.

DESIREÉ Public school is black, private is white. McKinley High School, where you have to go up and out and around—it turns a quarter- to a two-mile drive. Built to be a ghetto between LSU and downtown.

TOIRYAN The Weinerschnitzel is the border.

DESIREÉ It's a good example of how this city is set up to keep black and white separate.

[TOI gets journal.]

TOIRYAN I come from a long line of people who owned land, who owned empires, and I've been taken from that.

[JAZ and MEL enter.]

DONNEY Of course the state is a red state.

JAZMYNE Baton Rouge is blue among all the red.

DONNEY You have LSU, Southern, BRCC, so on a national level our city tends to vote majority democratic, on a local level it is dependent on what Baton Rouge you are talking about. There's a difference between Beauregard Town, Spanish Town, Mid-City, people outside the Chimes on Highland.

DESIREÉ But the flood didn't care. White flight built out of the infrastructure, and it flooded.

DONNEY There are people still displaced.

DESIREÉ What was a big divide was folks who had resources to flee.

JAZMYNE It went from being pro- and anti-black lives matter to we are all trying to survive this flood together. In my house, my aunts were there, my grandparents were there. My dad went out on his boat to his grandparent's neighborhood.

TOIRYAN This flood has devastated more people than the world is actually understanding.

[TOI gives journal to DES.]

JAZMYNE I'm having a hard time believing these are the neighborhoods I played in and there is enough water for there to be a boat!

DESIREÉ Foye, he stopped coming because his house flooded. He's 75, has dementia.

[DES pulls crane from journal.]

And his wife, Gloria, makes paper cranes and leaves them on the table and she told us the only thing he does is come to *Eclectic Truth*, is write poems, and can't remember most other things but he always remembers this.

[DES leaves journal under mic.]

TOIRYAN Like my dad, he lost everything during the flood. My uncles, my aunties, my cousins, they literally lost years and years and years of stuff to the flood. I'm throwing away like photo albums, scrap books, little knick-knacks. Stuff that's like from 100, 200 years ago.

QLAB 5C: PROJECTION: Police at Night in Spanish Town / Downtown Cameras

[Adapted from **"Storm Poem, Draft III" and "Squirrels" by Toiryan Milligan: A dystopic critique of the overwhelming nature of constant tragedy. Part one shows TOI, at work, condescendingly sang to by the shouting puppet-hands of DON, DES, MEL, and JAZ. Part two shows TOI and DON, at home, backgrounded on the stage-right Baton Rouge wall map by the eerily floating bodies of DES, JAZ, and MEL.]**

TOIRYAN The human body is 60% water—the other 40% gives space to—
 Seek advice from people drowning. My boss pissed me off. He
 told me,
DONNEY it's 2016,
DESIREÉ we don't need more poems about racism.
MELISSA Don't write more poems about racism.
TOIRYAN He told me
JAZMYNE write happy poems.
TOIRYAN My boss said
ALL Dig deep in the gospel...
MELISSA Squirrel poems.
TOIRYAN Here's your squirrel poem, boss:
 1. Pretty Orange Squirrel is the new black.
 2. Mama squirrel saw baby squirrel heading to the big tree in the
 sky.
 3. No more squirrel running away from racists into asthma
 attacks.
 4. Running from your life can take your breath away.

QLAB 5D: PROJECTION: Police at Night in Spanish Town / Downtown Cameras

TOIRYAN The human body is 60% water—the other 40% gives space to—
 In 2016, we buried a body of water.
DONNEY Lightning flashed through the funeral.
TOIRYAN Maybe lightning would finally strike I mean stay in the same place
 for once. I'm afraid of lightning.
DONNEY Only appears during storms.
TOIRYAN I survive terribly in storms. In 4th grade lightning struck a
 powerline next to me.
DONNEY the way a hurricane stares at a woodshed.

TOIRYAN My father is lightning. My grandpa was the storm. My grandpa flooded Baton Rouge. I ask how can I swim. I realize I'm seeking advice from people still drowning.

[DES and DON exit.]

QLAB 5E: PROJECTION: *Firehouse Gallery*

TOIRYAN I try to tie a lot of the flood to my personal life, like family issues, my grandpa dying.

MELISSA Being true to yourself is one of the hardest things when you're playing a game. Toiryan and I had a big talk. I'm like you need to slam when you have a whole bunch of family shit going on and you know you're gonna screw up. I had this very religious woman give my poem on god like a 4.7. I think I said

TOIRYAN "What is the shape of *her* face?"

MELISSA I can hear her going

T/M Oh no no no no—

MELISSA But then Xero goes up and gives his atheist poem where he compares atheists to unicorns, and she gave him a good score. It was a pill she could swallow, mine made her uncomfortable.

[MEL gets journal, gives it to TOI.]

Fuck it, you're gonna have to get uncomfortable. Be willing to accept that experience, then the mask falls away. It's just you and your poem.

[TOI places journal under mic.]

VI. The World's Gonna Eat Me Up

QLAB 6A: PROJECTION: "VI. The World's Gonna Eat Me Up!" / LSU's Middleton Library
MUSIC: Janelle Monáe's "Hell You Talmbout [feat. Wondaland Records]"

[JAZ enters.]

VOICEOVER JAZMYNE, 18, from Baker, college student, member of the BNV youth slam team the last two years. We met at my first *Eclectic Truth*, and I later chatted with her inside LSU's Middleton Library.

TOIRYAN Jazmyne, she's fresh. That's how I started off, hungry like that.

JAZMYNE I live in a tragic place. Tragic family, tragic community. Because something happened in 2016 doesn't mean I'm gonna stop writing about it.

TOIRYAN Jazmyne writes from being a teen woman and what she's seeing.

[JAZ gets journal, and talks to her younger self.]

JAZMYNE My writing is a lot of how I want to explain myself to a younger me: *The world keeps throwing crappy stuff at us, Jazmyne. So I've gotta write my way through it otherwise the world's gonna eat me up!*

[DES and MEL enter.]

DESIREÉ Sometimes I feel like, I wish people that didn't share our beliefs would hear this.
MELISSA That's not what the space was designed for. It functions as a support system.

[ALL split into two groups, splitting audience focus in order to create isolated intimacy. The following two chunks are delivered at the same time to different sides of the audience.]

[TOI and MEL to SL audience:]

TOIRYAN	We provide that space where people can share their stories, their mourning, their happiness, and relate to somebody else. We don't try to focus on the tragedy happening to capitalize on it.
MELISSA	We don't like to pimp our trauma.
TOIRYAN	We wanna know what can we do as a community to prevent this. Like, when the Pulse nightclub shooting happened, we had a reading specifically for that. I really realized how many trans people we have, lesbians, bisexuals, queer, and how fearful they were of that.
MELISSA	We were able to make more functional change within the community, which affected our writing, which affected the space.
TOIRYAN	When the community changes, slam changes.

[Simultaneously, DES, DON, and JAZ to SR audience:]

DESIREÉ	Some need a bubble in a world they don't get to be in a bubble in.
DONNEY	About four years ago I wrote a poem, "Confessions of a Reformed Homophobe," about growing up homophobic. My context of what it was to be black was cisgender, heterosexual, religious. So the first people to show me a different perspective were black queer friends of mine who I met through poetry, who came out to me after we've been friends for years, so I was already at the point where I loved them as people.

JAZMYNE There are people here actually promoting your safety, saying you know it's okay to feel how you are or be who you are or to love who you love.

DESIREÉ When slam changes, the community changes.

[TOI and DES overhear each other saying similar lines—recognizing a shared interpretation of experience. Then, JAZ interrupts—]

JAZMYNE Has the climate changed? Are we writing a different type of poem?

DONNEY If you feel the most powerful person in the free world is someone who's against how you identify, you're gonna see those things play out in the writing.

JAZMYNE Now everybody's gonna have a Trump poem.

[JAZ drops journal under mic, then exits.]

TOIRYAN Gonna be about 80,000 Trump poems.

DONNEY If you consider diehard core Trump supporters as alt-right, you could consider a slam community as the "alt-left." There's a connectivity between the summer and the national climate.

DESIREÉ This election reminded me of how much of a bubble we all live in. When do we step out of that bubble?

TOIRYAN We're spitting this poem to the same people.

DONNEY I'm not saying go to a Klan rally,

[ALL encourage audience *not* to do that.]

but figuring out how do we have these conversations with people who don't necessarily agree.

MELISSA White people are stubborn! You're not gonna get people to understand by arguing. You need to plant seeds.

QLAB 6B: PROJECTION: Sped-up Driving Trip Up and Down Florida Blvd.

[Adapted from **"Poem for Alton" and "Post-Flood Free Write" by Jazmyne Smith: An unapologetic implication of hypocrisy and silence from "All Lives Matter" supporters when Black lives are at stake. This piece implicates the reactionary nature and consequences of those who choose to reproduce that message. JAZ performs shadow imagery behind fast-moving video projections of Florida Blvd., while DES, DON, TOI, and MEL lead an unrelenting stomping-based call-and-response (motivating audiences to stomp along, if they feel so inclined).**]

JAZMYNE If you think All Lives Matter
Where were you when we protested
When news anchors became fortune tellers

When black children saw their futures
In Sandra %.
In Tamir %.
In Philando %.
Why were you not there
when we're unarmed
when it's caught on camera
when % % %
why do you tell us to stop fighting
Why do the words Black Lives Matter/X X X offend you?

Maybe when Black Lives Matter/X X X pollutes the air it will draw
people from the comfort of their homes and Black Lives Matter/X
X X will settle in their lungs until every breath is X X X...
until every breath is X X X...
until every breath is X X X...
X X X... X X X... X X X...
X X X...
X X X...

[JAZ, MEL, DON, and TOI enter, laying in a circle surrounding the mic and journal. DES enters.]

DESIREÉ And in that dimension
There is no tragedy to wash away
Gravity reversed
In that dimension we float
Crawl back into our homes
Reinhabit their space
Blend, like colors in a sunset
Like fragments
Of lost souls

[DES turns on mic light above journal, lays down with ALL. With the only light in the space being the mic and the upcoming projector slide.]

VII. Writing Beyond Ourselves

QLAB 7A: PROJECTION: "VII: Writing Beyond Ourselves"

[ALL, touching, talking to the sky.]

DONNEY A lot of us have experienced some pretty traumatic stuff over the last couple months. Grief went from local to hyper-local.

JAZMYNE Not only are we struggling with nature and man-made conflicts, but something supernatural almost, death.

DONNEY One of our students tragically passed a week after we brought our youth poets back from the 2016 Brave New Voices competition in Washington D.C.

JAZMYNE We had just got back is when we found out Kaiya passed. When we lost Kaiya—I'm saying 'when' like it's over—but it's like the community constricts. With each tragedy it gets tighter. It seemed like there was nothing else that could be taken from us.

TOIRYAN She offered everybody hugs, everybody smiles.

DONNEY She's 18, a recent graduate of McKinley High School, without a shadow of a doubt Kaiya was going to be a continued member of our poetry community because she was about to start school at Southern. Who, a week before she died, dedicated her poem at BNV to Alton Sterling. Her poem was all about this alternate reality for black people.

MELISSA It was someone they mentored. Desireé had a poem that really touched me.

DESIREÉ And I was on the coast of Australia.

QLAB 7B: PROJECTION: "For Kaiya" Poem / Fade-In of *Firehouse Gallery*

[Adapted from **"For Kaiya, Hallelujah"** by Desireé Dallagiacamo: *A commentary on how we often neglect the parts that make us whole until it's too late. For example, this ethnographic study and subsequent performance would not exist without local poets penning their words on a page. During 15 seconds of silence, the cast and audience read the onscreen text, together. The cast lays on the ground, in a star formation, all touching in some way, surrounding the lighted-microphone that hangs from the ceiling, clicked on by DES.*]

... My friend Anna says we cannot write someone's life into something as simple as a poem. /

I say, I cannot write you into a poem, because you always have been one— ...

[ALL slowly rise, DON first to stand.]

DONNEY A lot of us are writing beyond ourselves. When we talk about Kaiya, there's no resolve. When you talk about the Sterling case—

JAZMYNE We still haven't found out whether a police officer is going to be indicted.

DONNEY --no resolve.

[DON helps others up.]

JAZMYNE People still out of a home. The trust that was broken between communities and police can't be rebuilt as easily as a home.

DONNEY We're not gonna stay in the aesthetic of sorrow forever. There's a beauty that comes from creating from despair. It pushes you toward joy.

TOIRYAN Donney said it best when he went to represent us in Flagstaff. He put Baton Rouge on the stage. He put the flood poems, Alton Sterling, Kaiya, on the stage.

DONNEY Whether you talk about natives or transplants, we are by and large a resilient community.

ALL We are people who shake back from hurricanes and floods.

JAZMYNE Katrina,

MELISSA Gustav,

DESIREÉ BP oil spill.

TOIRYAN I'm afraid of lightning!

DONNEY We are also a joyous people.

MELISSA There's layers. Makes me think about Shrek.

DESIREÉ When we want to flatten we don't do the work we need to do.

DONNEY We're also a community of festivals, food, and letting the good times roll.

MELISSA And drinking.

DONNEY And that spirit of resiliency resonates with people who move here, who live here.

TOIRYAN But, is there a deeper layer?

[They think. TOI opens journal, showing the original poems, colorfully handwritten.]

JAZMYNE The experience.

[JAZ turns a page.]

DESIREÉ I got to be in this space with these people.

[DES turns a page.]

MELISSA An immediate validation.

[MEL turns a page.]

TOIRYAN I got to share my truth.

[TOI turns a page.]

DONNEY We got three minutes to get on stage and

[DON turns the page to "Timeline Trauma."]

ALL Make a piece of urgent art that will stick with the community after they leave the—

[ALL look at journal, touching the journal. Then, together, ALL look up to the sky above the mic.]

QLAB 7C: PROJECTION: Fade to Black

Lights out.

VIII. Epilogue/Post-Show

QLAB 8A: PROJECTION: “2017: *Eclectic Truth* slam team won their first group trophy at nationals.”
 MUSIC: Janelle Monáe’s “Tightrope [feat. Big Boi]”

[ALL lead audience applause toward screen.]

QLAB 8B: PROJECTION: “In 2016: The Baton Rouge youth slam team was 5th in the nation at *Brave New Voices*.”

QLAB 8C: PROJECTION: “In 2017: Coached by Desireé, the *BNV* team opened finals with “For Kaiya.” They won.”

QLAB 8D: PROJECTION: “*Eclectic Truth* Poetry Slam & Open-Mic. Tuesdays, 8PM, Greater Arts Council of Baton Rouge.”

End.

CHAPTER NINE

SKELETON, SKIN, AND SOUL: DIRECTING, REHEARSING, AND DESIGNING *BATON ROUGE SLAM!: AN OBITUARY FOR SUMMER 2016*

The Skeleton: Adapting the Best Performance from Ethnographic Accounts

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz establishes a criteria for presenting the *best* performance possible. Muñoz writes, the *best* performances linger in our memories, haunt our nows, and illuminate futures (104). This section navigates how directing, staging, and designing processes of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* worked together to create the best performance we could at that moment in time. How we scripted that performance and the performance itself is a continuation of ethnographic fieldwork. Madison writes,

The rehearsal process for staging ethnographic data demands a discreetly yet powerfully different set of considerations than staging a play or a literary text. The play is already written. The ethnography is not. It is always writing and rewriting itself through the rehearsal process (402).

Madison goes on to state, “therefore, the ethnographic performance not only constitutes an ethics of representation, it not only illuminates field experiences, but it is an act of data making (402). Performance theory and method are interdependent, and they merge through fieldwork at the site, in rehearsal, and on the stage. Fieldwork is not limited to the time spent at an ethnographic site; fieldwork also consists of the time spent with ethnographic artifacts during the rehearsal process. Rehearsal and performance utilizing ethnographic research *is* fieldwork. The field shifts, though, between space, place, and purpose. To show how the body of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* was built, this chapter offers the prompts and motivations we utilized in staging de- and re-contextualized star grouper texts. This chapter expands on critical components of directing, rehearsing, and designing *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An*

Obituary for Summer 2016. First, I excavate the *skeleton* of the show. Next, I peel back the show's *skin* so elements of production and design can emerge. Finally, I explore how the cast and me de- and re-contextualized the *soul* of the show, how we theatricalized the slam poems from which this *slamnography* initially emerged.

Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016 is a work of ethnographic adaptation, as it transports narratives from one site and set of bodies to another. The space of adaptation is a space to *make* sense rather than find sense. The sense-making ability in adapting texts for stage is why Goldman writes adaptations are “more than theatricalized versions of the text, but as dialogic and full-fledged cultural performances” (369). To re-create or display culture on stage, one must be willing to embody culture. To embody culture, one must have the trust of their fellow cultural members. The importance of building community when performing community is a necessity of performance ethnography. “Our caravan is not as interesting or as enlivening without Others to perform with” (Madison 361). Building community includes casting, rehearsing, and critically considering what the *best* choices mean for those representing and those being represented.

Casting performers to play ethnographic informants is daunting for all involved, and ethical pitfalls abound. I did not want to cast people to mimic the star groupers, I wanted the cast to embody how they individually connected to the spirit of their texts. This choice allowed us to straddle the line of ethical representation of another and a representation of how the cast came to understand the texts they embodied. Foley reminds, “texts can also be performed orally by someone other than the person who composed them in writing” (44). I knew the talents and backgrounds of the performers I cast would determine the much of the show. I had

five roles to cast. I searched for performers that embodied the spirit of *Eclectic Truth* members I befriended. Lexus Jordan, my officemate, possessed a burst of energy that reminded me of Toiryan. Lexus had been in classes where this project developed, and she already knew some members of the local slam community. Montana Smith, a member of my doctoral cohort and fellow Iowa-transplant, came from a background in movement and dance that reminded me of Melissa and her profession. Like Lexus, Montana had been in classes where this project developed. Laura Oliver, moving to Baton Rouge right when rehearsals began, had a similar passion for advocacy as Jazmyne. Laura is a passionate performer specializing in Black performance tools. Jordan Smith, a senior at LSU and native Baton Rouge-ian, exhibited a calm aura like Donney. Jordan worked in the same building at Donney, and noted how he had already looked up to him. Jordan said this made agreeing to perform Donney's words daunting!

I cast myself as Desireé. We are both from California, work with competitive youth performers, and often host events. Adding my body to the cast made sure I was visually accountable for the choices made. My male and passing body gave us alternate performance possibilities, and hopefully demonstrated a dedication to my cast that no matter how hard I push them, I am pushing myself, too. The casting of Lexus and myself bypassed genders from which the original texts derived. I felt ethical in doing this because performer spirits matched, and these star grouper texts were not explicitly focused on expressions of gender. This would have been more difficult to do for Jazmyne's role. While author and performer do not share one body in *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, message and performer do. "My cast created their own understanding of the words of my respondents when they themselves worked to embody the script" (Jackson 24). There was never slippage in our roles

because we began the process slipped. We understood we were playing the *not not me* (Schechner 112). This perspective allowed our bodies to conversate with the texts we were embodying, finding a performative middleground between the two.

Once I settled on a cast, we began rehearsals. To build community, we regularly did warm-ups to start. Our warm-ups featured call-and-response exercises, and fun games were used to create an energetic and focused dynamic. Warm-ups should set the tone for the energy of the show and should build skillsets rather than functioning as simply opening ritual. During rehearsals, we would regularly check-in with one another regarding how we were feeling and the choices we were making, and the news of the day. The only one of us not in the LSU performance studies graduate student cohort was Jordan, so we made sure to pay attention to his inclusion. He was also the only one of us from Baton Rouge, so he was an expert in many ways the rest of us were not. In the show, Jordan played Donney, *Eclectic Truth* veteran. With us, though, he was the young one! Some of my favorite memories are the life talks Jordan and I would have as I drove him home post-rehearsal. Sometimes our cast rehearsals ventured off-site, like when we collectively visited *Eclectic Truth* and they met their slam doppelgangers. Or, like having a four-hour rehearsal the morning before LSU tailgating! One rehearsal, a police officer came in as we were running the “Timeline Trauma” scene. We had to collectively navigate uncomfortability as the officer decided to stay in the space as long as he wanted.

As a director, my aesthetic leaning gravitates toward a grungy, punk rock, hip-hop feel. I like shows purposefully messy. I like to maximize space through minimalist choices. I consider audience entertainment and engagement as crucial to the live performance experience and actor<->spectator agreement. I ask performers to play actions and trust themselves to push

choices to their full extensions. Essentially, go big with choices, because it is easier for a director to pull a performer back from over-commitment than it is to push them further from under-commitment. Full commitment is also a stronger use of a performer's rehearsal time, as it allows for play and stretching of possibilities. I remind performers audiences will most likely only see this once, so keying on hot moments is integral. Hot moments, or hot choices, are performer-motivated actions that have life, that draw audience intention, that have urgency.

Several key choices emerged from cast rehearsals. We constructed scenes I and II to provide audiences a run-down of summer 2016, to highlight each of the poets and their poems, to explain the basics of a poetry slam and slam poetry, and to teach audiences how to audience the show. We wanted to portray a poetry slam community, but not re-create a poetry slam. Therefore, we structured scenes III, IV, V, VI, and VII around a theatricalized slam poem of each star grouper. Each scene contained a conversational interview thread, a theatricalized slam poetry thread, and a narrative and video-based thread. I constructed the conversational interview thread around the theatricalized slam poems. These constructed ensemble discussions lead into and provide context, and a conclusion for each scene. In these thematically ordered scenes, we played with movement, consensual community touch, and explored motivations through mashing up star grouper dialogue. In interviews, the performers talk about each other intimately, and we needed to create that as a cast during the conversational interview thread. In each interview scene, we made decisions regarding when to perform to the audience, to perform to each other, to explore the space, and to split the audience into two groups to hear two distinct narratives separately and simultaneously.

The second thread of the show featured poet slam poems re-contextualized into theatricalized scenes, the *soul* of the show (this will be expanded on later in this chapter). In scene II, each cast member performed a shortened version of their poem. We constructed these by including lines that resonate with cast members. We also made sure that lines returned as payoff during the theatricalized slam poems later through recall of specific lines in new contexts. In essence, we displayed a meta-version of the methodology used to create the slam scenes. I designed each scene to highlight one of the star groupers, and I built the spine of the show upon these five slam scenes. For each, I came to rehearsal with specific prompts motivated by the content of the poem itself and current events. Then, we played with those prompts until we arrived at a product of our praxis that satisfied us. The slam scenes featured sharp aesthetic contrasts to the interview scenes. They were more abstract and hyper-embodied, as opposed to conversational. We also used slam scenes to collectively offer our critiques and to create imagery that would linger with audiences. I also wanted to lean into strengths of the cast that coincided with the poem and the spirit of its authors. In scene III, Jordan was powerful and composed. In scene IV, Montana danced with deliberateness. In scene V, Lexus was powerful and poised. In scene VI, Laura was passionate and commanding. In scene VII, I offered Desiree's poem about Kaiya by removing myself and allowing everyone in the room to absorb the first few lines by themselves, in silence. The only lights were the text on the screen and the lighted-up microphone hanging from the sky.

The third thread of the show consisted of the narrative frame containing my pre-recorded voiceover, a choice that admits to audiences *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* is filtered through me, the ethnographer. This thread also provided ethnographic

context and documentary-style video imagery of Baton Rouge. This thread employed slides indicating each scene, as if it were an album tracklisting. This third thread allowed performers to catch out breaths, rock out to musical choices that introduced each scene, and provided digital components to balance conversational and abstract threads. I hoped my pre-recorded voiceover would situate my positionality and simultaneously create some distance between me as researcher and me embodying Desireé's words. While this is not a story about me, without including myself, I felt false objectivity would override my ethic of good. Breen writes, "objectivity does not always depend on physical removal from the observed event. The umpire and the referee are most reliable when they are close to the event. The surgeon is objective during the course of an operation, but inevitably intimate in relating to the patient" (32). By defining myself in relation to the population performed, I heed Alexander's call for performance ethnographers to share "intentions in performing, the desired effects of their performance, and the methods engaged in gathering and reporting knowledge" (418).

Another key choice framing the show was the "Question of the Day!" slam journal used to connect this slamnography together. Langellier and Peterson ask, "does the presence on stage of a manuscript of this text create any particular effect and, if so, can the presence of the manuscript be utilized in this production to illuminate some psychological or aesthetic aspect of the text" (5)? The journal served many functions: as our "Question of the Day!" sign-in book (and we use many of the answers in Scene II), as a prop throughout the show, as a nod to the textual origin of star grouper slam poems, and as a tip of the cap to forensics speech, reader's and chamber theatre, and performance studies' oral interpretation roots. The journal was passed around throughout the show, touched by every cast member, and ultimately became

the connection uniting everyone in the room during the final scene under the lighted-up microphone. In chapter ten, I provide examples of responses audiences penned in this journal.

The Skin: Elements of Production and Design

After developing the set design, we staged the show utilizing those elements as key markers to help motivate our staging. None of the elements or production, design, or staging could have been accomplished without the crew of the show. The individuals who volunteered their time to make this production go are essential. The invisible labor of off-stage work is rarely adequately highlighted on-stage or in publication. The people behind the scenes are as integral to the execution of a quality performance as the performers on-stage. Other influential aspects to the show that are also often backgrounded in performance research include development of the poster, the sceneography, and other design elements.

First, the poster design influenced the concept for the show. I used the act of designing the poster as a tool to crystallize my aesthetic decisions. The poster tagline clearly indicated the thrust of our performance:

“LAST SUMMER: RACIAL TENSIONS, PROTESTS & NATURAL DISASTERS FLOODED
‘THE RED STICK.’

WE STAGE LOCAL POET INTERVIEWS & REMIX *ECLECTIC TRUTH* SLAM POEMS,
INVITING THE COMMUNITY TO REFLECT ON A CAPITAL DIVIDED.”

The five vibrant colors used on the poster inspired the colors of the individual costumes in the show. The faded background features a map of Baton Rouge, divided by two blue lines indicating the north/south demographic divide that grows out of Government St. and Florida Blvd. In addition to inspiring the design of the show, a key benefit of the poster design was

publicity. We sold out the show through publicizing online, at Louisiana State University, at Southern University, at *Eclectic Truth*, and at arts-friendly destinations around the community.

Next, two gridded-maps defined our sceneography (a taped-on outline of Louisiana on the floor, and a taped-on map of Baton Rouge on the stage-right wall). The cast played within these topographical grids as we staged the performance. I was inspired by the de-constructed firetrucks at the *Firehouse Gallery* to create a de-constructed Baton Rouge, LA, on stage. We built many of our performance choices around these grids. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michael de Certeau notes, “to plan a city is both to *think of the very plurality* of the real and to make that way of thinking the plural *effective*; it is to know how to articulate it and be able to do it” (94). By re-creating a grid of Baton Rouge, LA, in a black box space, we provide an x-ray for audience navigation. Lindlof & Taylor write, “*maps* are a way to depict the human uses of space: how social actors gather, sit, stand, move, and orient to each other” (106). Maps illustrate infrastructural features that require daily strategic planning around. Informed by my interview with Desireé, who pulled out her phone to show me where the infrastructural divide occurs, I chose to design the set using maps and grids in order to key in on divides in the city. Upon entering the black box theatre, audiences were given a white-dot sticker and asked to walk through the floor-map of Louisiana and to the stage-right wall-map of Baton Rouge, placing their sticker on where they lived. Throughout the show, on that map, the cast indicated where in Baton Rouge the star groupers they played live, where key tragedies occurred, and we utilized the grids as a backdrop for aesthetically motivated movements. This production choice disrupted spectator expectations of theatrical proxemics and aesthetic distance. There was also something wonderfully tangible about being able to touch a wall! The projection screen was

another key aspect of the show's set design. It was connected to the stage-right wall-map of Baton Rouge, and to the taped-on Louisiana floor. By doing so, it formed three sides of a 3D box, as if you were looking into the stage from a corner of a box.

The costuming, props, and lighting design were simple. For costumes, we each wore one of five colors in choices that made us comfortable. This allowed us to move in ways we needed to for the show. The color became an aspect of both the performer and the persona emitted by the poets words. We sometimes joked that there was a Captain Planet or Power Rangers energy to us, "a colorful kaleidoscope with each member contributing a different shade of strengths and experience to the stage" (Endsley 138). The only props we utilized were the slam journal, a paper crane, and the light-up microphone that hung from the ceiling. As it was a show about the bodies and the voices, I felt anything unnecessary would distract from the most crucial elements of the text. Lighting design featured a general wash for interview scenes, and spotlights for shortened slam poems. We used more focused lighting choices for slam poem scenes and a few specials throughout critical moments, like the final moment of the show.

Digital and sound design became a key feature of the narrative thread. A key example is the digital video framing Laura's shadow-poetry delivery of Jazmyne's poem in scene VI. Laura performed behind the backstage projection screen, and the effect of her silhouette delivering poetry while traveling over Government St. was majestic and memorable. Before I felt comfortable talking about an entire city, I knew I needed to spend time in it. So, I spent hours a week driving around Baton Rouge, visiting stores and new places. Since the narratives of star groupers focused so much around location, this seemed like an essential aspect to include, and would also give me further experience with video design. A downside of my amateur aesthetics

was some shaky camera footage. When the show traveled to Georgia, we re-recorded and smoothed out some unintentionally rough areas. For sound design, I learned the importance of collaborating with a knowledgeable artist/technician. Thankfully, a community member agreed to help record with their tools. Key musical choices were inspired by the time, ethnographic interviews, the city, and the site of *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam*. For example, using “Poetic Justice” by Kendrick Lamar was a direct result of the music played while attending Baton Rouge’s weekly slam, “Janelle Monáe’s “Hell You Talmbout [feat. Wondaland Records]” is a call to #saytheirnames, and A Tribe Called Quest’s “We the People...” was selected because of the timing of the track’s release and the lyrical correlation to what Toiryan told me:

When it comes to making America great again, which America are we really talking about. You explain to me which America are we talking about because clearly we’re not talking about the same one. We’re not talking about an America with all races: Muslims, Black people, Mexicans. We’re not talking about *that* America. Are we talking about that or are we talking about the white America? The America that came in and kicked the Indians out? That Christopher Columbus discovered, is that the one we’re talking about?

For me, the most difficult challenges in stitching the skin of this production together lied in the intricacies of the individual tasks associated conducting ethnographic research, scripting the show, directing the cast, designing the concept, and performing the production. The most difficult tasks revolved around deciding how to convey as dynamic a culture as possible without overcrowding the script with content, how to balance guiding the cast without micromanaging their choices, how to create a de-constructed sceneographic concept that remained portably minimal, how to do justice to my embodiment of Desiree’s words and Kaiya’s memory, and how to make sure the show is publicized in an appropriate and effective manner falling in line with the star groupers goals of reaching additional audiences.

The Soul: Slam Poems as Theatricalized Scenes

This section delves into how the cast of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* de- and re-constructed slam poetry performed by *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* star groupers during fall 2016. The slam poems we theatricalized into ensemble scenes were selected because they overtly featured Baton Rouge and/or summer 2016-related content. In *How to Read an Oral Poem*, John Miles claims argues slam poetry illustrates:

What it means to live in America after the year 2000: the social injustice visited upon women and minorities, the meaning of ethnic heritage, the fight for gun control, the rage of the oppressed, the challenge of public education, the dark inside of the city, the ever-present specter of police brutality, and dozens of other crippling human problems (5).

Slam poetry works as both vehicle for sharing lived experiences and vehicle for radical social protest. Slam poetry challenges societal status quos. Slam poets often act as artistic journalists. Poets are “human scientists” that confront clean narratives and question power structures (Leggo 165). In *Feel These Words*, Susan Weinstein expands, “while poets may write *by* themselves, they often write *about* their place among others, in conscious and unconscious ways” (58). Slam poems are critical cultural artifacts emoting the world from which they develop. When words leave our bodies—whether from brain-to-page or from mouth-on-stage—they become some *thing*. Saul Williams writes in “The Future of Language,” “what we say matters (becomes a solid: flesh)” (23). Poems matter because the people that create them matter. Slam poets show language is material because of its potential to correlate with energy and action beyond the slam space. When audiences get amped up during a performance, or inspired, they need to find an outlet for that energy. Poets and audiences can leave the slam with micro-changes being made regarding viewpoints and perspectives. They can also channel

that energy into more macro-changes, like confronting biases through poetry, or starting their own slam event, or beginning a process of healing by writing through what hurts or what helps. As the origin of this performance ethnography began with my observation of thematically related slam poetry, it is only natural that those slam poems became the soul of the show.

By de- and re-contextualizing individually-delivered slam poems into re-framed ensemble theatrical scenes, *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* extends the redressive action of *Eclectic Truth* to new audiences. The eventual scenes were created by our cast from the texts of five *Eclectic Truth* star groupers, Donney, Toiryan, Jazmyne, Desireé, and Melissa. The scenes referenced summer 2016, when performers negotiated Louisiana's historic flooding, multiple deaths in the community, and the difficulties of being Black in Baton Rouge amid growing racial tensions in a segregated city. Slam poetry performances are not merely creative stagings of poetry. They are aesthetic coping strategies through which poets make sense and meaning from their experiences. The act of performing poetry with a community fosters social support through sharing testimonies, everyday experiences, and live presence. *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, uses performance not as a telescope but a kaleidoscope by stretching poems beyond their native site and bodies. *Eclectic Truth* defines slam poetry by what slam poets *do* in their space. During fall 2016, the poetry *done* was often centered around the tragedies of summer 2016. As an outsider to Baton Rouge, the city greeted me with this poetry. *Eclectic Truth* slam poets granted me the license to de- and re-contextualize their slam poems in the service of sharing a re-imagined narrative about the summer's events. By doing this, they allowed me, the cast of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, and new audiences access to their narratives in novel ways.

The five star groupers who sent me their poems and allowed me and my cast to remix them perform from vastly different styles and come from vastly different backgrounds, even though they live in the same city. This diversity of style makes this community performatively rich, and their poems collectively useful as ethnographic artifacts. “Diverse oral poetries need to be read diversely” (Foley 94). This is why de- and re-contextualization with my cast became an optimal tool, as adaptation of literature asks performers to engage the literature, to know it through doing it. Each of the slam poem scenes were developed by the cast of Lexus Jordan, Laura Oliver, Jordan Smith, Montana Smith, and myself. My cast and I had several discussions and rehearsals concerning the subject matter and context of the slam poetry they were asked to de-construct and eventually embody in front of an audience. For each slam poem to be de- and re-contextualized, I came into rehearsals with a prompt, activity, or discussion question. The cast and I proceeded to play with the texts through both structured and organic methods. I wanted each theatricalized scene to provide a unique perspective and experience when compared to the original slam poems in order to show their underlying malleability and depth.

To invoke the spirit of the original slam poems and their authors, each cast member selected a few of their favorite lines they connected with, and we constructed shortened versions of *Eclectic Truth* slam poems. These shortened versions gave audiences context for the origins of the poems, gave each star grouper recognition for their work, gave each cast member a highlighted moment to shine early in the performance, and gave audiences a sense of what a poetry slam feels like. Additionally, this choice of performing shortened versions of *Eclectic Truth* slam poems allows for audiences to key in on recalled moments and lines in the show’s upcoming theatricalized versions of those slam poems. Turner and Turner state, “framing

frames perhaps makes for intensified reflexivity” (34). Prying poet’s words out of their foundational form fundamentally changes poems’ meanings, but can retain their spirits. By adding bodies, theatricalizing texts, and staging for new audiences, we hoped to maintain the soul of the poems while adding to redressive discourse. While the everyday, aesthetic, and political can never be fully separated, they can be reconfigured and re-understood.

First, we worked through “Timeline Trauma” by Donney Rose. We printed each Tweet out on a separate page, put them in different orders, and brainstormed new scenes. Seeing Donney’s Tweets on 8”x11” rectangles gave our rehearsal concepts a boardgame-feel, and that undoubtedly influenced the pinball-style concept. Drawing upon our discussions and rehearsals, this slam poem developed into a critique of societal gamification of trauma. We staged the scene as if Jordan (as Donney) lived in a game of human pinball within the 15’x15’ taped-on stage of Louisiana. In it, he simultaneously navigated the intensifying heat represented by visuals (embodied by Montana, Laura, and Lexus), memories of the protests inspired by the photo of Ieshia Evans (embodied by Laura), the impacts of the floods (embodied by Montana and Lexus), and the presence of law enforcement (embodied by me) before the summer got too hot. In the shortened version at the beginning of the show, Jordan (as Donney) highlighted specific Tweets, like “when all you really want is love. And dope ass breakfasts.” Several of these were then called back in this theatricalized scene, but performed within a new context.

Second, we staged “Death” and “The Great Flood” by Melissa Hutchinson. In interviews, *Eclectic Truth* poets mention the labor still needed to be done by members of dominant publics. With this poem, we wanted to focus on the flood and sense of smell. We plucked the most visceral language from the poem, regardless of context. Then, we created repetitive body

movements that would increase in tempo. Drawing from our discussions and rehearsals, these poems developed into a critique of the overlooked labor women of color have taken on for families, communities, and society overall. Through stylized movement and repetition, Montana (as Melissa, a white woman) labored in flood wreckage. Then, Lexus and Laura entered (both Black women) adding their labor. Jordan and myself acted as echoes and ambiance, as the flood, as not getting our hands dirty. The scene culminated in a slowly turning image of the three women in the shape of a crane. This choice referenced the origami cranes that were left at *Eclectic Truth* by Foye, a member who stopped attending the weekly ritual when the 2016 flood hit Baton Rouge. After holding that image, Lexus and Laura exited. Melissa remained, frozen, as the head of the crane. Slowly, she broke out of the crane form, wondering where the two women went. In the shortened version at the beginning of the show, Montana (as Melissa) provided an overview of Baton Rouge's history using flowing movement. Those movements are called back in this theatricalized scene.

Third, we engaged "Storm Poem, Draft III" and "Squirrels" by Toiryan Milligan. These poems were each given half of a scene. We experimented with soundscapes and abstract body movements, and ultimately landed on hands-as-puppets and bodies-as-waves. These slam poems developed into a dystopic critique of the overwhelming nature of constant tragedy. Part one showed Lexus (as Toiryan), at work. The shouting puppet-hands of Jordan, Josh, Montana, and Laura sang to Lexus in a condescending manner. Part two showed Lexus and Jordan, at home, backgrounded on the stage-right Baton Rouge wall map by the eerily floating bodies of Josh, Laura, and Montana. In the shortened version at the beginning, Lexus (as Toiryan) performed about family, and those relationship are called back in this theatricalized scene.

