This chapter is organized as a reflection in five parts, a collage of voices examining the role that a student-led poetry sub culture played in a small school (Communication Arts and Sciences, or “CAS”) at Berkeley High School in Berkeley, California, and which spread beyond the walls of the school to the broader youth community of the Bay Area and the country. Two of the authors, Rafael Casal and Chinaka Hodge, were students in this small school and continue to work as poets. The other, Rick Ayers, was a founder of CAS and organizer of Poetry Slams from 1999 to 2006. The reflection takes the form of a conversation between the three participants, sometimes directed at each other, sometimes directed at the broader readers.

1—Refusing to submit—The early years

It goes one for the student who refuses to submit
And two for the teachers who are underpaid as shit
It’s the next generation of mis-educated youth
Who demonstrate the truth and manage to make it through
It goes three for the strikes giving young bloods life
And four for the years you spent stifled inside
It’s the next generation of mis-educated youth
Next time ask ’em for proof.

—from “Commencement Day,” by Blue Scholars

Rafael

I distinctly remember the first time I got a report card that wasn’t good. It was in fifth grade at Thousand Oaks. I remember getting the report card and seeing, then it was different symbols like satisfactory and unsatisfactory, it was before there was even A’s and B’s and I remember getting that report card and seeing the satisfactory which was like C’s and there was a few U’s. And I remember seeing that and hearing the conversation, you’d hear all these things like, “well he’s so bright and so creative but he’s not able to do traditional work, he doesn’t listen to the traditional
way.” Somewhere between there and the seventh grade when the standardized tests came along, to get into algebra, I just lost all interest.

Fifth grade was the year that I quit the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program voluntarily. And I never, until a few years ago, could understand how you got into it, you were just in it. Now, all my other friends weren’t and me, and these 10 White kids and two Black kids were. I never really got how the selection was made in second and third grade. But in fifth grade, I was way more into playing soccer in that second half of the day where you were supposed to be in the GATE program, so I asked if I could not go. So I pulled out of that and started hanging with the folks who stayed behind.

And in sixth grade, at King Middle School, was the first year I had a teacher that I really didn’t like. That was the first time I had a teacher who didn’t like me, who actually suspended me for doing little things that an 11-year-old does. And seventh grade was the big placement for algebra instead of pre-algebra. I had made it into algebra and then got into the class and then flunked out of the class, and they sent me back to pre-algebra. And I had a feeling that I belonged here because I’d tried algebra and couldn’t do it and I made it back here. And there was a very specific group of kids who were in algebra. King had two bus routes, one went into the hills, and one was in the flats. I knew the kids who went up to the hills, and they were all in this algebra class, and I sat down and I wasn’t friends with them and I felt that, “I don’t belong here, I don’t belong here socially, I don’t belong here academically.”

I tried to never to get on that “I was a victim” tip. The education fails in a lot of places, but it starts with the initial “fuck this” mentality. And at that point it’s either a constructive thing or a destructive thing and at that point, you’re 12 years old, it’s fun to be like, “you know, I don’t care about this class.” You’re clear enough that you’re not going to use algebra at any point in time. I settled into my pre-algebra rebellion. And I loved it. I got more and more into getting into trouble, and there was some gratification in that for some reason. My parents were tearing their hair out. I was very close with the vice principal at this point; we were on a first name basis because I was always getting sent down. I was in conflict resolution with folks.

And I was getting into fights, and the fights got me street cred with a certain crowd of people, and that brought me more street cred. I thought I’d never get suspended, and then I got suspended and I got all this credit, you know, Rafael, the one who acts up and will do some wild shit. I was getting all these social rewards that at the time feel more important than the official stuff in the classroom. The world beyond the classroom was more meaningful to me. Only later, of course, would I find a way to connect my public and the school self—and that happened through poetry.

Come eighth grade, I had 3 or 4 suspensions under my belt and I was leaving middle school, not failing anything but I had like a C average. But I hadn’t really thought about it. I was just not a good student.

Chinaka

I was not coming in with C’s and D’s like Rafa. I was a really good student, but I couldn’t make any friends. It was in sixth grade that the Oakland public schools went on strike. I was going to Cole Elementary in west Oakland at the time. Sixth grade was the first time I’d been in public schools, and by the middle of the year everyone had gone on strike so it was my first time really being involved in any of that. There was an oratorical fest going on that year for the first time. You know the oratorical fest? Oakland public schools puts it on. It was like the Black academy, the canon for us, and so I liked it and I did well in it. It’s poetry or debate with five or six different categories. This was my first introduction to public performance, and for me too it would be
years before I was able to fully integrate a public identity and my school self. And I always competed in the choral reading or individual reading of someone else’s work, like Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise” or something by Langston Hughes. So I started writing poetry in the sixth grade just to compete in the oratorical fest. Just to practice doing that kind of stuff.