Fourth, we devised “Poem for Alton” and “Post-Flood Free Write” by Jazmyne Smith. In this climactic piece, Laura (as Jazmyne) performed shadow imagery behind fast-moving video projections of a vehicle driving up-and-down Florida Blvd., while Josh, Jordan, Lexus, and Montana led an unrelenting stomping-based call-and-response (motivating audiences to stomp along, if they felt inclined). In the shortened version at the beginning of the show, audiences were keyed in on the pattern of the stomp, and prompted once again during audience interaction in scene II. Those rhythms and audience involvement are called back in this scene. This slam poem developed into an unapologetic implication of hypocrisy and silence from #AllLivesMatter enthusiasts when discussing lives of color. This piece implicated the reactionary nature, consequences, and hypocrisy of those who reify that message.

Fifth, we turned our attention to “For Kaiya, Hallelujah” by Desireé Dallagiacamo. Desireé was one of Kaiya’s mentors. Following Laura’s shadow imagery, and my solo delivery of a short transition developed from Jazmyne’s poetry—

DESIREÉ	And in that dimension There is no tragedy to wash away Gravity reversed In that dimension we float Crawl back into our homes Reinhabit their space Blend, like colors in a sunset Like fragments Of lost souls
---------	--

—the cast laid on the ground, one at a time, in a star formation, surrounding the lighted-microphone that hung from the sky. I clicked on the microphone before laying down, allowing a vibrant blue color to fill the black box space. We all touched each other in some way, while laying in that star formation, staring at the sky. During 15 seconds of silence, the cast and the

audience read the onscreen text, together. Only the first two lines of Desiree's poem were provided.

Pause.

Each of these theatricalized slam poem scenes were influenced by different performance theorists in order to create vastly unique experiences between them. I loosely drew from techniques associated with Brecht, Gradowski, Boal, Meyerhold, Stanislavski, Hagen and other performance practitioners and artists. I say *loosely*, as I did not follow their methodologies verbatim, but I was inspired by the aesthetics associated with their techniques. Meaning, if I had provided alternative prompts, directions, and inspirations we would definitely have created vastly different scenes! A strength of de- and re-contextualization of literature is that it provides freedom from the constraints of what has been. The essence of each slam poem should remain, no matter the performance methodology employed in its staging, due to the content, care, and craft deployed by the slam poem's native origin, its author.

Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016 featured drama through conversationally constructed interviews, prose through ethnographic and timeline narratives, and poetry with the inclusion of shortened slam poems and theatricalized versions of those slam poems. In *The Sounds of Poetry*, Robert Pinsky writes, "poetry is older than prose" (9) as a way of explaining how narrative comes after life's unpredictability. Meaning, life is messy, and pure prose often searches for a linear narrative. Poetry, though, embraces the messiness in order to can linger in our memories, haunt our nows, and illuminate our futures (Muñoz 104)..

Poetry is based on feeling, imagination, and articulating the inarticulable, so, naturally, writing about it on the page does not do the justice of feeling it on the stage. Pinsky adds,

The technology of poetry, using the human body as its medium, evolved for specific uses: to hold things in memory, both within and beyond the individual life span; to achieve intensity and sensuous appeal; to express feelings and ideas rapidly and memorably. To share those feelings and ideas with companions, and also with the dead and those to come after us (9).

In sharing the technology of poetry through theatricalization, in inviting audiences to listen and remember through de- and re-contextualization, slam poems can become something new while retaining the soul of their origin. By *tendonically* connecting a production's skeleton and skin to a soul, Muñoz's criteria for *best* performances becomes attainable, sustainable, and utopically emergent.

CHAPTER TEN

PERFORMING *BATON ROUGE SLAM!: AN OBITUARY FOR SUMMER 2016* FOR THE BATON ROUGE COMMUNITY AND BEYOND

September 2017: HopKins Black Box theatre, Louisiana State University

This chapter explores performances of and responses to *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. Performance is an effective mode of research articulation and community reciprocity because aesthetic dramas are platforms “for re-workings and trials of problem-solving strategies for social drama” (Bauridl 65). In addition, audiences can be motivated to respond to performance choices in real time, after the show verbally, and through writing. Schechner writes, “the theater is designed to entertain and sometimes to promote changes in perception, viewpoint, attitude” (215). Aesthetic drama affects outcomes, processing, and exposure of social drama. I contend ethnographic performances of redressive actions following times of crises can act as extensions of redress through new audience exposure. First, I dive into responses to our September 2017 performance-run at Louisiana State University’s HopKins Black Box theatre. Next, we travel to a February 2018 performance of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* at Patti Pace Performance Festival, hosted by Kennesaw State University in Georgia. In each performance, audience and respondent interpretations of the content performed by the cast demonstrated several divergent layers of understanding and comprehension of summer 2016’s events.

One year after summer 2016, a year after I began my ethnographic research with *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam*, *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* was presented to five sold-out crowds at Louisiana State University’s HopKins Black Box theatre. The department sustains the space solely through donations, and the performance studies program

donated a portion received to *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* and the *Poetry Alliance*. The cast and I felt we had strong performances we were proud of during four of the shows. The Thursday show, night two, however, fell flat for us collectively. A few of us had class right before the show, and it seemed our energies collectively dragged by performing so soon after finishing that course. In addition to self-checking after shows and providing each other with feedback following each performance, we received written and vocalized feedback on two levels: through attending audiences, and through assigned performance show respondents.

Audiences make sense of their theatrical experiences within their own interpretive reference points. For example, one specific audience outburst occurred on night three of our run, during scene III. From the audience, Lexus interrupts Jordan's line. Lexus, as Toiryan, states, "I think Donald Trump *should* be president!" Unexpectedly, an audience member bursts up and claps and hoots boisterously, agreeing with our intended satire. We went with the flow, despite this interruption, and honestly, we welcomed this break to improvise within our rehearsed show structure. This audience reaction served to prove the point of what much of our show was advocating for, like the misunderstanding of marginalized voices by dominant publics. Speaking of interpretive reference points, three of this performance ethnography's five star groupers were able to attend the production. The other two could not due to last minute obstacles. In turn, they were sent a video link of the production after the show's run. Other members from *Eclectic Truth* and the local arts community attended as well. Each of them discussed the performance with me following the production, and I continue to remain in contact with many of them to this day (I elaborate in chapter eleven).

The “Question of the Day!” journal that audiences signed in to as they entered the space provided interesting responses. To the left of the page, they were asked to sign their first name and last initial. To the right of the page, the question we asked Baton Rouge audiences was: “What word or emoji describes your summer 2016?” We provided two options—word or emoji—in order to prompt a diversity of responses. In scene II of the show, the cast, led by Laura, uses these responses when interacting with the audience. Some of the words audiences wrote as they entered included:

Hot (8), Exhausting (7), Stressed (7), Crazy (5), Difficult (5), Kaiya (5), Shit show (5), Fun (4), Working (5), Happy (4), Adventurous (3), Amazing (3), Blessed (3), Busy (3), Chaotic (3), Eventful (3), Overwhelmed (3), Wild (3), Awful (2), Cool (2), Friendship (2), Great (2), Heavy (2), Lazy (2), Lit (2), New (2), Numb (2), Relaxing (2), Sad (2), Scary (3), Travel (2), Anxious, Ballin’, Blur, Despair, Distant, Eye opening, Flame, Fuck me, Inspirational, Liminal, Long, Lost, Nope, Peter, Petty, Roller Coaster, Shiehan, Unmoored, Wet, WTF, Ugh, Woah, Yikes.

Emojis provided by audience members included:

Neutral face (10), Smiling face (8), Sad face (7), Heart (2), Angry face, Baby, Cat, Ghost, Money sign, Panda, Rock-on hand, Spider, Tongue out face.

A few unidentifiable drawings, a few scattered blank spaces, and a host of illegible words also occupied the spaces by audience names. While these responses do not provide context, they begin to provide a bit of insight regarding our audience’s collective intersection with how they remembered summer 2016. Following signing in to the “Question of the Day!” journal, audiences were given a white-dot sticker and directed to place them on the stage-right back wall map of Baton Rouge. Audiences were directed to navigate the unlabeled map, and place their stickers closest to where believed they lived. The proximity of audience members to key events of the summer positioned on the map, acted as an implication of how perceptions of the

summer's events unpacked in *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* are impacted by our proximity and prior conceptions of those events.

As the production took place at LSU's HopKins Black Box theatre, students made up a healthy part of the public audience. This was also shown in the amount of white-dot stickers that filled the wall map surrounding Louisiana State University. I received 60 written responses from undergraduate students enrolled in assorted LSU Communication Studies courses. Language choices reveal much about the positionality of the audience member and their interpretation of the production. Here is a smattering of their responses that stood out to me, with all identifiers removed:

"There were only a few minor incidents when I was appalled. The first was when one guy went crazy applauding Donald Trump for being President."

"I was able to personally and emotionally connect to her because that was exactly how I felt. I have two brothers and they both work night jobs and come in at about two in the morning... I wanted to cry because I do believe the actress playing that part felt the same exact way."

"Majority of the students speaking were black, which gave a direct explanation to the emotional effects the events had on them that white people don't share with them."

"One of the more memorable moments was when you could only see the black shadow of a performer behind a screen. As the performer shouted "black lives matter" over and over, the shadow got bigger, and her voice got louder. For me, this really emphasized that black voices should not be silenced."

"These people came together in rough times, and worked together, helping each other talk about their problems. They showed each other that it's ok to talk about these things in public."

"The purpose of them doing this I believe is two different reasons, the first one being to keep it fresh in the minds of the effects and for those people to never forget what they experienced and to keep fighting the injustices. The second reason would be to educate people like me, I grew up in a mildly conservative family so I always saw the Fox News side of everything. I never saw anything but

the conservative view point of the riots and shootings, clips of the damage from the flood and of the presidential candidates coming to meet with the victims that weren't the real victims of the floods. Going to this event was really the first time I had heard a different side of the events that happened."

"As a fairly quiet girl, I was uncomfortable by the amount of yelling of certain phrases."

"It showed how there are many new avenues I need to try. Like maybe writing or reading more so I can better articulate my thoughts and feelings."

"A statement used in the performance was that "Trump supporters are considered the Alt-Right, Slam poetry communities are the Alt-Left". Because Trump won the election that would mean over half of our country are an alt-right extremist racist. I know for a fact this is not the case and was offended that this generalization was made."

"I am from Gonzales and all of St. Amant flooded, meaning every person had at least 1 family member who flooded."

"For example, a white woman talked about racism challenges. This gave it a little more substance because it did not just come from a black person."

"I interpreted this on being about liberals and their beliefs."

"I believe that in the Alton Sterling case, if Sterling would have just complied with what the police were asking him to do, then it wouldn't have ended up the way it did."

"I think that racism as a whole should be addressed, not just racism toward blacks."

"Maybe the officer was scared for his life."

"The poem where the three women were cleaning the aftermath of the flood out of a house hit on a more personal level than words would have alone."

"I lived in a majority white community, so I have never had to learn about the Black Lives Matter movement."

"If you are not from Louisiana, or more specifically Baton Rouge, you can see that we had one hell of a summer. There were parts of the play where I had to nod my head in agreement, snapped my fingers in approval, and occasionally

raised my eyebrows in disbelief.”

“One prime example that sticks in my mind was the interpretation of gutting a house after the flooding; this example hit quite close to home, as I had to help my grandparents do exactly what they described.”

“They made you feel uncomfortable sometimes, but a good uncomfortable, a needed uncomfortable.”

“Seeing people that I once called friends, calling Alton Sterling a criminal and blaming him for his own death, it registered to me that people are blinded by what they do not identify with and therefore they would do and say anything to justify it.”

“I teared up a little because they reminded me that my people are not alone in this fight, this fight for justice and equality. When you feel like no one ever understands the way you feel it cuts you deep, so deep that you honestly begin to tell yourself that it will never get better until that one person, all it takes is one, comes along and proves to you otherwise. They remind you that you are not in this alone and that is exactly what this poetry slam did for me personally.”

“I found it incredibly offensive. I felt like the creators of this show chose an issue to perform on and only presented one half of the debate. Saying something like “Alton Sterling was an innocent man murdered in cold blood by a police officer” is not only factually wrong, but ethically wrong in my opinion.”

“I loved the beginning of the performance where they did the Robert Frost bit about “two roads diverged.” I thought it was a clever way to start the show. It poked fun at the genre of slam just enough to get the audience comfortable.”

“I felt like “obituary” was an accurate term. So much tragedy went on that summer, and all we did was fix it as fast as we could then move on. I was there when it rained, and rained and did not stop. I helped clean out my high school teacher’s house. I remember how it smelled, how it felt to throw away his memories and tear down the walls of his home. I live less than a mile away from where Alton Sterling was shot.”

“I live near Airline Highway in Baton Rouge, and the shootings of the police officers were only lightly touched on in the performance. The sound of helicopters, sirens, the staleness in the air, and even the weirdness of traffic around the area were part of my experience. Why wasn’t this elaborated on?”

“As a person who experienced a life changing natural disaster such as a flood in my life, I appreciated this. As a person who experienced a life changing death of

a close cousin in the same manner as Alton Sterling, I appreciated this performance.”

“I also enjoyed the tribute to Kaiya in the performance. This was very relatable especially to me because I attended high school with her and actually had taken classes with her in the past so to see the performance shed light on the tragedy definitely hit close to home for me personally.”

In assessing feedback post-performance, there is a certain push and pull that should occur, akin to balancing an ethnographer’s perspective atop Conquergood’s moral map (chapter two).

From written student responses, I noticed many self-identified white students believed in color-blind rhetoric and that they felt they had the agency to declare someone’s lived experience as truthful or agreeable. I noticed exaggerated quotations that neglected the nuance of the arguments our performance was making. Perhaps, we did not give these audience members enough time to process the nuances. Perhaps, we did not agree on the premise to begin with, so all communication after they entered the space was futile. I noticed several attempts to justify the shooting of Sterling on behalf of Salamon, despite indisputable video evidence opposing that viewpoint. Many wrote about never being to a poetry slam before and their previous stereotypes of slam poetry spaces. A few wrote about being actively involved in poetry slams. Some wrote about their own homes being flooded, their family members who had been affected by the floods, and their own efforts and labor cleaning up the summer’s debris.

Responses to the show ranged from standing ovation *snaps* and boisterous applause, to individuals stating they found the perspectives presented incredibly offensive because of the overt support of politically-charged narratives presented. Others wrote about the need for there to be another side mentioned as a counter to the poet perspectives presented. This stood out to me, as this was not a debate. A few referenced this performance as if it was part of a

debate, rather than expressing a particular community's experience or aspects of the craft behind the artistic journalism. A couple students even exclaimed the show needed a moderator! A few audience members seemed upset that the performance did not confirm their conservative perspectives. Many others responded with how they personally and emotionally connected with moments throughout the performance. And others wrote about how the show very much reflected their perspectives and experiences growing up in Baton Rouge and Louisiana. Some wrote about their desire for a gentler approach in tone. I read this as seeking a discourse of civility, which I find problematic as it infers the presentation of these narratives are not civil. Some students stopped short of reflexivity, stating, "I don't have their experience, I have privilege," but leave their observations at that level. Many do not understand the structure and concept of racism, even if they agree in principle with the production and that racism exists. Some wrote about the confusion of non-linear storytelling in a show like *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. Many approached their responses through their lived experiences, giving their own experiences more credence than those the show was based upon. Most mention the appreciation for the conviction of the performers, the details of the production, and the visual choices. Some can clearly articulate the nuances of this critical 2016 time period, and they even theorize beyond the makeshift slam space experienced in the HopKins Black Box. Audience responses were clearly rich!

Researchers note discrepancies in how dominant publics respond and read performances of identity compared to those from marginalized backgrounds when evaluating the same performances. This is not to say all people in these groupings respond the same way,

but notable tendencies exist. Goldman describes this dichotomy in his production of *Divine Days*, noticing:

Many white audience members focused on the virtuosity of the performance, in particular the athleticism of the dancing and the extraordinary gospel singing, while African Americans tended not to comment on this at all, but to talk much more in depth about the content of the piece, especially around Forrest's non-stereotypical characters, such as the complexity of the women represented, and the very rare portrayal of black homosexuality (381).

While I did not demographically categorize the written responses I received, my observations run parallel to Goldman's. Audiences seemed to consistently access and remark on aspects that resonated with the lived experiences they brought into the theatre. Elam remarks, "white Americans are by and large acculturated to think of themselves as individuals while people that identified as being of color more conditioned by internal and external sociocultural factors to think of themselves as representative of their particular group" (121). Drawing on critical race theory, the power of whiteness and dominant publics allows certain audiences to retreat from critical awareness, to disengage from that aspect of a performance, to argue an experience does not exist despite its live, breathing, embodied proclamation. This ability to retreat is similar to the ethnographer's ability to opt-out, a privilege those marginalized or embedded in a counterpublic do not always have. As HopKins notes, "we cannot properly respond to the text if we cannot embrace" its foundational values (4). If audiences do not arrive into the performance with some semblance of shared meaning, performances then have the potential to validate the outlier. Meaning, without shared meaning, overtly political performances can both rally support as well as push some audiences further away. I imagine many of the audiences we pushed away due to the productions equitable political leanings would never attend a slam for many of the same reasons they espoused in their responses to the student narratives presented in *Baton*

Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016. A question then becomes, should performance ethnographers attempt to reach dominant publics that do not want to be reached?

Second, two official production respondents from my LSU graduate cohort delivered written versions of their responses at our performance studies program's ritual talkback. These normally occur the week following a production. I am struck by the attention of Naomi Bennett and Greg Langner's reflections, as both respondents were fellow doctoral students in LSU's performance studies program and close to the production from concept to page to stage to now. In addition, one of my performance studies professors, Dr. Patricia Suchy, e-mailed me a thoughtful summation of her experience. First, here is a portion of Naomi Bennett's response. Naomi was also a technical consultant for the production:

As a transplant to Baton Rouge who is often struck with awe at the deeply ingrained racism that divides this city and someone who has seen *Baton Rouge SLAM!* evolve from a class ethnography project, to staged readings, to fully a realized performance, I am continually impressed by the new meanings I find each time I encounter this performance. I began my Summer of 2016 managing a community pool in North Baton Rouge, a couple blocks from where Alton Sterling was killed. Though I transferred to a different location three weeks before, I felt the ripple effect as I lived through a very different Baton Rouge than ever showed itself through the purple and gold tinted lens of the LSU bubble. That summer I experienced deep conviction, faith, and resilience of coworkers, both Black and white, all local – with me as the odd white woman from the north – as we attempted to make sense of what the news was reporting, shared stories and personal accounts of what the news was not reporting, and just tried to make sure no one died on our watch (both in and out of the pool).

Baton Rouge SLAM! touched too many feelings and memories than I could possibly recount in this response – and more than you probably want to hear – but in the end the message I continue to come away with is one of resilience and a call to action; the need and space for mourning, and an acknowledgment of a great divide, the thin blue line of Florida Boulevard that alters perceptions and grants excuses for racial violence; and the beginnings of a discussion that needs to be started over and over again: the discussion that we are all complicated, we are all imperfect, but that none of those things were actually a factor in

Alton's death, regardless of the his character or whether or not he was legally allowed to be carrying a gun, that is not why he was murdered.

Towards the end of the summer, two days after regaling several of us about how amazing his little sister was, I got a phone call from one of my lifeguards saying she, Kaiya, had suddenly and unexpectedly passed away. He had already flown to meet his family and had no idea when he would return. Though I did not know her, I knew of her, and I knew how much pain her loss caused those around her. Underlying the events of the Summer of 2016, Josh's staging of "For Kaiya" as a mini-memorial within a greater obituary for the summer continues to grab at my heart and bring me to tears every time I see it.

Artistically, a myriad of incredibly successful elements of *Baton Rouge SLAM!* must be mentioned: the beautifully orchestrated division of solo and choral speaking; the simple yet elegant movement work, including Laura's shadow movement piece behind the projection screen; the repetition of insistent stomping on the lines "Black Lives Matter"; the snapping to denote transitions with the ensemble; the book and the hanging microphone as central focus points for both the performers and audience members; the integration of visual imagery through video projection, visual poetry, and the color palette created by the combination of costumes, scenic and lighting design. All of these worked to enhance what for me was the central element of *Baton Rouge SLAM!*: the sharing of stories. The sharing of stories in this community, during these times, going through struggle after struggle after struggle.

Second, here is a section of Greg Langner's response delivered at the same talkback, following Naomi's response. Greg was the lighting designer for the production:

The tone of the show was explicitly critical, skillfully comedic, and disturbingly somber. I don't call the show disturbing because I see this as a problem. Rather, I see intentional disturbance as one of the foundations of the performance. The show's message is definitively political, and never pretends to be otherwise; and it is genuinely entertaining to watch. *Baton Rouge Slam!* does not seem to want to establish any kind of normalcy for the audience. No, *Baton Rouge Slam!* makes clear to its audience that this is an experience that will insist on self-reflection, even when resistance to self-reflect is an impulse as sharp as the kind that cries out, "All Lives Matter." *Baton Rouge Slam!* demonstrates through its interweaving of narratives and recent-historical and present-social realities that, in our society, Black lives do not matter.

The performers were committed, and worked exhaustively to be genuine. The show, in this way, speaks to the dialectical power of performance that can be reached when performers do the kind of work that does not flatten, but instead,

aims to experience the perspectives of others. Of course, raw and perfect empathy is not a real thing. We cannot see through others' eyes, but putting in the work to *try*, as this show does, can help both performers and audiences to see something in between; not to fully feel the original experiences, themselves, but to feel something outside of oneself. All of this was magnified by the show's logistical execution, which produced both moments, and images, often overlapping, that were truly striking—I recall Laura's shadow behind the projector, Jordan's solitude on a stage somehow still filled with four other people, Montana's body and voice taking on the weight of a flood victim, Josh's honest serenity, and Lexus' sharply impressive sense of presence on stage .

The structure of the show was such that it was richer in content than many four-hour-long three-act mid-century plays; and while we can locate the various parts a conventional narrative arc, we could never genuinely draw a clear linear narrative of plot, place, people, and purpose out of what we witnessed. The show is simply too complex for such an achievement. Instead, we can only draw our own conclusions, and for that, there are many. Seeing the show so many times gave me the opportunity to see many different audience reactions. People left elated; people left confused; people left emotionally-taxed; people left provoked and pissed off and unable to articulate why, and even if only out of this reason, *Baton Rouge Slam!* finds its success.

Third, Dr. Patricia Suchy, a long-time LSU performance studies faculty member, also sent me an important and thoughtful response. In two graduate courses I had the privilege of taking with Dr. Suchy, I was able to experiment with video work I used in *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. In her response, she offers me an unexpected gift, as she helps me extend the departmental connection with *Eclectic Truth's* originator, Ray Sibley:

Your commitment to community--to uniting 2 communities with this show--is one of the best things about the project for me. We all like to talk about working together, extending reach beyond the ivory tower (and the black walls), but few of us really pull it off in any meaningful way. You did. I like the sense of vision, your work ethic, and the time and care you took to develop a rapport and relationship that feels very two-way.

It was so uncanny to me personally to hear my own life implicated here, though I have never been to the firehouse slam. But, I used to go to the Green Mill in Chitown, and Ray Sibley (aka "Rowdy" back in the day) was a good friend. He wrote a poem for my wedding. I went to his first slams, the first year I arrived in BR, and they were a big part of what convinced me I had made the right move

for myself at the time. The poetry was uneven, but that wasn't what mattered: it was the sense of people from many walks of life gathered because they wanted to speak, to craft messages in the slam cadences. When I thought more about it, it seemed tied to the oral cultures and the love of language that prevails in the deep south, and interestingly, to preaching and testifying--only in a secular way.

Your show articulated some more of that for me, with a deft, light touch that also became urgent and tough when it needed to.

I don't know what I expected, but another surprise was that you relied on what I might classify as fairly traditional or conventional kinds of PS methods--traditional for PS, that is--dating back to chamber theatre, oral interp, and so on. The combination of those with slam created a really nice tension and mutual enhancement. I liked very much how you taught the audience about slam and at the same time taught us how to watch and listen to the show.

The mapping overlay gave you a nice structure and grid, scenographically, and it was fun to find where one's dot was, and to see those accumulate. There's another kind of community--potentially. But one criss-crossed with complications and (literal) color lines.

These three responses by people I admire are a privilege to read. They provide thoughtful perspectives from those familiar with the show, with my ethnographic process, and are each adjacently familiar with *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* as it was constituted during the turbulent 2016 time period. When combining their perspectives and observations with the post-performance data I collected from audience members, I did notice that, if audiences seemed to come into the show with a receptive attitude toward the subject matter, there was potential for deep engagement, connection, and reflection. If audiences entered the theatre with a neutral demeanor, there was potential to move them toward being receptive toward the performance. If they arrived hostile toward the issues discussed, neutrality beyond aesthetic appreciation seemed unattainable. Responses to *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* collectively indicate that being uncomfortable is necessary for growth, but being too uncomfortable can cause audiences to retreat to their previously conceived scripts.

February 2018: Patti Pace Performance Festival, Kennesaw State University

Taking the show on the road to a new location required a few revisions and rehearsals, but I would say 90% of the performance remained similar to the version performed at the Hopkins Black Box theatre. The cast and a few crew members traveled *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* to Kennesaw, GA, to present at the 2018 Patti Pace Performance Festival, hosted at Kennesaw State University's Stillwell Theater. This became an interesting experiment in what happens when localized performances about particular communities and cities cross state-lines. We made a few adjustments to account for the new audience demographics, as most would not have lived or visited Baton Rouge, LA. One adjustment was the "Question of the Day!" section in the show and in the slam journal. In the journal we asked, "what do you remember about 2016?" rather than "what word or emoji describes your summer 2016?" in order to broaden the impact of this interactive prompting device. Not as many audience members signed into the journal as the 60-or-so in attendance because of the early Saturday morning performance start time. Some answers audiences provided included:

Staying up 36 hours for the election.
I had an awesome time at my first Gay Spirit Vision Retreat! Oh, and there was an election.
Keeping a full year of dream journals.
The beach/Sarasota + being pregnant + miserable.
Bourbon.
The feeling that Trump could never be President of the U.S.
___ and I opened our community out space, "the Open Space."
Living in a children's hospital.
Love. And tragedy.
Heartbreak -> life changes.
Memes.
Graduation.
Pain.
The summer.
Baton Rouge and living in Louisiana.

The 2016 presidential election seemed to be a hot topic hovering over audience members. During the show, during scene II when we teach the audience how to audience slam, Laura asks audiences that same question, inviting audience participation. Following their impromptu responses, we had a list of our own responses ready, including: Cubs, Pulse Nightclub, Aleppo, Zika, France, clown murders, North Carolina's anti-Trans bathroom law, Carrie Fisher, David Bowie, George Michael, Prince, Leonard Cohen, John Glenn, Fidel Castro, Gene Wilder, Alan Rickman, Mohammad Ali, 258 Black deaths at the hands of police. This choice helped globalize Baton Rouge's local sorrow, giving outside audiences a way in to a tumultuous summer 2015, and simultaneously producing audible reactions based on audience member proximity toward our namedropped responses. Loud "oohs" and "ahhs" and *snaps* validated this as an effective addition to the show. Like our run at the HopKins Black Box theatre, the Patti Pace Performance Festival provided us the opportunity to receive feedback on two levels: through attending audiences, and through a show respondent.

First, attending audiences again responded differently depending on their positionality and lived experiences. The Patti Pace Performance Festival audience was filled with performance studies faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students from about a dozen institutions. Therefore, the audience can be assumed to be one that tends to approach performance with critical generosity. Though, on the first day, two white graduate students, specifically, came up to me beforehand and stated, "ugh, slam performance," relying on their stereotypical idea of what slam can offer. They both regurgitated those sentiments to a different cast member, later, and in a similar tone of superiority. In the talkback, their tone shifted to appreciation, commenting on more superficial and aesthetic aspects of the

performance. A few schools attended with predominately students of color, who responded to the show very differently than their white counterparts. During the after-show talkback and in interactions following the performance, students of color were more likely than white students to speak to the cast and speak about their experiences. In after-show talkback responses, students of color spoke of emotional connections. White commenters, like the two graduate students, tended to speak of performed choices made and aesthetic dimensions of the performance. While these aspects are incredibly important to the conceptualization of the show, these responses add to a consistent pattern that has emerged in this dissertation: If an audience does not see themselves in the performer, they seem to be more likely to keep a tenuous connection to the presented experience. While this claim may seem obvious, reaching dominant publics, then, remains challenging. How do we develop shared meaning without shared feeling? Acknowledging how others experience themselves is the least we can do when being offered another's story. Because of the divergent audience responses to *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, I infer that audiences often see themselves as arbiters of authenticity, and that desire to claim authenticity is rooted in past experiences and exposure.

Second, Dr. Jonny Gray of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, was assigned by the Patti Pace Performance Festival to formally respond to our show and to lead our post-performance talkback with the audience. Dr. Gray, working in real time, offered us a gift with his vocalized critique and discussion leadership. Following the festival, Dr. Gray generously provided me a typed-up re-construction of his handwritten notes from that February afternoon. I find the scratch-paper construction of Dr. Gray's thoughts to not only be insightful, but poetic in its own right! Here is a portion of his comments:

So this is going to be a challenge in reading hieroglyphics.

Obligatory theory reference. The show made me think about Conquergood's moral map. This is a performance ethnography project, after all. I worry that it engages in the Enthusiast's Infatuation. I worry that my worry is a Skeptic's Cop Out, too, though

Owning my resistance to the emphasizing of competition in our aesthetic work and play. I connect this to a value I learned from Forensics competition--that the activity helps us learn the difference between rules and conventions, and then that to succeed (win) we must play in the tension between convention and invention. Note where the show shows us folks struggling against while struggling to learn the conventions of the poetry slam. Contemplate what it means, in this context, to be trained to audience. Note this tension with conventions as also a site of resistance. [I am taking notes in the dark!]

The show focuses on absences--who isn't heard, what isn't said, etc.. It begs the question: what does the show, itself, erase or leave unacknowledged? I go to climate change as a possible "fill in the blank"--especially re: the BR unprecedented non-hurricane flooding.

Finally, I end with "The Book"—which is a bid for going meta in my response and an acknowledgement of one of the show's central devices. What, I wonder, is the tension between the oral performance and the preserved text that that device marks? And now, full circle, as I try to recreate the gist of my response from these chicken scrawl notes, that question resonates another way.

Truly, I know I trusted my gut in the moment and went "off script." I remember a general acknowledgement of the polish of the show and the incredible gifts of the performers, for example. I know that I acknowledged the quality of the work that went into the crafting of this show allowed us to dig in deep with the issues it raises (and I REALLY appreciate that!).

I would like to thank Dr. Gray for his feedback and questions. Dr. Gray brings to light three key areas of conversation I will delve further into: the moral map, neoliberal constraints, and what *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* omits.

First, the moral map. Dr. Gray asks me to consider if I am engaging in the enthusiast's infatuation. I would say, depending on one's interpretation of the presentation of the script and what specific moment of the show is being referred to, the show could be engaging in any of

the moral map's quadrants. While an argument can be made that the enthusiast's infatuation, the skeptic's cop-out, the custodian's rip-off, and the curator's exhibitionism all find a way into the performance, the script, and the choices made, a counter argument can also be made that each is balanced with an alternative performance choice. For example, the enthusiast's infatuation can be identified in the glorifying of the talents, passion, and energy slam poets often possess. The constructed interviews, then, serve to dig beneath what motivated the slam poet's poetry that was crafted and performed so passionately. Thus, both a performer's frontstage and backstage presence can be theoretically observed by audiences to help create a push-pull between the quadrants. As discussed in chapter two, resting in the middle of the moral map can be problematic, because neutrality does not often fall in line with a marginalized community's needs. So, as *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* implies, we should not aim to be stationary, but aim to provide balance through checking of our choices, co-performative reflexivity, and dialogic engagement.

Second, a benefit of neoliberal constraints on creativity stems from what Dr. Gray refers to as the "tension between convention and invention." This is a direct application of my understanding of de Certeau's notion of strategies and tactics from *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Essentially, environments are defined by previously designed strategies, while tactics are how we learn to maneuver in those environments. A basic example is the layout of a busy road with a crosswalk. Instead of following that outlined path, I might choose to jaywalk for expediency, despite knowing the possible consequences outlined by those who create and manage that road. Competitive creative structures are rehearsals for navigating the strategies of a capitalist world, where our Western societal worth is determined by what we can produce

that is deemed of value to others. Therefore, if we know what others value or, what strategies audiences may expect, we can then manipulate that machinery to our tactical advantage. Dr. Gray's stated resistance to emphasizing competition in aesthetic work is not uncommon in performance studies. In other performance avenues, like slam culture and forensics speech tournaments, it is less chastised (although still critiqued). A positive outcome of the neoliberal tension developed through conventions and limitations is that participants can develop anti-structure, allowing for the form's subversion when conditions allow. A negative impact is that audiences, then, become arbiters of authenticity through their position as consumer rather than as co-creator of knowledge. This might contribute to dominant publics being able to place themselves at an arms-distance regarding the lived experiences of marginalized populations. They are provided the choice to opt-in or opt-out.

Third, Dr. Gray asks me to consider what is not said in the show, what aspects of summer 2016 are left unacknowledged. While Dr. Gray brings up climate change, that was not part of the presented poetry by star groupers. While some students demanded more about the police murders, that perspective was not highlighted by the poetry of star groupers. The narrative constructed in *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* focused on how a slam community experienced their city, not the political debates that often further marginalize subaltern populations through having to advocate for their own existence. Clearly missing from the show are the bodies and actual voices of the slam poets that originated this script. While I discuss this choice earlier in this dissertation, an unaddressed limitation of this choice is that some audiences could conflate the performers of the show with the actual poets whose personas we portrayed. I wonder if this conflation, though, might indicate that marginalized

experiences are sometimes indistinguishable for dominant publics? Finally, Kaiya's voice or picture was not included in the production. This was a decision I grappled with, because I did not want to use her narrative as a plot device, but I also did not want that difficult choice to be an excuse to omit Kaiya or her poetry. Thus, I turned back to my methodological foundation. As her voice was not a voice of the star groupers I interviewed, the methodology made my decision for me. Therefore, the show talked about Kaiya from the perspective of those in the community that mentored her, like Donney and Desireé. Yes, that decision might invoke the skeptic's cop-out. Though, in this circumstance I would argue that the notion of the skeptic's cop-out is balanced by avoiding the enthusiast's infatuation, the custodian's rip-off, and the curator's exhibitionism.

The Afterlife of SLAM!

The afterlife of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* continues to live on in subsequent performances, in the narratives and poems of star groupers and the work they continue to create, at *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam & Open-Mic*, and with the experience gained by those who worked closely with these texts and these spaces. The malleability of slam poetry is an example of what the form can offer those attempting to learn more about cultural development and adult responses to crises. Eleveld writes of slam's 1980's origin story, "turning the poetry reading into a 'show' was a revolutionary idea and it worked. 'Show' is the reason the slam has flourished, not competition" (119). While I agree, I also disagree. As Dr. Suchy remarked, the people coming together to make the show made the slam flourish. The power of ritual made the slam flourish. The communal sharing of stories made the slam flourish. The

show gave poets a vehicle to shine.

Ethnographic performance is where fieldwork, theatre, and audience collide. Was *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016* an effective performance, though? Looking back on this process, I answer Alexander's checklist (428). I feel the performance offered a substantive contribution that ethically informed on a cultural experience, attempted reflexivity and accountability throughout the process, fleshed out an embodied sense of lived experience, offered an aesthetic product with entertainment value that invited a multitude of interpretations, affected performers, engaged audiences, and extended well beyond the immediate experience. However, effectiveness can mean many things to many people. This performance did not start a revolution. As commented on following Dr. Gray's moral map response, one may argue my research both over- and under-identifies with a moment in time. I do know some audiences saw their own lives reflected in the show. Did more people attend *Eclectic Truth* after this performance? While I did not codify this, I do know that a few students that saw the show in Georgia visited *Eclectic Truth* a few weeks later, and quite a few student responses invoked that they would attempt to attend the slam at some point to listen, and even slam themselves.

The theater has historically articulated social causes and provoked sympathizers toward resistance. Elam writes about social protest theatre, like the Black Arts Movement and *El Teatro Campesino*, stating, "'ritualistically,' they transformed spectators into active participants, and their participatory activity inside the theater was an indicator of or precursor to revolutionary activity outside the theater" (11). Theatre's ultimate lasting impacts on audiences are considerations of their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. When a public is considered,

ethnography extends “beyond confines of academic discourse and can position social scientific knowledge at the nexus of public debate, current affairs, and popular culture” (Vannini 3).

Audiences being in the space with us implicated our social agency. We must remember that the “actual living author creates and establishes, but the implied author is the reader’s perception that emerges from the experience of the whole work” (Hopkins 3). In terms of our performance, the originators were the poets who created the original poems. However, an audience is always decoding and interpreting who they think the author is. Elam’s description of 1960s and 70s social protest theatre seems to capture our experience:

By conflating art and activism, not only did the social protest performance serve social ends, but the performers’ conception of themselves as activists propelled and inflated the value of their art. The performers’ sense of the political, social, and cultural significance of their work kept the actors from being absorbed by the role, consumed by their identification with the characters. Moreover, the performers’ awareness of the social import of the performance foregrounded its political function and prevented it from becoming aestheticized as mere diversionary entertainment (103).

The surrounding social contexts added urgency to our performances of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for summer 2016*. Saldaña writes, “for the audience, who must be engaged throughout the event, the central criterion is, “Do I care what these characters have to say” (27)? Inversely, audiences should also critically ask themselves, if I do not care, why not? Different audiences care differently. Audiences bring their perceptions to their engagements. How those perceptions clash with a show’s vision reveals a lot about our shared value of difference. Meaning, ultimately, that the differences between dominant and marginalized publics, the breaches underlying our crises, probably need more than an hour to be worked through!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LOOKING BACK: TAKEAWAYS AND EPILOGUES

Concluding this Dissertation by Looking toward the Future

Every time I typed K-a-i-y-a into my keyboard, or wrote K A I Y A into our sacred “Question of the Day!” slam journal, or spoke her name in *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, I felt a chill in that space between my shoulder blades. Even now, three years after I began my Baton Rouge journey, typing those five letters to represent a human being feels sacred. And uncomfortable, in that there is no way of knowing how she would feel about me writing about her, or performing about her. After this dissertation, that is what I, as a performance ethnographer, am left with, a heavy feeling to think about, to write about, to perform about; but, acknowledging my feelings are nowhere near as heavy as those who live without Kaiya every day. Tangential to the specifics of this ethnography, I had the privilege of instructing several *Forward Arts* youth-turned-university students in performance studies classes at Louisiana State University. Before an audience-invited showcase performance, a former teammate of Kaiya’s revealed to me how they wanted to take the mentorship and creative skills they developed through poetry, through mentors like Donney and Desireé, and start a poetry-based clinic for self-help therapy. McCallister writes, “the poetry community here has literally lifted two segments of society—people of color and a younger generation—to another level” (188). In this project, I not only met *Eclectic Truth* and its star groupers, but I met the people they are connected with. I met several of their family members. I met people through their poetry, through communities-of-choice.

The ethnographic accounts and thematic performance scripting showcased by this performance and study underscore how, during the fall 2016 portion of the 2016-17 slam poetry competition season, Baton Rouge's *Eclectic Truth Poetry Slam* provided the conditions necessary for a dedicated community of slam poets to transcend the form of the poetry slam. This research is a concrete example of how communities of artistic adults make contextual sense of their lives in times of crises. Through this ethnographic and performative adaptation I argue, during fall 2016, members of *Eclectic Truth* utilized the vehicle of slam as performance, practice, and theory in order to collectively re-imagine and interrogate power hierarchies. As an ethnographer I ask myself: why do people do *this*, together? To understand more about how communities can be collectively shaped, I befriended individuals and participated in activities within the community, some of which went beyond the space of the weekly slam. At the slam, I participated as audience, judge, and performer. Outside, I was invited to workshops, give feedback to their youth slam teams, and met with community members across the "Red Stick." If actions speak louder than words, then I claim that the stage speaks louder than the page.

I hesitate to refer to the final chapter of this dissertation as a conclusion, for there is nothing conclusive about summer 2016, about achieving unicity, or about *Eclectic Truth*. All of it continues to move through time. I have learned passion shapes spaces, communities nurture poets, and slam cultures can transform when sparked by critical issues of the day. This shows that everyday performance stakes can overshadow stakes associated with aesthetic performance. Qualitative accounts and performative approaches to researching adult counterpublics like *Eclectic Truth* show that, especially in times of tragedy, safe spaces are vital to unearthing honest community discourse about impacts of dominant publics and social

struggles. In this research I observe a trajectory from established counterpublic to transcendence through the poetry slam. The political action inherent in community performances of tragedy is emblematic of a desire for a shift in community paradigm. In *The Nature and Necessity of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn argues conflict between opposing paradigms leads to revolution. Summer 2016 in Baton Rouge reveals obvious divergent paradigms within the “Red Stick.” *Eclectic Truth* provides a supportive space for Baton Rouge to use the poetry slam as a vehicle to collectively process impacts of dominant ideologies and personal tragedies. In these types of spaces, personal revolution becomes attainable. Through the de-contextualization and re-contextualization of artifacts, discourse, and identity, we tried to thematically organize community motives, isolate those themes, and examine how a culture articulates its functionality within a community. By de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing interview transcripts and unedited poems of community members, then filtering those texts through a performative scripting orientation, the co-created script simultaneously functions as product and critique, a document of re-co-created reality.

The community slam is an optimal site to explore how culture travels from body to body. *Eclectic Truth* is community where you are allowed to grow privately in public. These poets choose to be at this weekly ritual, to share. In performing oppression, disaster, and lived experience through urgent poetic narrative, community identity and needs become symbiotic exchanges between poet and audience. Endsley writes, “I have yet to find substantial work that focuses on such a varied community of people who, instead of sharing a particular racial identity or gender, share instead a commitment in growing their artistic skill sets as social change agents” (2). Maybe the reason substantial works are difficult to locate is because of our

notion of literary merit? The power of this script questions the notion of “literary merit.” Academia traditionally considers the canon (i.e. white male writers) within this nebulous terminology. The news media often considers pigmentation to determine coverage. Thus, literary merit has historically been a false construct. This terminology is as loaded with ghosts that are as white as they are problematic, and does a disservice to the art that people of color produce, local communities espouse, and how the digital age has impacted these compositions. The question of “why this specific literature matters” is a more useful inquiry, and it matters because these poems evoke real life situations that are crafted by and impact real life people.

Epilogues, a Few Years after Summer 2016

March 27, 2018. In the midst of studying for my general exams—Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry revealed no charges would be filed against officers Blane Salamoni and Howie Lake in the 2016 shooting and death of Baton Rouge-native, Alton Sterling. That same day, authorities released official police officer body-camera footage from the July 2016 Triple S Food Mart parking lot shooting, corroborating stories from witnesses and previous citizen-recorded footage. The newly-released footage showed Sterling being restrained while Salamoni ordered Sterling to “put your hands on the fucking car or I’m going to shoot you in the head, do you understand me?” Seconds later, while restrained by an officer on the hood of a silver Toyota Camry, Sterling responds, “what happened, man, hold on, my hand is on the car,” right before an order is given, twice, by Salamoni, to “taze his ass.” When that does not work to incapacitate Sterling (who remains standing, but is clearly *not* being confrontational), Sterling is brought to the ground by force. Seconds later, multiple shots are fired into Sterling by

Salamoni. This shaky camera footage is immediately followed by Salamoni, in a hectic manner, searching through and emptying the pockets of the deceased Sterling, a man he actively referred to, twice, after his murder, as a “stupid motherfucker,” as Lake looked on. While Baton Rouge residents looked on. While, nineteen months later, three years later, decades later, centuries later, we continue to look on with (as Jazmyne astutely predicted) “no resolve.”

April 2, 2019. Donney—after an *Eclectic Truth* hiatus of a few months—returned to guest host and feature, performing five poems. Donney discussed that *Eclectic Truth* has become a different event than it had been in 2016 as it is now bi-weekly instead of weekly, and regularly held upstairs in the white-walled space *above* the *Firehouse Gallery*. Because of a lack of slam sign-ups, *Eclectic Truth* essentially transformed into *Eclectic Truth Open-Mic (and Sometimes-Slam)*. Donney also introduces new members of the *Poetry Alliance* like Hazy and Jahi. Performers that night included Donney, Xero, SK, Choice, and other new and returning members. I was the final open-mic performer that night. I presented a new poem I wanted to share with *my* Baton Rouge community. After three years in Louisiana, I received a job offer to return in Iowa, and knew I would be moving during the coming summer. I began informing star groupers of this decision at this *Eclectic Truth*.

August 6, 2019. As I was moving to Iowa, a new Louisiana hurricane. And, a new Baton Rouge murder. My last day in Baton Rouge, I attended *Eclectic Truth* for a special memorial event they promoted as offering a space for expression, grief, and unity. This time, Miss Sadie Roberts Joseph, community leader and founder of the nearby *Odell S. Williams African-American Museum*, was found murdered in the trunk of her car. Through each performance on

this night, a visible halo was observed above the performer, caused by the way the bright white lights hit the area around the microphone.

Miss Sadie's son eulogized her,
at Tuesday evening's *Eclectic Truth*:
"We sit and talk and laugh and learn together right here at the kitchen counter."

Donney cited Toni Morrison, stating: there is
"A certain amount of weeping when a black matriarch transitions."

Sarah, a teammate of Kaiya's,
presented a poem, asking: "What does death smell like?"
Invoking Kaiya by name, Sarah demands:
"Tell me what does death feel like."

Toi penned: "I knew her,
but I didn't.
I knew her even though I never knew her presence."

Jahi exclaimed:
loneliness accompanies grief.
Then, belted an Italian operetta.

Melissa unveiled: the "first stage piece I've written in a couple years."
It is about her father's recent passing.

After, Melissa walked near where I stood.
In front of me,
Donney and Melissa embrace.

Xero walks up to the mic, carrying one of his young kids,
and shares how he lost his job,
how he had been going through depression,
and how Miss Sadie contacted him to use his talents:

"I don't know
if we ever know
the ripple we create."

One poet I had never seen before asked for permission from the elders in the crowd and Sadie's family members to speak: "Remember your sisters by ritual and honoring. You can't destroy or

kill energy.” Desireé concluded the eclectic service, stating, “*Eclectic Truth* is here to hold space, and is honored to be part of Baton Rouge’s legacy.” And, in true slam fashion, stated, “Hazy, play the music because we gotta get out of the space in five minutes!”

October 4, 2019. After a commissioned performance at my institution, the University of Northern Iowa, in the theatre I serve as production coordinator, the Interpreters Theatre, I drove Donney back to his hotel. Donney just finished presenting portions of his upcoming work, *The American Audit*, as part of “Tales from the Bayou: An Evening with Donney Rose.” In my 2012 Ford Escape, Donney and I chatted about the St. George vote to secede from Baton Rouge, the never-ending Presidential controversies, and what *Eclectic Truth* star groupers have been up to. Since 2016, Donney has become a Kennedy Center Citizen Artist Fellow and created the annual *Black Out Loud Conference*. Desireé published a chapbook, *SINK*, and has been touring all over the world. Jazmyne is close to graduating, and has been coaching LSU’s CUPSI slam team. Melissa continues to be part of the *Poetry Alliance* and support her children. Toiryan continues to slam, but in Houston, New Orleans, and other areas. Kaiya’s mother, Petrouchka is almost done with her Ph.D! After Donney brought up how multiple sclerosis affects his artistic outlooks and energies, we chatted about time. About how time is all we have, and if someone gives you their time, they are giving you part of themselves.

Thank you for your time. This performance ethnography process has taught me it is often all we have. I hope you got to know a little bit about the *Eclectic Truth* and slam through my analysis of *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*. Hopefully someone builds on this performance research of a supportive community of adult slam poets. Feel free to tear it

down and re-construct its bones into something new, into something that makes sense. I
volunteer my sense-making as sacrifice.

CHAPTER TWELVE

POETRY OF AND INTERVIEWS WITH BATON ROUGE'S ARTISTIC JOURNALISTS

Poetry of and Interview with Donney Rose

Traditionally, dissertations utilize an appendix for full interview transcripts. This co-created artifact showcases our dialogic texts as a chapter instead of burying them in the back. Critical scholarship urges researchers to provide space for people to make-meaning of their own lives, to speak for themselves. My ethical stance requires me to present expressions of these individuals in full and as part of the primary text of this dissertation for three primary reasons. First, by offering full transcripts, interviewees can maintain textual agency of their experiences. Second, I hold myself accountable by enabling you, the reader, to cross-check my ethnographic observations and subsequent performance choices. Third, this structural and conceptual choice is my attempt to emphasize that I in no way speak *for* Donney, Toiryan, Jazmyne, Desireé, Melissa, *Eclectic Truth* or Baton Rouge. Instead, at the heart of this critical performance ethnography lies my intention to listen and speak *with* and *behind*. In this section (and each subsequent section of this chapter about the *Eclectic Truth* star groupers I interviewed) I offer context into our informant<->ethnographer relationship, an unedited version of the slam poem(s) they allowed me to remix and theatricalize, and our unedited interview transcripts. Triangulating these ethnographic artifacts provided the foundation for developing the concept, script, and ensemble performance, *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*.

I met Donney Rose at my first visit to *Eclectic Truth* in September 2016. During my first slam, Donney performed "Timeline Trauma," and he also performed that piece two other times

that fall (to watch a version of the poem from week eight of the fall 2016 slam season, type “Donney Rose Timeline Trauma” into an internet search engine). Since then, we have maintained a regular relationship through social media, attending *Eclectic Truth*, seeing each other in the grocery store, and through other shared performance objectives in the community and professionally. Donney, 36 at the time of our interview, is also a community activist and teacher, and has been performing poetry since 2003. Since fall 2016, Donney has added Kennedy Center Citizen Artist Fellow, Black Out Loud Conference founder, and several publications to his resume. Both Donney and Desireé actively mentored and coached Baton Rouge youth poets during my “Red Stick” residence. To me, their willingness to mentor and give back to their community says much more about their character than anything I could ever write about them.

After observing Donney at the slam and with other members of the community over the first five weeks of the season, I knew Donney’s experience and outlook would be incredibly generative. My interview with Donney took place at 5:00 PM on a Monday, November 14, 2016, around week twelve of the slam season. As an important note, all of my official interviews with *Eclectic Truth* star groupers took place following Donald Trump’s electoral-college fueled election to the Presidency on November 8. Donney and I chatted on the phone while he was grocery shopping, I was in my third-floor graduate school office. Donney vocalized consent for me to record our conversation. In our phone-based interview, we tackled six ethnographically-informed areas of discourse: *I. Introduction to Baton Rouge through Alton Sterling, Politics, and Policing; II. How the Summer Shook Out and its Connectivity; III. A Support*

Group for Counterpublic Voices; IV. What's Sacrificed at the Slam; V. Positionality is a Work-in-Progress; and VI. Grieving and the Spirit of Resiliency.

Poetry: "Timeline Trauma" by Donney Rose

A found poem made from Tweets I sent out the summer Baton Rouge left my heart in ruins:

- Jul 23 Dear summer of sorrow, I don't want your grief anymore. Give us back what you stole from us.
- Jul 5 Baton Rouge police murdered a Black man in cold blood who was selling CDs outside of a store he always sold CD's. #AltonSterling
- Jul 11 Yesterday #BatonRouge youth led the largest and most peaceful demonstration yet. Right after #BRPD reigned down terror in my neighborhood
- Jul 10 The police started all of this
- Jul 11 Black women in #BatonRouge are being terrorized for seeking justice in the name of a man guilty of sexual assault #justice4AltonSterling
- Jul 10 The police started all of this
- Jul 7 The male ego is prevalent everywhere. I'm not interested in a pissing contest, I'm interested in justice
- Jul 17 I'm black in baton rouge and I just want to survive the summer
- Jul 24 This poet meant the world to so many. I wake up today not wanting there to be no absence of her. ❤️Kaiya
- Aug 7 The bodies of poor and working class Black people are subject to destruction in a variety of ways.
- Aug 11 Asserting my humanity is not minimizing yours.
- Aug 13 Baton Rouge spent July bleeding and is spending the top of August drowning. What is this summer 2016 curse?
- Aug 14 Poverty & classism makes a ppl disposable. Sometimes Mother Nature assists with negligence that's already grandfathered in
- Jul 19 They don't love us.
- Aug 15 Some truths are inconvenient. No one ever lies about a nightmare.
- Aug 17 Maybe they think we've grown accustomed to catastrophe at this point. We haven't.
- Aug 7 Today I did not stay woke.
- Aug 18 A vacation would be so clutch right now
- Aug 18 Donald Trump is headed to Baton Rouge tomorrow to add to the overcast.
- Sep 3 Protesting police violence is not protesting the military. Not knowing the difference is proof of how militarized the police have become.

Sep 8 "How does (injustice) live in 2016?" Because people die & systems don't.
 Sep 9 It is quite the load to carry grief & anger when all you really want is love.
 And dope ass breakfasts
 Aug 23 Trying to encase joy & break the casing in the event of emergency. If you
 see glass shattered around me, don't be surprised.
 Jul 9 Somewhere between wanting a fast forward and rewind button for all of
 this
 Jul 6 We cannot fear speaking out. What more can they take but our lives.
 They've already proven themselves capable of doing that
 Jul 25 Trying to write more. This summer has been a lot. Still processing.

Interview with Donney Rose, November 14, 2016

I. Introduction to Baton Rouge through Alton Sterling, Politics, and Policing

JOSH: **Hey Donney, how are you doing?**

DONNEY: / [not recording yet.]

Thanks a lot for talking to me.

/

[Recording.] I'm in my office right now. So, I told you a bit about this before: I'm a performance studies student, a PhD student here at LSU, and I wasn't thinking about this until a couple weeks ago. So my first two weeks living in Baton Rouge over the summer, my first week was the week of Alton Sterling's murder, then I went back to work in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and my second week was the week of the floods.

Yeah, I remember us talking.

That was my first greeting into Baton Rouge. Things were all over the place. They still are. I've done a lot of performance and hosted slams before, and I was looking for that kind of a community. I found *Eclectic Truth* and what I noticed, at least half of the slam poems are relating to the immediate tragedies, the immediate disasters, the immediate struggles that are happening within the community during the recent summer. And I thought that was just very affecting because of how fresh that scab, that wound is.

Yeah, yeah.

I've talked to a couple other folks from the slam--I interviewed Toiryan yesterday, and I've talked to Melissa, Desireé, Sue as well, and Eric. I still don't know where it's gonna go, and that's why I would like to do interviews with y'all.

Okay. Sure.

The first question I have revolves around how have all the events that happened in the summer influenced the poetry and the community? Second, how the vehicle of slam might be influencing those? And third, how it personally affects you as far as writing, growth. So the first thing, I know you are a Baton Rouge native. I also saw your Twitter poem, I think it's beautifully haunting. How has the summer affected you three months removed from all the damage that happened? What kind of place are you in now compared to where you were?

I would say that I'm in a place of restoration or improvement or just feeling somewhat better.

Mm hmm.

But that's kind of a half-truth. Because now, with the election of Donald Trump as president, and everything that comes with that, one of the key things that comes with that is his new appointment of an Attorney General. As far as right now, the Attorney General of the United States, the Department of Justice is handling the Alton Sterling case along with other cases regarding police brutality around the country. There has not been any resolution from the Attorney General's office. And so what that means is, within the next two months, someone else will be appointed Attorney General. Donald Trump has already made it very apparent that in cases of state-sanctioned violence, it is more of his stance to leave issues like that at the hands of the state.

Mm hmm.

Say for example, whoever he appoints to Attorney General, be it Rudy Giuliani, be it Chris Christie or whoever, these are gonna be people who are already very pro-police and they are not going to have, they are not going to take any investment in getting into state affairs in reference to police killings and things of the sort. Saying all that to say, we have right at two months for Loretta Lynch to come back with the Department of Justice to come back with a resolution to the ruling in regards to the Sterling case. There's not a lot of faith in a positive ruling coming back. Mainly because, what would have to happen with the Department of Justice, they would have to prove that Alton Sterling's civil rights were violated.

Yeah...

Which is a very hard thing to prove. They would have to prove it is a hate crime, which is also another hard thing to prove. So, essentially, after the state of Louisiana handed it over to the Department of Justice, they absolved themselves of the responsibility of gaining a conviction. On one hand you have an Attorney General that's all the way out the door, that had not

reached any resolution up to this point, on the other hand, once that transition of power switches, it becomes a non-issue. I feel like whatever hope that myself and others in this community had at the very least for some sort of resolve may be going out the window. Honestly, a lot of us had gotten beyond whatever hope of getting some sort of, you know, conviction, or anything passed down. Now it's like just tell us something. If you're going to say that the officers did not violate his civil rights then just go ahead and say that. Say anything!

Stop beating around the bush.

Right, but right now we're dealing with a clock that's winding down. On the other note, in addition to that, you're talking about an administration that's coming in, that's very much about—their answer to the crime epidemic is doubling down on police presence in inner cities. So they're not even addressing the issues of police violence against citizens. Their thing is, we need to double-down on policing.

Their solution is more militarization.

Right, more militarization, more police state, re-implementing policies such as stop-and-frisk. And all of that, the dreadful trajectory of that, is that all that looks like it leads to more incarceration and/or more state-sanctioned violence. Because now you have police who are moving into an era of being completely absolved of any responsibility when it comes to using excessive force.

II. How the Summer Shook Out and its Connectivity

DONNEY: I might be saying a lot to say that I probably would have had more optimism if the election had gone differently in reference to our summer.

JOSH: **Why do you say that?**

Because the way the summer shook out for me was that you had Alton Sterling's situation happen, and then you had the black community and white allies that were like "this is wrong, something needs to happen, blah blah blah." Then when you had police being killed a week and a half later you had the city saying we need to come together, we need to heal, we need to unify. Some of the same people that had nothing to say about Alton Sterling's murder all of a sudden had these cries of unity. And then you had the flood and so you had almost a literal-slash-metaphorical washing away of all of the above.

Yeah, like a tidal wave.

So then it was like, you know, the city needs to restore collectively. Let's not talk about what happened in July, let's deal with the damage of the flood. You had people in communities that

were at one point being terrorized by the police and they had to rely on those same police to come on in and rescue them out of their homes. So it just became a very, a very just weird dynamic. And we're not outside of that. And that's the thing, everything that took place over the summer, there's gonna be a ripple effect of that for a while. Whether you're talking about there not being any closure in the Sterling case, whether you're talking about there are people still displaced from the flood, there are a lot of things that are still rippling down from the summer. I am and we are outside of it from a standpoint of yes, this was three months ago, but we're not necessarily outside of it from the place of there's no more residual effects.

That makes a lot of sense. Are you saying, it's almost like, if we bring it back to *Eclectic Truth*, the first six to eight weeks was about the more recent reaction, and now it keeps building because Trump's election?

Right, because there's connectivity, right?

Mm hmm.

On a very basic level, you have a president that has been elected, that will within his transition change out positions that are there. One of the key things being the changing of the Attorney General. Loretta Lynch came to Baton Rouge after the Alton Sterling killing and met with some community leaders in Baton Rouge to talk about that. So on a very basic level you're not gonna get Rudy Giuliani or Chris Christie to come to any city in the nation and meet with community leaders about a state-sanctioned killing. They're just not gonna do that. On the bare minimum if they're not going to talk to people in the community about things that happened, then you certainly cannot look for charges of civil right violations. It's just not gonna be a thing. So there is a connectivity between what took place over the summer and what is the national political climate right now, and what does that mean for Baton Rouge in response to something that happened here that's worldwide news. And not really getting any resolve let alone any justice.

III. A Support Group for Counterpublic Voices

JOSH: Since the election on Tuesday, things have been hectic. When we are talking about the community that is built here—I was talking to Toiryan about this yesterday at Starbucks on College a bit—one of the things I noticed, is that *Eclectic Truth* functions like a support group. The way it's set up, the way a lot of slams tend to be set up, arranged, is kind of like an AA meeting or an NA meeting. Like, let's talk about some dramatic-slash-traumatic experiences, and now let's harmonize about it a little, bond over our shared experience—

DONNEY: Right, right, right, right.

So it functions as a support group, which is a great thing for a community. But, because of an insular nature of like-minded folks, do you think, at times, some of these messages get lost

since the people that might also need to hear won't come into these types of spaces? In other words, a lot of times these venues are filled with people that have been oppressed in some way, and never really the oppressors?

Right, right, right, right.

How do you think that functions as far as *Eclectic Truth* goes? What would you like to see happening, or who to see your stuff?

I think that you're absolutely right and I think that it is up to poets and artists to figure out ways to get beyond preaching to the choir. I think a lot of that comes from the fact that when you say things in front of certain audiences there is an immediate validation. So there are folks that are like yes this is true, I agree with this. And, you know, artists are sensitive beings and so one thing that a lot of artists are not looking for is push-back. Or, you know, folks being like not only do I not agree with that, I think you should not say that.

Mm hmm.

I think you should be quiet. But when art is working at its best its continuing or evolve a conversation. And conversations can only be so fruitful when you're only talking to people who are in agreement with you. One thing that I would like to personally strive toward, I hope that members of our community, *Eclectic Truth*, we can strive toward putting our poems in spaces that aren't as, you know, necessarily accepting.

Yeah.

I'm not saying go to a Klan rally with poems or whatever, but figuring out how do we have these hard conversations with people who don't necessarily agree with us.

People that tend to be more conservative or would be more pro-Trump don't really do poetry in the same type of way.

Yeah, I think that one thing we have to consider, and this is something that I have had to think about myself as of late, everyone that voted for Trump is not a raging White Nationalist. You know what I mean?

Yeah.

That's the narrative that I think the media has kind of sensationalized. And it's true that those people were apart of the people that supported him, but they are not the whole of him.

They are saying racism isn't a deal breaker, aren't they?

Yeah. I mean, it is. But I think what you have to consider is, if you're talking about a working class white person that does not fashion themselves as a white nationalist or a white supremacist that's like "I voted for Trump because I feel like he's gonna bring my jobs back," these are the people I would love to have come to a poetry slam or reading or meet them where they are. Because these are the people we might likely have some sort of discourse with.

That idea makes me think about when we were talking about *Eclectic Truth* as a community, and how it represents the Baton Rouge community—

Uh huh.

Juxtaposed with a 60% red-state as far as voting goes—when you are talking about *ET* being reflective of the community, is it actually reflective of Baton Rouge—

Nope.

Or is it reflective of a sect of Baton Rouge?

Yeah, but hold on a second, hold on a sec... [18:04-18:47] Hey Josh, sorry I was checking out at the store. When you're asking about it being reflective of Baton Rouge, I don't know, that's an interesting question. Because on one hand when you talk about the political vote of East Baton Rouge Parish, the majority vote went to Hillary Clinton for President and it was the same way with Barack Obama in 2012 and in 2008. East Baton Rouge Parish votes majority democratic. Of course, the state is a red state, but within the confines of EBR parish you have two major universities and a community college, with LSU, Southern, BRCC, so you have that voting populace, and then you have a lot of people who may have attended those universities that stay in town. So to a certain extent, us having those schools provides us with a fairly diverse demographic of people who become residents here.

That's a great point.

That diversity is not necessarily from a racial standpoint, as much as it is from a political ideology standpoint. I know a fair amount of people that voted third party that lived in Baton Rouge, a good amount of people which nobody would probably suspect. To some regard, you could say that some of the views that are expressed at *Eclectic Truth* could be in line with some of the ideological views in Baton Rouge. But, it really is dependent on what Baton Rouge you are talking about.

Almost separating Baton Rouge and Louisiana.

Yeah, it's the separation between the city and the state, but it's also a separation between the city. So there's a difference between the conversations you may have with folks who are the residents of Beauregard Town, or some Spanish Town residents, or some Mid-City residents, versus conversations you may have with folks outside the Chimes on Highland, you know what I

mean?

Yep, I can understand that.

The die-hard Death Valley LSU demographic. We're diverse in that regard to where there's a lot of different view points in the city even though the city on a national level, our city tends to vote majority democratic. On a local level it's a toss-up. And in some regards our city will vote conservative. It's a weird thing. Then you also have to talk about the breakdown of the numbers. So within the city limits of Baton Rouge is majority African-American. But when you talk about the parish of East Baton Rouge you're talking about 47% black and about 51% white, right?

Yeah.

So there is a lot of different factors to consider, like the viewpoint of the Baton Rouge-ian. Because it's a little more diverse than what it looks like on the surface.

Definitely, that makes a lot of sense. As if the surface does not always reflect what is beneath.

Yeah, exactly.

IV. What's Sacrificed at the Slam

JOSH: **Kind of like spoken word. So, the slam is different than a poetry showcase or an open-mic. What I've noticed in the first six to eight weeks pretty much half the poems in the slam were somewhat related to floods, to Alton Sterling, the police murders over the summer, they were all tied in to around half the poems I witnessed.**

DONNEY: Yeah.

What do you think slam does for those topics as opposed to performing in the open-mic portion or a poetry showcase?

I think that the urgency of slam and the fact that you know, you have literally something to gain by way of points or a win

Something's at stake.

It dictates what poets put up on a microphone. I would say that that the national trend of poetry slam has been this way for, forever, but even moreso in recent years. To almost serve as

its own wing of media, you know what I mean?

Yeah.

So you have slam poets that are functioning as artistic journalists. When you're up on a stage and you're talking about current issues and relevant issues, things that people can see in the news, but you're giving it your creative or poetic interpretation, there's a good likelihood that those poems will score you well. You have no illusion when poets get into a poetry slam, everyone, whether they say it or not, are looking to be successful.

They're playing the game.

Because it's a game. No one comes to play the game to lose. Because the slam is such a democratic space, it allows people to say things and for audiences to listen to things that they may tend to overlook even in the open-mic setting.

As opposed to page poetry, the urgency, three minutes, a lot of times the pacing is much faster, emotion is added—but would you acknowledge that sometimes the content is lost because of the urgency? Because of the pacing, intricacies of language and meaning could be lost? All that to say, do you ever feel your message is sometimes lost because of slam?

Well, not all the way. What happens with the slam, the poet is trying to make a three-minute sales pitch. Within that point of time they're trying to relay their specific viewpoint on a certain topic. And they may have more nuanced thoughts on that topic, but they're trying to make it as accessible as they can with the time that they have. And also they're trying to make a piece of urgent art that will stick with the judges after they leave the mic. Sometimes you'll see a poem win a slam because it has a really dynamic ending, because that's the last thing the judges are left with. Or because it has, you know, clap-traps throughout, or punchlines throughout, because even if I can't go into all of the nuances of what I'm getting at I need to leave you with enough so when I get off the stage your immediate reaction is to give me a higher score.

Mm hmm.

There's been many arguments along the lines of, does slam compromise the writing? Who knows? I've seen some amazingly written slam poems that can stand up against anything that I might just read on page, right? I've also seen my fair amount of gimmicky slam poems that were written or performed because the poet felt that would get them what they needed to get at the time. For me, one of the more interesting things that have come about the last couple of years, particularly among black slam poets, is that I have seen more black poets write about black issues than I had ever seen. And some of these people I've known for years! And they were writing about certain issues, but the Black Lives Matter movement has been highly influential in the creation of poems amongst a lot of black poets over the last three years. So there's two schools of thought when it comes to slam with regard to that.

What are they?

One school of thought is, well, this is part of a national conversation and so you're going to see black poets writing these poems because it's part of a national conversation.

Okay.

The other school of thought is well, because it's part of a nation conversation it makes it popular rhetoric. The poet maybe slamming with that in order to gain benefit because its popular rhetoric, not necessarily because that's what they totally are invested in.

Talking about investment, one thing I've noticed from my time being at *ET*—the background of the firetrucks and being in that *Firehouse Gallery* space is striking to me. It's almost like a de-constructed model of law enforcement—or what you would associate with law enforcement, these indoor red-and-gold firetrucks—is surrounding all these political, socially-charged, urgent topics. And, at the same time, it's never really mentioned by poets.

Yeah.

Maybe the “Keep Off” signs have been mentioned by whomever was hosting, like Desireé, I've heard. It pops out as an interesting juxtaposition of floods and fires.

Yeah, it's funny that you would say that. None of us had never even thought among those lines. Initially when we started the reading at the *Arts Council* we were upstairs, and there's a gallery space upstairs that at different points in time there's different showings and when it's not showing it's just a blank bare wall.

Yeah, my first *Eclectic Truth* was up there. After that it has all been downstairs.

About a year ago, there's a lot of gallery bookings, and we would get there, and our contact would say “can we move downstairs for the evening?” After doing that a couple times we were like we really like the aesthetic of downstairs. We like the size of it, we like the fact that there's these antique firetrucks, it makes for this cool type of background. And since we've made the move to downstairs we've taken a lot of very high-quality photos and videos in that space. And it looks good to see photos and video of that space. What you just said, we never even took into consideration. It was more like this is the venue where we do our event, we were formally upstairs, being upstairs became a conflict of interest, so we moved downstairs.

Like most things circumstance happens. I brought up that the host seems to be the only one who has mentioned the environment this fall, the host also has been the one to introduce the sacrificial poet at the beginning of the show. The notion of a sacrificial poet, could you expand a little more on that for me? Where it comes from, what it means to you?

The sacrificial poet is a staple in all poetry slams. The concept is pretty much to allow the judges an opportunity to practice scoring before they actually score, and to give the poets somewhat of a barometer of what the judges may be looking for. So, for example, if a sacrificial poet goes up and they do a poem that is highly performative and the judges—first and foremost, I'll start by saying this, there'll hardly be a case where a sacrificial poet gets a high score. We do random order. Pretty much all slams around the country do random order. People are conditioned to give higher scores as the night progresses, which is what we call score-creep.

Yep, score-creep.

So the only thing that a sacrificial poet can do is possibly give the other poets in the competition somewhat of an idea of what may be working that night. If a sacrificial poet goes up and does a poem that's highly performative, maybe not as crafty, does moderately well, then the poets behind 'em may say alright I need to pull out one of my more performative pieces. If a sacrificial poet does a poem that's heavier on craft, not necessarily on performance and does moderately well, then the poet may say alright I need to look at one of my craftier more well-written pieces to pull out. If the sacrificial poet strikes a balance between good craft and good performance well then the poet knows, alright, this is probably a sophisticated pool of judges that knows, that they should be looking for good craft and good performance. The purpose of the sacrificial poet is A. to give the judges an opportunity to see what they're looking for that night. And then, the other thing is to give the poets the opportunity to say, alright, this is what judges seem to be gravitating to for this slam. That's the thing, it changes from slam to slam. The judging is always random. It's always five random people. So I can go on Tuesday, and the judges may love someone getting up screaming and being emotive. I can go the following Tuesday and the judges may love the sacrificial poet as subtle and just very vulnerable. It ebbs and flows from slam to slam.

Other than the calibrating and the gauge for the audience and the performers, is there a deeper aspect to the idea of the sacrificial poet? Where does that come from? Is there something else other than the calibration and the gauging?

No. Not really.

Because the idea of sacrificial just sounds so like, official.

It is, well, the thing to understand about slam as an art form is that it is all things hyperbolic. The performances are usually exaggerated. The written text is usually exaggerated. It is performance art. Because it is a thing that is all things hyperbolic, we have to say we're sacrificing a poet.

Mm hmm.

Because it just sounds more grandiose to say that. Is there any deeper layer? No, nah, not really.

There doesn't always need to be.

Nothing more than a calibration, but it sounds dramatic to say "we are sacrificing this poet."
But, I guess, there are deeper layers if you dig.

V. Positionality is a Work-in-Progress

JOSH: One thing that is happening more and more in academia, and my area of performance studies, specifically, and in slam poetry, hyper-specifically, is representing one's positionality unapologetically. How would you define your own positionality. If I was to write about myself, I'd be like, I'm mixed-race, passing, half-Persian, half-white, a member of these performance communities, and so on. How would you define yourself?

DONNEY: From a poetry standpoint, the first thing I would say, from a poetry-spoken-word-slam standpoint, I am a veteran of this scene. I would say I am an evolving writer and a consistent performer. I am not the most dynamic person that you will see, but I am probably going to be the most consistent person you'll see. From a standpoint of me as a writer, and I put this somewhere on a bio or whatever, I am a product of southern upbringing, a product of black masculinity, southern upbringing, who learned that the world was bigger than the world that I grew up in. There are ideas that I try to express in my poems that are pretty much a, they're a graduation of things that I've come to realize in my self, in my humanity.

How so?

Growing up as a black male in South Louisiana in Baton Rouge, there were a lot of things that I was not attune to. There are a lot of things that poetry and poetry slam communities made me attune to, made me aware of. About four years ago I wrote a poem called "Confessions of a Reformed Homophobe," which was all about this idea of me growing up homophobic, not even necessarily realizing that to be the case, and remembering what the turning point was for me. Even seeing marginalized groups outside of myself, because when you grow up in the Deep South, and you grow up black in the Deep South, your marginalization is such a big thing to where you cannot fathom anyone else having it more difficult than you. Through poetry slam I realized that there was such thing as a poor or working-class white American. And I realized that by way of poets and peers of mine, friends of mine, white poet friends and peers that grew up with much less than I did. But before I got into the world of poetry slam, my lens on anything outside of my identity was very narrow. So, for me, there was no such thing as marginalized people that were not southern and black. You know what I mean?

I follow.

Maybe I shouldn't say southern, maybe I should say there was no such thing as marginalized people that weren't black. But even within that, initially, my context of what it was to be black was cisgender, heterosexual, religious. So, the first people to show me even a different perspective were black queer friends of mine who I met through poetry. People who came out to me after we had been friends for years, so I was already at the point where I loved them as people. And by the time they came out to me I was like, oh okay this is a defining moment, because I was not going to love these people differently. I guess the point that I'm getting at is that, for me, slam has made me, and poetry and spoken word has continuously evolved my personhood. Through it evolving my personhood, that has evolved my writing.

As if poets are forced to confront your own ideas and beliefs and preconceptions about how the world works, and other people's, as well.

Yeah. If you're going to be genuine about what it is that you're saying and the work that you're putting out there, and also I've been performing poetry for a little over 15 years. I'm 36, I'm one of the elder statesman of our community. I started performing poetry when I was a freshman in high school. I started slamming nationally in 2003. With that, I've witnessed the evolution of the conversation in slam, just in what poets write around the country. So I remember when there's a time when a poet could get away with making statements in their poem that what we would consider homophobic or transphobic or xenophobic now, like I remember that time. As we continue to evolve as human beings, and as our conversations continue to evolve then there comes a point where certain things just don't work anymore. Because slam prides itself as being an evolved art form, as being a democratic art form.

It's always breathing.

Right. You can't stay stagnant in your views in your writing. I mean, you can...

But it's not good for you.

It's not good for you artistically. Getting back to the game aspect, if you are performing a poem in a slam, and there is poets that represent the wide range of identities, some reductive shit, that's going to be a problem for you from the game standpoint.

Definitely.

You know? You are going to look like the unevolved poet and that's going to affect the way you're scored.

It's part of the game.

I'm not a proponent of people writing things outside of their beliefs for the purpose of scoring, but, at the same time,

It is a more progressive-leaning audience.

And at the same time it's a more evolved audience that kinda celebrates an elevated way of thinking. Which, going back to what you were saying earlier, it may be almost, almost impossible to have even a moderate audience to begin attending because, like, if you consider the die-hard core Trump supporters as alt-right, you could very well consider a poetry slam or spoken word community as the alt-left. You have folks that are like here's your idea of being liberal, but I'm way, I'm beyond that. I'm somewhere else on my outlook of equality.

There is no binary in equity for me!