During strike school, the teacher asked us to write an essay, write a report on something. I hadn’t really done anything like that. She wanted a 12-page report and I was like, what? It was the sixth graders and seventh graders and eighth graders altogether and the eighth graders were ready to do that but I was like “I don’t know”—so I was going to write about the Tuskegee Airmen because that movie had just come out, and I started working on that and I came across the story of Tuskegee 626 because it was in the library back in those days when books were next to each other. I started doing this report on the syphilis experiment, and I was just shocked that the U.S. government would act in a way so blatantly disrespectful to the health of Black people.

In the process of that, I found the Gil Scott-Heron album about Tuskegee 626—that was a big thing. I was doing poetry at the time, but before I didn’t know that poetry could be like that—so musical. I was big on Bob Marley and Gwendolyn Brooks, but Gil Scott-Heron was the first poem that really got to me.

The following year I was in the seventh grade, but it was Montera, an Oakland public school in the hills, and there were lots of things going on. The kids had slashed the science teacher’s tires and then run the car into the tree and so the teacher left and they couldn’t find anyone to replace her. So my folks were saying “You can’t go to school here,” and I ended up leaving Cole and going up to Montera. I had been pretty popular at Cole; I had a cousin who looked out for me. But at Montera I was just like this nerdy, poetry-liking dork kid. And my parents made me wear the school uniform, and I couldn’t make any friends. So I just started writing poetry for the eighth grade dinner dance, and I was in yearbook in the seventh grade. I fell in with 3 or 4 kids who were dressed all in black and writing ska lyrics or punk rock lyrics.

Rick

When I started teaching, I was given a few “lower track” classes of sophomores—designated “Multicultural Literature” as opposed to the higher track “World Literature.” It was a shocking introduction to the culture of school. The students understood something about that class that I could not figure out for many months—“we are the dumping ground class,” announced Pierre on the first day. I was determined to understand, through asking my department chair, reviewing the cumulative files, and getting to know the kids, what exactly got them to this class. It turned out that it was nothing in particular. Some were low skilled or poorly prepared, some were considered behavior problems, some had barely diagnosed disabilities. And when Sienna came to me as a new transfer from Louisiana in November—a young woman who was more well read than any sophomore I had met—I realized sometimes it was simply being Black and having no advocate. What all these kids had in common was being unwelcome in the higher track class. And they knew it. And they responded accordingly.

The good part, for me, was that no one in the administration cared what I did in this class. No one checked out the curriculum; no one observed me. As long as we stayed in the room, I was doing a fine job. Eventually we moved from dramatic readings to creation of a classroom mural (on huge rolls of brown paper) to the creation of a classroom chess tournament. I really had no particular plan because it took me so long to even figure out what we were doing there. Like most other teachers assigned here, I did not do a particularly good job. We were happy to end the year in an uneasy truce.
The following year, when I joined others in the department to argue for the abolition of a separate "Multicultural Literature" track, one of the elders in the department gave me a dressing down: "Of course it's a horrible class. But I taught that class for 15 years before I got the assignment I have now. You have to pay your dues." This was my introduction to the culture of status and privilege that dominates high school departments, considerations that have very little to do with the needs of students.

For young people coming up in the schools, the homogenizing project of the classroom, the hidden curriculum that concerns obedience, compliance, and power, is a constant challenge. Students are dealing with their own issues—their conditions of life, their social identity, their survival. For some, rebellion is a conscious act. For most, especially in the fifth through eighth grade, it is something carried out subjectively, reactively. As teachers, even progressive teachers, we find ourselves laboring to win these kids to get with the program. For these students, the public realm, the world beyond the classroom, is more real and more important than anything inside the classroom. We are certain school success is in their interests; we worry about the drubbing they will take if they continue to resist. We want what is best for them but so often we act as agents of repression. Can we find the spark, the core, the authentic motivation inside these angry and confused young hearts?

2—Everyone else who sat between—Starting high school

Now to the knuckleheads clownin’ in the back of the class
To the teacher’s pet monkey in the front kissin’ ass
But most of all everyone else who sat between ’em
And questioned all the falsehoods the teachers believe in.
Up in hallways herded and locker territorialism;
Up in assemblies, nobody would listen;
Instead, rocked the mix tape and Walkman discreet
With the headphones threaded from the pocket through the sleeve.

Never tell you the conditions in which to apply the math
Only 65% of your peers freshman year are still here
And half that total will move on
But three out of four will drop out in two years
Add it up and it equals some shit has gone wrong
Now the snakes gave the education budget roll back
No child left behind is just a back door draft
As you stand at the summit future facin the wind
Now it’s time to let your true education to begin
—from “Commencement Day,” by Blue Scholars

Rafael

And then freshman year of high school is when it totally changed. I never had to worry about getting picked on in school because my older sister was Miss Popular and she took care of me. Come high school, she was a junior, and I was in her footsteps. So I came in CAS (Communication Arts and Sciences small school), and my sister was there with straight A’s.
When I heard 4,000 kids in high school, I was scared, so I wanted a small school. I got taller later, but I was 5 feet tall. I would drive past that high school, and it looked tough, and it looked like a place where shit happened, and my first week of school shit did happen. So I was pretty happy to be in CAS because I needed to make friends fast.