So you can't really come at it from an unevolved place. For me, a lot of my identity is rooted in this consistent work-in-progress.

VI. Grieving and the Spirit of Resiliency

JOSH: The first six to eight weeks also seemed to be evolving, out of the summer, specifically. I noticed *Eclectic Truth* was very heavy performing about personal things going on in this community. That are affecting people not just at an arms-distance away, but like right up-close to them. Everyday, I am seeing the floods everywhere I drive, and in my conversations with folks, there's seems to be this haunted aura hovering over people. Did you notice the topic shift in the first half of the slam season? Have there been shifts before? Any that stood out to you?

DONNEY: Yeah. I would say we've had a lot of shifts. One thing that I have to keep coming back to, because I've talked to a few people about this topic of the summer, and poetry in the summer, and activism in the summer, and things of that nature: For our poetry community, we had a devastating loss internally in the midst of all that happening. We had one of our students, Kaiya Smith, who tragically passed a week after we brought our youth poets from the Brave New Voices competition [in Washington D.C.]. And so the timeline was like, Alton Sterling is killed, and then we bring our young poets to Brave New Voices, and then we come back from Brave New Voices, and the day that we come back, the police officers are killed, and then five days after that Kaiya passes away tragically. Right?

Wow, that's horrible.

Yeah. Kaiya at the point of her passing, she's 18 years old, she's a recent graduate of McKinley High School, we knew without a shadow of doubt that Kaiya was going to be a continued member of our poetry community because she was about to start school at Southern University. She was going to be in Baton Rouge. She had a very very high interest in spoken word. The gravity of that also changed a lot of the conversations and what people were writing about.

Mm hmm.

Kaiya was someone who never met a stranger, who people instantly gravitated to, so even people who didn't know her that well wrote poems in which they mentioned her name. Her immediate peers who are 18-19, recent graduates of high school, and are starting to attend *Eclectic Truth*, they're talking about her, as are her mentors and some of the other adults in her life that came in contact with her, they're talking about her in this context of this traumatic summer.

Yeah, I've noticed that at *ET*, too.

Now, as I've said to a lot of people, grief went from being local to hyper-local. So now we're talking about a person that's directly in our community that was very vocal, very much an advocate for herself and for others, very much attune with what was going on socio-politically. Who, a week before she died, dedicated her poem at Brave New Voices to Alton Sterling. Before she starts her poem she dedicates her poem to Alton Sterling because her poem is all about this alternate reality for black people. Then after the competition she dies. So it puts all of our collective grief from the summer into this different type of context. To answer your question more, there's been a few shifts in what people have been writing about locally. I will say that the overarching theme has been that of grief and trauma and tragedy.

It's like this combo of natural, personal, and community struggle all intersecting with one another.

Yes. I'm not gonna say that every poem has been about those things, because that's not true,

Yes, of course.

But it has been in the backdrop.

Definitely. Like subtext.

There are certain things that will just be of no resolve and then there are certain things that will help our community heal, and thus, may change some of the narrative of what you hear in the poems. When we talk about Kaiya, particularly, her mother did not do an autopsy so we don't even know the cause of death, so there's no resolve there. When you talk about the Alton Sterling case and the Attorney General and the Department of Justice and nothing happens, then there's no resolve there. When you talk about the flood, you can see tangible results of people recovering from the flood so there is a level of resolve there. When you do talk about a lack of resolution, you talk about a continuation of the tone of the writing being a particular way. You have people who are writing through these seven or so stages of grief. Some of us have reached a point of accepting certain things, some of us are still in the point of anger or

denial. Its been an interesting time, to say the least, for the poets in our community because we've been grappling with a lot of different things.

Just coming into this community was, it was different than other communities I have been part of, because the wounds are very very fresh.

And also, a lot of poets on our scene have openly grieved since the election on Tuesday. They are publicly upset because they know what Donald Trump embodies. Hold on... [19:06-19:19]
Hello?

Here.

People are dealing with that. It's not grieving in the same way of being flooded out or a state-sanctioned killing or even a loss of a community member, but it's a grief nonetheless. If you feel that the most powerful person in the free world is someone who's against who you are, against how you identify, then that's a different layer of grief, and so you're gonna see those things also play out in the writing. And that's gonna be that way for a while. But the thing about poetry and poets in Baton Rouge and south Louisiana, whether you talk about natives or transplants, we are by and large a resilient community. We are people who shake back from hurricanes and floods and abysmal education and poverty. There's a lot of things that are adverse to south Louisianians that we are resilient from. And that spirit of resiliency resonates with people who move here, with people who've lived here. We are also a joyous people. We're also a community of festivals, and food, and letting the good times roll, and drinking. We're not gonna stay in the aesthetic of sorrow forever, but a lot of us have experienced some pretty traumatic stuff over the last couple months. Great art is reflective of the times and where people are, so you're going to see people continue to create until their personal grievances move them in another direction.

The way you said that, reminds me of this one line you said at *ET* right before you went to Flagstaff in October for iWPS [Individual World Poetry Slam]. You said you were going but you were not doing this for you, you were doing this for the entire community, for Baton Rouge.

Yeah. I think that a lot of us are writing beyond ourselves at this point. We are very much representative of the underdog. National underdog. At the bottom of many things, statistically, you know? For many people, living here seems like why would anyone do this, why would you reside here? We definitely are the voice of the underdog, the disenfranchised, the left behind, and we just keep creating. There's a beauty that comes from creating from a place of despair, because it pushes you toward evolving to a place of joy. Or of non-despair. That's who we are. That's what we do.

Poetry of and Interview with Toiryan Milligan

Toiryan Milligan—aka “The Poetry Devil,” normally adorned in Pokémon-related hat, backpack, shirt, and other accessories (specifically showcasing the energy of Pikachu or Eevee)—was the first person who greeted me at my initial visit to *Eclectic Truth* in September 2016. I chatted with him both outside and before the slam. Showcasing his expertise and commitment to the space, he guided me on how community members can qualify to represent Baton Rouge at the national poetry slam. His “Storm Poem, Draft III” was the first performance I witnessed at *Eclectic Truth*. Since then, we have kept sporadic contact through Facebook posts, and have found ourselves sharing mutual friends through our related performance interests. Toiryan, 24 at the time of our interview, is also a father and continues to slam, primarily in Houston and New Orleans. He was on Baton Rouge’s *Brave New Voices* youth slam team in 2011, mentored by Baton Rouge’s more seasoned slam veterans, like Donney and Xero. He began his adult slam journey with *Eclectic Truth* in 2013. His dynamism and willingness to confront obstacles through wit and rhythm really stood out to me. After explaining my ethnographic and performance intentions, Toiryan volunteered to e-mail me copies of the notebook pages of two summer-related poems he performed at *Eclectic Truth*, “Storm Poem, Draft III” and “Squirrels.”

After observing Toiryan at the slam and with others over the first five weeks of the season, I knew Toiryan’s commitment to slam and involvement in *the Poetry Alliance* would be extremely generative in providing me information about the culture of *Eclectic Truth*. My interview with Toiryan took place at 11:30 AM on a Saturday afternoon, November 13, 2016, around week twelve of the slam season. As an important note, all of my official interviews with

Eclectic Truth star groupers took place following Donald Trump's electoral-college fueled election to the Presidency on November 8. Toiryan and I hung out at Starbucks on College Ave., directly across the street from a Wal-Mart and an IHOP. Toiryan vocalized consent for me to record our conversation. In our iced-coffee-filled interview, we tackled eight ethnographically-informed areas of caffeinated conversation: *I. Getting a Hang of the Game; II. This Stuff is Really Happening in My City; III. Building on the Floods and Gaining Perspective through Challenges; IV. Speed and Seasoning in Slam; V. A Support Group Coming Together through Competition; VI. Conquering Fears and Self-Definition; VII. Inspiration through Music and Poets; and VII. Changing the Community as a Whole.*

Poetry: "Storm Poem, Draft III" by Toiryan Milligan

I'm afraid of lightning.
In 4th grade lightning struck
A powerline next to me.
I guess that's how it feels to see life
Flash before your eyes.

I guess I'm afraid of things
That can kill you just by looking at you.

My father is lightning.
In 4th grade lightning struck
My mother
I mean powerline
I mean both
I mean, I wish I was a bottle of Hennessey
Because you can never catch lightning
In a bottle but you can
Always catch lightning with that bottle!

Maybe lightning would finally strike
I mean stay in the same place for once...
I guess I survive terribly in storms

My grandpa's death was a storm,
One we are still surviving!
My grandma is a tropical depression,
Still depressing,
Still surviving
But no one ever taught her surviving
Also means evacuate!

The human body is 60% water,
That means the other 40% gives us enough
Space to drown!

In 2016 we buried my grandpa
I mean we buried a body of water,
In 2016 my grandpa flooded
Baton Rouge! In 2016 my father, I mean
Lightning flashed through the funeral!
In 2016 if I got sick
My grandpa would have stormed
In that hospital,
In 2016 my grandpa was the storm
Inside that hospital!

An earthquake of bone and jawline
I loved that earthquake
Loved his faults
My grandpa's heart was at fault, at his age
He treated a pack of cigarettes like
A weather report
He was always high in the upper 70's!

Have you ever stared at a casket
The same way a hurricane stares
At a woodshed? Destroyed...

Have you ever put a tsunami to bed?
Watch your grandma tidal wave
Herself to sleep?
To the wake?
See a levee of eye give birth
To whirlpool tears because her water broke?
You ever been told don't cry
Over spilled grandpa?

I ask how can I swim to my grandma
I realize I'm seeking advice from people
Still drowning...

You say my grandma is human
I say my grandma is humid,
Who can storm a church
And turn the services into an air mass...

Hey dad
I mean lightning,
I'm so ec-ec-ec
Zzzzzstatic to see you,
You only appear during storms
I'm still surviving,
I mean evacuating,
I mean, both.

Poetry: "Squirrels" by Toiryan Milligan

"My boss pissed me off.
He told me, don't write anymore poems
About Racism.
He told me write happy poems like,
Pretty Little Squirrels...
Yeah boss!!!!
Because when I see black church mama
Screaming gospel,
Hear pastor over congregation to bury
Casket bearing black boy,
That's what I'm supposed to write about...
A fucking squirrel.

Here's your squirrel poem
News headline, white cop kills unarmed
Squirrel.
Mike, Brown squirrel leaves his fur
In Ferguson.
Sandy Bland Cheeks killed in Texas!
Alton Squirreling Shot 6 Times!
Philando Squirrel Castile goes Casket...

Pretty brown squirrel life all in a nutshell
Resting in that acorn casket from a cops
Shell casing to the chest.
Pretty Squirrel is roadkill everyday,
Pretty squirrel brains paint concrete
Like Mona Squirrel Lisa's but
Pretty Squirrel death isn't art!!!

Pretty squirrel project home tree house
Becomes the next project for a liquor
Store, arts and crafts
Meaning project home artfully drawn
Into blueprints to craft beer
In white hands!
Pretty Squirrel going nuts behind
Gentrification,
Pretty squirrel too ghetto
Pretty squirrel taking over for the
99 and the 2000!!!!

Pretty Squirrel like me,
Grew up around little brother
Slangin that acorn to keep fruits
On family tree.
Mama squirrel saw her baby squirrel
Heading to the big tree in the sky,
Boss. The fruit never fall far from the tree..
Because the tree falls with the fruit.

My boss said, be Peace squirrel
Dig deep in the gospel squirrel
He don't care a pretty squirrel like me
Grew up in a pretty rough
NeighborWOOD!

Lynched in the neck of the woods,
To become the woods of necks,
Necropolis, croplless necks
Aint it funny how backwards all that
Sounds?
My boss said no,
Write them squirrel poems,
Those furry George W Bushy Tail poems,

Those Donald Tree Stump poems,
All animal lives matter poems!

No more Brown Squirrel lives matter!
No more Brown squirrel living in
His Rosa Parks,
No more squirrel running away from
Racist into asthma attacks because
Running away for your life can
Take your breath away,
You hear me boss??
Pretty Orange Squirrel is the new
BLACK!!!!

Here boss. I wrote your squirrel poem,
You like it, will you hang it in your office,
Will you? HANG it?

Interview with Toiryan Milligan, November 13, 2016

I. Getting a Hang of the Game

TOIRYAN: I was born in Scotlandville's area.

JOSH: **How far away's that?**

That's pretty much going towards like Baker, Zachary, those little areas, I lived up there. And I've been back and forth between there and this area right here, so.

You travel often?

Yeah, I do, whenever it's poetry related. Like being in the scene that I'm in right now they have a lot of competitions out-of-state and we have our national team. So anytime they have me go to Texas, Cali, any of those areas, it's really strictly to perform. Austin, all of those areas.

How'd you get into *Eclectic Truth*?

So I use to do the teen scene.

That's almost like an *Eclectic Truth* funnel, it seems. Jazmyne's part of that, too, huh?

Mm hmm. I started off with that in high school. And then, like 2011-2012 they told me I couldn't, you know, get back on the mic because I was overage, right?

You're too old, Toiryan.

And they was like *but* we have our adult readings. So I kinda jumped into it. I won my very first one against Donney! So I was kinda like, okay, maybe I can do this. After that, I started getting like really beat, beat! I just hung with it. If you really hang with it, and you really just like learn the community, and you learn the actual craft of poetry, you can get on the stage and kinda just figure out what you, you know?

Do you ever find yourself playing the slam poetry game a little bit?

I do.

It is a game in the end. Or is it? How do you do that?

When you're writing poems, whenever I'm writing poems, I sit down and say okay I know like this line comes from the heart. I'm not trying to get a reaction out of it. This is really something that I'm feeling. And sometimes when I'm looking at a line, it's like, okay, now I do wanna play the game of slam a little bit let me turn this into a punchline. What could I say that would spark this audience or spark this audience. You kinda like tweak your lines a little bit. Not to say that it's not your poem. But you're playing the game of slam, as in like punchlines, creativity,

I've got three minutes.

Right. Three minutes to really get on the stage and slam.

How can I show 'em as much as possible in the time I have.

Right.

II. This Stuff is Really Happening in My City

JOSH: **Toiryan, thanks again for talking to me. Going off of the summer, going away from poetry, what were your reactions to the summer? I know you're from the area, and I know you have slammed about your personal connection to the floods. And the Alton Sterling situation also seems personal for everyone, and you have slammed with "Squirrels." And then the police shootings on top of the recent Trump stuff, from my perspective it all seems to be crescendoing. What was your experience of the summer?**

TOIRYAN: It's different when you're looking at it on TV. Because it's not your city, it's not your state. So you're kinda like, man, this is really happening to my race, this is really happening to my people. When it started down here with Alton Sterling, it's just *that* killing right there, that's not saying it hit close to home. It hit home. So, it came to the point where I'm like wow this stuff is really like happening in my city. Like I'm really fearing right now because I don't know whether I can just go to a Wal-Mart or whether I go to IHop and I'm next. The community, they were really torn apart by it because they really knew Alton. If you knew Alton, you knew all he was a humble guy selling CD's. He use to really sell 'em like down the street from me and he'll sell you CD's, he'll tell you, he'll give you advice, he'll be like "stay safe out here" or like "pull your pants up," you know? "Talk like this." He was really humble, so to actually see that that happened to him it was like, wow, it can really honestly happen to anybody. It just impacted the communities, too, because during the whole protesting, I never knew the cops were *that* militarized. Not me! Like I knew they were militarized in other areas, but in Baton Rouge, because you don't really see it that often, I didn't really get to experience that until I saw them with the riot gear, the rubber bullets, they're really militarized.

I remember what seemed like a 100-car police parade going down Florida Boulevard. I was like, was that really necessary, right now? What are you getting ready to fight or protect?

Exactly. And that was like something we're not use to seeing that down here. We're use to seeing it on the news, debating about it on *Eclectic Truth*, debating about it on Facebook, and talking to people about it in community dialogue. But to actually see it face-to-face right in your hometown, like right in front of you, it's a real fear factor.

I came from Iowa, I'm from Los Angeles originally, so in a way my first experience in Baton Rouge was a culture shock, but it also kinda felt like back home.

I can see that.

All the things that were happening, I was like, this is real familiar, but removed, because of my six years in small-town Iowa. The other day, I live in Spanish Town now, and I was in the Spanish Town Market, the day after the Trump election, Wednesday, I walk in, and there's this older white dude, drunk at three in the afternoon, and, only provoked by my presence, he starts calling me all these ancient slurs, like "hey Dago," "hey Wop," "what country you from?" I was like is this the 50's? Am I in West Side Story?

East Baton Rouge Side Story. Not only did like this election, not only did this election really like expose racists, it actually showed the world they will support somebody, they will let somebody lead an American country that is racist, that does have a lot of bigotry.

And give zero f's about it.

Right, and down here in the states, where we always elect a republican, it was bound to happen that he was gonna win Louisiana. So it sorta doesn't surprise me how much of it is happening, what surprises me is people are surprised about it.

Yeah, I was a little surprised by the reality of the reality show of it.

Like this has been happening. The only thing that's changed is that we're recording it now. We've got Facebook, we have got Twitter, we have social media that can actually capture this stuff. Back then it was oh it happened it was your word versus my word. And most of the time your word doesn't get processed. It's way different. This election has really opened eyes. And if it didn't before, by the time January happens it's gonna open a lot.

We know where everyone stands now.

Right.

Like that guy was a racist out in the open, I know exactly what's up. But then, like Trump said *that*, and they say he's not like *that*. His supporters say he's just playing the game.

I mean, people will support, people will—and when I say people, I'm a be straight up honest, it's white people. White people will support what they feel is best for *them*. When it comes to making America great again, which America are we really talking about. You explain to me which America are we talking about because clearly we're not talking about the same one. We're not talking about an America with all races: Muslims, Black people, Mexicans. We're not talking about *that* America. Are we talking about that or are we talking about the white America? The America that came in and kicked the Indians out? That Christopher Columbus discovered, is that the one we're talking about?

What's the verb for it? Columbusing?

Yeah, Columbusing!

That's what they're doing. Let's overshadow what's happening, let's whitewash it all. Van Jones called it "whitelashing" it all, I believe.

Right. Gentrification. All of that is happening, and extremely fast right now. And it's only gonna get faster. What people are not realizing is they put this guy in office, but a lot of the stuff that he's trying to do, *legally* you can't even do it. You've gotta go through congress. Like this wall, do you know how much it's gonna cost them to build a wall around Mexico? Come on! What is the purpose of that? As a poet you actually go out and compete in these national competitions, I've met Albuquerque's team. I've sat down and talked to Albuquerque's team, and they're really fearing for their lives. Behind not only this election but the treatment they're getting afterwards. I'm still talking to 'em on Facebook, and they're really fearing right now. They're really fearing what is gonna happen now that this guy's in office. That's kinda sad to really sit

down and see that person that you elected is bringing fear instead of change. That's a really scary thing to see. And it's only gonna get worse. He's got four years. Everybody's saying "oh, he's not gonna make it four years in office." Donald is a businessman. He's dodged FBI investigations, prison time, I'm pretty sure this is something he'll do.

He'll find a way. He did already.

Right. We just gotta get a closer grip to reality. We're really stuck with this guy for four years until we get a stronger candidate. Even so, Baton Rouge is the type of community where if one fall we all fall. Like, that's just how we think, that's how we feel. So I feel like our community is going to band together and get stronger through this. But, at the same time, that's how they want you. They wanna break you down and catch you off guard in small numbers. They don't want to catch you as a whole community because a community divided is way weaker than a community that's actually built for these situations. And Baton Rouge is one of those communities where if you're hurting, I'm hurting. You need a place to stay, you come stay with me. If you're walking down the street by yourself I'll pick you up myself. And *Eclectic Truth* is kinda like the tie in to that. We provide that space where people can come in and share their stories, their mourning, their happiness. And relate to somebody else that feels that same way, and kinda build a connection off of that. This election is really gonna show you people's true colors. Not only racially, not only as a standpoint of belief, but as character as well.

III. Building on the Floods and Gaining Perspective through Challenges

JOSH: **Now that the Trump stuff has happened, going back to the summer, do you find yourself moving away from the summer's events in your slam material? Do you find yourself building on it?**

TOIRYAN: I understand what you're saying right there. Most poets they really play the game. They're picking fresh wounds. Trump is really, like in the slam community right now I guarantee you, I promise you, there's gonna be about 80,000 Trump poems coming into the slam season this year. What I do personally is I don't let anything go. Like, this flood, this flood has devastated more people than the world is actually understanding. Like my dad, he lost everything during the flood. My uncles, my aunties, my cousins, they literally lost years and years and years of stuff to the flood. Like a lot of that stuff they can't gain back.

You lose memories, too, the intangibles.

Right. Before I started working back at Take 5 [Oil Change], I was doing demo on all the houses. So I had to go in and throw the stuff away and take the sheet rock out and put brand new sheet rock back in. This is stuff that I'm throwing away like photo albums, scrap books, little knick-knacks that mean more to them than it'd mean to somebody else. Stuff I'm throwing away that's like 100, 200 years ago. 1,000 years ago. This flood really hit a lot of peoples hard. And

the type of poet I am, I try to pick at the wounds that hit hardest. So, just because something happened in 2016 that doesn't necessarily mean I'm gonna stop writing about it. I'm gonna keep writing about it. I have a poem right now, you've heard it, it's the "Storm" poem. And I try to tie a lot of like the flood to my personal life and I try to carry it over to the next few years. And I've been building on that poem since, right now it's in draft three. It's still talking about the flood, but it's talking about family issues like child abandonment.

Your grandpa.

My grandpa dying.

That was the first poem I heard at *ET*.

Yeah, I started the slam [season] off with that.

That's a powerful poem. I felt this is exactly where I want to be after hearing that.

I gotchu. That's how I see slam. I play the game, I'll try to win, but as far as like picking at fresh wounds, I'll do that as well, but I feel the best poets are the ones that can really diverse themselves from that crowd. This flood has impacted Baton Rouge and I feel there has to be more than one Baton Rouge poet to tell that story. If that has to be me, or two other people, I'll join those two other people. I don't wanna put down a subject because it happened a couple months ago. It still impacted me.

It still matters.

Right.

The first six to eight weeks, I saw Jazmyne performing from her perspective. Melissa speaking from a white person's perspective. Donney from a more seasoned perspective. All tackling the summer from different angles. Did you feel that happening? I ask to avoid research bias, to make sure it wasn't just me noticing something that might not actually be happening, you know?

Not at all. With *Eclectic Truth* we have different levels of talent and perspective. Donney he's the more seasoned poet, we call him "Slam-Pa." He's been in the game so long, he *knows* slam. He really knows what's gonna work on an audience and what doesn't. And what I like about Donney's poems is, not only does he write the poems that he wants to write, he can craft it to fit an audience. If it's this type of audience he can use this poem to work with that. And we have different levels of that. Like Melissa tackles "black-on-black crime, white-on-black crime," from a white perspective—that's something I can't do. So I have to hear it from our allies, you know, how do they feel about it? Are we the only ones in this battle? To hear poems like that, it makes me feel like we're not the only ones, we actually have other people in this. You're definitely

right, there is a different level of talent, a different level of seasoned experience, and different perspectives going into *Eclectic Truth*. We always get new people like Jazmyne, she's fresh.

Jazmyne's so talented!

She's fresh. That's how I started off, hungry like that, just wanting to jump into every little competition. I'm still that way. You just gotta really find a community with different levels. Me, personally, I never want to be in a community where I feel I'm the greatest. I never wanna do that. I wanna be in a community where every time I get on the stage I'm challenged. I'm challenged diversely, mentally, physically, emotionally. I wanna be challenged in every area. I want to leave out that place drained.

Yeah.

And I feel *Eclectic Truth* does that. You have this person who does metaphor, personification, at a level that I can't. Or like I do metaphor and extended metaphor at a level that they can't. Or this person does allegory and alliteration. It's different thing to pick at. That's the benefit of coming out of *Eclectic Truth*, or other poetry communities like that. You really get to see literary devices that you're not using into play. And then you can really say, okay, I see alliteration here, I see hyperbole here. How can I use that in my writing instead of changing my whole writing to fit that? That's how you get better. You take your writing and you take tools from others. You don't take their writing and try to cover yours with it. I've made that mistake many times before I really started to sit down and say alright these are the type of poems I want to do so let me nitpick at some of these literary devices. So there are levels at *Eclectic Truth*, and the more you come the more you see them and nitpick the ones you wanna use.

IV. Speed and Seasoning in Slam

JOSH: **With three minutes, do you find that you lose morsels of message compared to what you put on the page? Would you say intricacies get lost sometimes in the messages you perform?**

TOIRYAN: Yeah. With slam, being that you have to have three minutes, or three minutes and ten seconds, some people will write a poem, keep a stop watch on the side of em, I've seen poets do this, and see what the time is. With me, the way I write a draft or freewrite, I don't worry about time. I literally sit down and however long it takes me to get all those thoughts on paper, I'll do that, and then I'll read it afterwards and it'll be like six or seven minutes. And so what I do from there, I look at all the details I got, and I'll shave it. I'll shave it. I can word this down a little bit more, I can cut this, I can take this out and probably put it in another poem.

Mash it up into one sentence instead of six.

Right, I'll do that. I'll get my poem at 2:30, 2:45, the type of pace that I use I try to read at a slow pace so everybody can catch on. A lot of poets who aren't seasoned to writing like that, they'll write a poem at three minutes and try to speed through it. You can see that at *Eclectic Truth* who sits down and breaks down the fat from their poem, who trims it, and who writes toward that limit. You can really see that, and there's a lot of poets that do that. I use that technique, and another technique you can use to actually prevent that. There was this guy, you're really the first person I ever told about this, this guy named Chase, he use to be a poet at McKinley High School. He was my mentor, he taught me a lot that I know about poetry. He was like the best poet at McKinley High School. What he did was syllable count and everything. He'd write to 400-500 words when he's doing a poem. He wouldn't count the words, but he'll write his poem, he'll get to a certain point and count how many words it is. If it's 4-500, you're really edging at three minutes.

You can only pack in so much and still be understood. Seems like over-cutting a text gives seasoned performers room to add nuance and purpose. And memorize less!

Yeah, yeah. What he does after that is he'll cut 50 words, or cut 50 syllable counts, and it'll normally get your poem to 2:20, 2:30. That'll give you a lot of time to breathe, delivery, accents, really punch a line. So I use that technique a lot rather than writing it all on page. It's different ways you can tackle it that will help in the slam environment. But you can tell a lot of poets at *Eclectic Truth* are writing towards 3:00. And they'll really speed through that poem, and people will be sitting back like, I would have caught it if it was on paper, I would have caught it if they said that line a little bit slower. I would have caught it if they said this with a little more umph to it. And sometimes it ain't even that, sometimes you'll have a poem at 2:00 and you'll get stagefright and you will speed up that poem. I've had that in high school where I'd have a poem that's 2:30 and by the time I get off the stage it's really 2:00 because I sped through it. I was afraid.

It's like, I'm gonna forget if I don't get through this, I can't stop for applause.

And memorization plays more of a key factor than people realize. If you really know your poem, then while you're performing you really keep a mental note of where you are of the time. And you can really like, okay, I know this part, I'm normally at like 1:55, I can punch this line right here, pause for a second and go in. Memorization plays a lot. The season we're in right now poets are really like trying to get their material together, to try to make the team. So a lot of stuff that's going on stage is freshly memorized. So they really aren't trying to think about where they are on time, they're really trying to memorize the poem.

They're just trying to get through it.

Right. So there's a lot of things that goes in to the speed factor in slam. A lot of things. This slam season everybody is still trying to get their stuff together, so you're going to see a lot of that up until January. And I feel even after that, even towards February, when we actually have our semifinals and final bouts you're gonna see a lot of it because it's fresh, people are gonna be in

semifinals, there's a fear factor. The more seasoned poets, they've done it, so they know exactly how the judges are gonna be, and they know how tough they are gonna be. So it's more of a calming factor when you know it. But when you don't know it, like I feel Jazmyne, a few other people, they don't know it, so there's gonna be a fear factor. Like, how are these judges going to be? Should I read this poem like this or like that? You gotta really know your community in order to work it. And even if you go out nationally, you're not gonna know that community. I'm not gonna know Atlanta's community if I don't compete in Atlanta like an Atlanta poet would. But if you know the language of slam, and you know what's poppin' nowadays, then you can work with that. And if you got your stuff memorized, you got it polished, pretty much as far as you can really take that poem in that moment, then time wouldn't be a factor, and speed wouldn't be a factor. The more seasoned poets are gonna see that, and the more fresh poets to the game that are dippin' in and out of it, they see that time is really against them, so they're gonna try to beat it. With me I've only had two time penalties, in general. That's high school and being an adult poet. It plays a key factor when you're not thinking about that time. When you're thinking about it it plays a pivotal role in how fast you can do that poem.

V. A Support Group Coming Together through Competition

JOSH: From my perspective, *ET* so far this season seems to be separated into two areas: the first six-to-eight weeks, and since then. The first half of the season, with the rawness of the summer, the beginning of the season, wounds still fresh from the summer, people didn't seem to care as much as other slams I have been to about the judging and points, even though the slam here has a lot of quality competitors. But the last few weeks, that seems to have started to shift a bit, there's now a more noticeable urgency to the slam. Do you think the community that's judging is affecting that?

TOIRYAN: Yeah. When we pick our judges, we are really looking for people that's never been to a poetry slam before. We're really looking for people that they just walked in because, oh, their best friend walked in and they told 'em to come with 'em or they heard about us on the internet or they saw us in a newspaper article. We're trying to pick those judges. And the way we prep those judges before the slam, we'll tell them, look, these poets are preparing for the slam season, they're preparing to try to make our national team. We're sending a national team to compete nationally, so we need you to be rough, we need you to like really make them work for those 10's. Like, if you hear something that relates to you we need you to give them a higher score. If you hear something that one poet said that another poet said it better, don't give that poet the higher score. We really prep the judges like that. The way we're going right now, we're kinda locked into the season. We take the top four poets and we send them to Austin [for the National Poetry Slam]. And when we take them to Austin they slam for a spot for Baton Rouge to have a spot in the national competition.

Who has the most points right now?

Right now, Jazmyne, she's ranked number one with 17 points. Me and William Brian Sain are literally at 16 points, we're tied for second. And Donney is right after us. So that's your top four right there. That just shows not only how tight the race is for the slam season, but it shows what the judges are doing. They know they want to spend four poets out there to represent them well. So they're really locking down on what we're doing, what we're bringing to the table, and how we're bringing it. Compared to like the flood happened, I need to hear your story about the flood. I need to hear your story about Alton. I need to hear your story about Philando, I need to hear what you have to say. Now we're into the stage where Trump is elected, and there are new issues popping up. So now it's like, okay, I need you to rock this audience. I need you to not only get me on fire, but this person on fire to the point where they're so inspired my score goes up for you. So we are in that era now.

Building on each other.

And it's only going to get way stronger when you get towards January and February when we actually start picking our team. It's only gonna get stronger

It's almost like people are telling these stories not only about the past and how they feel now, but pushing that slam environment to represent Baton Rouge for the future, too.

Right.

The *ET* community seems to function like a support group. The way it's presented. I don't know if you've ever been to an AA meeting, or an NA meeting?

Yeah.

It's like, here are some really intense, for the most part, some really f'd up shitty things happening now, but let's also have a critical and constructive support group mentality. Similarly, I notice in slam communities I've been to, there's a lot of poetry about oppression told through lived experiences. But people in positions of power, from dominant groups and organizations, are not really represented in the audience.

Right, because that's who we're writing the poems towards. I would love to get on stage and talk about police brutality in an audience full of cops. That's what I would prefer. A lot of other people, they kinda fear that. They want the cops to hear their message but some people don't want them to hear it directly because then you gotta leave out that venue. You gotta go about your way. They remember your face. It was like, oh, so you said this about me, okay, so you said this about us. Or this group seen you do this poem. Okay, I seen what you said about oppression, I'm gonna show you oppression. You really have some people out there who will take your message as more hindering than helpful. A lot of people will sit down and be like I'd rather just have my message performed in front of my people. Or you'll have people like me, Donney, a couple others, we really want an audience full of cops. I want to be able to see that. I

want to see that shield, and make you put the shield down for a second so you could hear what I'm saying. And you're right, there aren't a lot of oppressors in the audience and that makes it a little more difficult for us to get somewhere. We need more law enforcement, we need more governors, congressman, in these readings, in these areas where we're talking about this subject matter and it can be heard, rather than you hearing this on the news or rather you seeing it in the article where you can't really get the voice out of the article. Listening to someone talk you can get their emotion, you can get their vibe, you can get a better understanding than me sitting down reading it and saying wow this is happening. Compared to me telling you about it and you're like WOW this is really happening. So, it's a big difference between having oppressors in the audience and not. And your vibe kinda changes on the stage when you're realizing that okay it's just another day, it's literally just another we're just spitting this poem to the same group of people.

People that agree with me already.

I want to spit this to people that will not agree with me, I wanna challenge them. And that's the problem with slam today, it's not challenging. The competition itself is challenging, but the audience isn't. At nationals this year, I say about 90% of the poems were about police brutality, sexism, racism, 90% on the final stage was about that. The room as a whole, me sitting in there, for the first time at a national competition with adults, I didn't feel challenged. I felt like I already agree with all these subjects, and you're not pushing me in a way that where I need to be challenged. If you're going to talk about police brutality, that's great, that's a really good subject to talk about, but you gotta talk about it in a way where it's gonna pull my strings. I have a poem right now, you haven't heard it, I literally just wrote it. I had a couple of *majorities*, I had a couple of them tell me, you know, you write a lot of racism poems you never really write happy poetry. Never.

I did hear your "Happy" poem. I heard that one.

Yeah, I'll write a happy poem! That's the type of challenging I want, I want something that's gonna play with my mind. Donney said this, as best as I can summarize it, Donney said if in a slam if this guy is talking about how corrupt the government is, but he's saying it in such a one dimensional plane compared to like another guy who's saying it in like different dimensions, like there's metaphor, there's allegory right here, there's just something that's gonna tug you away from that, if you open up a poem saying something like "I think Donald Trump should be president," you're gonna have people lookin' at you at that point. Whereas if you say "I don't think Donald Trump should be President" people agree with that already. But if you open up saying something completely opposite they're gonna be like, wait wait wait what? Where you going with this? You're challenging.

It's like the interesting stuff is in those liminal spaces, those fissures, where are the places we intersect?

Right, right.

My goal with this project is to interview folks like you, Jaz, Melissa. Eric.

Eric!

His “2 Chains” poem is very memorable.

The thing I like about Eric is you can expect him to get on the stage and really like make you laugh. And he talks about some serious stuff, but the way he talks about it, it's pretty engaging, It's also funny. Sometimes I need that. Sometimes I need to walk into a slam, I need to walk into an open-mic, where I'm hearing something that's just funny. I need to leave with some type of joy, I don't have to always leave with depression or anger and that's what he brings. It's pretty impactful for our community. It's well needed.

VI. Conquering Fears and Self-Definition

JOSH: How would you identify yourself as a person and as a slam poet?

TOIRYAN: As a person I would say I'm not afraid of anything. It's kinda strange to hear that, everybody has a fear. I mean, I have a fear, I'm afraid of lightning. I'm really terrified of lightning.

I'm afraid of boulders.

See? Everybody has fear. But when I'm saying I'm not afraid of anything, what I'm saying is, even though I'm afraid of this I'll conquer it. I haven't told anybody yet, but I'm doing a logo reveal two or three weeks from now, and my logo is my initials in a lightning bolt. What that symbolizes is, I'm afraid of this, but I'm owning it, this is copyrighted. I own this lightning now that I'm afraid of. That's how I would describe myself as a person. Somebody that doesn't fear anything. I will get on the stage with anybody, I'll compete against anybody. If this person is the Tom Brady of poetry slam I'll be the first one diving in after them. That's just what I am, I'm very competitive as a person. I'm very strong-willed, strong-minded, strong-hearted. I won't let something just like shift me away from my directions, so that's who I am as a person.

Yeah.

Now as a slam poet, I don't know if you know this guy, but CM Punk, the wrestler.

Yeah!

I feel I am the CM Punk of slam poetry. And this is why, because like, I try to go against the room in every slam. I look at the stage as a UFC ring, as a WWE ring. If the room is talking about

racism this night, sometimes I will stray off from the direction and talk about homosexual love. I have a poem, "Teaching My Son How to Love." I will bring that poem out in a room full of racial poems. Or if it's a room that's like really depressing, I will try to come up with a funny poem. I always try to challenge the status quo. CM Punk he was that wrestler, where he didn't take anything from authority, he didn't listen to authority, he didn't care what it was, he will challenge the status quo. This dude, they tried to tell him "we, we gotta go to commercial." He said "no, we're not going to commercial." He said that on live TV! That's how I am in the slam. I just won't take anybody saying, okay, this is how you need to write your poem, this is what's working right now, this is what you need to write about. I'm gonna do what I'm gonna do. That's how I define myself. It's two different kinds of personalities, but they're kinda together. Because that strong will, strong heart, strong-mind goes into the slam perspective, and that slam perspective goes into my character. I can go to work tomorrow and say okay, I'm gonna stock these air filters this way, and if another co-worker says well you could do it this way, like nah, I'm a stack it this way because this and that, this and that, I'm gonna have a reason. I'm not gonna just be the bad guy.

Just to do it.

Right. There's a reason. Now if you can show me an easier way—

And you can save me some time.

Right. So that's how I define myself as a character and as a slam poet.

How would you define how you connect to your background? Your cultural upbringing?

My family, we're kind of mixed with everything. Half of my family is white, and the other half, which is my dad's side, they're Black.

I'm half-and-half, too.

I guessed, ha. I always define myself as Black, though, because, at the end of the day, when I'm on that stage, when I get pulled over, by a policeman, or when I walk out in public, that's what I'm considered. So, instead of me trying to compensate that by saying I'm half white, or I'm half Indian, or half Cherokee, I like to say you know what I am Black. I'm proud of that, because I come from a long line of people who were kings. Who owned land, who owned empires, and I've been taken from that. I'm proud of where I came from, I'm proud of my bloodline, so I always identify myself as African-American no matter where I go. I never say I'm half. I will say it on the strength that that's actually what it is, but as far as how I identify myself, ask me I will always say I'm African-American.

Like, this is how you see me, this is my position in the world, this is how I am forced to interact in it?

Right, and that's where a lot of my poetry is generated from, just being that race, and being that proud of it, that's what fuels a lot of my writing. Like I already understand that I get out on the stage that's what I'm seen as and that's the type of poems they're gonna expect out of me. So I have to be able to identify with myself who I am to convince somebody else who I am, because if I don't know who I am and you're seeing that, then you're not gonna get that vibe, you're not gonna say, okay, he knows exactly who he is I understand him. You're gonna get that vibe of he doesn't know who he is, so how does he expect me to relate to him if he can't relate to himself.

That makes a lot of sense.

VII. Inspiration through Music and Poets

JOSH: **Do you want a refill? Same thing?**

TOIRYAN: Yeah, same thing.

Good, because I've gotta use the restroom, too.

Oh, I understand! [8:09-10:45] Thanks you.

I feel like I'm too use to iced coffee—I need a new strain. I'm desensitized.

I got into iced coffee, I'll drink it in cold weather now.

I'm the same way. I want something different than water sometimes, or soda. Or pop.

We call it Coke. It's Coke for everything, You want a Delaware Punch? Oh yeah, gimme a Coke out the refrigerator. This little two percent of America we call it Coke. I didn't understand the cultural diversity of soda until I went to Ohio. I was like, can I get a Coke? They was like "you want a soda?" "I was like, no, I want a Coke. "A soda?"

Just take my money!

Right.

I've noticed in diverse and performance spaces like *ET*, event theme music has recently featured socially relevant artists like Kendrick Lamar. And people like J Cole. Why do you think?

When you're asking why that, you gotta really know the rap game. Poets are more woke up to the rap game than I feel society is. Because we know the politics behind it. We know Kendrick is

not 'bout to get on the radio with any of his stuff, they won't allow it unless it's commercialized. J Cole is the same way. He started out on the radio, but he started making heartfelt messages and soulful messages, and that's stuff that's not gonna get on the radio. As poets, our entertainment is way better than Young Thug, Lil Uzi, Lil Yachty and all these different artists that don't talk about anything, we actually have subject matter to talk about. We hear Kendrick and J Cole the same way, we kinda relate to that because they're not getting radio play unless it's commercialized, we're not getting put on TV unless it's commercialized. We kinda take them as the theme song to poetry venues, and slam, and just like in general, because we also pull from their energy when we're writing. Like, me personally, I cannot write a poem with Lil' Wayne in my ear.

How to Love.

It's impossible. I would probably come out with some crazy stuff. Whereas if I'm listening to something soulful I will sit down and be like, wow, if he could say it, I could say something different with a same vibe, a same feeling. It's a different vibe you get for it, him and Kendrick. We use them in slam, because they're pretty much are in the same category that we are. Of course they're more richer, but they're not on the radio unless it's commercialized, and we're not on TV or going viral unless it's commercialized.

Are there any specific performers at *ET* that you remember performing about Baton Rouge-specific issues that inspired you or influenced you?

Yeah. When I started off in high school and I made the 2011 Brave New Voices team, he was a coach, his name is Xero Skidmore. In 2014, he was the iWPS Champion of the world. He literally ranked number one in the entire world. He did a couple poems about Baton Rouge and the police brutality we're facing, and not only did he do those poems, he did them in perspectives where they had a lot of satire in it, a lot of comedy relief. He did some where they were like gut wrenching, but for the most part they were very light and they were funny and charismatic, and it kinda inspired me to break away from that shell as well. Not every poem that's about oppression has to be seriously depressive. It can be funny, it can have satire in it. That's what kinda strayed me to do the "Happy poem". It's him, we've had Ameris, she's another teen poet. She's done a couple poems about Baton Rouge as well, and I've kinda pulled from that. We've had a few other poets that kind of dip in and out of the scene. We're still trying to build a community to hop on that subject. As we're preaching to the community, we don't wanna be that way, we want the community to preach to us as well.

When did you start with *Eclectic Truth*?

I started with *Eclectic Truth* two years ago, 2014. If we're talking started like in general, I really started in 2013, that's when I went to the first slam and won that. And then I started going back when we had a little bit more people in the community. I was doing it in 2013. I realized a lot of the poems I was sending on stage I was still writing from a teen perspective and I was getting really beat out by these adult subject matters. So, I pulled back from there, in 2013, I sat back

and I was like, okay, what type of poet do I want to be? Because right now I'm just going on stage with these types of poems, it's not working. So I jumped back solidly in 2014 and I've been part of it since. So two years solid.

Has it changed as far as the community? I know over the recent summer, Kaiya, one of the community's youth poets, passed.

Yeah, Kaiya. She was a dynamic person in our community. You can really walk in the room and see her energy. She offered everybody hugs, she offered everybody smiles. She was pretty much, 90% of the time, very happy. If she had an issue, you never really heard about it. You would have to ask her if anything's wrong, that's just the type of energy she brought. So, when we lost that, not only did we lose that energy, not only did we lose that gratitude, but we really lost a part of us. As a community. The community did change. It changed in emotion, in changed in the way of attendance, it changed in the way of perspective, but I don't think it necessarily changed in a bad way, I just think it changed in a really different way.

Change is life.

Back in the day, something you didn't know, *Eclectic Truth* was generally thriving on *erotic* poems! That's what they were doing. If you went on stage with an erotic poem it got everybody *geared* up, got everybody into it.

Got a rise out of everyone?

Right! And then it went from there to this punchline, like I'm the sickest type of poet. Then it went from there to I'm gonna pour my heart out on the stage. We went through three or four different changes as far as content, people, and perspective-wise. And right now we're in this era of vulnerability, politics, and character. That's what's getting it on stage and that's what's getting it done in the community. So there've been a couple of changes, but the vulnerability and the politics that's kinda where we are right now as far as a community, as far as changing.

Why do you think that?

The poets that are coming in. Like, back then, Xero had a line in one of his poems that really got people hyped up. He was like, "I throw it in reverse, reverse in it throw I / Cuz I back over MC's if they try to survive." And that got people like ooooh! That was slam poetry. He used poems like that to win the 2014 [iWPS] championship of the world. That's what was working. But, you got these new poets coming in not doing that, they're doing more heartfelt poems and it's a massive number. It's really drowning out that phase of punchline days and MC days with poetry. And rhyming and all that, you're really seeing a change. It's sorta like the rap game. Back then it was Cash Money, Wayne, Baby, Juvenile, that's what was really rocking the world. But now it's this mumble rap. It's so much the younger generation that's gonna drown out what we're use to. If it's now mumble rap, the generation ain't listening to it today. And we know better, we know we don't understand what the hell they're saying. Compared to Lil Wayne, or

like Drake, these other rappers that actually are very clear in annunciation. It's like that with poetry. It's a massive number of people coming in and doing poems that are straight from the heart, pouring their heart out on stage, whether it's getting on stage dropping a couple punchlines and trying to win the slam. That's how the community changed as far as community and slam. So many people doing that, that it's real hard to drop back into that shell and I'm gonna go back to the punchline days. It's really hard to go back into that when you have people looking for something different.

VIII. Changing the Community as a Whole

JOSH: Disaster, tragedy, a chain. Summer 2016's timeline to me seems like it's all connected through struggle. The floods, a natural struggle. Kaiya's passing, personal and, in some ways, an apolitical struggle. Sterling and the police murders, community and political struggles. Do you think the shifting of a slam community's purpose relates to the struggle the community is going through in-the-moment?

TOIRYAN: Yeah. The struggle definitely has an impact on how the community deals with it. I know when the Pulse nightclub shooting started—

I was in Florida the day that happened, hours away.

Terrifying, in general. I was still fresh to the community. I been at *Eclectic Truth*, but as far as community services I was still fresh to it. So when the Pulse Nightclub shooting happened, I really saw how supportive our community is with that acronym, that community. I really realized how many Trans people we have, lesbians, bisexuals, queer, I really saw how many we have in Baton Rouge, and how fearful they were of that [shooting]. So, what we did at the next *Eclectic Truth*, we had a reading specifically for that. We said it was free, come in, get on stage, and we had dialogue about it. Because what we try to do at *Eclectic Truth* is we don't try to focus on the tragedy happening to capitalize on it. When it happens, we wanna know what can we do as a community to prevent this. Or be stronger in the face of this.

Yeah.

So any time tragedy like that happens, we try to shift as a community in a direction that's going to benefit us as a whole, instead of like as individuals. Like when Alton was shot, not only were, like, the Black people getting together, but your allies were getting together, Muslims were getting together, Mexicans. The next reading had 500 people at *Eclectic Truth*, and that's the biggest number we've ever had. That showed me that if a community wants change they will go to a place to seek change. So when tragedy happens the community changes in a sense of what do I need to do now, instead of I'm ooh, I'm afraid, I don't need to do anything. It change perspective, it changes emotion. That same community that was happy the last week, they can all be depressed the week after, and it affects the poetry. Because at that point you're feeding

off their energy, so you're not gonna go off your energy anymore if that whole room is going off a different energy. It's really hard to do that. When the community changes, slam changes. Poems, perspective, character, a lot of that changes, and that has to deal with how close we are. If one person is mourning then everybody mourns. And you can really feel that. It's really impactful.

We talked about how *Eclectic Truth* is representative of Baton Rouge through its diversity, but what community is *Eclectic Truth* representing? After seeing the voter turnouts from the election, and living in such a heavy red state, how representative of Baton Rouge is *Eclectic Truth*?

That's a really good question. I'm a love to explain this. With Baton Rouge, when I first stepped into *Eclectic Truth*, the national team that we had before that, nobody was from Baton Rouge.

Really?

Nobody. One of the members was from Cali. The other was from Boston. The other one was from Mississippi. The other one was from Oklahoma. That was William, William's from Oklahoma. And we had their stories, of like Cali, and Oklahoma, of depression, of fear, we had those stories representing Baton Rouge as the emotion. But as far as a community—like William's part of the community now, but back then, William couldn't write a subject on this community because he hasn't been in it long enough. He could only write from what he saw. And that was pretty much *Eclectic Truth* back then. As far as representing Baton Rouge, the emotion was representing Baton Rouge. We all felt fear, we all felt depression, we all felt anger, at one point we all felt happiness. But as far as the aesthetics that goes into Baton Rouge, what makes Baton Rouge, a lot of that wasn't hitting the stage, a lot of that wasn't getting out there.

Yeah.

Donney said it best this year when he went out to iWPS, the same competition Xero went to [in 2014]. He put Baton Rouge on the stage. He put the flood poems, Alton Sterling, Kaiya, he really put Baton Rouge on the stage and we hadn't really had that as far as representation in the national world. So when I came in, Jazmyne came in, Ameris, the newer poets came in, we started really putting Baton Rouge on the stage. Okay, I need to talk about this that's happening in Baton Rouge right now. So, as an organization with *Eclectic Truth*, we're so diverse, that it really depends on the amount of diversity that's in the room or in the community that night that's gonna show how well we represent Baton Rouge. If a lot of people are Trans up in that night, you're going to get more of a Trans community supporting turnout. If it's more Black people that night, you're gonna get the Black community—it depends on the amount that's in there that night. With me, personally, I never feel *Eclectic Truth* is gonna target one community specifically, I feel we're gonna always target different communities because we have so many diverse people coming into the readings. With *Eclectic Truth*, the way I see us representing Baton Rouge, we don't only represent it from a cultural aspect, we can all represent it from an emotional aspect, a mental aspect. Everybody has their part in representing Baton Rouge. Me, I

represent where I'm from, which is the poverty line, some of the hoods, the Bottom, which is the southside of Baton Rouge, the top, towards McKinley, Middleton, all of those places. I write from that perspective, I try to show my life in that area and bring it to the stage. Donney writes from a more like, I've been at this shooting in the face of it when this happened, I need to write about this, or I grew up around this in Baton Rouge. We target Baton Rouge with what we're facing. Like me living from hood to hood, Donney with different interactions with people, Melissa with what she sees in Baton Rouge, William with what he sees in Baton Rouge. Jazmyne from being a teen woman in Baton Rouge going into an adult phase and what she's actually seeing right now. There are different things we tackle as a community in *Eclectic Truth*. We try to tackle as many areas as possible, and try to touch as many people as possible. I feel now we have brought Baton Rouge on the stage because we are back in, but before it was more of like the emotion and not the culture.

Any other changes?

Eclectic Truth is changing each and every week. I've noticed its small changes, like what's going on stage, who's going on the stage, who's joining the community, who is leaving, who is coming back, a lot of that is changing. It doesn't necessarily have to do with the slam aspect in general, but it has to deal with people really realizing that I got some wounds I need to pick at, I really need to get back to this space. Or I feel that the wounds I'm picking at aren't working, I need to go to a different space. We've had the same poets that I talked about earlier, like from Boston, they went back to their areas and they're doing their own thing where it works in their area because that's what they're use to. They're using to telling their stories from Philadelphia, they're use to telling their stories from Boston and it works with a Boston crowd. We see a lot of people coming in and out. It's changing not only the poetry it's changing the community as a whole. I never know what kinda community I'm gonna walk into Tuesday, and that's the exciting thing about Baton Rouge.

It's like the slam's breathing.

Right, I'm never knowing. Every time I get on stage, every time I see other people get on that stage, it excites me, because I realize how diverse Baton Rouge actually is. Our goal is to expose that, to take that lampshade off and to expose that light. It's changing for the better. It's only gonna get deeper, it's only gonna get deeper. And I feel as the years come through, we're only going to have stronger community, a more solid community, and we're probably gonna be reaching levels we wouldn't be able to reach as just an individual.

What do you think the slam environment adds to those stories?

When we do slam, even when I first started, when I heard the word "poetry," "slam," I'm thinking it was a place where like three or four people would get on stage, read from a book with no emotion, really Robert Frost the stage.

The Road Less Traveled.

Right, right. Like that's what I thought slam was. But when I got there, and I saw that the competition, when it comes to slam, when it comes to anything in general, people love to see competition. People love to see a battle. They love to see wits versus brawn, strength versus heart, they love to see battling. When I saw what slam does to the psyche, and also to the poems, it brings out this competitive nature in the poem where, like, I know you said this, but I need to strike harder with what I need to say. It boosts the morale of the poem, and the morale of the poem boosts the morale of the audience. So slam plays this game with your writing and your performance, where if you know there's something on the line you're going to perform like there's something on the line. Where if there's nothing on the line, I can kinda just lay back and get this message out, sometimes you're more relaxed than you are in a slam.

There's an urgency to it. And in poetry you can heighten your emotion in a way we don't do in real life.

Right. I can sit here for days and talk to an audience about my oppression, or I can sit there for days and talk about how my grandpa's death affected us as a family, I can talk about that for days, and all they're gonna hear is my story, but in no type of way that they can relate to it. Where if I put a metaphor, where if I say something in a line where I'm talking about my grandpa's death, and I say something like "I need to stop making temporary scars out of permanent situations" people are gonna be like, well my job is a permanent situation and I'm making it into a temporary scar." If you have lines that can relate to people that's about your poem then you're getting more than me just sitting back and just telling. It's the same with opera, when they hit those high high high-pitched notes, you're not gonna sit down at a coffee shop and just start busting high notes right there to tell me my day was great.

Ahhhh!

Right, you're not gonna do that. So when you're sitting there, you're really involved in this emotion. You're sitting down like I'm *hearing*, instead of like I heard you. You're more involved emotionally rather than you are mentally.

You're showing rather than just telling. You're seeing through your body, too, seeing poets relive those experiences again. Being surrounded by all the fire trucks, a law enforcement surrounding, a government agency, have you thought about what you're surrounded by in that context? The juxtaposition of fires and floods?

Anytime I walk into the *Firehouse Gallery* to set up for *Eclectic Truth*, because I set up the sound and everything, anytime I walk in and I realize that I'm about to perform in front of those fire trucks that are so boxed in and caved in, I really do think about the environment. So I'm performing a law enforcement poem in front of vehicles that are closely related to that. Anytime police are out in the area you see fire trucks, or paramedics. There is a professional type of aura that you're getting from those firetrucks, and it does kinda hype you up to get on stage. Act like this is all scenery to a play. And we write to that. When I say poets really write to

their environment, they do. You're in a coffee shop, you're probably not gonna do the same poems you're gonna do at *Eclectic Truth*. When you're at Wal-Mart, you're probably not gonna do the same poems at all! So it really depends on your environment as to how you feel about your writing, and I think the fire truck plays a pivotal role.

Have you ever had firefighters watching?

We've had a couple come in. Watch the flood poems. I'd love more. I'd love more paramedics, more police officers, more mayors. I'd love that.

Poetry of and Interview with Jazmyne Smith

Over the past three years, I have had the privilege of witnessing Jazmyne Smith's dedication to her craft at *Eclectic Truth*. I have watched her evolution from local slam poet, to *Brave New Voices* champion, to coach of an LSU team at the 2019 College Unions Poetry Slam International competition, to performing in the HopKins Black Box theatre and even trying out competing in collegiate forensics speech tournaments! Our paths have crossed in Baton Rouge multiple times and we remain in contact via social media. Jazmyne, 18 at the time of our interview, is from Baker, which is north of the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport, about a twenty-minute commute from LSU. We met at my first *Eclectic Truth*, and eleven weeks later, she agreed to be interviewed about *Eclectic Truth* and her perspective on the recent summer.

After observing Jazmyne at *Eclectic Truth* and with others over the first five weeks of the season, I knew her community commitment and wiser-than-her-years perspective would be incredibly generative. My interview with Jazmyne took place at 3:00 PM on a Monday, November 21, 2016, around week twelve of the slam season. As an important note, all of my official interviews with *Eclectic Truth* star groupers took place following Donald Trump's electoral-college fueled election to the Presidency on November 8. Jazmyne agreed to meet me

inside LSU's Middleton Library (named after the former LSU President Troy H. Middleton) near the first-level CC's Coffee House, an area that's surrounded by empty metal bookshelves. In 2019, Middleton's racist views were amplified by the discovery of a letter he wrote to the chancellor in 1961. He wrote, "Though we did not like it, we accepted Negroes as students," and he explicitly elaborated on his anti-Black positions in regards to integrated-rooming, social functions, athletics, and humans (Price). This abhorrent stance is just one instance of a systemic breach that litters Louisiana like a fault line. Sitting in a zombie library named after an outright racist talking about the impacts of racism with a young Black woman seems like an apt microcosm of the Baton Rouge experience for many marginalized people. At this meeting, Jazmyne agreed to send me drafts of her slam poems, "Poem for Alton" and "Post-Flood Free-Write." In our interview, we tackled seven areas of conversation: *I. Could Have been Any Person in My Circle; II. The Flood Sucked and the Supernatural; III. Just Existing; IV. Competition and Validation; V. We Haven't Forgotten; VI. Blue Among All the Red; and VII. We Couldn't Vote.*

Poetry: "Poem for Alton" by Jazmyne Smith

For centuries this country's law enforcement
Stunted our growth
Snuffed out flickers of our hope
left our families strung up in trees
Laid out in the street
Buried 6 ft under
Always leaving us as less than the $\frac{3}{5}$ of a person
You want us to be

CNN said Alton's shooting sparked outrage
Well let that spark turn into a wildfire
Let it serve as competition for this Louisiana heat
Then let it flame from coast to coast
Until every grain of sand or soil

Is singed with Black Lives Matter

Let the smoke draw people from the comfort
Of their homes
Let it settle in their lungs until their every breath
Is Black Lives Matter
Maybe when it pollutes the air
You'll finally accept it as truth

Even when we're unarmed
when it's caught on camera
when we're at our local convenience store
Whether we are twelve
Or 37
Even when "We can't breathe"
We're still a threat somehow

you continue to ignore the trend of police brutality
You want us to lay under the boot of police officers and not squirm

Accept injustice and brutality with brave face

want us to be colorblind
But even then black blood still stains
On white skin
On blue uniform
On grey pavement

Want us to take police commands like lashes on our backs

Know that the only way to be innocent
Is to be dead

I'm not trying to make man into a martyr
But they tried to make man into a monster
Took away his breath
With his heartbeat at their fingertips
Took away his right to be a father

I'm tired of begging my friends
To be safe
At protests

I'm tired of asking them to overcompensate

For their ethnicity
To apologize for existing

When my friends are assaulted by officers
For standing up for their rights
Does their plea for justice
Deserve a slap in the face

I'm tired of being terrified
That my brother will be next
That my father will be next
That I will be next
That my right to protest
Means nothing

Mr. Officer

I know you're trying to think of your wife and your children
But can you acknowledge that I am someone's child

If you think All Lives Matter
Where were you when we protested
why are you unbothered when we are executed
In front of our neighbors
When the news anchors become fortune tellers
When black children see their futures
In Sandra
In Tamir
In Philando

The words Unarmed black man rolled off of their tongues
But it didn't make death any easier to swallow

When our legs grew tired from marching
And our voices went hoarse
Why were you not there by our side

Why do you tell us to stop fighting
When we're fighting for our lives

Why do the words Black Lives Matter offend you
But the idea of black lives cocooned in a black body bag doesn't

Why do you say we play the victim

when we are the victims

I think you mean you'd rather us play dead

Poetry: "Post-Flood Free Write" by Jazmyne Smith

And in that dimension
Gravity reversed
The earth wears itself inside-out
Flood waters were cyphoned
Back into the atmosphere
We stand on gray skies
Our homes
Rooted and cemented
To tree canopies

Draining systems regurgitate water that isn't contaminated
We bottle up flood waters
And flood our city with brotherhood

Homes are left hanging from God's mobile
We float
Our lives crawl back together
Assemble themselves like transformers
Crawl back into our homes
Reinhabit their space

It's Spring, we've been cleansed
There is no tragedy to wash away

Sadness is swept away
With a city-wide broom
It sweeps up sad faces
Vacuums up the broken hearts
Glues families back together
And paints the sky golden

And it never rained again
Storm clouds repelled from
Our whoville on Earth
We decorate ourselves in happiness
Blend together like colors in a sunset

We grow from the sky downward
Intermingle with celestial bodies
And fragments of lost souls
Plant themselves in our hearts
And our yards

Interview with Jazmyne Smith, November 21, 2016

I. Could Have been Any Person in My Circle

JOSH: I was an immigrant to Baton Rouge and *Eclectic Truth*. The first eight weeks, the summer's struggles seemed to be a heavy topic of slam poems. I'm taking a class on ethnography—do you know what that is?

JAZMYNE: You can explain it to me.

Basically, being invited into a culture to understand what makes people part of that culture. I'm curious as to the themes y'all are using in your poetry and how they relate to the context of your city and the event of the summer. I'm interested in how people from a similar community talk about related issues.

Okay, that sounds real cool.

Would I be able to get a copy of the poems you have used in the slam? We had talked about my intentions of casting people to theatricalize your texts.

Yep, yep. If it's handwritten, it could be anywhere. But I'm pretty sure I typed those up. Some of it's on the phone, some of it's on paper, but it's there! I'll get it you.

Thanks, Jazmyne. You know, it was an interesting culture shock entering a creative community that seemed to be grappling with so much in-the-moment following the summer. Were there specific ways the summer affected you?

Actually the night Alton was murdered I was at *Eclectic Truth*. I was performing, I was featuring that night as part of the *Forward Arts All-Stars*. So we were all there as a community, and I went home on social media and found out everything. I guess, individually it's like, being on the All-Star team all summer we had been cranking out poems, cranking out poems to go to *BNV*, so when that happened it's like, okay, so we've been writing about stuff like this all summer, we've been listening to poems about this. We've been taking it in at every direction and here it is happening miles away from us celebrating and sharing out truth, and living our lives, and just doing things we normally do. So it made us hypersensitive of the community, in a sense. Now it became so surreal. This is happening here, now. Especially I imagine coming into the

community you kinda saw the best and the worst of it. From one sense you see a bunch of people unifying and saying this is what we believe in, this is wrong. And then on another hand you see the worst of it in the friction between the community and the police. We have this strong sense of community being built and at the same time there's still this conflict between community. It's beautiful and it's horrible at the same time. It's a sad truth, to it. We went to the vigil with me and a couple other poets. It was beautiful, it was a great thing to experience together. Going forward it shapes so much because, the week after, the week immediately after, we went to Washington D.C to *BNV*. We're talking to people from all over the country, we're telling people hi, we're from Baton Rouge, and they're like "oh, Baton Rouge? How's it going? What's the latest?" And we don't know, you know? We know there's protests going on. We know our friends, our family, are being assaulted because they're just there protesting. And this is specifically the wildest thing about the protesting was that, because I was coming from a youth scene, a lot of my friends were youth poets, and they were going to participate in protests. And these are 17, 18 year-old kids being assaulted by adult police officers. And so *Forward Arts*, the same organization that holds *Eclectic Truth*, held a safe space event for youth to sort of deal with the protesting and to deal with the shooting in a way that was, you know, a little less charged. It was a super safe space. *Eclectic Truth* is a safe space, it's a super safe space because this is the youth. This is the future, these are children, ultimately, and we're being put into an environment where all this is happening. So that was an important portion of it. And when we came back from D.C. that was the week that the police officers were shot. It's like, everyone's like reaching out to us. All the friends and people we met in D.C., from all across the world, all across the country, everybody's reaching out to us, like, are y'all okay? Specifically there's some poets and people we met in Dallas, and there was also a shooting in Dallas. And I still talk to them everyday, like we're that connected now because that just build a bridge. Because we are both coming from communities that are trying to gather and rally and support this idea of accountability in the police force, and trying to have a positive relationship with police. And seeing the negative outcomes of that. Obviously, personally, it's like, wow, this happened down the street. This could have been any person in my circle, because Baton Rouge is a pretty small community, it's pretty tightknit. Then zooming out of it and going to something that's an international competition and everybody's like "oh, your city's making news, what does it mean to you?" It makes you more conscious of what your community means to you because part of you is like, yeah this is going on, this is terrible, this is horrible. But another part of you is like I have to represent my community in the best way to all these people who don't know anything about Baton Rouge other than Alton Sterling and the protests. So, it's like a combination of trying to bring up beauty in your community, and it's that duality that's happening the entire time.

You say you view *Eclectic Truth* as a safe space for its younger participants?

That's literally when they had the meeting for the youth, specifically, that's what it was. Anybody could have came, but it was targeted as giving the youth a place to go to where they wouldn't be out at night protesting and getting assaulted. It was just insane.

Sounds like it.

Because it was our community and it's a place people are so familiar with, and B.R.P.D we're all familiar with, it kinda made the writing, not *easy*, because it's hard tackling and talking about it, but it made the imagery that much more powerful. Because it's not us imagining what it was like for Trayvon or for Mike Brown. We can go to this spot that this happened. And we can paint the picture. The place is there, it's available to us. It's so real, there's no amount of imagery that can apply to that specific concrete image of what actually happened and what actually occurred there.

Do you remember any specific people from *ET* that performed poems about the summer?

I really remember Donney probably because I heard his poems several different times on several different occasions.

"Timeline Trauma" popped out to me right away.

Yeah, yeah, *that's* my summer. And I spent a lot of time with Donney this summer, as well. That's basically walking through my everyday. So, Donney. Dre—Dre, his "Hands Up" Poem.

The "Hands Up, Amen" poem, right?

Right. I think it was written before the shooting, but after the shooting it embodied a new life. And Dre is just a fantastic performer, I just want to be him one day. But something about the after, after it happened, the implications felt so much more heavy. It went from not just a story, from something he experienced, and yeah it happened, and it ended okay, to, no, this is something that happens, and it doesn't always end okay. This isn't a happily ending story, and we see that right here in our community.

Like a whole new context was found?

Yeah, it opened another layer up to everyone else, it definitely gave it a new context. Who else? Shannon and Melissa because they were doing a lot of work for the protesting and all the organizing of everything. I remember them doing specific pieces that talked about that. Because, whenever you're writing, especially going through something that traumatizing, as organizing a whole protest for an entire community, and then having police forces combatting you every step of the way, that's what you write about because that's what you're experiencing and that's where most of your emotion is coming from.

II. The Flood Sucked and the Supernatural

JOSH: **Like a hurricane from so many different directions, too. Baton Rouge had natural disasters, community tragedies, personal—**

JAZMYNE: Yeah, it was literally each level of anything that was going on was conflicting. So, I guess I'll talk about the flood. So, the following week—no, it wasn't the following week after we came back, it was maybe two weeks after, that's when the flooding started. The sense of community, it wasn't, I don't wanna say strained, but it went from being okay, these are the pro-Black Lives Matter and the anti-Black Lives Matter, we are all trying to survive this flood together. We know it hit some places harder than others, and we know some communities and neighborhoods are more affected than others. But it was like, whoever you knew, any age, you checked on every single person in your contacts who you knew in this area regardless of where we stood before. It intensified that sense of community even more.

Do you think the flood brought people together?

Um... for a moment. For a moment. A brief, brief moment.

Do you think the Presidential election hindered the focus on the flood?

Yeah, so the flooding happened, and I know there were people who were saying different things about the amount of media coverage the flooding got in relationship to the Alton Sterling shooting. I didn't feel that that was important at the time. It was like everyone just get somewhere safe, and look out for your loved ones and everybody who's associated. I know in my house, my aunts were there, my grandparents were there, and we were all just happy that everybody was safe. I was texting everybody trying to make sure everyone was okay, offering everybody everything we had. My dad went out on his boat to my grandparents' neighborhood and rescued them and rescued neighbors.

On a boat in the streets?

Yeah, yeah. It's hard because he's taking pictures and sending videos and I'm like, I'm having a hard time believing these are the neighborhoods I played in and there's enough water to put a boat in.

Like, I didn't swim here.

Yeah, yeah, it's extreme, seeing sort of a man-made conflict in the police brutality issues and seeing the natural conflict in how it affects the community. We can't blame anyone for the flood. Depending on who you are or whatever side you want to blame for Alton Sterling's murder, that's one thing, but everybody just knows the flood sucked. And everywhere you went people are just asking each other "how are you, are you okay, how's the house coming along?" Because, you know, lots of people just lost everything. It definitely unified us all for a brief moment. As more time goes on it's like, okay, well, now back to business as usual.

The flood wreckage is still up in so many places, is still everywhere, even though it happened three months ago.

Yep, it's insane. Even now on my route to work there's still stuff that hasn't been picked up. There's still houses that nobody's gone into to start working on. It says a lot as to how bad it was. I don't think, no one expected that much to, that flood, really. Everybody was like, you know, it rains a lot, sometimes. Especially in the summer in Louisiana. There were some areas that everybody was like, Denham it's by the Amite river, but nobody thought it was going to get as bad as it did. And so everybody just kinda pulled together and made it through that. And then the next, was it the next week? It was, it was, I'm losing track of the time. Dates, I think it was—

Just go back to Donney's "Timeline."

Yeah, yeah, I really could, though. Either a few days later, or maybe the next week, is when we found out Kaiya passed. Everything was extremely, extremely touchy. We went from kinda strengthening community with Alton Sterling, but there's still the issue between community and the police. Then we went to the community kinda all coming back together. Then we have like the poetry community, and the McKinley High School community and the fashion club community, just all these people who knew Kaiya from everywhere and were already so broken from all the tragedies that have happened. It seems like there's nothing else that could be taken away from us. When, when we lost Kaiya—I'm saying when like it's over, you know—it kind of, it's like in each, in each different tragedy the community just kinda constricts. And it just gets tighter and tighter and tighter. Not as many people knew Kaiya as were aware of the Alton Sterling conflict or anything like that. Not only are we struggling with nature and struggling with man-made conflicts, we're back to something super, supernatural almost. Dealing with death and trying to figure out how that played a part in our daily lives. This summer pretty much changed everything we deal with forever because some people are still out of a home. Some people, that trust that was broken between the community and the police can't be rebuilt as easily as a home can. It's been, it's been intense. It's sort of like, it's like, like scratching the surface and then you just breaking through it and then breaking through it. Like the dolls you can take out of each other and it's, oh, surprise, another try.

Like those magic acts in the sleeve that never end.

Yeah, it just keeps going.

III. Just Existing

JOSH: Over the first half of the slam season, a lot of what you just said seems to have been expressed in the slam poems at ET. A lot of times community members are presenting these in-real-time topics to other community members. While it's a safe space in the performance of these issues, are the people you want to be hearing your issues in your audience? What do you think about that? The tendency for slam communities to be an echo

chamber, as, for example, law enforcement, who you might want to hear these topics, or politicians doing the damage, or other people that may not be fighting on behalf of *all* community members, that don't hear about it?

JAZMYNE: It's definitely a thing. Typically, the people who enjoy poetry slams are people that come to see the connection between emotion and everyday life. Until Tuesday, I'm going to class, going to work, just, existing.

Next, next, next.

Just existing. Doing what it takes to get by. In that one hour of my week or whatever that I take the time to write about how I'm feeling, sometimes that's reflective of what's going around me. And my feelings are rubbed off on my poems. The reason *Eclectic Truth* seems like such a safe space, which it is, is because most people in the room are sharing those feelings, because we're this community. Because if we're taking this time to write about our emotional reaction to what's happening in our community, typically we're seeing things from the same perspective. There isn't necessarily the kind of person who would necessarily benefit from hearing that. In my mind it's because, if we view it as an argument, and we say let's talk about Alton Sterling from an argument perspective, someone who's emotionally looking to, if we're gonna have emotional appeal, if we're gonna go to that pathos, they would probably already be pro-Black Lives Matter.

They're there for a reason, they know what they're getting into.

Yeah, if you think it's bad what happened to him, if it hurts you, if you're emotional about it, you're already going to be on a certain side. The people who aren't already feeling are the people who are trying to appeal to their logic, and make everything by the numbers, and not sit there and visualize it as a person's life. And just see it as a statistic, you know? It's those people who I don't think necessarily would have an appreciation for poetry. I've run across these people, I know people like that, they don't really care about emotional feelings. They're all about facts, facts, facts, here it is.

Facts.

Facts. Post-truths. They're all about that, so they're not really interested in hearing how people are personally affected. Existentialism, what is the importance of an individual? *Eclectic Truth* does pull a specific crowd. There's always at least one or two people that come every once in a blue moon, and they say something problematic or kind of violate the feel of the safe space, and they don't typically come back. But it's because it's not an argument space. This isn't the debate. This is everybody letting this off their chest. So if you're looking for an argument or if you're looking for someone to go back and forth you're not gonna find it there.

It's a different kind of dialogue?

Yeah, okay, we can talk back and forth about how we feel about it, but we're not going to run the numbers and say "well..." It's not gonna get loud and boisterous for that reason.

Let's understand each other rather than fix each other.

I'm not trying to one-up you on who's smarter or who's intelligent. I'm just telling you this is how I feel about it. And if that is undermined or undervalued I can't make you appreciate it. And that's happened, even at a situation like *Eclectic Truth* you can't control who comes in the door. And even if you could that would negate what it's suppose to do.

Why don't you ever see conservative poetry slams, you know what I mean? An alt-right poetry slam?

I know exactly what you mean! I do know problematic poets. Because I have friends who are poets and they have friends who *were* poets who get upset because they score well when they say problematic things. The judges are like, if I give you a "10" for saying something hurtful, how can I give someone a "10" for breaking down and telling their whole truth.

And those are just people saying problematic things, not necessarily people that are against a person's existence.

Because poetry is so raveled in your feelings and how you're personally affected about something, haha, and this sounds ridiculous, but if you're a privileged white male you can't make an emotional appeal to me about why you should continue to be privileged at the expense of someone else. Like, I'm not gonna feel bad for you.

What are you angsty about?

Like, "aw man, this sucks that I'm not as privileged as I could be and I wish I was more privileged and you were less privileged." It would sound weird, and I think it makes you hear how ridiculous it sounds. People write controversial poetry all the time, on both sides. Especially on issues of abortion. And there's been problematic Trans poems. It starts a conversation. It starts a conversation. And usually the problematic poems and the problematic people reassess how they say what they say. Is their truth harming somebody else's?

Yeah.

If you do get up there and you speak a poem that is hurtful to someone, how does that make you feel leaving the room? I think everybody deals with what are you willing to do to get the point, because it is slam poetry.

Because it's a game?

Yeah, because it is. But at the end of the day, if you do all this dirty underhanded stuff to get points you've kind of ruined the whole poetry aspect of the personal relationship and building this vulnerability and openness with an audience if you're just going to isolate people.

If you can't back up your argument in a poetry setting, what is that saying about your argument?

That's true. I've heard misogynistic poems that contributes to the patriarchy, congrats! Like I said, you discuss that, you talk to people. "Could there have been, I kinda felt this way about it." That's where we talk about it. If it made me feel uncomfortable, if it made me feel unsafe. That's how we discuss our issues, rather than someone who doesn't care about uncomfortability or how safe the space is, there is nothing to lose or gain from even walking into a poetry slam.

There's nothing at stake with those conversations.

IV. Competition and Validation

JOSH: How do you think the constraints of slam affects how poets such as yourself talk about the summer? For example, many more poems referencing the summer's events happened in the slam portion of *ET* rather than the open-mic portion.

JAZMYNE: It's complex. I'm gonna talk about *BNV* specifically. We went to *BNV* post-Alton Sterling. And we're just like this is sort of like a vacation away from home, get away from the chaos. Yeah, we'll talk about it, we're still concerned about our home but we're going to enjoy this time that we have to be together and we're gonna perform these poems that we prepared and we're going to represent our city. We're there with teams from other areas, that have a high track record for slam, so like they're known for being awesome slam teams. So they're there to win and we're like we're here to celebrate ourselves, celebrate our culture, celebrate our community.

If we win, cool, but—

If we win cool! Baton Rouge has never had a super duper awesome slam team. We weren't expecting to even do as well as we did—but, we did great. When you put a slam aspect to something and you have people who do go to extreme measures to try to get great scores, it's like, "congrats, you got a cool score, but you don't win a trophy for slamming." There's no real tangible thing that you ever get from winning a slam thing. Some competitions you can win money—maybe some cash, that's enough to get you back home. There's no super competitiveness I feel when it comes to slam, or there doesn't need to be. For some people there is. It's a game, if it wasn't, then I'd just read at an open-mic. Slam provides a sense of urgency. I have a limited amount of time to present this idea to you to tell you how this made

me feel. It puts a little bit more on the line. Because I don't have five minutes, necessarily, even though some slams have different time restraints. I'm also trying to not only make the audience feel something I'm trying to convince the judges of something also. So there's a certain amount of, I feel, performance bravado or whatever that goes on when I'm just reading to something in front of a group of people or I'm reading something for an open-mic. But when I'm sitting in front of judges and I'm like, okay, you're gonna score me on how I feel about *this*? Okay, I take it as a challenge.