So I’m already the kid in the family that’s not doing well. Come freshman year, my first day of school, I had two groups of friends coming into high school. I had my White hippy skater kids who lived north from me up a little farther up the hill; and I had my west side Berkeley home-boys that I kicked it with. And I always kinda existed in between, somewhere in between there. And I met Hiro in there the first day, and we had a similar mindset.

So it was whatever handout you gave us on that first day, I’m tagging, drawing all over the back. And Hiro was big into sketching and he’s looking at my stuff, and I’m looking at his. Here we were comparing our expressions of identity from the street—graffiti tags—and hiding out in the back of the class with it. And we both didn’t fit in with the groups we came from in middle school, and we’re looking for a new group in high school, and Luis and Hiro knew each other, and I just ended up spending all my time with them. And we were these kids who wanted to be street but didn’t want to go all the way because we liked being smart and being the kids the teacher said things like, “He’s so bright and artistic and not linear thinking,” and we liked that middle ground so we formulated our own group. And it works for and against us in the classroom.

Where it started going really bad for me in high school was off-campus lunch. You could leave and you had this choice of coming back or not. Seventh grade was the first time I smoked weed, and that changes everything, especially the introduction of that social realm. And then freshman year, when I could smoke a cigar, could buy weed on my own, and toward the end of the year I started selling it. And the way you’d do it was you’d be in the park and this kid would be, like, $10, and this kid over there pays $12 so you had two. And if you keep doing it, you have money for food and for weed. It starts out simple like that.

I was much more preoccupied with fitting in and feeling confident about myself, and I never even got to the school part. Internally, I always felt that other people came in feeling much better about themselves and that they were able hone in on paying attention in class and not talking as much.

I did not have time to have that clear of a thought that I felt bad about myself; I was too focused on trying to fix it. You figure that everyone felt incomplete to a certain extent. It was middle school and high school when you started wanting nice shoes and all these things that elevate you socially just by having them. I was much more preoccupied with that. I was in a school of 4,000 people, and I was thinking about girls and other things that were complicating it. And I would get in the classroom, and I had never experienced focusing on it and what you could get away with in middle school did not work any more.

And I was still plummeting down, and my last semester of sophomore year the progress report came out and my GPA was .5, and I really wasn’t going to class except for my CAS classes, and my math teacher was horrible. A teacher like that made me feel like everything was messed up. And he gave me an excuse to rebel against all the classes because it was so messed up, and I felt like no one really cared about us. Sophomore year was when I officially, really locked in to the fact that since seventh grade all my math classes had been all Black and Mexican. This was messed up. This guy does not care for us. In fact the first day of class he gave us a speech about if we went to jail, he would still be there for you. That speech was not given across the hall; that was a whole different group. And as much as he felt that this was helpful, it just pushed you down another notch.
Chinaka

Having come from the larger school at the time into CAS was the best experience for me. Before the small school, there was a teacher that my friend Chris and I had. History. There was not one day where we opened the book. We would just watch movies and we would write synopsis on the movies and we would never get that writing back. So that was the pinnacle of my frustration; it seems like I’m here to be here because I have to be. Then the shift from her class to the CAS classes which linked the history and the English, and then being able to tie this third subscript about poetry. So we’d read Tortilla Curtain, and you’d see all these poems in the next slam about immigration and maquiladoras. And I loved this other student, Fritz, in the whole thing because he would not write poems, but he was all about the critique; so he was one of the taste-makers because he felt impartial and was scoring classroom teachers. We ranked each class. We were sitting in the class just acting a fool. We were critiquing on the performance all through the day. This carried from the slam, from the way we did our performance and judging and taking charge out there with the beats and rhymes, into the class.

Rick

In media, the story of high school is reduced to these silly clichés, with the archetypal nerd and jock opposition, the gangster and the queen bee. But this is not how students live it. Most of them find themselves in that “in between” zone, somewhere between this world and that, in some kind of twilight zone of danger and possibility. Do you notice that the teen movies almost always have the hero as the picked-on outsider? That’s because everyone, even the one you identify as the bossy popular kid, sees his or her life as hell.

So often, we are just background noise to the students. And, as teachers, we usually miss what is going on with the students—the drama, the fights, the joys. We miss it all. Part of our responsibility is to simply pay attention, to be present in these lives. Having this conversation with Rafael and Chinaka has forced me to revisit my first impressions. How often did I minimize or dismiss the struggles they were going through, anxious to keep the mass, the herd, pointed in the right direction. Yet I also felt that in our small school, being with a group of students over time, there eventually happened the moments when this or that student would get noticed, would become visible. I experienced Rafael as a pretty resistant student, one who had little to say and stayed inside himself. But his scribbling, his graffiti art on the back of his papers, his little hip hop verses in the column, those started to stand out. This was his public expression of identity. Who was he writing for? You don’t spend so much effort in art and writing without wanting someone to see it? Was it for me, the teacher? For other students to see? It became pretty clear that the best stuff he was doing was not for me, and I was only getting a glimpse when I crossed the barrier, the line between his official writing and the doodling. So the journey was not going to always be him coming to me. Sometimes I had to come to him. Because the real education, the real literacy work, was going on in the public space. How could we make the classroom part of that, or at least not a hindrance?

With Chinaka, well, the first connection to her was made by some of her teachers in her freshman year. Because we were organizing poetry slams in CAS, these teachers told me that I simply had to seek her out and get her to the slams. So in her case it was more a matter of a recruitment project—in poetry, she was a top draft pick.
You received education through the music you heard,
Cafeteria tables enabled beats to occur,
The state of the nation manifested up in high school politics.
History repeated, you read it to regurgitate.
Slave ownin’, dead white men,
Folks you know they made curriculums to make obedient drones.
Bring your paper but please leave your lyrics at home.
— from “Commencement Day,” by Blue Scholars

Rafael

Hip hop came into my interest around seventh grade when I really dove into it. I felt totally inspired to write stuff because it was a gratification from my peers on writing, music, you know. So sitting there writing a rap, instant gratification: I write it, I spit it, he likes it, slap hands, cool, you know. It was pretty straightforward.

Poetry, at Berkeley High in particular, which has spread to other schools in the area, rapping was how I got into spoken word because I did not have any interest at first. But there was this movie came out, Slam, and I didn’t want to watch it but my parents were watching it and they said you should really watch it. I watched it. I loved it. And the whole time I’m thinking to myself, “I can do this, it’s just rappin’ without as many rules.” And I went at it, and I wrote 10 of them, and I gave them to my sister—because subtly I was always searching for her approval. She read them. She loved them. She told me about the slam. Got me to sign up. I only knew what a slam was from the movie. I didn’t even know about scores.

And I was still debating it, and then I wrote that piece on the back of one of the papers I had to write for you (Rick). I remember the thought going through my head that I hope this essay I’m writing works. My writing was two pages of just bullshit. I hadn’t read what I was supposed to read. You saw right through it. It wasn’t an F it was a “come on, what the hell?” But you had put an A on the back of the paper. It was a rap going in one direction and in another way, written all crooked, and I guess you could read my handwriting. And you put a note saying that “If you read this, this can be your paper. Since you did write something on this side of the sheet, something you care about, use this.” And then I found out that you were a part of the slam, and it was like yeah I’m coming to the slam. And you said you’d give me extra credit so that sealed the deal. I wanted to do it, but now I had an excuse, just in case this wasn’t cool. And I did go, but I read another poem, one of those ones I’d done earlier at home that I thought was better.

And there were a lot of people there. My sister did not even make it, she was late and I was up first. Anyway, I did it; I got this huge cheer. Of course, I lost. But people liked it, and I tripped out. Because everything in my head was telling me that this was nerdy but here was 200 people here and they go to my school and they are not just nerds, everybody’s there. And the further into the year it got, and the next year it got really huge. And it was these kids who walk the in between, not hood nor jock nor nerd kid nor gangster nor perfect skater kid. So it was these ones who walk the in between pulling these others in who they got down with in this space and turning them out. People like Daveed who was a chameleon, he was with all these different groups, and that was Chinaka, that was Nico, and I was starting to pull others in, and I brought Hiroshi, and he liked it a lot. And the audience was diverse. And the scores were what made it cool.
because people don’t care so much about who wins, but they love it when people lose. You lost. You won. We talk about how it went. It’s like a sport. The scores un-hipped it.

Chinaka

So after having done seventh and eighth grade pretty much by myself, writing all these poems by myself, mostly love poems, nothing particularly great, I came to ninth grade and started doing this poetry unit with Ms. Fonté and Ms. Bell, and they had us doing all kinds of things, writing pantoums and sestinas. I really like those and then she said, “you’ve gotta do this other stuff, Bam poetry, it’s called Bam poetry.” And then she corrected herself and said, “No, it’s called Slam, it’s Slam poetry, it’s awesome, you’ve got to check it out, you’re going to love it.” And I was saying, “I’m not going to love it, Ms. Fonté.” I don’t care what you say because this is lame, why would I compete against anyone else in poetry, that does not make any sense. We had the core classes at the time, and it was her and Mr. Brooks lecturing with his eyes closed, and Ms. Bell, and you (Rick). We had a poetry day with like a group of four classes up in the large size class. So I got up and read a poem when the young poet-teachers from the Youth Speaks non-profit community group came in, and Ms. Fonté would let me get away with writing a poem for anything after that. And the slams were going on—the regular Berkeley High once a month things—and Niles and I were up there on the first ones along with Daveed in doing the CAS slam. Niles and I were the first kids to do the Youth Speaks slams at Berkeley High.