Like, you're judging me on my feelings?

You're judging me on my feelings?! Well, now here I go. It's always depending on who you talk to how important the slam thing is. A lot of times the super successful people are like, "oh, a slam isn't that important, I've just won 12 of them." I'm not one of those people. I like slam because it's a game, but it doesn't need to be super competitive. I don't win a Super Bowl ring for walking out as a member of a great slam team! I win the experience. I got to write. I got to be in this space with these people, and I got to share my truth, and people sort of validated me for it. The scores do validate, in a sense, moreso than an open mic. There were some politically-charged poems in the open-mic, for sure, but there's a climate in the slam community, nationally, internationally, that is centered around political poems. It just seems that's where you do 'em, they just score really well at every stage just because everyone knows what you're talking about, we're all on the same page. Even with personal poems, they do well, too. But right now, just because of how things are charged politically, and everything, it's super heightened. I think this election has made it even wilder. We did all this, now everybody's gonna have a Trump poem.

Who's gonna talk about this in the most provocative way, now.

Yeah. Because the world keeps throwing crappy stuff at us. So, okay, now I've gotta keep writing my way through it because otherwise the world's gonna eat me up! This past couple weeks I've just been doing open-mic if I've been going. It's a sense of urgency when you're in a slam. And when you do the slam there's usually three rounds so you have more flexibility, I can do a three minute political poem *and* a three minute personal poem.

To show more range?

Yeah, you play around with your writing even more.

V. We Haven't Forgotten

JOSH: Now that Trump's Presidency is real, do you think that starts to wash away the recent events from the conversation, from the headlines?

JAZMYNE: I feel like nationally, definitely. I was looking at some slam poets' Twitters or whatever after the election, and they were like "oh, well, now everybody get ready to get "10"'s, everybody's gonna have a Trump poem." Because apparently like back in the day everybody back in the day everybody had a Bush poem. It was just a thing that was before my time. I think definitely on the national scene that's what's gonna happen. I think here, locally, yeah, people are going to be writing about Trump, but we haven't forgotten that the flood happened. We haven't forgotten about Alton. Especially when the Department of Justice comes out with the results and all of that happens afterwards. We haven't forgotten anything. These are still key parts in our community. People haven't even gotten back in their homes yet, you know?

The rest of the country starts moving on, but the community is still there. Nothing has been fixed.

Even if all of the slam community moves on to Trump pieces, like I said, people are still not in their homes. We still haven't found out whether or not a police officer is going to be indicted for the murder of Alton Sterling. These are things looming in our futures.

And even if they are indicted, what then? Does that fix anything or it just another band-aid?

Right, right. These are things I feel like we are going to be writing about, definitely, for the next coming year. And then we can maybe look back a year from now and say has the climate changed? Are we now writing a different type of poem? Versus right now, we can kind of be blending and meshing both. I definitely think if you went last week, if you go this week, it's gonna be a lot of Trump poems. Just because that's what's new. But it's still part of who we are, it's still affecting us. And it's going to continue to going forward.

My first week here *ET* was in the upstairs gallery space, and since then it's moved down to the *Firehouse Gallery*, with slam poems surrounded by industrial-looking antique firetrucks. Have you thought about that environment? Slamming about the floods surrounded by fire?

I've never thought about that, actually. The first *Eclectic Truth* I went to was also in the [upstairs] gallery. It's not usually, the firetruck room is where it normally happens. It's just that if there actually is a meeting with the firemen then we have to go upstairs.

I've seen a couple firefolks before a show once.

That's just the *Arts Council*. I don't know why it has those old firetrucks in there. You can say those were art, but also, that's, that's a truck!

That's true.

Upstairs there's all the photography, and there's paintings, so it feels like a more artisty vibe. Then you come down the stairs and it's a room full of firetrucks, and there's like firefighter gear over here. I never thought of a symbolic meaning to it just because I knew the story behind it.

They are there in the background. From an outside perspective coming in, it's like there's an authority over what can be said here. An invisible hegemony.

Ohh, that's true. I think I've heard Desiree mention before, "don't touch the firetrucks, they're patriarchy and egos and you don't wanna upset that balance" or whatever. It's subtle, because you're not supposed to touch. If anything went wrong we can potentially probably be thrown out of that space.

It is symbolic.

It is. We still have to follow these rules set up by, you know. Don't get too crazy. You can say what you want but don't do what you want. I've never thought about that. I was introduced to it as the place with the firetrucks. There have been other events that I've been to that were there, it's like, oh, they got firetrucks in the room? Okay, that sounded weird, but I'll go, I guess that's just the way it is. Once you get use to it you don't question it as much, so I never thought about it.

VI. Blue Among All the Red

JOSH: **It seems to me if you want to feel what a community is feeling you go to their poetry slams. Taking in consideration, voting percentages, for example, yes, Baton Rouge is bluer than the rest of Louisiana, but how reflective of Baton Rouge is what goes on in *Eclectic Truth*?**

JAZMYNE I think definitely for Baton Rouge it's pretty spot on. As far as Louisiana, especially Northern Louisiana, it's pretty rural, rura—that's a word I can't say.

Rural, *rural*. It is a hard word.

It is. I don't wanna say that's why they don't have poetry communities, but I don't think that kind of culture or environment or safe space is something they recognize there. New Orleans has a pretty dope poetry community, a pretty cool poetry community.

Is it because those areas don't want to expose themselves to critique?

One of my friends brought up this one thing, do we need to keep having spaces for people to keep saying the same 'ol things we're hearing over and over again? If Louisiana's a red state,

would we need a bunch of super conservative poetry slams? Like, nah, that'd be one on every corner. Yeah, we get it. So this is a space for, I don't wanna say unpopular opinions—

Marginalized opinions?

Yeah, marginalized opinions. We know half the population is reasonable and not problematic. I think it doesn't reflect it, and that's why it exists. Because if it was reflective of what all of Louisiana was feeling, we could be like "cool, we're normal, we can just stay at home on Tuesdays, there's no need for me to be writing about how I feel because everyone else feels the same way, too." There's a sense of comfort when you go to *Eclectic Truth*. Like Alejandro, she's from Plaquemine, there's people from pretty faraways out, and these are the only people you hear who are actually promoting your safety and saying, you know, it's okay for you to feel how you are or be who you are or to love who you love. It says a lot if I'm looking on a map Baton Rouge is blue among all of the red and New Orleans is blue among all the red and these are where the poetry communities are thriving. That just kind of makes sense.

As if it's safer to talk about it in these areas because there are people who feel and see what you're seeing in between all the red?

Yeah. It's interesting from a community level. From a statewide level it makes sense. But if you go up north and their poetry communities are so different, I feel like. They're super enormous. So there's almost, like I don't wanna say a hierarchy because that would sound mean—but it, like it is. Everybody is in the poetry community, but these people are actually like slam poets and these people come for fun. Whereas like *Eclectic Truth* it's like everybody reads, just have fun. When you go up north to places that are considered a little more liberal, there's the larger communities, but there's also sort of a separation between the actual community and the people who are like this is craft, this is what I love to do.

I wonder if it's distance to community struggles that influences that?

It's a whole thing about the arts movement and how the south deals with stuff like that versus how they deal with stuff up north. We recognize that. At *BNV*, places like Philly brought like 50 people to *Brave New Voices*, and we're like we can only afford to bring six. It's just us y'all! And only five people are competing. It just shows the resources and the amount of importance up north I'm sure, I know they invest more money in arts and extra-curricular programs than we do down here, so that makes it more important that we have it. Because we're like we have to have this, that's all we have!

With a mini-squad I imagine you feel a bit like the underdog?

Yeah, that was definitely a thing. I think it's not reflected here and that's why it's so essential. I mean you go to other places where it is reflected, and they're like "yeah, poetry is cool, but we're also super cool in other stuff, too." We met a lot of poets from big cities like Chicago and D.C. and all that and they're like "yeah, we do poetry, we're also actresses and we dance and,

you know, we are actual activists and we're basically senators already." And we're like, "we're kids, and we write!" Because it's just like we're scrapping up whatever we can from our community, you know? We're not given a lot so it's like, okay, we're going to put all our heart into this writing even though that's the opposite of what's going on around us.

VII. We Couldn't Vote

JOSH: **How would you define yourself as a poet? As a person? Can you separate those?**

JAZMYNE: Definitely a poet. Some poets don't consider themselves poets. But I write. I slam. I'm a poet. I definitely douse myself in intersectionality. I didn't realize, necessarily, how much people value different branches over the other. Like people are like, you're feminist, so focus on that. I'm like I can't be a feminist and not be Black.

You can't separate the two.

Yeah. I can't separate. And that's definitely something I touch on in my writing. I feel like I write a lot of sad poems. I haven't been, what's the word, diagnosed with anything, but I live in a tragic place, I feel like. Tragic family, tragic nature, tragic community. I'm not afraid to write about that. A lot of what I'm doing right now with my writing is kind of reflected on who I want to explain myself to be to a younger me, if that makes sense? Because I'm on the cusp of youth poet meets adult poet, I want to write where I influence the youth poets. You can write, and you can feel this way, and you can be this person, and you can be comfortable, and you can say these things, and nobody can stop you. So I'm trying to write as a mentor for youth.

Almost like if I thought this way at 13, how my life would have changed?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I've always loved writing, but as far as like me saying I'm gonna write this and I'm gonna perform this in front of people, that's just not something I really got into until I was 16, 17. There's youth who are like 14 years old and they're tackling some of this, and I'm like do it! Go for it. This is who you are. You are capable of doing everything you set your mind to.

Like, don't censor yourself?

Right, and my thing is, because I'm so young, for a while the adult scene intimidated me. But I'm like, why? Maybe I'm not as adult as some of the adults in the room—

But you're fresher than them.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and there's a lot of this wave of slam poetry that's coming from people who are viral poets. People who have like 300,000 views on *Button*, and those people are like,

extremely successful. And I looked those people up, and they're like, "I'm 19." I'm like, cool, I can do that. Not like I can do that, but it's possible, you know? People are taking time to listen to what the younger group of adults, what millennials are saying as far as what the world we want to see is like and what the world actually is. I think I'm writing to a younger audience. This is okay, be yourself, enjoy yourself, love yourself, treat yourself in a positive way. But also to an older audience. Like, hey, I'm here, the world is kinda trash, but, you know, I would like to see it get better, please?

Please? Maybe?

If you don't mind it? I can't quite be a senator or a councilmember or anything like that, but can you listen, maybe, if you are? Anybody with influence? It's easy with the group of poets I'm around now, especially in college, we're all 18, 19, we can vote on stuff now, okay, we can kinda have something to do with this. But with youth poets who are like 17 and 16, I'm telling them, yeah, yeah, you have a voice, your voice is important and it matters. And they're like we just elected a President that affects our lives and we didn't do anything, we couldn't vote. It's like a balance between knowing what I want and saying it, and knowing that I can't necessarily take steps to make it happen currently because I'm restricted by how old I am. So a lot of what this younger group of poets is doing, is saying, they're writing sorta ranty poems like, this is wrong, this is wrong, address it, please. Because that's all we really have the power to do right now. And it is powerful, because youth poets have 100,000 views on *Button*, it's just a matter of who's hearing it. Is anybody being moved by it? Some people are.

And sometimes it affects folks in different ways. It's hard to get the stats on what these slam poems actually do.

Yeah, how effective this actually is. Who heard this to make this happen.

Did that go into how you wrote your summer-related poems for *ET*?

A lot of what I was performing at the early fall ones were just drafts. It wasn't even necessarily I'm gonna go and compete and win with this. It was just like this is what I have right now because this is how I'm coping and dealing with what's around me. I have a flood one, too—I just haven't.

Poetry of and Interview with Desireé Dallagiacamo

For most of fall 2016, Desireé Dallagiacamo functioned as the host of *Eclectic Truth*, guiding the vibe and flow of the weekly slam. Serving dual roles as host and sacrificial poet during week five of the slam season, Desireé's poem to one of the youths she mentored, "For

Kaiya, Hallelujah,” received all 10s from community members. Desireé is also from California, moving to Baton Rouge a decade before our interview, and we seemed to bond immediately over our mutual status as southern transplants. We have maintained a relationship through attendance of slams, invited performance opportunities that benefit us mutually (such as youth poets using the HopKins Black Box theatre space at LSU, or me providing formative feedback before their national competitions), and we remain connected through various social media platforms. Desireé, 26 at the time of our interview, has gone on to publish a book of poetry, *Sink*, that grapples with the intersections of family, mental health, and womanhood. Desireé also hosts *The Heart of It Writing Retreat*, a body positivity group called *Your Body is a Good Body*, and was the coach of the 2017 team that won *Brave New Voices* nationals on behalf of Baton Rouge, and in honor of Kaiya. Desireé and Donney actively mentored and coached Baton Rouge youth poets during my “Red Stick” residence. To me, their willingness to mentor and give back to where they live says much more about their character than anything I could pen about them.

After observing Desireé at *Eclectic Truth* and with others over the first five weeks of the season, I knew her regular role as host combined with her history as a Baton Rouge transplant and time on the national slam poetry scene would be incredibly generative. My interview with Desireé took place at 3:00 PM on Monday, November 19, 2016, around week twelve of the slam season. As an important note, all of my official interviews with *Eclectic Truth* star groupers took place following Donald Trump’s electoral-college fueled election to the Presidency on November 8. Desireé agreed to meet me at Highland Coffees, right across from LSU on Chimes Street. Weeks before this meeting, Desireé agreed to send me a draft of her poem, “For Kaiya,

Hallelujah.” In our interview, we tackled ten ethnographically-informed areas of conversation: *I. The Roots of the Readings; II. Framing and Reflecting Baton Rouge; III. The Game is Complicated; IV. Politics of Place and Space and City and Segregation; V. Conflating Race and Class, Water and Fire; VI. Shifting Narratives in a Time of Trump; VII. Hosting: An Exercise in Energy and Efficiency; VIII. Community, Chemistry, and Flexibility; IX. Tangible People and Talking Points; and X. “Good” White People and Bubbles.*

Poetry: “For Kaiya, Hallelujah” by Desireé Dallagiacamo

On July 22nd, the Baton Rouge poetry community lost one of our youth, Kaiya, to an unexpected death. She never returned home from the Brave New Voices Youth Poetry Festival. I was her mentor. This poem is for our Baton Rouge youth poets. For Petrouchka.

My friend Anna says we cannot write someone’s life into something as simple as a poem.

I say, I cannot write you into a poem, because you always have been one—
The best poem your mother ever wrote. Plucked from her body and heaven said,
yes, this is the one.

You, lay in the soft dirt now. Maybe, in a land made entirely
of your bone and sinew, up grows a new kind of tree
with your wild blue hair— sprouted from your new body. Here,
a new world blooms and it’s the one that has always lived in you.

I have so many memories of you, & how nostalgia has hardly touched them at
all.

Just earlier it seems, your hands offer up a mango from your Grandmother’s
tree,
split in 2, we share, we eat with our teeth and our whole mouths.
& then blink. Gone.

When you died, when your mother the phone, said she was holding your hand,
I wept in a cottage, somewhere on the Australian coast, alone, for days, days.
An unknown continent, this new world without you in it.
Walked in the Pacific barefoot and brought you with me—

though it was you that walked me to that place, vast and blue.
there, tasted the salt on my lips and somehow it all ended in laughter.

Which poem will it be, that lies the grief of you in the soil with your body?
This thought, makes joy and misery neighbors in me.

After your funeral I slept the whole day.
wrote your name in the sky.

Kaiya,

Kaiya,

Hallelujah.

I will not say your name and summon someone else's God.

Whose god was it, that ripped you from us without a word of why?

Whose selfish god took you from us in a blink?

For you are the God here. No religion or myth paints you as holy
as you already were.

I close my eyes. Hear your heart tucked in my own. See your face,
your wild blue hair. Your smile, a small prayer I remember each day—

Your face does not belong to a God or casket neither now nor any day—
but belongs to our memory, our blood.

The other night, I sat at a dinner table with your mother
and I read your poems to her. Each word, you live in.
Each word, a prayer.

I say your name and in there lies a god I can believe in

Hallelujah

Hallelujah

Kaiya, sweet Kaiya, your heart, always in mine.

Hallelujah

Hallelujah

Hallelujah

Interview with Desireé Dallagiacamo, November 19, 2016

I. The Roots of the Readings

DESIREÉ: Xero is our boss, of our youth spoken word organization, *Forward Arts*. In LA, there's an organization called "Get Lit. We teach workshops in high schools and middle schools, spoken word workshops. We also do a lot of afterschool programming. My job with *Forward Arts* is basically the design and partial implementation of the programming.

JOSH: **A lot of curriculum-related stuff, then, too?**

Oh, yeah.

That's a lot of what I've been doing during the summers, too. Performance and interpretation curriculum for high school speech camps.

So, yeah, we do all kinds of stuff, too. The organizations that are bigger, in bigger cities that do what we do are like *Urban Word* in New York City, *Youth Speaks* in San Francisco, and *Young Chicago Authors* in Chicago. Are you familiar with any of those organizations?

I've heard of *Get Lit*, I'm from that area. *Youth Speaks*, I've seen some of their work online in videos.

We're basically like the small Baton Rouge town version of that. When I moved to Baton Rouge I started going to the *Eclectic Truth* readings and met Xero who at the time was Program Director for *Forward Arts*, which was then called *WordPlay*. Anna West was, is our founder. Are you familiar with *Louder than a Bomb*?

Mm hmm, yep.

So Anna West founded *Louder than a Bomb*. She's from Baton Rouge. So she moved back to Baton Rouge after working for *Young Chicago Authors* and founded *WordPlay*. Xero was the first staff member. And then Donney was hired about maybe eight or nine years ago? And then, when I moved here I was just here for a year of service and then Anna asked me if I would stay on, essentially, as a paid intern. So I did another Americorps year with Louisiana Delta Service Corps which is a regional Americorps program and they place Americorps members in partner organizations. And so Anna applied for funding with that and then I stuck around for that. And originally, just read at *Eclectic Truth*, then became part of *The Poetry Alliance*, which is the organization that helps curate *Eclectic Truth*. And then just kind of stuck around. I lived in New Orleans for a few years between then and now, but still stayed really involved in the Baton Rouge scene. So yeah my full-time job Director of Programming for *Forward Arts* and then a lot of community work is with *Eclectic Truth*.

How many people are part of *The Poetry Alliance*?

Right now there's six of us. Our most has maybe been like 12, but right now there's six.

Is it mainly a community-based organization? Are y'all paid?

It's not paid. We, for a while, were filing for non-profit status and we were just like, eh, it's not that serious, we're having a reading. We are just a group of community members. It's comprised of folks that stuck around. In order to be a member of the *Poetry Alliance* you have to be pretty active for six months or a year and then also want to be part of this organization. So we meet, we put on the reading, and we book features to come through, and we do different community events, and partner with different organizations, and are kind of a liaison for when different groups want poets. Stuff like that.

That's exactly why, when I moved here a few months back, the first thing I was looking for was a type of community like this, you know?

Yeah yeah.

I was like alright, I'll gravitate toward y'all, y'all are providing space for folks to do the work they need to do.

When did you start getting involved in spoken word? Was it in Iowa or LA?

So it was in Los Angeles. My trajectory with it has always been mining from spoken word and poetry, and then putting it out in different formats, re-mediating. Started off in theater, collegiate forensics—not sure if you're familiar with that?

Yeah, a lot of folks in the slam community do. It's a similar trajectory.

They're both argumentative performance, in the end.

Yeah, yeah.

The last four years in Iowa I hosted *INK! Performance Slam* at Octopus Bar on College Hill, right next to UNI. We took a lot of poetry slam tropes and mashed it up with a variety show.

And that was in, Iowa?

Iowa, yep. More recently, I've been touring shows across the country. Like, *The Deported: A Reality Show!*, where we play three immigrants trying to come into the country, but we have to go on a reality show to earn our spot because there's a quota, and make the audience choose who gets to stay.

Have you ever seen *Black Mirror*? There was one episode that's similar to that.

Haven't seen it yet, it's on my queue!

II. Framing and Reflecting Baton Rouge

JOSH: I originally came to *ET* to hang out, to perform stuff. So, I'm navigating my performance style as I'm here, too, which I like. But, my attending *ET* also coincided with an ethnography class I'm taking—so I wasn't planning to do a project on the subject of what a slam community does with the events of the recent summer. But, the first six to eight weeks of being here I noticed over half the slam poems were related to the summer events here in Baton Rouge, it was like a reaction to everything that was happening, on stage, for everyone present to witness.

DESIREÉ: Yeah, there was so much, there was so much.

There was Sterling, there were the police deaths—

One of our students died.

Kaiya, yeah.

Yeah, Kaiya.

Her passing added another heavy layer to the struggles and tragedies, natural disasters, already consuming those who were impacted by her.

Yeah, yeah.

My first two weeks in Baton Rouge framed my observations. My first week was the Alton Sterling murder. Then I went back to work in Florida. I come back, my second week here is the floods.

Oh gosh, Josh!

That was my first introduction to this area. Now I'm seeing everyone else's reactions to all that through interviews, conversations, and poetry, to event I saw but I didn't *feel* because of my novel proximity, do you know what I mean?

Yeah, mmhmm.

I've dabbled in ethnography before with an LGBTQH Toastmaster's community in Long Beach. And like forensics speech, slam poetry is another competitive public speaking performance advocacy venue for people looking to perform. I'm not sure where this project is gonna go, but I'm curious as to how communities react to recent tragedies and how they carry over into the future, and then how performance plays into that. And I really appreciate you taking the time to chat with me.

Totally, totally.

I feel like you've been the main host, for the most part, over the first half of the slam season.

Mm hmm, yeah.

The other people I'm interviewing are because they had specifically Baton Rouge-related poetry.

Right, right. It's crazy the difference between locally and nationally. For me I knew, but you can't really—I kinda watched things unfold with Ferguson and Baltimore and so on and so forth, but when it's, like, your community it's just so different, it's so different.

It hits home?

Yeah, and it's not even that it's more intense or the same feelings, it's totally different feelings. It was back to back to back. I've been doing slam for six years and I was pretty active for a solid, maybe, four years, and I just don't really, I read in the open-mic, but I don't really slam that often. A big part of that is because I spend so much of my time teaching, so I do read in the open-mic, but I don't really slam that much. It is interesting to go into the night being a spectator, right, because sometimes some of us will bring poems and we don't know if we're gonna read it. But for the most part I don't even come with a poem anymore. It's a similar thing of watching, like it's interesting for you as someone who has seen consistently the show and been able to see it in such a poignant way is pretty interesting.

What I've noticed from *ET*, it seems more united than a typical slam gathering I have attended in the past.

Hmm...

Not like that one dude we were talking about from Chico—

Haha, right, right.

It's dedicated, there's tradition to *ET*, there's a before, an after.

Yeah, yeah.

And I've noticed it kind of functions like a support group. Here is the baggage I'm holding onto, and there's also positivity coming from this side. While it functions like a support group—and I've heard this from other interviewees, too—the people who may need to be hearing this message aren't necessarily hearing this message. While that's a good thing, because it allows for a safe space to talk, what are your thoughts about that message getting out, or who you're performing it to?

It's like preaching to choir.

Is the *Eclectic Truth* community actually reflective of Baton Rouge?

The first thing that comes to mind is the election, right, and how those of us who are not conservative were in some sense shocked but in the other sense reminded that we do live in bubbles, right? That's something I've been thinking about the past week is how much of a bubble we all live in. Like my family is from California and I don't even think I have a single family member that voted for Trump. My partner's family's from Oklahoma and we go to their house and it's like, Trump Train. How that I think relates to your question is, I think that we've gotta sometimes ask ourselves, with *Eclectic Truth* specifically, are we a support group, or are we an activist group, or are we somewhere in between? It sounds like you travel quite a bit, and I perform and teach in colleges and universities in different parts of the world, and some communities have a similar—like, have you been to *Da Poetry Lounge* in LA?

Once, and I've read a few academic articles on that site, and I know Javon Johnson through the forensics family tree.

Shihan runs that reading, and that was Javon Johnson's, he represented that reading. Very big, competitive, they make final stage all the time. And when I slammed with *Slam New Orleans* we took third at nationals, and prior to that they had won nationals two years in a row. It was like we were definitely the poets, and there was definitely an audience. It was not like at *Eclectic Truth*, where pretty much any given person is gonna read. There's really not many people that come and don't read, and most people that can stay through the whole show. And the people that don't, we have a lot of folks that only stay for half the show because they have this other thing, but even that dedication of I'm gonna come for half the show even though I have this other thing is pretty cool. Because we've never won a national title, we have some individuals that have had some success, but collectively there's nothing really tangible or career-wise to gain from coming to *Eclectic Truth* like there is with *Slam New Orleans* or somewhere like *Da Poetry Lounge*. I think the vast demographic of Baton Rouge somewhat comes together at *Eclectic Truth*. But sometimes I feel like man I wish people that didn't share our beliefs would hear this, right, and sometimes I think man a lot of these folks spend their whole days with people who don't believe. If you are somewhere like California it might be different. But somewhere like Louisiana that has been red pre- and post-Bill Clinton, for those people to be able to come to a safe, liberal space, which, like Louisiana can't even get behind a pronoun. Louisiana can't even get behind interracial marriage. We're stuck in the 20's, what's going on?

Right after Trump won, the day after, I had this older Trump supporter dude at the Spanish Town market call me all these West Side Story slurs, like "dago" and "wop." I was like, at least get your slurs right, this ain't the 50s, shark—or is it?

Come on! I'm sorry that happened to you, Josh.

I pass, though, and I'm a taller male, so I do understand that positionality-wise I can take these dated insults.

But where are the cameras?! Even somewhere like Spanish Town, even liberals aren't that liberal here. I come from a family, my mom is gay, all of my nieces and nephews are at least bi-racial. Because of my insulation of my privilege and my position and being able to insulate myself with folks like Donney and so on and so forth, moments like this remind me of the importance of a safe space like *Eclectic Truth* that says you can come, you can say what you want, you can be who you want, and we won't, we won't... call you dated slurs.

Like, what is this?

And I think that's so important. I don't know if you've noticed this, but my time in Baton Rouge, moreso than other places I've been in the world, you don't go to a lot of spaces where there's anybody but white people or anybody but black people. Even, like, where we are now. And where we spend most of our days it's usually 95% one of the two things. When I first started going to *Eclectic Truth* I was the only white person there. We were at the *M Bar* on Third Street and I was consistently the only white person there. Being a part of it for seven, almost eight years now, it ebbs and flows as scenes across the country do. But, regardless of just the flattened identity of black and white, there are people who are exploring their pronouns, their gender, their sexuality, their political beliefs. And someone like Eric is incredibly important to our reading. And someone like Foye, I don't know if you've had a chance to meet Foye? He's 70-something?

Oh, yeah, I saw him at that one reading. Week seven or something?

He use to come all the time, but he stopped coming because his house flooded. He use to come every single week. Foye is 75, I think, has dementia, and the only thing he does is write poems for the reading and reads two new poems every single week. And his wife Gloria makes paper cranes and leaves them on the front of the table and she told us the only thing she does is come to *Eclectic Truth*, the only thing he does is write poems for *Eclectic Truth*, and he can't remember most other things in his life but he always remembers this. And whenever I kind of get into a funk about our reading, I always just think about specifically Foye and Eric, and how a space like that is, they don't have spaces where they can just be whoever they want. Foye and Eric are usually both at least somewhat problematic, but the audience is always like they're figuring it out, and the audience is willing to figure it out with them. Whereas some readings are super cutthroat where they won't let you be that or do that. I think *Eclectic Truth* does a good job of not flattening someone into just one identity, or one personhood, like Eric and Foye. I think that was a long-winded answer to your question.

I echo that as well. It's a supportive community, but it's also pushing you to get better as a person, but not that you have to do it this way. A balance between personhood and the entity of the organization.

Yeah, yeah.

III. The Game is Complicated

JOSH: How do you think the vehicle of slam, that three minute time limit, that urgency, with something at stake, how do you think that might influence how poets have slammed about the summer's issues?

DESIREÉ: I could probably point to most individuals and say it slightly different. Someone like Foye and Eric who usually get giant time penalties they don't even think about it, right? But some folks do, like Toiryan does. Toiryan is very slam-oriented, is very about the slam. Melissa is also very about the slam. Slam does change the way we write and process, and when you start to know your judges and you start to know your audience you definitely can subconsciously or consciously start to write towards that.

Towards the game?

Exactly. For some folks that means a lot for other folks it doesn't. Toiryan and Melissa are good examples of who the slam means a lot to, in different ways. ... And I think it can be problematic when white people slam with poems about race, poems about white privilege. I think they should be read, I think they should be read on the open mic, I think they should be read in ways that disqualify you from the slam, but I can't quite get behind reading it in high stakes slam for the intent of winning.

How do you play the game with real issues that are not your issues?

How are you going to use your privilege to talk about your privilege to win? Sometimes we see this a lot more when men write about women in the slam. And I think it's hard, right, it's a hard line, because people should be writing about these things, they should be processing these things, but I don't think they should be using it to their own advantage.

But how do you define that? Am I saying you are doing this because I perceive it this way?

Right, and it's complicated. And I don't want to police your processing. This is the first step for you. And I think that's a lot of what I go back to.

What signals that to you? Say someone from a different positionality is talking about an issue. I cross that, too, say working on a project with students about Black Wall Street, or Trans-focused issues. How do you gauge that when you're watching it? How do you determine if it's authentic, or gameified? Can you?

I think it's hard for me, I'm exceptionally critical. More so than a lot of people. I did very well in national slam, and have performed and taught all over the place, and see it all the time. Part of it is functioned out of fear. I think I teach and practice write what you know, but what if nobody in your community is writing about issues of people that are absent? If you are in an all-white reading and nobody is talking about their whiteness, there is probably an issue, right? Or if you're in an all-white reading and everyone is slamming about their privilege, is that effective or not? Part of me says yeah! You should be, because you're not slamming against people-of-color, because you're all-white. Well, at *Eclectic Truth* it might be different because you don't really get anything from this. I would say 80% of the time the slam means nothing, it's just formality. Sometimes it does mean something, but most of the time it doesn't. I think that people are processing, and people are working it out, like we said earlier. Working it out in either one of those forums I think is fine because we're all there. It is a bubble. We don't really draw a hard line in our slam, we don't have a huge audience, there's not really a lot at stake. If someone gets a lot of success by doing that over and over and over again, there's a poet who has won lots of national titles and individual titles, there are quite a few, but one comes to mind that I take quite a bit of an issue with because he's constantly writing about women's issues, and he's constantly speaking for women, and using women essentially as props. By writing poems about these women but using their personhood to his own advantage, right? When he's doing it on a bigger scale where there's money and titles and all that stake, I think it means something different than at a small local reading. And if there's anywhere that you can do it should be at a small local reading. I think the goal is just to get people to think about it. To think about the complexities of that, and then to go from there. Because if you're not even thinking about the fact that it's problematic to slam about something about women, or about your white privilege, then you don't know any better. But if you're thinking about it and then either making that decision or not, that's where it becomes a point of conversation, where it becomes important. Basically, it's complicated.

How do you ride that line, but at the same time acknowledge you're riding that line? One of the lines I must ride while coaching my performance students is guiding how to coach positionality-based traumatic pieces, when I have not had those experiences. Doesn't necessarily mean you shouldn't, just *how* can we do this ethically to not re-inscribe trauma?

Exactly, we see a lot of that at *Brave New Voices*. And also as somebody who works in a city that is 50% black, and works in public schools that is 90% black, both of my co-workers are black men, how do I as a white woman function in that space? Like you were saying, as a coach, as a teacher—our whole *BNV* team was five young black women and I was their coach, is it better or worse than Donney being their male, black coach? It's complicated. One thing I have been thinking about a lot is how so many social justice endeavors just get flattened. It's not as simple as people can say in a Tweet. And right now, for me, being in the adult spoken word scene, being in the adult slam scene, and being in social justice circles, there is such a want to point fingers and to say this person can't do because this and this and this, and this person should do this because this and this and this, and I think everything is just so complicated. Everything is way more complicated than we have time to dialogue about, than we can put on

social media, that we can put into a three-minute poem, that we can score. And that's something I've been thinking about a lot lately.

IV. Politics of Place and Space and City and Segregation

JOSH: The main space y'all perform in is the *Firehouse Gallery*. Among the first eight weeks with so many poems being about law enforcement or treatment or militarization of police, there's been the backdrop being surrounded by a law enforcement-adjacent organization, but it's never really mentioned, but it's always there. The only time it's mentioned are when the host talks about the "Keep Off" signs. Have you noticed that?

DESIREÉ: Yeah, yeah, mm hmm. And the fact that it's technically a museum. So when we've had the reading upstairs, which I think we've had once—

Yeah, it was the first one I went to, in September.

It's because the firepeople have meetings downstairs, it's mostly white dudes. Donney's brother is a firefighter, his older brother, what's his older brother's name?

Mr. Rose.

Haha, yeah, that's Donney's bargaining chip with the firefighters when they show up. I think firepeople are interesting because do firepeople inflict institutional racism or misogyny in the way police do? I don't know?

You see cops, you see fire trucks.

Firepeople don't have guns.

Still part of that brotherhood.

Exactly, exactly. The woman who runs the *Arts Council* is a woman, and her righthand person is a woman of color, and they hate the firepeople. The firefighters who own that space are the worst. One of the firefighters showed up to our reading, sat in the back, and she said I'm sorry that happened. I think space is interesting in Baton Rouge, because there's not a lot of it. There's not a lot of performance space. And the venues we've been in, we were in this bar, I don't think it's a bar, it's right next to the cookie place, it use to be a bar, it's called *Northgate*. It was called *The Library. N Bar*, which is now a different bar, which is on Third Street. We were also in the McKinley Alumni Center and those spaces never worked with us for longer than maybe a couple years. *Northgate* was the worst, *N Bar* we were there for a couple years, McKinley Alumni Center nobody came to the reading. And I think it's a question of the master's tools, maybe? Could we have an autonomous space? That would be ideal. Where can we have a

reading where people will have us, where people will respect us? And this has been the space that does that, and it's no thanks to the firepeople. It's all those women who have gotten us into that space. And that's something to think about, how radical can we be in Baton Rouge? How can we use what's given to us to offer that space to disenfranchised folks? It is an old firestation, upstairs is the museum, and a lot of folks aren't spoken word poetry friendly.

From an audience-spectator perspective, the backdrop is kind of cool, abstract. It's not a typical poetry slam coffee shop. It's like a show, in a way.

I'm actually not super fond of the space. I really like small spaces I love it. I love when we have a tiny space that's just packed out. I don't wanna be there, but there are a lot of perks to it. We pay a very low rate, but that will probably expire soon. And Donney and I we always know that's on the horizon and so we're always on the hunt for a new space. And maybe one day we'll get to a position where we can have an autonomous space. I think it's a cool, charming place, maybe, but it's also, it use to be really dirty, no one ever upkept it. Our stuff would get stolen from in there. They would not be there in time to unlock the building, or they wouldn't have it set up like we needed it. Or we'd get there and there'd be a meeting there. As I'm sure you know, performance art just is not the—especially when it looks Black, or it looks woman, or it looks queer. Baton Rouge is so gaudy. Baton Rouge is so cut and dry. Baton Rouge is so white. Or rather, the powers in Baton Rouge is so white.

Before coming to work at LSU, I looked in the demographics in the city, and noticed how different the city is from the campus.

I don't know if you've ever been to McKinley High School?

No, but I know that's where Toiryan went.

Yeah, Toiryan went there. I want to show you a map really quickly, something that's been brought to my attention.

Sure.

[Shows map on phone.] So McKinley High School is right by LSU. So, McKinley is right here. We're right here, McKinley is right here. So we're like, maybe like a quarter of a mile?

Yeah.

But if you notice you have to go *all* the way around to get there. These are the LSU Lakes, which are almost directly backed up to McKinley. But all these are dead ends, and so you have to go up and around. You can't even go around this way, you have to go up and out and around, around around around around to get there.

Oh, wow.

And it's a half a mile, a quarter of a mile maybe, but it's really like a two-mile drive. And McKinley is a very Black neighborhood, right next to us, and I teach at McKinley sometimes, and if you go there it's the only part of town I get lost in because there's no way to get in and out and it was literally built to be a ghetto. It's between here and downtown, and LSU was built two miles from downtown, and then all this space was filled in, and was already on its route to be a black neighborhood, a Black poor neighborhood. The Weinerschnitzel is kind of the border, and it has been the border for years and years and years and years. It's a good example of how this city is set up to keep white and black people separate. You go on the other side of Florida and real estate drops by like a \$100,000, \$50,000, you know? And the houses are just bigger. You go outside of downtown, if you go beyond Spanish Town, it just changes. And you can see. And it was crazy because the flood didn't care. Like all these people built out from Baton Rouge, white flight built out and it flooded, because it built out of the infrastructure. It was interesting because there was no specific people spared, which can happen with most things. Ideally we would be in a less institutional white man space.

V. Conflating Race and Class, Water and Fire

JOSH: **So, Sterling, police, the floods. The floods, on the surface, seem like they could be a uniting factor, in a way. It might have been in some ways, but it didn't seem like it did what the narratives I heard from Hurricane Katrina espoused.**

DESIREÉ: I agree with that.

It wasn't that kind of uniting factor, because of all the recent events, it seems. It seemed like there was still a disconnect in the community. It was emblematic of a lot of the poetry I saw at *Eclectic Truth*. Were there any moments in the first eight weeks that stood out to you as far as Baton Rouge-related poets?

I don't know if you saw it, people were calling it the Cajun Army. I don't know if you saw it, but it was all these country white dudes on boats saving people. I think it was kind of a momentary glue, maybe. Do you know where *Radio Bar* is?

Yeah.

That's my street.

Okay, that's a convenient place to be near!