So after that it was like Daveed was doing his and he was so cute and a poet and I couldn’t talk to him, he did slightly cynical humorous poetry, he did that one slam at the nearby Berkeley Repertory Theater (the Berkeley Rep) that you organized, it was like Shakespeare Slam. I did this whole poem on how Langston Hughes didn’t need weed and neither did I, and Langston Hughes was my hero by then, and I completely forgot about that piece.

So that was going on, and I felt like I had to keep it going at Berkeley High. I tried to pull all these kids into the after school workshops. I was trying to get all my teachers to let me write a poem instead of other assignments. I got Mr. Brand to let me write a poem for extra credit on my chemistry final. It was about moles and something else.

I was getting validation from the teachers. But I kinda felt like I was manipulating the teachers. The curriculum wasn’t really there for me. And I was doing the other work, trying to shift what I was doing in the school day. So I was teaching a poetry session in Ms. Theodore’s class once a week and in Ms. Parker’s class once a week. I would convince all the English teachers to let me out, and then I would tell the science teachers that the English teachers have already let me out for the day on an in-school field trip. So I would just walk around, poke my head into classes, observe the poetry. In retrospect, I felt kinda bad about doing it at the time and hoped I wouldn’t get caught. Well, everybody knew and the security monitors would hassle everyone else but they knew I was on some poetry project. In the long run it was helpful; it’s exactly what I later had to do at NYU in all of my classes. If you can find teachers who are responsive, even in high school you can begin to set your own agenda.

Lots of young people were writing rhyming couplets, picking up on hip hop lyrics. Always a contrarian, I did not really do rhymes. I wasn’t really very good at it. It didn’t make sense for what I was writing. It was all really heady, I was writing about Hamlet and Black power struggles and a couple of love poems for Pablo, but I never showed them to anybody. I was writing about my grandmothers a lot; I did a lot of family stuff, it was real heady. Only in senior year I started getting out a couple of them that were narrative based, not rhyming either.
Rick

So what you guys are saying here just goes against my whole thesis, but I guess I’ll have to take your word for it, revise my thesis. I like to romanticize the youth poetry thing as arising completely from the heart of the youth, from the streets, from the collective unconscious of your generation. But, in fact, it seems that both of you experienced something different: adults who encouraged, prodded, goaded, and supported you to get into the poetry. Whether it was parents who showed you the film Slam, teachers who pulled you out to run workshops and gave you extra credit for performing, or people like James Kass from Youth Speaks who was always finding and nurturing the talent—there were adults blowing on the little embers, nursing them along until they exploded into the big fire.

And another thing: often you give us handful of teachers, the ones who responded to your poetry, more credit than we deserve. We were at a loss, casting about for some way to engage students. So often, when teens have the big breakthrough, the big epiphany, they look around and see an English teacher standing there, the one who gave the prompt or created the retreat. And they say what a marvelous job we have done. I think we did some helpful things but it would be a mistake for us to accept all the credit that is offered by our students. The students broke down this barrier between their lives in the community and lives of school. We allowed some tiny openings for this. We did not make this revolution in spoken word…not even close.

I remember going with a group of CAS students in 1999 to see the film Slamnation—the documentary on adult slams—not the fiction film Slam. We were blown away. We simply followed the scoring rules that we observed in this documentary and started doing slam poetry at Berkeley High. Next, we got invited by Berkeley Rep to do a slam based on themes in Shakespeare and again students stepped up and created great stuff. Soon the youth slams were a monthly event, a public showcase of student talent, with borders that were quite open and fluid, with students and other young people coming from all over the bay area. It was organized by students, who made the flyers, put out announcements, and brought the cards for scoring. It was the school leaking out of the walls and the wider world leaking into the school. I also remember being at an early one. A few of us English teachers sat near the front, helping with the door and the scoring. A colleague, Amy Crawford, turned to me half way through, her eyes sparkling with excitement, and said, “This is an English teacher’s dream come true. They are all doing English, reading, writing, critiquing, creating—and we aren’t pushing, prodding, begging. They have taken the initiative and now it’s all we can do to keep up!”

That was what we had to learn. It was not a story of heroic teachers rescuing kids from the mean streets, the cliché of Dangerous Minds and so many others. We teachers were at a loss. But we did one thing right. We gave students space. We let them grab the mic. We got out of the way. In a funny way, that was enough to make us heroes. So many experiences they had had were ones of routine repression and patronizing advice.