Yeah, it's one of the highest points in Baton Rouge, so we don't ever get—our backyard was flooded because our neighbor's house his backyard is right above ours so it floods into it. But nothing in our house—

We were safe in Spanish Town, too.

Yeah, yeah. I don't know if you know William Brian Sain, my partner, he reads sometimes.

Mm hmm. He did a poem about addiction a few weeks back.

Yeah, that's my, that's my boo. And he teaches at Broadmoor High, and they were out of school for a month. They came back and many of those students were displaced, many of the teachers were displaced. Same with LSU, too, it's like y'all came back in no time and teachers like still didn't have houses. I think what was a big divide was folks that had resources to flee or to stay in a hotel. Or have family with space. And folks that didn't, I think that was, again, a racial divide. When you're in the south race and class are so conflated because it's so infrastructurally present versus somewhere like, some parts of the country they're not as conflated. Like the Bay Area, it's not as interchangeable. But here, because of infrastructure, and the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, public school is black, private school is white. Probably one of the factors is social capital, and things like that. But, I don't know, I mean, I think, I don't know, man, the flood was like, I don't know, it's all still, it's all still a blur.

It's still fresh.

I know, yeah! And also media versus what was real. And some of our students, I feel like every week I'm learning of a new student that was either displaced or something happened in the flood and I just had no idea. There was this one student was late to *WordCrew* every single week, which is our Wednesday afternoon high school writing group. And I'm like, "dude, why are you always late?" And he was like, "oh, my family's staying with me, I have to give everyone a ride everywhere." And I'm like I didn't know, I didn't have a clue. It was something we were forced to continue to move through. I don't know, Louisiana is crazy in the way that it just takes natural—like Katrina, Gustav, the BP oil spill, like these floods—it just kind of takes it and keeps it. That's just the culture of it. I don't know if I answered your question.

You did, though. It's like the water just keeps coming. That's why I was curious watching so much poetry about floods against the backdrop of firetrucks. But, I'm like, you can't really wash out water with fire, it doesn't work that way.

Right, and water you can't, you can't. I'm from Northern California which, in 2008, all the wildfires, my Grandpa's house burnt down, we weren't allowed to go outside because the smoke was so thick, you know? But water's different. Water and fire are so interesting but they are so different. The water has nowhere to go. You can't do anything to stop it. With fire there are some things you can do and you can continue to work and work and work, but with the water there was literally nowhere for it to go. You can't do anything.

You can't extinguish it.

Yeah, yeah, you can't even put anything in place because the infrastructure it takes is so, infrastructural. Right? It's so internal, it takes so long to build, you can't just—like, with fires you can kind of do in real time action, but with water, you just can't. You just can't.

You hope it goes away.

Seriously, seriously.

VI. Shifting Narratives in a Time of Trump

JOSH: **So now that we have our Dear Leader Trump—**

DESIREÉ: Haha.

I'm curious as to what you think might happen to those Baton Rouge narratives about the summer? Slam poetry is so reactive to what's happening in real time, do you think this might be overshadowing, or incorporated more?

I don't know, it's so surreal. It's like so fuckin' crazy. But we did have [Bobby] Jindal, we did have Jindal. Louisiana has had a lot of these things. I mean, Louisiana was forced, like *forced*, to desegregate.

It wasn't a choice.

And we started desegregating really like 20 years ago. And now we're still segregated. I don't know if you've ever been in a public school classroom here? A public school classroom here is just like a lot of cities, we're absolutely segregated. We have barely any abortion clinics. We really don't allow gay marriage. A lot of the stuff that is probably gonna be happening nationally—

Will happen here in 50 years?

Right! Yeah!

Moving from Iowa to here did feel a little like time-travelling to the 80s.

Are you familiar with Michael Moore, do you follow him at all?

I watched *Trumpland*.

Did you see in July his prediction of the Midwest Brexit, which was predicting the exact states that went red. He predicted them to go red, and he called it the Midwest Brexit. Which was like

basically they were so disenfranchised because they were working class and they felt such a strong—anyway, that’s a different thing. I think in the south, in some senses, we’ll probably maybe going to feel it worse because we’re so red. There’s nothing in place, there’s no firewalls, there’s actually like total agreement to move forward with all that stuff. I feel like there was already poems about Trump, there’s already a narrative about Trump.

Trumptopia.

I think he kind of has a way, just like with the media, right, he has a way of soaking up all the space. Soaking up all the everything.

He is like a sponge, in a way.

It’s crazy, right, like all the media couldn’t keep their eyes off of him. And all of us couldn’t keep our eyes off of him.

It’s a Trumpwreck, we can’t stop watching.

Totally, totally! There is a sense, from the liberals, there is a sense that we have to do something. And maybe that will translate to Baton Rouge.

But no one knows what they’re fighting against. It isn’t a Romney, or a Carson.

I mean, we just don’t know. We just don’t know, nobody really knows.

He doesn’t know.

And he’s so like, oh, sure, maybe! And his comments about not wanting to overturn gay marriage, which he just made the other night, yet his VP is Pence, like okay. They already disagreed with each other on the campaign trail. Oh, man, it’s terrifying. But that’s interesting, right, to watch what happens. One thing we do, as a national initiative, we do with the youth. At every workshop, something we just started, at every workshop at every reading, we have the youth fill out this form. I think I took them out, but I might have one [takes out form from bag]. They fill out this form about what their poem was called, what they identify as, gender, race, so on and so forth, and what their poem is about. And they self-identify, they self-identify. Before, the initiative was going to be a mentoring-agreement identify, but the youth identify. It’s an interesting way to collect data. Kind of sounds like what you’ve been doing on your own and kind of seeing what you’re hearing. They put all the stuff in and they check their own identities.

Oh, it’s from *Brave New Voices*.

Yeah. Here’s all their identity stuff.

This is what the census should look like.

Haha, right. Here's all their identity stuff, and then up here they check the boxes of things their poem dealt with. So, they self-identify and then we can say, oh, this young person said their poem was about suicide. I read that as it was about math or whatever.

Yeah.

So, this sounds like what you've already been doing with coming to the readings. But this is something that's interesting to see what the trends are in youth poetry, and what will happen in adult poetry, too.

Can I get a copy of that?

Yeah! And it was interesting because we went back and forth as mentors of having them self-identify and having us identify. And we came to a consensus of having them self-identify. Our afterschool writing group, I can look at those and I can identify whose is whose. But at our readings, at *Fresh Heat*, our team open-mic we don't know most of the kids that read, or we don't know some of the kids that read. Some of it we can look at this and see, oh, Imani says she wrote about this. That's interesting because I heard it as this. So we can kind of dissect that internally, or with another mentor that was there.

To compare with one another. They're both right, but intentions—

Yeah, because we might think something—you've heard Toi read before? Toi the Poetic Beauty?

Yeah, Toi has that 90's hip-hop style and rhythm!

She's so awesome. She read a poem about Bill Cosby, I don't know if you heard that one. It's a poem about Bill Cosby being a rapist, and she has a lot about being raped as a child, and so she might, we might identify this poem about Bill Cosby, but she might identify it as her own rape, right? So, how we kind of couch how we talk about these things. Someone might write about the flood, or they might write about racism, but they actually feel like they're writing about the flood, but we hear it as racism.

I wonder how this might work with your *ET* audience? With an adult audience?

It could be really interesting just to do it for a couple of weeks. And if this is something you wanted to implement there, you're more than welcome to. It would be a lot of data collection, a lot of work. This is also a very involved form. All of our kids were like "what, I don't know how to fill this out." It's not the most user-friendly form. But this initiative was actually started in Baton Rouge by Sue Weinstein. I don't know if you know Sue, but she teaches English education at LSU and her doctoral research is in youth spoken word. And Anna West, who founded *Forward Arts*, now teaches at McKinley, something called *Humanities Amped*. They started this

and then the larger organizations across the country took it on and put a lot of manpower behind it and now we have a national initiative to do it, which is pretty cool.

Yeah.

I think Trump can be the vehicle to talk about what we've been talking about. I imagine that's probably how it's gonna work.

VII. Hosting: An Exercise in Energy and Efficiency

JOSH: Any time one goes into a slam, or any type of performance event, the host, I think, creates a lot of the energy through how they go about their duties. From my experiences hosting, I've learned hosts probably shouldn't banter unless they're good at it. Like poets and stuff, don't talk about it, just do it.

DESIREÉ: Just do it, yeah.

Unless you're good at this, it kills the energy a lot of times.

It drags it.

You do a great job at that. Even if you're waiting on judges to finish scoring, you seem like you can talk without making this about you, or make jokes to help the flow of the event. How do you feel the host navigates that slam environment? What's your approach?

Yeah, I have not always been a good host. But I've seen a lot of really really awesome hosts and try to take what they do. Like, you were at the WOWPS [Women of the World Poetry Slam qualifier] slam, right?

Yeah.

And that slam was like, we gotta get through all this shit, we have to keep it moving,

It was a huge one, too.

We have to keep the energy high.

That was incredible, *ET* had so many people there.

It was incredible. It was exhausting, but it was incredible. And there was so many different poets there. We had some really seasoned ones and some that were like I've never even been at a reading. One of my favorite hosts is Donney. I get weirded out by small audiences, I always

have I always do. Let me say small audience in big spaces. I can deal with a lot in small spaces, but me, like, space and lighting, I'm very emotionally connected to it. My house is very, well, very—

Like *Stranger Things*.

Exactly! I think my house is very curated. And Brian, my partner, when we first met he fucking had lawn furniture in his house and I was like [horror knife noises] eh eh eh! And that's how I feel about like my desk at work. Donney's desk, like, Donney's calendar is still on November 2015, and had been on it for now a year. My boss Xero has piles and piles and piles and piles. I love Donney as a host, and I love him as a small space host. He is hilarious. He is one of the funniest people I know.

He seems like he's not trying to be funny, there's just a natural charisma that he exudes.

I know! Donney is one of my favorite people to talk to one-on-one. He is awkward, and Donney is not the—he's effective in a different way. Like Donney and Xero are very different performers.

Donney told me, "I may not be the most dynamic, but I will be the most consistent."

Donney is so loveable and so likeable. He's totally like everybody's dude. Rarely do people dislike Donney long-term. Like Donney and I disagree and Donney gets on my nerves and visa-versa, but Donney is one of my favorite hosts. Like SK, I think we have some pretty awesome hosts. For me, I use to be like really bantery, I would just tell all these crazy stories about my brother all the time, in like my sets. My brother was in prison in California for ten years, and I tell all these absurd stories about him, and it's kinda like my thing because he's so fuckin' weird. But since then I've realized I wanna run an incredibly efficient show, always. I'm the one that's like, okay, you have three minutes to get this person on and off stage. You have ten seconds to read the scores. In everything I do I've always been like that. We have a budget down to the cent in our house, that's just kind of the person I've been. I really enjoy keeping score. I don't so much enjoy hosting, because I wanna be like the person keeping the host accountable and I don't really wanna be the host because I don't think anybody's as good as keeping people accountable as I am. Which is totally egotistical.

You're on top of your shit!

I use to really love slamming, I use to really love reading, I use to really love hosting. And since I've just kind of like, not, I just don't really like it as much. I really like hosting a big show and seeing how efficiently I can run it, but I enjoy working a door and counting money and keeping score more, because it's just more fun to me.

More of a stage manager?

Yeah, exactly, because I will be like, oh, man, I've gotta get up again? To answer your question, the host totally curates the night. Is totally the face of a reading oftentimes. Because we rotate hosts, we don't have like a face, you know? Xero use to be the host of the reading back in the day. Xero is funny and very mean. Xero is very mean, and that's his schtick, he's just an asshole.

Your audience feeds off that, too. If the host's a funny asshole, they'll probably act that way back.

Exactly. He was an asshole to folks that were problematic and folks that didn't hold up the spirit of the reading. And 80% of the time it works really well, but sometimes he would just take it too far, and sometimes he would just not nurture folks in a way they needed to be nurtured. And he's like that as a boss, he's like that as a friend, he's like that as a parent. It can be really really awesome for a really big show. But smaller shows it can be harder. The host definitely runs the night. I think Donney is a fun host because he's so chill, he's so approachable. I don't have anything to back this up, but I think with Donney I think we get the most audience participation. Like, the *Poetry and Pancakes* we had last week was totally born out of something that happened in the audience with him. I don't remember what it was, but it was like, somebody said something and Donney was like "alright, let's do it." And Donney is the host that creates that space, it's really a conversation between him and the audience. SK is very serious. SK is very like, they're very gentle and feminine, and they're effective but serious and sentimental and quirky. They're an awesome host for events that we have that our benefits because she just takes it very seriously. They're very good, They're very politically correct. They're driven to be humble, and to hold space. And I think that everybody has their niche as host. I really would love to see Toiryan as host but he never wants to host, he never, he refuses to put himself in the rotation, but he would be interesting to see as a host. If you look at different shows, it's about who hosts the show, how they curate the space. I think that answered your question.

VIII. Community, Chemistry, and Flexibility

JOSH: **I've noticed poetry communities are not very conservative. Those folks don't lean toward that.**

DESIREÉ: Especially within spoken word, right? I think any conservative narrative totally just gets shut down, and totally gets just like not supported. It's interesting how spoken word now is changing. Are you somebody that listens to a lot of spoken word?

Yeah, especially because of my forensics students, we are always looking for slam literature on topics they care about.

It's interesting, spaces like *Eclectic Truth*, there aren't any real career poets. Me and Xero might be the exceptions, but for the most part everybody has their life and then poetry is totally their hobby. Like, somebody like Javon Johnson—

They're the exception?

Yeah! And it's really awesome to see folks like Toi who is a middle school teacher. SK who is also a middle school teacher. Melissa who is a gymnast coach. All these people who have this other life who come to poetry as a release and not as a capitalist endeavor. Not even necessarily like an ego thing, it's more like I really love writing and I really love reading my poetry so I'm just gonna do it. I think that's something really special about *Eclectic Truth*.

Like, a need to share?

Yeah, I think there's less of an ulterior motive that can sometimes happen in bigger cities, or can sometimes happen in more competitive scenes. Like, *Slam New Orleans*, one of its downfalls is everybody is also navigating their own ego, their own agenda. That's super difficult because it's hard to form community. There's all this research about why grassroots stuff has such a hard time surviving, and it's because of egos, and it's because in activist circles there are folks whose identity is to be an activist and that's the biggest thing at stake.

So it becomes not about the cause all the time?

Totally. With Trump, too, it's him as a person. It's not even about the Republican party, it's about him. Everything is about him. Republicans support him or don't support him. And now Republicans and Democrats alike have to grapple with their own identities, as parties. Same with Bernie Sanders, Bernie challenged the Democratic party so much. In some ways it can be positive, ego-driven things. But I think with *Eclectic Truth* there's very little ego at stake with most of the readers, which I think is something that really galvanizes the community.

I imagine as you get closer to picking who is on the team, though, that would start amping up during those rounds?

I think so. We always have a new crop of poets. Every year is the different, every group of people is different, the chemistry is different. I think this year we're going to have a lot of young folks, a lot of 19, 20, 21 year olds that, maybe come January will start showing up more. There'll be alumni of our program, *Forward Arts*. I don't know if you've heard Ameris read? Jolie, Brittney? Jazmyne?!

Yeah! And I'm going to chat with her later.

She was on the *BNV* team. Jazmyne is brilliant but also an incredibly hardworker, and incredibly humble. She was on the *BNV* team this year and I would ask her to do something, and she would have it, like, no question. And I would only ask her once and sometimes I would forget that I asked her and she's be like "oh, I did this thing."

I see her at LSU sometimes, her class is near the class I teach.

She lives in Baker, which is a 30-minute drive. Also works at *Dairy Queen*.

Busy!

She's somebody that makes time and is totally reliable. Awesome. Not many are as hard of a worker as Jazmyne. You've heard Brittney read, she tied Jazmyne at the WOWPS qualifier. She read a poem that started with "trigger warning, this poem talks about the rape of a 13 year old girl," she is also remarkable.

Chelsea, who won the WOWPS slam, was amazing, too!

Chelsea! She used to come around, she was a part of the *Poetry Alliance* and she was treasurer. She was around for five or six years, and then fell off, and came back, and won. What was I saying? Oh, yeah, the youth, I think this season will be totally dominated by them.

Even though the community changes, the topics change, the people change, what has held steady about *Eclectic Truth* in Baton Rouge?

I think the thing about Baton Rouge is that we don't really have an agenda. And that's the thing that has stayed consistent. We're so fluid, we don't have a leadership that's pushing really hard for one thing.

The poets themselves are determining the agenda.

Yeah! That's one thing about Baton Rouge, we have such a flexible leadership and such flexible poets. And we have to be flexible because we don't have a lot of leverage or social capital or whatever. We don't make a lot of money at our reading. We're not a big city. Well, we are, but not really, we're not New Orleans. I think that's one thing that's always been consistent, Baton Rouge lets its people be what it wants to be. We don't have a narrow idea of what a poetry can look like, or what a poet can look like, or what a community has to look like. And I think that's really powerful. In slam where it's so competitive, it's so rinse, lather, repeat, rinse, lather, you know. Like with the popularity of *Button Poetry*, there is such a fucking formula for a poem, and that's fine and that's wonderful, but we don't ask our poets to adhere to that. We can't. Because we have Toi, and Foye, and Eric, we have folks who just like, won't. Foye doesn't watch *Button Poetry*. Eric, Eric has like a fuckin' flip phone!

I love his 2Chains poem! I've heard it three times now, one of my favorite things I've heard in my life because of his delivery-style.

Eric is a super special part of our community, yeah. Man, he is diehard. He is diehard *Eclectic Truth* and he is diehard Mid-City. He lives in Mid-City and he's at every single Mid-City event ever. If you ever look up anything about Mid-City he's in all the pictures. He's so diehard. We have some diehard *Eclectic Truthers*. It's pretty awesome, and I think that's one thing that has

stayed true. We just become what we become. And we don't have an agenda. We don't have a true objective other than to serve our community in the way it asks to be served.

IX. Tangible People and Talking Points

JOSH: When asking what the community wants out of this space, it almost becomes like a townhall meeting so speak on what the community is feeling.

DESIREÉ: It's interesting that you say that. We do different things, we've been trying different things lately, and we see what works and we adjust. Our door price use to be seven bucks, but we dropped it to five because we were like—there a poet named Scott Woods, he's in Columbus, and he's been in the game forever. And he wrote this thing, something like "15 Ways to Run an Incredible Poetry Slam" or something, and one thing I keep harkening back to is what are your goals? Do you want to have a packed house, or do you want to make a lot of money, or do you want to do both? I presented to the PA—well, we all kind of were at this place altogether, the collective conscious of the group was like we want to have access. It's more important for us to have more asses in the seat than it is to make more money, so let's drop our price, let's do more free events. We also want to have big crowds when features come. When Alain [now Aeon Ginsberg] came I had this big grand idea, and I was like, okay, can we try to have Alain's reading be free and I think that we can get Alain a hundred bucks by passing around a tip jar. And everybody was like "you think they're gonna donate a hundred bucks?" And I was like I think they will. We had 70 folks out. They donated a hundred and forty bucks, which means we could pay the venue fee and we could pay Alain the \$100 and it went incredibly well. It created access, it got Alain this incredible show, every seat was full, Alain was able to sell more merchandise, and Alain had an incredible experience in Baton Rouge.

When I saw a couple of their poems, I made sure to write them down for my students to watch online later.

That's so awesome, and yeah, I think when we can create more space for people to do something like that, like I went to this free show and saw this poet check their work out. I don't pay for shows, really. I mean I do sometimes, but it takes a lot for me to pay for a show. I think that's a culture in Baton Rouge, too. Is that venues have a hard time making money because folks don't wanna pay for a show. And I don't think we should make our reading free every time because we do have to pay for some things, but I think the more access we can create, the better. And we have never, every time we have done a free show we've had 50 people or more. And that means a lot, to me. And it clearly, people like free shows in our community. We just do stuff like that. Or when we have food at a reading because folks really like having food at a reading. Or when we have a social justice event, people are really responding to that, and we are trying to do more of that. And that might change because before, there was a time where we were really about the slam team, and we're not so much anymore. But that could change again. Being open to that I think is super important.

Responding to what the community wants.

And also listening to that, because, sometimes, we haven't always done a great job listening to that, so we're trying to do that now.

In listening to people's experiences of the summer, are these tragedies, disasters, struggles? What comes to your mind when bringing these chain-linked events together?

I think for me I just keep thinking of the word, complicated. That word has just been harkening with me a lot. We have such a desire to flatten everything, and it's not that flat. And I think... ohh! [Deep exhale.] One thing that was the hardest, I mean, right after *Brave New Voices* I was in Australia for two weeks and I was supposed to go to the *National Poetry Slam* because I was the team's coach but I came back here because Kaiya died, and I just like, couldn't—I was in Australia when Kaiya died. I mean, it was fucking crazy. Came back, and dealt with everything with Alton Sterling. And Alton Sterling also went to prison because he was a child molester. And we had to deal with that, and that is complicated. And we just kind of brushed it off. ... And that complicated things further. So now we say, so now, part of our programmatic structure is to not say Alton Sterling's name in any of our programming because now it's not just theory, right? Just again and again, like we were talking about earlier. Ferguson is theory, Ferguson is talking points, Ferguson is dialogue. Baltimore, Oscar Grant, those are all talking points. And now, it's like, okay, now we have these real tangible people in our lives that are affected by this thing. And the Alton Sterling thing is so complicated. But you can't say that publicly, right? But police didn't kill him because he was a child molester. Police didn't give a shit that he was a child molester, right? ... so now it complicates it so much internally, you know? ... The flood was complicated. The election is complicated. Racism is complicated. And Trump didn't further complicate it, but showed us unapologetically the complications of it. And how we all have to confront that complication head on or we end up with Putin's best friend as our President, you know? I think complicated is the word. Yeah, yeah.

The interesting stuff is the complicated stuff. It's in those fissures.

Exactly, And to resist the desire to flatten it. And to resist the desire to say that Alton Sterling is a rapist so fuck him. Because that's not really all true. Like, Alton Sterling also has a 16 year old son. He also was not murdered because he was a rapist, he was murdered because he was black. So, saying this is complicated, and this is hard, so let's try our best to talk about it. Just like, to harken back to slamming as a white person with poems about white privilege, it's complicated, and when we want—[Desireé, to someone familiar: Oh hey, how are you doing? *I'm doing well, how are you?* Good, nice shirt. *You look great.* Thank you, likewise.]—trying to flatten things.

X. *"Good" White People and Bubbles*

DESIRÉE: With a lot of privilege we want to distance ourselves, as a white person I want to distance myself from those white people that voted for Trump, or those white people, or that drunk dude that said that to you.

JOSH: **It was 3PM, day-drinking on a Wednesday.**

Right, right. I think we have to call each other in and we have to talk about the complications of it because if we don't we continue to flatten it. That's one of my grievances among a lot of praise with something like what "good white people" do is that, I think one of their goals, subconscious or conscious, is to distance themselves from whiteness, or to be the good white person. And I think we just can't afford to try to be the good white people.

Because then it becomes, like, not all white people?

Yeah. Instead of saying don't call me racist, instead of being offended someone called you racist, be offended that you're racist. I think, yeah, complicated. And this summer, the police officers that we killed in Baton Rouge that's fucking complicated. Kaiya died. That's also very complicated in ways, internal dialogues, you know? Like you, as a performance coach, coaching someone to do a lynching is complicated. And when we want to flatten it we don't do the work we really need to do. We just point fingers at people or shut down. And I think a lot of people, myself included, have a total shut down mode. And a place like *Eclectic Truth* is a place that allows me to not have that shut down because there's so much camaraderie. To me, at points, we have had such diversity in education, region, narrative, race, gender, ethnicity, national background, so on and so forth, and that's important to foster. And to harken back to the question of do we need to be sharing this with people that don't agree with us or do we need to share with people that do agree with us? I think it's hard because some of us do need a bubble in a world we don't get to be in a bubble in.

Yeah.

But when do we step out of that bubble?

Like what is the space for? That might be an interesting event idea, bringing people that don't share ideas to hear those narratives.

And poets can opt in, people can read poems to people who might really disagree with you. In what ways can we send people who are equipped and want to do that work to speak with those who don't agree? That could be a really interesting way to do that.

How do you see dialogue happening after these performances? Slam is an energetic dialogue with an audience, but it's also more of a monologue.

That's one thing that totally has to be fostered and we can choose to do that or not.

Do you ever have talkbacks?

In our social justice readings we always have a dialogue halfway through. We have *Poetry Alliance* members lead dialogue groups. In the vein of theater, with our youth spoken word group, *WordCrew*, we have a production we do every year and part of that is to have a talkback pre-showtime. To give feedback and to have a closed show. To figure out what that would look like in a slam setting, what would it look like? Maybe it's like *Get Lit*. They have an event where they do classic literature paired with a response, and that's something that we could totally foster. Maybe one of our slam's everything at this slam has to be a response to something you heard at the last slam, it's something as simple as that to create more space for dialogue.

That's almost like that Taylor Mali "Conviction"-response poem, "Like Totally Whatever" by—

Yeah, Melissa.

Melissa Lozado-Ovida.

That's a great idea for a workshop. We have a workshop similar to that. And we have this workshop around what does it mean to write after someone. With that Taylor Mali poem and then the Melissa poem—

He responded to her with a FaceBook post after.

Yeah, yeah. With that, how do you have, essentially, political discourse through poetry. Melissa didn't use Taylor as a model, really. Would you call it a model text?

Maybe a jumping-off point. She was responding to him, using his poem as a patriarchal symbol, which he took as a direct attack.

You see folks being like "to the politician duh duh duh," but when she's calling out someone in her own culture! Yeah, from twenty years ago, but still.

That is someone still super popular.

People around the country don't even know spoken word but they know that poem. Now I'm thinking about how that could be turned into a writing workshop. If you ever want me or Donney or Xero to come in to your classes, we come to LSU classes all the time.

I appreciate that! How would you introduce yourself? How do you define your positionality?

It's so fluid. Let's see, my students would define me as a poet, teacher. I think a big thread is also a feminist. A big part of my identity is also a Californian.

We do talk in directions. But you probably have more *hellas* and I have more 405-to-the-10s and traffic lingo.

Yeah! Yeah, but it's hard because I live in a place that my upbringing is so disconnected from. Somebody like Donney has lived here his entire life. Same with Xero, Xero is from Plaquemine. As a young person I was so identified by everyone in my community as someone who is from a big, poor family, because we grew up in government housing. That was such a part of my formative identity that now, as an adult, who is a public figure that is also an educator, that lives in a place I'm not from, it's different. Some folks might identify me as an academic, but I don't have a college degree. As a white woman. As a feminist, as a lefty, as a teacher, as a community member. It's so vast.

Who am I talking to, what do they need to know.

Yeah, yeah.

Do you see yourself as a Baton Rouge-ian, officially?

I've been thinking a lot about this idea of place and home and how, this place doesn't, as far as art is concerned, this place doesn't inspire me as an artist. It inspires me as a person, as an individual. An educator, a poet, a community member, a feminist, a white person. And a woman. That would probably be the flattened, yeah.

It's hard to avoid flattening, huh?

Yeah, it's complicated.

Poetry of and Interview with Melissa Hutchinson

Throughout fall 2016, Melissa Hutchinson was a stable and consistent force in Baton Rouge's *Eclectic Truth* slam poetry scene. Every week, Melissa put herself out in front of the crowd and performed with passion. Often, she performed something freshly typed out on her phone. Melissa, 36 at the time of our interview, is a mother of two, and we remain connected through slam attendance and social media. Melissa's poetry genuinely resonated with me and

my own life experiences. Melissa's willingness to be vulnerable shines through no matter her poetic style. I experienced this when Melissa slammed about abusive relationships, her childhood, when she presented a Stephen King-themed eulogy for her father, and when I found myself scrolling through compelling Facebook posts of her dreamlike and spiritual poetry. Melissa and Donney went to high school together and remain connected through the art of poetry. This connection shows that our growth can be shaped by our communities and the people with who we spend our time.

After observing Melissa at *Eclectic Truth* and with others over the first five weeks of the season, I sensed her regular performances as a slam poet and her commitment to *the Poetry Alliance* would be incredibly generative. My interview with Melissa took place at 3:15 PM on Saturday, December 3, 2016, around week thirteen of the slam season. As an important note, all of my official interviews with *Eclectic Truth* star groupers took place following Donald Trump's electoral-college fueled election to the Presidency on November 8. Melissa agreed to meet at her place of work on Bluebonnet Ave., and we agreed we would chat in between her shifts at the gymnastics center for kids. There, she coaches children in recreational and competitive gymnastics and tumbling. We sat on a bench, facing Bluebonnet Ave. The week before this meeting, Melissa agreed to send me two poems she had presented at *Eclectic Truth*, "Death" and "The Great Flood." In our interview, we tackled eight ethnographically-informed areas of conversation: *I. From Notebook Pages to Slam Stages; II. Growing Out of Your Comfort Zone; III. Planting Seeds, Uncomfortable Truths, and Holding Space; IV. Slam as a Vehicle for Presenting Poetry and Sharing Confessional Narratives; V. Resonating with the Audience; VI. Local Shit and Layers; VII. Breaking the Rules; and VIII. In the Wake of What Happened.*

Poetry: "Death" by Melissa Hutchinson

month 1
July 2016
death

I am a white woman in a river of drowning black bodies

1699 French explorers came down the Mississippi
noticed a cypress tree stripped of its bark
marking the hunting boundary between two tribes
covered in blood of bear and fish heads
they called it le baton rouge
the red stick

Baton Rouge
oh how we honor our past
Baton Rouge
says boundary
says division
says hunt
blood
kill
death
says nothing's changed
says still two tribes on this land
now divided by a road named for a state that's shaped like a gun whose name
means flower
but the flowers of Florida Blvd only bloom red on chests rooted 6 feet under
Baton Rouge only knows dying on one side of this road
this gun road
death road
don't cross the thin blue line road
Louisiana boot pressed firmly into your back

is it any wonder our city means red stick
as in blood stick
as in death stick
terror stick
night stick
night is black
black is terror
which is death
which is blood

which is red
red is stop
is warning
is the only color this city has in common
which is self fulfilling prophecy

I am a white woman in a river of drowning black bodies

I know this river well
this Mississippi River
mighty Mississippi
slave ship Mississippi
do not listen to those who say this name means only great river
this ancient river named by Native Americans
as here is a river beyond all ages
this indifferent Mississippi
named at its source as river of the falls
white falls on white bluffs flow south
collect sediment to
become our muddy waters
it's mouth a dead zone

we are a white river muddied with drowning black bodies
crowned with a red stick
on burial ground banks
making tribes out of citizens
hunting each other
divided by a road
that offers flowers only as condolences
in a bloody city resistant to change

Poetry: "The Great Flood" by Melissa Hutchinson

month 2
August 2016
The Great Flood

rivers of muddied black bodies
flash flood
over burial ground banks
red stick
submerged in rising flood waters

leaving no water line
in over its head

yet somehow we all float on resilience
tethered together
today no black bodies drown

we tell the world that
Louisiana is most beautiful when it's a great disaster
but what we mean to say is
natural disaster
as in Florida Blvd drowning
instead of black bodies
I say
Louisiana
has always been great disaster
but that's when our Cajun navy
sipped it's beer
said he had it coming
said blue lives matter
all lives matter
but wouldn't dare rescue
a black mans family
drowning in grief after his death

oh we shine in tragedy
but it's just because
we have so much damn practice
and a little compassion
sprinkled on top rising flood waters
does nothing to cover
the stench of decomposing bodies
ignored for too long
red stick
will always be red
red stick
stays red after flood waters subside
didn't mama teach you
flood water can't remove blood stains

this water is toxic
dead body stench even bleach can't get out
wash again and again
scrub stains

bleach smell
until hands are raw and bleeding
ignore the irony of red hands in this red stick
blame it on mildew
bacteria
anything but 300 years of drowning black bodies
tell yourself how this time
we've all come together
forget that we've told ourselves this before
smash out sheet rock
rip up floors
treat mold
remove rot
wonder why this fucking smell still won't go away
when everything is taken from you
all you have left is what's inside yourself
follow that smell

flash flood brought black bodies home
follow that smell
gut homes
home is where the heart is
gut hearts
remove rot
smash walls
follow that smell
purge contents
scrub heart until raw and bleeding
and bleed and bleed and bleed and bleed
blood is sacrifice
is stain
red stick will always be red
says you can't ignore the past any longer

flood waters subside
rivers return home
a little less toxic
uncovering burial ground banks
crowned with a red stick
stained with blood of black bodies
raw hands and hearts
after a flood
rebirth is inevitable
what's important is how you rebuild

Interview with Melissa Hutchinson, December 3, 2016

I. From Notebook Pages to Slam Stages

MELISSA: I figured you'd have a tape recorder. So, I expected that. Yeah, you can record. That's Bluebonnet. We can go inside or stay out here, I don't care.

JOSH: **I kinda like the day, actually.**

This doesn't bother me. Any colder then I'd be miserable.

Just moved here from the Mid-West, Iowa. It's snowing over there, like 20 degrees. I forgot what winter's like *this* are like, even after being from Los Angeles originally.

Right, I knew that. I still don't like it because like it's a humid cold. And I hate humid cold. It gets in your bones. I think the day before yesterday I took like three baths. One in the morning, one like after my kids got to school because I was cold, then one cuz [REDACTED] had his band concert, to get ready for that.

I don't need a blanket, I'll use hot water instead!

Yeah. And then one cuz I was cold again at night. It's the only way my feet'll get warm.

Yep.

So, yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah. Proceed.

So we've chatted about this, eventually creating a performance for the community from this project.

Ohh. Cool.

How'd you get started with *Eclectic Truth*? What brought you to this slam community?

I've been writing, like I've written my whole life. And Donney and I actually went to high school together. Actually, and middle school. And I've almost always written poetry in some way—

I saw the notes of your older poetry.

Oh, God—

It's so beautiful!

Thank you!

It's smart that you catalogued it all.

I did, I did.

We often regret it later if we don't, huh?

Right. And I have it in notebooks. I have every poem. I have it in notebooks and I have it on there. Probably about the past year or so, though, maybe six months, I go in waves, I use to every time I'd write something I'd post it, but now I'm like, I'm like okay I haven't posted anything in six months y'all are just about to get poetry-bombed with a whole bunch of poetry. I've always been a page poet. When I met my ex-husband, it was kinda weird, I quit writing within a couple months of us starting to date. I was like 18.

Oh, yeah?

And a few months before we separated I started writing again. It was like 12 years.

When the going gets good, poets do seem to stop writing.

Right, right. And so I started writing again. Like I said I was very much a page poet. I was in theatre once like in eighth grade. Had two lines in a play, and just never did anything like that. I have a lot of experience projecting my voice, and speaking. Parties are a performance. You make the parents happy, you make the kids happy. You have to know how to say the right things. You have to know how to talk in front of a big group of people. Coaching, you have to command the kids' attention.

Yeah.

All of that. You're in a big room. You're talking over people. So unbeknownst to me I was kind of already in a line of work that really helped me feel comfortable with that.

Being in front of people. Being in charge? Commanding a room?

Right. So I guess I had been writing again for about three years, and a really good friend of mine that actually went to high school with Donney and I, was like—Donney and them use to do something called *Soul'd Out Sundays*, it's a whole bunch of different things they've done—and our friend was like, "oh, you need to go do this, you need to start branching out in different ways." So finally I got brave and I was like, okay, I'll go do this. So I went to one and just listened. And the next one I went and I read a poem on the open-mic. And I think within six

weeks I was slamming. Which, I was slamming, just like we always tell people now, we're like—people who open-mic— “just slam, just do it.” It's gonna sound the same when you're on the open-mic, just do it! That was almost three years ago that I got involved. So I'm three years in now. Yeah, it was definitely 100% because I knew Donney. He would post things on Facebook, me and Jeremy were both friends with him, and it was like, huh. And then, maybe he actually invited me. He would invite me to events sometimes. And then, finally, the guy I was dating at the time, I was like “I need to go.” That time it was on Thursdays. And I was like, I need to go. Ever since.

And then you were hooked.

Ever since. Pretty much.

II. Growing Out of Your Comfort Zone

JOSH: As a host of performance slams in the past, I've noticed how, sometimes, these types of weekly performance rituals function similarly to traditional support group environments. Here are my struggles, and here is my support system that will respond to and validate my perspective, my experiences. And the first half of this season half the slam poems were about all that happened over the summer—

MELISSA: Right

Floods, Alton Sterling, the police killings, the Baton Rouge atmosphere. Kaiya. I was wondering if you noticed that?

Definitely, definitely. Whenever I write page poetry—well, you've looked at it, you've seen the evolution of my poetry.

Yeah.

Not that I didn't touch—I guess, a lot of different perspectives, and not just mine, but other people's, underpinned what I wrote. But it wasn't about—social justice, of course, could have underpinned it and you could read it through that lens. So really any of my poetry could apply to anyone. Anyone going through any kind of struggle or anything could read it. But it wasn't until—I didn't write a lot of dark poetry. I mean, there was some, but there wasn't a lot. It really came from a place of hope, and trying to tie either my perspective or other perspectives I had witnessed and help people learn to see the world in a different way. And then when I started slam of course I kind of still wrote in that way. But then I started, cuz the whole reason I got into it, I'm writing really good poetry, I need to grow. And to grow I need to go outside my comfort zone. And then I really started to notice the difference. I know my writing changed some pretty soon. But it may have been a while before I even—I didn't write poems about

social justice issues or things like that. I never had. I didn't know how to approach them. And then, when they were having the Baltimore riots—actually I wrote one about Eric Garner, which was before that. It was kind of my perspective. It just talked about lots of injustices and lots of different kinds of privilege and things like that, and tied it into my abusive relationship. But then, when Baltimore happened, I'm watching like, everywhere, riot, riot, riot. And "The Help" came on TV. And I never read the book. My daughter read it in middle school. And I'm watching this movie, and I'm like, "God." So, I have a poem, "Thoughts on Whiteness while Reading 'The Help' during the Time of the Baltimore Riots." And that was the first one. And we had some, a couple different people, one person in particular, and he was white, and he tried to write poems about racial inequality and different things, and he unintentionally always came off showing his privilege. And it was just an awkward, interesting thing to watch because some of his poems hit, and some of 'em you were like, eh.