4—Planting seeds of revolution—The voice of youth in poetry

Class is out of session at last.
You’ve been patiently waiting,
12 years in the making,
Anybody who has doubted you is sadly mistaken,
With the paper with your name in old English for the taking,
So moms can bring it home and frame it and display it,
With the grade point average hanging over head,
Brother sister please don’t believe the bullshit they said.
F*ck the pledge of allegiance and arrogant teachers
But peace to the people who don’t ever preach in the front of a classroom
All day long, planting seeds of revolution,
We dedicate this song.
— from “Commencement Day,” by Blue Scholars

Rafael

In the course of the poetry slams, I was learning. I’d only heard one poet, I’d heard Saul Williams, and that’s all I knew. I’d read some other stuff but never thought to say them out loud to myself. So I got there and I saw Niles, who was incredible. And Niles just scooped me up right after that and was nurturing my writing. Daveed was there, and I didn’t even get to know him until after high school. There was this kid Simon who was just great. There was Chinaka, of course. And the line-up was full. Someone got up there with an acoustic guitar which I really thought was corny.

It could have gone so many other ways. It could have gotten like the Apollo Theater shows where people say, you suck, get off the stage. But it kept just enough hippiness where everyone gets love just for sharing their voice. Even I don’t agree with that all the time, but that makes it more inclusive so people feel safe to walk up there. But then you take the good with the bad. That’s the reason for the scores is you can spot out that bad and it’s still an interesting show.

This was at the end of freshman year. It didn’t affect school for me at all. I had found a more constructive way of rebelling. I was still rebellious. I was going to write my poems, and a lot of them were against something. These were the self-indulgent days when it was always about me, and what was messed up about what I was going through and it was very hard to relate it back to anyone because at 15 you really can’t see far past yourself. The school poetry slam was the first Wednesday of every month. And I would go, and I would bring more people and it grew. And I never won. For the first year and a half, it was never. I never made it to the second round. Gabe Crane, Nico Cary, they made it immediately. I was there for a year and a half doing poems that didn’t work. I’m not that cat, I’m never that cat to get it right right out of the box. I’m Mr. Trial-and-Error—this sucks, that sucks, and finally I get it right. Then the first slam that I won was against that kid Ise, from Skyline. Because now people were coming over from other schools and competing because there was nothing going on at those schools and we had the slams going on. It was not classroom sponsored, it was public art taking over some of the facilities at the school. You had to come to Berkeley High. It was word of mouth, underground. Spoken word is poppin’ around and everybody was like, I do that.

That day that I won my first slam was the first day that Adarius came. Now I’d known Adarius since I was five, but we didn’t hang out. And he came in and had been writing poetry on his own and he came in, more rehearsed than I was. But that was the time it was me and Ise in the second round. So we had to write the second round poem during the 10-minute break—they’d give us a theme right there. And, of course, neither of us did it, we both took poems we already had and changed the last line. We wanted to win and there was lots of money as a prize, sometimes $100. Ise was the reigning champion at the time and everybody loved him. And Ise brought in the sexiness to it, he was really cool, he was the Usher of poetry, and girls would come to look at him not to hear him spit. And he’s got so much charisma. So me and him went head to head, and that was the first time I finally won.
Chinaka

Let’s talk about some of the poets who emerged from these slams.

For Nico, he was not trying to outdo himself on the intellectualism. He was just trying to make sense of all the stuff he was reading in his spare time. He was trying to make a bridge between the two worlds. He was just a heavy thinker. It was dense. If you weren’t reading all the stuff that he was reading, you were just like, “Man that guy has a lot of words.”

Niles’s rhyme scheme was predictable, but he put it together in such a compelling way that everyone was blown away. He was an organizer, always trying to get things done like the Hapa Club (Asian bi-racial youth), and Youth Together (a youth activist organization). His poetry was very clear, with a thesis, like a five part essay.

Daveed’s poems were theatrical and very much character driven. So he had this poem about him waiting on Kyla to get dressed and trying to go out. She was in the audience, and he was using her interaction to drive this point home.

And Eli was heady as well. Daniel Palau was real hip hop, you could tell he was into Lyrics Born, and they were like backpack rap kids and so the delivery was the most important thing to him.

So each of us had something that we latched on to. So we were just people, just people who don’t think I’m dorky for sitting in the corner writing poetry by myself. Suddenly poetry became hip and the way to make friends. That’s what I needed though. I really needed a circle of people my own age. It was serendipitous for me. Now I got friends, cool juice.

That kid Rafa. I thought he was older than Gabriela at the time. So I went up to her and I said “Oh, your brother’s so cute. I know he’s older than you but can you introduce me to him?” And she says, “Eeew. Chinaka, he’s a freshman.” And I was like “Oh, no, don’t tell him I talked to you.”

And Adarius doing his first poem, all about his brother passing away, and I remember he was real serious. And there was this other girl Tina who was performing all the time and she encouraged ‘Darius to come to the slam and he was with her. He and I became good friends.

There was the time when Antonio got up for the first time, Amen was his name. But that was his first time performing. Centering the Youth Speaks slams at Berkeley High meant that Berkeley High became a hub. You had the CAS-Youth Speaks slam on Wednesdays right after the workshop. He came for 3 or 4 weeks and didn’t talk. Then he came and finally did one and he turned off all the lights and he talked about being this ghost in the dark and it was amazing. This was this kid from San Francisco who barely even came to the east bay, didn’t really talk to White people, and all of a sudden got all this affirmation.

As divided and hostile as BHS was, in that space, it was positive, everyone gets to the same spot. The space was evening. Kids from Oakland High and Albany High and Maybeck kids would come, and Arrowsmith. And it cost money to get in and people were paying it and it was a decent prize, around $100. That was money. I loved that part about it and I loved that there was sex and intrigue…back stories.

Rick

I remember when I put a West African quotation up on the board on the first day of the first semester of Chinaka’s junior year, “Nommo means words and if you control words you control everything,” and she shouted out, “That’s my favorite quote!” Immediately meant we had a connection. She realized I was cool enough to have that quotation; I realized she was widely read enough to know it.
The hardest thing for us adults to do is to think back on what it felt like to be a high school kid. And in the teaching profession, we have a selection of adults who probably did pretty well in academics. So the real life, the democratic everyday culture of youth in school is something we forget about. This slam phenomenon, it is something new, well new starting maybe in the late 1990s. Spoken word has swept through, and it is a defining reality in this generation. For many students, they found poetry and poetry found them at the same time. It is historic, no less than the Harlem Renaissance or the birth of rock and roll. And like those revolutionary arts phenomena, slam poetry was a huge community movement which swamped our little idea of poetry curriculum. It was a matter of youth agency, of youth appropriation of space and even language for their own purposes. And the purposes were not small, they were not about getting grades or getting into college. They were as huge as they come, like ending the war in Iraq, saving lives of their peers, turning a culture of acquisition and repression into one of solidarity and hope. Lots of us were there in schools and were oblivious to this revolution in the arts. Others of us, the lucky or the crazy ones, got to witness these indelible moments, these transformative moments of performance, where everyone in the room was speechless at the same time—everything was changed, changed utterly.

5—Questioning the conditions—Official curriculum vs. youth curriculum

Hey yo we made it, 45 caliber proof,
And the teachers don’t believe that you can handle the truth
But the truth is these suits can’t stand it when youth
Begin to question the conditions and backwards traditions
As you recognize the threshold of negative stress
The crossroad between complete failure and success,
It’s so necessary you pay attention in class
—From “Commencement Day,” by Blue Scholars

Rafael

Every time I’ve ever worked on trying to correct something in the school system, the ceiling that I always find is that it is necessary for some people to fail and some to succeed in order for the balanced economy. There needs to be people working here and other people working there. So the problem to them is not really a problem. The gap is something they need. It’s a fake game, how it’s supposed to go.

The tactic in the curriculum itself—just gauged on me and my peers—here’s this group of folks all into the arts and kids who are rough and then here’s the curriculum. And the classes that worked best were the ones that were the most directly relevant to daily life. This is something we say all the time. The process to make the material relevant is a whole other facet to the teachers’ education that doesn’t happen. Because now you have to study what youth are doing and what they’re a part of and what the whole back end is. What are they doing, what is the music they’re listening to, what do they do with their time? These are play-station kids, they’re talking about this. At 15 what are they going through as far as boys and girls? What socially can you understand to become relevant? This is something you used to do that is the most effective thing I’ve seen done with a text: to read a passage, in the language, right out of the book, and then stop and just “common dialogue” it. OK, so what is this guy doing? Let’s talk it up. He’s going here and he’s saying what? This would make the material more understandable and accessible. When
that would happen, I couldn’t do it for myself, I couldn’t do it for myself but when it was done in
a group, once I got a way in to it, then I would be interested in responding, writing.

Now a lot of these kids who go to college they get into their culture super-hard because they
need to compensate, they get into poetry or something because they’ve never had anything that
opens them up at all. It all comes down to budget and what we define as valuable. It is the ques-
tion of rich, great life or college bound. And there’s no need to take a tour of the murals in the
Mission District if you’re just taking the SAT’s and going to college. The path that I eventually
took, which I still think was the best bet was to get out of high school, take some time off, do
community college at your own pace, and then go for your focus, those last two years, buckle
down for something that you care about. And the rest is your own pace. What happens is you
get in this idea that you have to be done right now, you have to go straight to college and be
done when you’re 22, you gotta spend your savings…this feeling that for some reason you’re in
a hurry.

With spoken word, people were doing their best work without any validation from school. No
institutional encouragement. All the avenues for you to find where you excel are just narrow in
school. And music programs are closing. We used to have shop in school. We never talk about
trades; trades are things to fall back on and things to do if school doesn’t work for you. But some
people just want to do what they’re damn good at and they love.