What do you mean by showing his privilege? How is that happening?

I can't even tell you because that was like a couple years ago. But there was one particular poem, and the poem is literally about white male privilege but you don't realize, in the poem—and it wasn't, it wasn't anything where it offended anybody, or anything like that, it was just slightly problematic. It was like you don't realize that, by virtue of what you're saying and what you're doing—it was almost like he was showing his privilege by whining about his privilege, you know? He had the privilege to get on the stage and whine, but he didn't see the irony of it, you know? I don't think it offended any Black people or anything like that. I saw this poem in the movie, and with everything going on, I got this idea to write this poem. And so I write this poem. And it went through a major revision to what it is now. But it was still kind of the same thing. It wasn't as slammy. And then I revised it. I was like, I know what I need to do to really get this poem to be more performancy. And I found that I innately have a talent for writing about those issues in a way that doesn't put the stage on the fact that I'm a white person, you know? Or if I do, I'm somehow able to call it out in a manner which isn't problematic. So I realize after I wrote a couple poems like this—no white person wants to be like, oh, I'm good at writing this. But I was.

Because they don't want to be seen as using oppression for their own gain? For points?

Right, right. And so I did that one. And I think I did another one. They're just random. And for a while that's all the issues I could come up with to write about revolved around—and it may not have been, I have this poem about Jesus. It's just about America. About how America is. So they're not all—but usually within any of those poems race comes into it at some point.

How do you approach slam so as you are not coming across in a way you don't want to be perceived, especially with you clearly being a white woman in a space that's often filled with people of color? Or you are not coming across as being an ally without understanding your own positionality? How do those decisions influence your writing and how you present it?

I don't know because my writing isn't a very—what's the word I'm looking for? I'll come up with ideas, so I don't mean it that way. But I don't have to think about what I'm writing. There's only been one poem with one line and one of my white friends was like, "that might be problematic, that one line." And Donney read the poem before I brought it on stage. It was the first one I told you about, with Eric Garner. And he was like, "no, that is really good." But that was because from our white perspective we were like is that gonna be offensive or not? Innate. That's the word I was looking for, it's just an innate talent.

Your poem about Baton Rouge being divided by Florida Blvd, "a state that's shaped like a gun whose name means flower," right away you say, "I'm a white person in a river of drowning Black bodies."

Calling it out helps. I have no problem saying any kind of hard truth about it whatsoever. I'm one of those people that maybe, because who I am probably on stage isn't necessarily, it's not that there's different, it's not that I present one face here, one face there. There are hard conversations that are had, you know, with my Mom, with some of my family members. This and that. But my main form of activism is definitely in the stage and definitely in my writing, which gets shared all over Facebook so everybody sees it anyway. But, I think that I'm—and, see, this is where my tiredness comes in. I think I'm just more one of those people that I just say whatever I think. That "Thoughts on Whiteness" poem, I was literally like, there's gonna be some white people who are really gonna hate this. They're just really not gonna like it. The whole point in the poem is to cause cognitive dissonance—

Yeah?

Because you're not gonna see growth from people. It's not even really my viewpoint. It's the viewpoint that needs to be heard. There's a lot that I say on stage that isn't necessarily where I'm at. Because if I got on stage and said where I was at, with it, I would really piss a lot of people off and not the right people. I wouldn't be helping people of color with where the world is if I just got out, for lack of anything better, when there are spiritual teaches out there, like Jesus is a good example, in the stories they crucified him. So there is only so far that I'm willing to go with people who won't understand what I'm saying. So I stick to a level of truth that's accessible to the people that need to hear it.

III. Planting Seeds, Uncomfortable Truths, and Holding Space

JOSH: How does that work in a place like *Eclectic Truth*, where it's a safe space to present ideas, but it can also be like an echo chamber, a filter bubble? Is your message getting out to the people you think you would like to hear it?

MELISSA: I think it cuts both ways. There's people in the audience that still need their minds expanded further. They're definitely more open-minded people. But it definitely

functions in the support system of the fact that those people in the audience need to have their perspective validated. So that helps. We do have events, and we do have people come out, and they may never come back again, I've seen it happen where something gets said that they don't agree with. There's a number of people who come and they may not agree and they might be very conservative, or they might be really religious, and what they hear really might bother them, but they're gonna come back cuz it's art. And they understand, you know? But yeah, I've seen people in the audience who've visibly gotten very uncomfortable with a poem. It's usually their first time they've ever come so I don't really think they knew what they were coming to hear. I don't know if they don't come back so much because of the poem, or because they're like this just isn't my kind of space?

Yeah, I see random folks come late and leave early after being exposed, a couple times this season.

I think there are events—for example, not so much our social justice free readings, because that's definitely pulling people in. For example, when we did the Alton Sterling event, we're not gonna get people that completely support the police officers. They're not coming! But that's not the space was designed for. But when we do, like our final stage, different things that we promote a little more heavily, we get people that we've never seen before. And I think that one thing, as far as white people and everything going on with us, is you need to hear over and over and over again that yes, this is how it is. You should never become complacent just because you do *do* the work that you're doing everything that you can. One of the best things you can do is hear somebody else's opinion on it because you still may not agree with it but it's gonna make you think in a different way. I think that that's the most important thing with trying to reach more and more and more white people, is that you're not gonna get people to start to understanding by arguing. You're gonna plant seeds. And planting seeds isn't getting in a 45-minute argument on Facebook with somebody and you're both being stubborn and nobody sees either way.

That's like running into a brick wall!

Exactly. It's them hearing little things and catching these little nuggets of wisdom, and they think about it. And maybe next time they interact with somebody they think about it different. That goes the same for Black people because there's a lot of Black people that aren't doing the work they need to do. And you'll hear more people talk about that on that end. You'll hear Donney talk about it, you'll hear this, you'll hear that. There's more work we *all* have to do. I'm not gonna go out there and stand up and tell anybody else necessarily what they need to do as much as I'm just gonna offer them a different way to look. I'm not even gonna tell a white person what to do. Your opinion's your opinion, and that's your truth. So me arguing with you, I'm not gonna debate you. I'm not gonna because what you see is really your perspective.

Your experience.

Your experience, I can't invalidate that, you know? I can't even invalidate you trying to invalidate somebody else. So there's a lot that I don't get involved with, because I operate at a different level. But I know what I need to say on stage in order to plant those seeds, if that makes sense. I've had a lot of my spiritual friends come up to me, and they're like, "do you really believe what you're saying in that poem?" I'm like on a certain level of consciousness, yes I do. It's not my level, but I'm speaking to people that need to hear this. You have to go to each person's individual level. If I literally get on stage and just talk about my perspective, how is that helping anybody else?

Is this about me?

Because this isn't about me. Then I'm preaching, you know?

Navigating that line between preaching and having a dialogue.

Right, especially because I'm a white person. The last thing I need to do is "hey this is what y'all need to do." Even when I'm talking to white people. Because white people don't like being told this is what you need to do. White people need to be tricked into thinking they thought of it on their own. It's really true.

Haha, I agree with that. You can plant the seeds, but it's up to you to grow.

White people are stubborn as fuck! Most of them are. It's just digging their heels in and being like nope, nope, nope, this is just how I see it. My daughter got in a conversation with my sister-in-law on Facebook over abortion, had to do, somebody compared what we bury, it was a tweet, and [REDACTED] shared it, my daughter. Something like, "We make sure that fetuses are buried—but we're gonna dig up a grave, an indigenous gravesite to run a pipeline." And of course, my sister-in-law rejected her perspective—going of course they call them fetuses, even though that's just a medical term. And they went back and forth a few times, and they were both very, very, very civil. And [REDACTED] is explaining her point of view, and they're both saying we can have different opinions and this is how I feel and I love you. And at one point my sister posted, "yikes, I just read your last comment, we can't have this conversation." And then [REDACTED] said something else, I guess they were responding at the same time, and my sister-in-law in parentheses she said "(I'm just completely pro-life, we can't have this conversation)". And I'm just like, wow, my almost 17 year old is more open-minded and can have more of a conversation than my 24, no, 27 year old, however old she is, sister-in-law. But [REDACTED] like I can't, I can't—well, no, you *can*. There was no level of privilege there, because it was just two white women that just had a different perspective, on that. But you could see what she was doing and the defense mechanisms that came up and it's just what a lot of people do. This is what I believe, and we just can't have this talk. And I'm like, really? Why not? It makes you uncomfortable?

That's probably what you need to deal with.

Yeah, you're gonna be the same your entire life then, because you're just not gonna grow if you're comfortable. It's just not gonna happen. But because there's a lot of people that shy away from uncomfortable truths, all you can really do is plant those seeds. Like I said, I'm very much a live and let live type person. I do a lot of space holding. Which is very tiring. Because it means that like when Alton Sterling happened, and when the police were shot—and not so much that flood. That was just really shitty for everybody. So that was different with space holding. Just because of how I view the spirituality I view everything with, I'm kinda like, I just have to hold space for everybody. And everybody's perspective. I knew where I fell on certain things even though I don't have too many definitive lines. Holding space means you give people room to have whatever experience they're having. To me, in a lot of ways, that's a much more spiritual path to take than I run out and I'm constantly saying oh, well, you shouldn't do this, you shouldn't do that.

Shaming them, in a way.

Yeah. Who am I to say that? And I was like really tired. I wasn't running around, I wasn't protesting, I wasn't this, I wasn't that. I was just a witness to what was going on. And just held everyone in peace and love. And hoped that by doing that, that in turn affected people to think more conscientiously. To act themselves from love.

It seems like, sometimes, the biggest difference you can make is by holding space for those around you.

Mm hmm.

And you hope it spreads from there?

Yep.

IV. Slam as a Vehicle for Presenting Poetry and Sharing Confessional Narratives

Since you originally defined yourself as a page poet, how did your writing change to fit into slam conventions? What are some strategies you picked up that helped you evolve as a slam poet?

The three-minute time limit, that was interesting, cuz I never wrote long poetry before. And then all of a sudden at the open-mic I had written a long poem. I didn't even know that slam had a three-minute time limit! I just had this super long poem. And then writing long poetry just got easier. Not that I didn't write any long poetry, I had no idea what time any of that was under.

So you had to make your poems longer, whereas others have to shorten and condense?

Right, right, but then I found that I was going really long. And I was having to edit. I wrote was sounded like I was reading you a story. Very, very prosaic. I've read to my children their whole lives so I have a very calming voice. And so I would get up and slam, my poems were very metaphor dense, like very. And I talk fast, so that was interesting. I remember the first poem I wrote where I was like aw, shit, I just wrote a poem that's like a performance piece. And it had repetition in it and I had a spot in it where I really paused. You definitely have to learn it. You can really honestly get up and slam anything. And so that's what I did at first. Then I learned how—my poems before bled emotion on page. You would read them and it would make feel things, you could feel the emotion. And I had to go from that to learning my words didn't have to convey my emotion, my cadence could.

Yeah.

The pauses that I used. The way that I said the poem. So that was my first big change. I was like, oh, wow, I can literally just say stuff and it can just be poetry. And then I learned things don't have to connect and make sense as much as they would on a page poem. That you could write a very disjointed piece and it's gonna maybe be pulled off better than a page poem because you are giving it in a performance. What I had to do, though, because like I said, slam is whatever you want it to be. First, I had to learn the rules. And I had to learn the rules of slam that don't exist but they really do because unfortunately people have preconceived slam poetry is not an art form.

It's a game?

It's a stage. And it's a vehicle for presenting poetry. First what I did was I learned how everybody else did it. I was immersed in it. I don't remember who in the heck it was, I don't remember if it was Da Vinci, Picasso, somebody, it could have been some Buddhist monk—basically, you have to learn all the rules before you can know how to break them, how to be a master at it. And that's what a master is, they know which rules can be broken. Now I'm at a spot where in some aspects I am. The poem you've pointed out are very slammy sounding. And that's because I needed to grab people's attention. That wouldn't necessarily worked as well if I would've gotten up and done it in another method of delivery because there wouldn't be the urgency. I wouldn't have caught the people's attention. The points aren't the point, the audience *is*. So when you're trying to deliver a particular message you have to think about how am I gonna grab them?

So, the points aren't the point, but the audience is the point. They control the points.

Right.

So, by pleasing the audience you get the points.

Right. And it was really really funny because, Donney posted last week a little meme. It was one of those dark side memes, you know? With the frog, and the frog's got the hood on. And the first one says, you know, "it's like slammin' this week." And then the normal frog's like "I should put up some new work to show range and growth," you know. "Points are not the point." And the little frog on the bottom with the hood's like, "but it's the cash slam and you need money for Puerto Rico so you better put up that work!" What was funny was that he put up some of his best poems he has right now. I put up two poems that I just wrote, I've slammed stuff like that before, it was still a kind of different way for me go. I read them off my phone and tied for second. And Donney even came up after, somebody said something to him, and he looks right at me and says, "I think I'm taking a break from slam for a while, let other people win for a while." It just shows you really, on any given day, have no clue.

Yeah.

At the last cash slam I did some of my race poems. And one of 'em I hadn't done in six months out loud at all, and I totally screwed it up, and that's probably why I didn't do as well. But you just never know.

How do you think slam affected the stories being told after the summer?

We don't like to pimp our trauma. Like how I did last week. That definitely wasn't—in fact, I waited until I knew it felt authentic to me. That I knew 100% I wasn't doing it because I was worried, oh, I've got good poems. In one respect you have to toe that line when something traumatic happens, especially when it's something like that, you don't wanna go, oh, I don't want this to just be seen as I'm using this poem for slam. Or for people to go another race poem. Oh, God, this, or, oh, God, that. I think part of the difference between Baton Rouge and maybe some other places—first off, this is the first time it's actually hit at home. So we all have this personal stake and this personal narrative about it where this really happened. We're not writing about an incident that happened on the other side of the country. We're writing about something that we experienced. So that made it more real, I think. That we, I think what it did is it made it come from a—we're not sharing this because something happened and we wanted to write a poem about it and share our perspective. We're sharing this because this is shit that we dealt with and we need to process it and we need to heal. Mine especially very much came from the irony of the name of the city. I just had this idea. Actually, "I am a white woman in a river of drowning black bodies" I just wrote one day three times in my notebook. I don't know why. And then I actually, this other poem I started to work on and I was like wait a minute these go together. I had slammed that poem a couple of times, maybe once or twice or read it on the open-mic or something. Then when the flood happened, things you start to read on social media—I wrote about, it was different rivers, I wrote the poem about the Mississippi—but I literally wrote about what happened a month before it happened. Not in that way, but I was touching on themes. And I've had a lot of crap that happens with me, like, I write a poem and two months later it's like, real shit happens that's reflective of it. And I even joked and told everybody after I was done with this poem, I was like I need to watch what I write. I don't know

if I'm touching some kind of stream where I'm catching what's gonna happen. Or if I'm like writing and it's influencing, and it's setting us more on this timeline of what is happening.

Like, am I foreshadowing?

Or am I creating, right? I'm like I need to start writing about puppies or rainbows, this is getting like really weird. Or I would write a poem and haven't read it yet, or I've been working on it for a couple of months because I keep putting it on the back burner, and then somebody gets up on stage and slams like the exact topic. And there's even an exact line I wrote in it and I'm like, guess I'm not quick enough, now it's gonna look like I stole that from him.

Yeah.

I think that it's interesting that you came in at that point, because what you would see at *Eclectic Truth* is, there is a pattern of things that are going on that people write about. I'm sure you noticed that at your own slam. But like I said we have never had the experience where it was a collective, it happened as a community. This happened here. There's poems that I could write about just my experience, I have a few of 'em that I kinda like just started writing and like threw away. I definitely wrote it from a white perspective but of what was unjust. Where Donney's Tweet poem ["Timeline Trauma"] is just Tweets. That's like my "Things I Google'd" poem that I just read [last week], that's just questions.

Yeah.

That's what hits so hard with it, that looks like an essay on paper. I mean, it is a poem. But why that is such a good poem is because of the emotion and the story you are drawing people into. We were able to get more at that real level, of just like, like Donney did, stating these are just Tweets. And a lot of Donney's Tweets are metaphoric so that helps.

You called slam "a vehicle for poetry." Would you say the urgency of the summer's struggles transcended the urgency of slam?

Definitely, definitely, oh, definitely. In *Eclectic Truth*, we started a couple years ago, and we've gotten more into it, of having more community events. More open-mic. We always do the open-mic at these community events when something tragic happens.

As if invoking the open-mic says we're not competing against each other tonight? Rather, we're performing for each other?

And we wanted to start to be able to do it more, not just when there's something to play off of. That was unintentional on our part that that was happening. Where there is this level of transcending slam. And this just being a safe space and a community space and that's already there. But I think our venue has shifted some with how much of a safe space we are we definitely go beyond that mold. We definitely transcended slam over the summer. And we've

been there lots of time before. I also this it's interesting how, possibly, slam, so our experiences kind of modeled how we were functioning in that space. But I also think that space very much modeled how we went out into the world. And how the people we came in contact with did.

How?

I especially mean people of the *Poetry Alliance* who were there every week, and our regulars who were just consistent. It's not just us and what we brought in and what we brought into that space, but it was definitely what we took out, too. And I think that was possibly more important, was emboldened and understood by everyone else's perspective. We were able to go out and make more functional change, and do more within the community, which then in turn affected our writing, which then in turn affected the space. So there is a very cyclical nature. Part of what we're starting to realize is how far us operating in that capacity has come, and how far we have shifted to that. When Donney came up to me after the last slam, he's been out a couple of times that I read some of my poems, and so he didn't know that I already read those. And he was just like "for you to trust us with that," he's like, "that's amazing, that you felt that you were safe enough here and that you could lay that vulnerability out." He says, "it shows me where we're growing." And then he said, "Melissa by you getting up there and do that poem it means that somebody else is gonna go, well, if she can get up there and talk about that, I can get up and say what I need to say." And so it's very cyclical, especially within the Black community, that they see and hear that. Our mission statement actually talks about us being a platform for diverse voices, that champions that. That you can go there and feel safe doing it. And so I think that part of that evolution has happened since all of that happened.

Almost like you needed the trust built up from the goodwill of the community and *Eclectic Truth* being here for so long to have that safe space being created so you can model it and place it back into the community, so you can go beyond the status quo.

Right, right. And definitely for me, I could have easily, just because of who I am, done that poem, or put that out there a long time ago. My journey with that was just more, it's not just about me, I wanted to make sure it was okay with my daughter. When I read her a different poem, she was like, "you need to slam that one." I was like, "are you sure? Do you want me putting this out there?" And she goes, I mean, *she* writes, she goes, "I'm not writing about it," she said. "Isn't that why we write? To share it? So we can help other people." And I'm like, "as long as you're okay with me sharing our story." Like I said, I had to get to that place where I didn't feel like I was exploiting it. Where it felt like it was coming from the right place. Not that I ever thought I would, but that's just integrity within me. I had to make sure that anything I put on stage, and especially social justice poems, that it's not being exploited for a score, because that's not what it's about.

Definitely.

V. Resonating with the Audience

MELISSA: I've slammed and lost enough slams and had this and had that and, not that this matters, but proven my integrity to anyone that comes out. That I'm definitely never putting a poem out because I'm thinking, "oh, I'm gonna play this poem because we have this crowd and I just wanna win," basically, "there's a lot of Black people here tonight, I definitely need a Black poem that's gonna win." Now, I might look out at an audience and go, "oh, I have four Black judges, I'll do this poem."

JOSH: **Because you think it will resonate more with that specific audience?**

Right. Sometimes I will get an audience and go, "all my judges are white, they're getting the poem about whiteness because they need to hear that." And I'm not gonna score well but that's not what it's about. It's about creating an uncomfortable dynamic so growth and truth can happen. Fine, give me a "5." I don't care.

Haha. You're gonna get booed.

I had some very religious woman one day give me, a poem that was about enlightenment, give that poem like a "4.7" or something, and everybody in the audience just turned and looked at her.

Haha.

Because in my poem, I'm on stage, and I can hear her going, "oh no no no no, oh no no no no". I think I said "what is the voice of God? What is the shape of *her* face?" And she's just like, "oh no no no no." But then of course Xero goes up and gives his atheist poem where he compares God to unicorns, and she gave him a good score. Because he was funny. Because he was basically saying that your belief in God is like believing in unicorns. She swallowed it.

Because she had a unicorn hierarchy. It's kinda like *Equus*.

Right, right, right! It was a pill she could swallow, where mine just made her uncomfortable. If you give me a "5" that probably means as long as I didn't offend you.

You got a reaction.

I got a reaction. You may not have liked it. Now it's different if a misogynist gets on stage and gets a "3" because they're spewing hate about women. But in that context I was like give me a "4," because I affected you. You give me an "8.5" you were ambivalent about it. I know you were really, really, really were bothered by that poem, and that does something.

What do you think placing all these law enforcement-related poems against the backdrop of antique firetrucks does for the community, the poetry?

Well, actually, we like those antique firetrucks, just in general, the *PA*. It's a cool space. Before we were there, we were, when I started, we were at the McKinley Alumni Center, which is at McKinley, and it's freezing cold. It's a high school. And then we moved to *Le Bon Temps*, which is a restaurant, and we were on the little bar side, and they had a little stage. And then we moved there. And we were actually upstairs at the *Arts Council* in the art gallery, for about six months or a year.

My first *ET* I went to was in there.

And it was kind of interesting, it was almost like too hoity-toity of a space, if you know what I'm saying. It was just a little extra. Even when they had an art exhibit set up in there, we liked it. But when we moved downstairs this is like, cool, you know? Honestly, the irony has completely escaped me. I know we are around firetrucks, I see them as antiques. I don't think I've ever once associated it with a modern day, even the uniforms. I have never once, I might be the one person that tells you that. I can tell you, now that I'm looking at it, I can be like that is really interesting and that is really ironic. But the irony completely went over my head. And I do a lot of those poems. I think it works. It's almost like it's meant to be. It's almost like it's full circle. To me, it doesn't speak so much to the irony of it, or a grating juxtaposition, as much as it just feels like it fits.

How long have you been downstairs at the *Arts Council* now?

We've been there a year and three or four months. [Sees a client leaving.] Oh, I need to get payment from them, and clean before the next party comes. [To them: "Bye!"] If you wanna hang out for fifteen minutes, and I will be right back.

Sure.

VI. Local Shit and Layers

[15 minutes later.] I was like, look, if you need me, I'm out here. We literally get 'em in and get 'em out.

It's a system. How long have you lived in Baton Rouge?

My whole life. I was born in Baton Rouge then we moved out to Central. Do you know where that is?

Not exactly. I'm still learning my Louisiana geography.

It's north of Baton Rouge, it's still in East Baton Rouge Parish. Not as far north as Zachary. It's like, Central, Baker, Zachary. So, it's that way.

Being from here, how reflective do you think *Eclectic Truth* is of the Baton Rouge community, considering that Florida Blvd. divide you speak of in your poetry?

It's very reflective of a certain group of people, if you know what I'm saying. We're not outside the norm for a good amount of people that live here, if that makes sense. We're not some little enclave of these like-minded people. I think that there is, in the state, and in Baton Rouge in general, I think we're more liberal maybe than we look. Because a lot of people don't register to vote, and a lot of people don't vote. And especially because we're a red state and my vote doesn't count. So I think we are a little more liberal than we look. Baton Rouge, like, where I live in Central, ultra-conservative. Everybody's like ultra-Christian. It's like way worse there than it is in Baton Rouge. But *Eclectic Truth* is not representative of the majority of Baton Rouge. It is representative of the majority of some certain subsets. The younger you get the more *Eclectic Truth* is reflective of—even if maybe some younger people's viewpoints it's not reflective of, it's reflective of the open-mindedness. Because there's a lot of kids that definitely, like, have their own points of view, but, are totally, like, "hey, but like this is your space to say what you want. I don't agree with it, but I'm not gonna sit there while you're on stage and say anything about it or tell you you're wrong because you think this way and I think that way." But, in general, it's not too reflective of the city itself.

Slam seems like a reactionary art form. Now that Trump has been elected to office, what do you think this talking point will do to the Baton Rouge summer-related stories?

I think to an extent it does get incorporated because you're always building on the experiences that you've had. I don't think they'll get brushed aside. I think for a certain group of people it will, of course. Or they'll use Trump as a, "well, now that Trump's President we don't have to deal with that bullshit anymore, he's gonna put a stop to that." I think it'll get wrapped into it in that way, but I also think because what happened over the summer is something that happened to our community and we dealt with it personally, I think that's why we haven't seen—like, nobody really, I think like one or two people have written a Trump poem. Nobody's even touching it because we're all just like eh. It's such a massive topic, because he's such a troll, we don't even know yet—like, we don't know. Anybody, anybody who's not republican knows that the republicans just got trolled. They may not admit it. Some of them are starting to. Some of 'em are like, "wait, wait, I'm starting to regret my decision." But we don't really know what he's going to do. He's so unpredictable. He's never had any actual stance on anything.

The world seems to be in a holding pattern right now.

He doesn't know what he's doing. I think that that's why we're all kind of like, it's not the shock of it. While I think that there were a lot of us, in all honesty, I didn't want him or Hillary to win. I mean, I'm just shocked that he actually did, because I would not have accepted it. It just shows

how many people in the heart of America were tired of their views not being met. Just like a lot of people on the coast who were eyeing Jill Stein, and Bernie, and Johnson, and people like that, it just shows that the electoral college does kind of work. I don't think that here, I don't think you're going to see that go away. I don't think that anywhere that's dealt with any level of tragedy—because think about it this way, Trump's the President of the whole country, but local shit is really where shit really happens. Even if it's local government and things like that. That's like being a peasant and really being concerned with who is elected the King of England. It's shitty, but the fact that there is a king and you're a peasant is always shitty.

Are you saying there should be more focus on local communities? How to get locals to vote in their local elections?

At the end of the day there is a lot the United States government does affect, but we're just dealing with so much here. I think if what happened this summer wouldn't have happened this summer, I think people would have a lot more at stake and wouldn't seem as tired and just kind of whatever about Trump, it's because we wouldn't have had too much that happened personally here. It would be more about fighting that battle because that battle would be ours. But I think a lot of people right now, when you get into the flood, because that affected everyone. Even the thing with Alton Sterling, that definitely affected everybody because you've got people who are very much on the social justice-end of it on one side who feel like it's something that needs to be dealt with. And then you've got everybody who's on the police and government end of it. So I really think that that's why you don't really think you don't see as much about Trump around here. On a local level, too many people don't like shoving it in people's faces.

It's like everyone knows.

It's redundant! My family at Thanksgiving, who typically would always talk politics at, the adults who would sit around, eating this or that. When you have kids you're not at the adult table, because there's not room for you and your kids. I was at the adult table for like one year and then I got put back to the kids table because I've got kids. I'm glad I'm not at the adult table because I really don't like talking to my family about all that when we're eating turkey or whatever, you know? But like, there's kind of like a segment of my family that showed that they're way more conservative than we thought. To another part of my family. Even to some of my family that is more conservative-thinking, but there's like a certain part of my family. Me and my kids are talking, and I'm like I hope nobody says nothing, I don't want anybody to say a thing.

Let's get this over with.

I'm not talking about my kids, but nobody talked about politics. Why? Because the people who were like, "hell yeah, Trump," even to the people that might be a little more conservative, but more vote on who the candidate is and issues, and aren't just like I'm republican so I'm about to vote republican, weren't even about to bring up a conversation. And then a lot of people in

my family are liberal. Had it have been a normal presidential race between two normal, I hate to say it, but run-of-the-mill candidates, there just would have been normal political talk. But he is such a dividing figure, and polarizing, that nobody could even talk about it. I think the only way that there would have been any conversation is if it would have been Trump against Sanders, I think you would have had a lot of interesting conversation, because you would have been talking about two people who aren't mainstream, and who really would have gone in and shaken it up. But those people that were like die-hard Hillary are die-hard Hillary, and those people that were die-hard Trump are die-hard Trump... Like, how did we end up with these two people? Is this the best we can do?

Will you see that echo in the slam community?

Believe me, the few people that have done Trump poems have been appreciated. We've been appreciative of 'em, we needed to hear that. But I think as an artist, a lot of people are just like, that's heavy. To even begin—it's not unpacking baggage, it's not this, it's not that—to even be able from an artist's perspective to poetically express fucked up shit. Dude, there's like layers. It makes me think about Shrek, ogres have layers, onions have layers.

Yep, social penetration theory.

Jesus Christ, that's too many layers. I don't feel like dealing with all of Trumps layers. Makes me feel nauseated. I don't want to deal with Hillary's layers either. And I think that's where a lot of people are at is—it happened, let's just worry about all our other crap that's going on.

VII. Breaking the Rules

You mentioned earlier that you had to learn the rules of slam before you could break them. What are some of the rules that you decided to embrace or break?

Basic rules for are like how to play it slam. First off, what makes a good slam poem? What is hands down gonna win all the time? And figuring out how to do that and write like that, knowing ultimately, that's not what the game's about, but that's what wins it. And we know what those poems are: Hot-button topics, getting angry, conversely being very sad.

Showing vulnerability?

Yep, shock value, going in a completely different direction in a poem than you thought you were gonna go. The way that it gets broken, kinda like the poems I did the past couple of weeks, you embody. One, you are kind of putting on an act, not that's it's not who you are as a poet, of course it is. But you're playing a game. You're writing and you're thinking I know how to make a really good poem that's gonna wow the audience. It's coming so far back to yourself that your very presence in which you have to offer through your own life experience, that in

effect makes people go “wait a minute, that’s better than what I’m use to hearing on the stage.” And not that it’s better, but it touched me more. That’s one end of it. Another end of it is playing the game is trying to read your judges, and trying to hear what kind of poems other people are putting out and if the judges like it, and this and that. And wanting to play that way. Because you wanna think about strategy and you wanna learn how to do that, but then always going in and not giving a fuck. Being like, I know that this poem is not gonna do well with this audience, but I already decided to do it, and I don’t feel like figuring out another poem even though I know that if I switched these two poems I’d do better. And just doing the opposite anyway. Putting yourself in a position where—not playing the game, and not doing well. And having those humble experiences. Not humble as in not-egotistical, but humble as in refining you as a person. And I think that as that happens there’s a part of you, if you let yourself go through all of that, and all of these various experiences, going up and knowing you’re gonna drop a poem. Making yourself do a poem you haven’t done in six months and you haven’t rehearsed it cuz you’re probably gonna drop it. Drop it. Be letting anything bad that can happen, or be willing to accept that experience. Then what will happen is you’re going to go on stage, and not because you’re trying to, but the mask somehow all falls away. Then it’s just you and your poem.

Do you think that helps because of the trust built in this community? That you can let yourself go in this space?

I think it’s different for different people. I think that I could probably do it in an venue, and it wouldn’t bother me, and it may or may not work, but that goes back to me be willing to put up a poem I haven’t done in six months. And know I’m probably about to get up on stage, and not do well, and they’re gonna score me bad, and that’s cool. So I can go into a space somewhere else, where other people maybe wouldn’t. That’s what I mean, sometimes, in a more unorthodox way, to answer your question, that’s some of the things you wouldn’t expect to hear me say. Toiryan and I had a big talk about that because he’s been going through stuff. I’m like, “you know what you need to do? You need to slam when you have a whole bunch of family shit going on and you know you’re gonna screw up your poem. Go do it. Because right now, Toiryan, everything’s about winning, and if you think you’re gonna mess up you won’t get on stage that night. So get up on stage and mess up. And not because, oh, I’m Toiryan and—.” I said, “but you need to get up there and not give it a 1000 percent.” I said, “you need to get up there and go I’m probably going to fail and that’s okay.” Because Toiryan is very much centered about win win win win win. I said, “but Toiryan are you growing as quick as you could? If you really want to grow, get up on stage when you’re having a really bad day. Accept that you might mess up. It’s gonna humble you. It’s gonna bring you more to the core of yourself, and then you’re gonna get to that authenticity.” Because he says he feels like he’s performing for other people right now, and he feels like—and I’m not violating his confidence because he posted a lot of this on Facebook—and he said he felt like he was slamming based on, and writing poems based on, he always thought he was going into a poem for himself, but he ended going into it thinking, “what would other people wanna hear?” And he’s not being true to himself. I’m like being true to yourself is one of the hardest things when you’re playing a game. When you’re just writing poetry it’s not. But, “you know what, Toiryan, how many poems have you written

and you didn't put on stage because you didn't think they were good enough?" Fuck it. Who cares if they're good enough. "You'll get so good at being you that you'll have your own voice that is completely different. And right now, Toiryan, almost all your poems are the same. They're not the same, you're writing about different things, you sound different, you can slow it down, you can speed it up. But this is Toiryan, high intensity, competition, this is what I'm giving you." I said, "you're gonna have to get uncomfortable." He's gonna have to be willing that the net's there, pretty much. And that net, honestly, honestly, thinking your community is that net is a placeholder. For a lot of people it is. But I hate to say it, no offense to your religious beliefs or anything like that, but that's what God is to a lot of people. And then there's a lot of people that are more spiritual and not religious and they found that within themselves. So, for Toiryan, if he needs to believe that it's the community that's doing that, then that's good. And the community's part of it, the community'll help him find it in himself.

In the end, you're saying it's all about you, then. The community is there to support you to make us better. For you to take a chance and be caught by a cloud of support?

Right, right, 100 percent. I don't feel like I have anything more to add to that.

VIII. In the Wake of What Happened

Any specific Baton Rouge or summer-related poems that you remember from *Eclectic Truth* poets?

I remember some that were written about Kaiya—did I say her name right?

Yes, yes. Kaiya.

That's how tired I am. I'm horrible at names. I'm like a grandmother here. I call kids like 12 different names.

Hey, you!

Yeah, you, you, you, you! The cute one with the blonde hair!

Haha.

A lot of the ones about Kaiya. Desireé had one that really really touched me. And there was one other person that wrote one. Those touched me because they're a little bit more personal, but they were able to bring it home. It was still a Black woman. Young woman. And her life was tragically ended for whatever reason. And it was someone that they mentored, and it was someone who had more talent, probably, than all of *PA* put together. Than everybody in the room put together. And just the timing of it all. I think that that's why those touched me. I hear

so many poems, all the time, that I can't list out particular ones. I will say I was one of the first people to write about both those situations. And a lot of people were coming up to me going, "yeah, those poems are coming to me, I'm just not there yet." But those are people who, especially with Alton Sterling, who had more at stake. Talking about my Black friends coming up to me. And then with the flood, the flood affected everybody in so many different ways. Some people flooded, some people didn't. Not too too many people have written about that, they're written from more of a peripheral point of view. Honestly, [exhales], there's been more poems that touched me that I've heard since it happened that touched me more now. There were poems that were already written, but that people brought back out in the wake of what happened with Alton Sterling. I guess a lot of people were like, "I have nothing else to say and damn I've already said it, and now that's happened here."

Doing it again. Giving it new meaning through re-performing.

For everybody to get a different perspective on it. Those are probably the one's that touched me the most. A couple by Brittany. And then Jazmyne had a couple that have just blew me away. And some of them I've heard before. And that's another thing. Unless they're specifically referencing the flood, or specifically referencing Alton Sterling, because of everything that's going on, you don't know if they wrote it before. So Donney's Tweet poem, it's obvious, because that's exactly what it was about. But the majority of people, and I mean I really could be wrong, because my brain doesn't like, my memory doesn't—I try not to talk about everything I've been through spiritually, but it's really hard not to, because it ties in. But I'm a very present-minded person now. And so I don't hold onto things from the past. And it's not intentional. Like, literally, my brain chemistry is different. There probably have been and they probably touched me, but there's like Donney's poem that really really stands out in the same way.

Is it because there was so many?

Yeah. I do feel like there was a poem by Toiryan. But that may just be because you said it.

I realize I've been freshly immersed in it, it's all super fresh to me, so aspects probably stand out more to me than y'all. That's also why I'm doing these interviews, to cross-check my perception.

Where I've been with this group for so long, and that's what you came in on. So, that's like when you fall in love with a band, and it's like their third album, that's gonna be the best album they ever made!

But, I never heard the first one.

And everybody was like, no their first one's were better, and you're like, no, the third one, because that's how you found it. It's kind of like that with you. And then because you're doing a project around it, you're very much seeped in always looking through that filter.

Yeah, you're right. While still trying to not be exhibitionist is something that I'm always keeping in the front of my mind.

And that stuff's sticking out. Where I'm like oh, damn, this is just my life. It's what I do every week. So I would say it has been more poems in the past that have really touched me. Donney's Tweet poem is one that like, I really like, it was okay, but the more of the genius of it grew on me the more I heard it. The first time I heard it I was like oh, well, that's not bad. I read it, on Facebook or something, But the more I hear it, and maybe he's living in it more, versus just kind of saying it, the more that poem grows on me. The more I'm like, hey. Like he never says this, but it's like, an obituary. I feel like its really turned into an obituary for the summer.

An obituary for the summer. Hmm.

An obituary for the summer. In however many Tweets. I guess because I'm so immersed in it myself, because I'm part of the *PA*. Maybe what I'm not doing is, where you're able to, because you came in as an outsider, there's so much less separation for me. On all of it. I feel like we just live and breathe and exist this summer, and that comes across in everything that we do. Every poem that we read. Even if it's a poem that Jazmyne might get up and get—but now she's saying it through the lens of oh, shit, now that's happening here.

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VITA

Joshua Hamzehee is a performance scholar<->practitioner who engages in critical ethnographic methods, spoken-word roots, and remixed performance techniques. With these tools, Hamzehee culturally, aesthetically and collaboratively excavates how marginalized publics foster community and reach dominant publics (if they choose) through live, digital, and ritual performances.

Hamzehee was born and raised in Los Angeles, CA, and currently resides in Cedar Falls, IA. His recent touring solo and ensemble performance projects include *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show!*, *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, *The Deported: A Reality Show!*, *CONVICT*, and *The Worst of the Worst: Performances of Guantanamo Bay*. In Hamzehee's performance-related research, two areas of inquiry emerge: 1) What are our responsibilities to one another within our communications, through ethical representation of on-stage performance, and for advocating toward equitable social progress? and 2) How can we reflexively grow out of past traumas inflicted by dominant others, systems, and structures?