Chinaka

In the small school CAS, it was a back and forth between rigor and entropy. We had to work
it out. We would go off to groups and then come back. There was heady conversation going on
without us really even knowing it. Do you remember this game Chevalier would play with the
“Mexicans” and play the dozens back and forth and try to set each other off? Sometimes the
discussions would be so inappropriate but instead of patrolling it and forbidding things, the way
to do it is to go there.

Sometimes you’d get mad at us but you were the only teacher who would talk to us as if we
had something to say. On the other side of it, you would put whatever we said on a pedestal, even
when it was ridiculous. We thought we were getting over on you at the time but by the end, when
we were juniors and seniors, we came to realize that you had invested in us.

Then there was someone like Stephan Friedman-Hawke, who quit school and would hang
around in the park with his little bike. But we would leave class and bring him a copy of the book
we were reading, and he would read along with us and talk about it. He’s such a thinker but just
could not stand school. I think if he’d have stuck around in CAS, he’d have had a different kind
of experience with the school but still he had his way. Berkeley allowed for all of that to happen.
He was an independent thinker and set a template for me about what it meant to be a learner. He
dropped out in ninth grade but knew so much and was reading all the time and painting all the
time and taking pictures all the time and just being around us, you know.

The poetry wouldn’t have happened if we didn’t feel so tied to each other. And the other
way around, I don’t think we would have been so anchored to each other, through our adult
lives, through Meleia’s death and everything, without the artifact circles, the sharing of the
poems, the responsibility to the younger classes—and that’s something you don’t see in most
high schools. Class of 2002 felt really responsible for the 2003 kids.

It was a magical time for us and it was all ordered perfectly. With the B building burned
down, we had the portables and it was a literal walk away from the rigidity of the campus, and
there were barbecues going on and staying late. And you were the teachers under pressure for
not meeting the standards, supposedly. Rick and Dana are in trouble with the principal; Rick and Dana gotta go defend themselves to the school board. And these are the kids who were most involved. And those were the two small schools that really flourished during that time. You guys had the retreat for us at the beginning of the year, and it was the first time people had experienced nature and then Common Ground got going and folks were hiking in Tilden and talking about the books and so on and that’s exactly what it’s supposed to be. Poetry was one component. Some of us decided to make an entry into what is happening in the curriculum. So we felt we could say, “Rick this book is horrible; we don’t want to read it, and you would defend it to a point and then say, ‘OK well pick another book’ and there would be class sets in the book room and we’d go in there and figure it out. Who else feels that much agency in their work?

Rick

The main script and work of school is pretty destructive and undermining to knowledge. But there is a public space, the youth in the community, in hip hop and spoken word, in graffiti and beats, that engages them and challenges them to increase their knowledge every day. Because there are all these young people in one place at school, there is a second script that just runs all the time—the subversive and creative that is intertwined with youth life. If we worked in a Catholic school with all worksheets, that second script would still be there. It’s the drama, and it’s also where real learning and real writing just appears. My style of teaching is really chaos, and a lot of times it’s frustrating because often the chaos doesn’t work, but that’s how I tend to do it.

By the end, I want students to think critically about their circumstances. What works in school, what is wrong with them? What are schools actually about? What is the secret agenda, hidden curriculum? There is a huge disconnect between the official school discourse and the discourse students come in with. Teachers make a mistake to think that students are simply a collection of deficits, of problems. We must recognize the many ways our students are brilliant, the many powerful literacy practices they already have. The best teachers discover, or at least honor students, and help them get their heads up off the desk.

In CAS, we only had a vague idea of what to do. We had a simple plan: let’s create a community of students, a community of staff, and a connection to parents and the wider community. Somehow this community-building would make things better. We did not have a deep understanding of the theoretical basis of it. But we just created a little space, and gave the students a few things, and they took the initiative. Create the space and the kids take it from there. I could never have foreseen the shape it would take. The whole poetry initiative: we followed that. We were simply open to what it might be. The key is delighting in the poetry, enjoying the creativity of that youth life.

Both Chinaka and Rafael have taken their arts self-education out to the broader world, continuing to create poetry, theater, educational projects, music, and community organizing. Hundreds of the others from this spoken word movement continue to pursue their dreams, their projects, and their direction with a clarity and power that speaks to the importance of this movement.

Notes

1. Blue Scholars is a powerful Hip Hop group from Seattle, Washington. Its DJ Sabzi and MC Geologic focus on issues of youth oppression and resistance. This song, “Commencement Day,” is from the CD The Long March, copyrighted © 2005 (bluescholars@bluescholars.com).
2. Meleia Willis-Starbuck was a former CAS student who was shot and killed in Berkeley in July of 2005. She had been a leading student of the class of 2003 and was at the time doing an internship with homeless women. Students from CAS came together to support each other through this tragedy.