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Louder Than A Bomb

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Louder Than A Bomb
The Chicago Teen Poetry Festival and the Voices that Challenge and Change the Pedagogy of Class(room), Poetics, Place, and Space

KEVIN COVAL

We know of course there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.

—Arundhati Roy

Before she transitioned, I had the privilege of hearing Gwendolyn Brooks speak to various sized audiences in bookstores, classrooms, and theaters in Chicago. She was a small woman whose eyes saw everything and whose talks would turn often to a discussion of the writing process. She would tell rooms filled with emerging and would-be-writers that our responsibility was to **tell the story in front of our nose**. And it took a while for me to really digest the enormity of that statement. I had heard it from her lips perhaps a half dozen times and turned that stone over in my hands hundreds perhaps thousands of times until something clicked.

I think it was while listening, for the millionth time, to KRS-ONE's classic, 1990 release *Loves Gonna Get'cha* on the Edutainment album. A first person narrative about a young man who makes difficult decisions and suffers the consequences in the first decade of the war on drugs—the continued but newly named war on communities and bodies of color. In this rhyme, KRS says what food stuffs are on the shelf of his mother's kitchen, describes his walk home from school, and is specific enough to number the pairs of pants his brother and he share.

Hip-Hop has always been specific, from the time it became a national and global export, the cities and suburbs around the planet knew the slang, street names, and conditions of several boroughs in New York. Eventually this poetics of place, the specificity of block, neighborhood, city, and region began to affect emerging poets outside of New York as well. Hip-Hop roots in other cities after the initial imitation of style dissipates and an indigenous sound, style, and poetics takes shape. The South was primarily unheard from until Outkast and Goodie Mob brought locality into their aesthetic both sonically and syntactically, choosing subject matters that resonated in Atlanta and other southern cities.

Similar to how Jazz music birthed an aesthetic transformation of arts in the 1950s, the play and freedom of improvisation helping to create The Black Arts Movement, Abstract Expressionism, The Beats, Nuyorican Poetry, Afri-Cobra Painters in Chicago, the aesthetic innovations of Hip-Hop music and culture have given rise to a generation of poets who are engaged in the...
(re)presentation of location and self. Around the country a new poetry is emerging written by *the deliberately silenced* and *the preferably unheard*. A new excitement around language and hyper-literacy is festering in the notebooks and laptops of young, fierce poet-journalists who gather at open mics, compete in poetry slams, share and build together in public and virtual ciphers, a growing network of word workers who as Talib Kweli and Mos Def put it, are *real life documentarians*.

Around the country poets gather in large forums, such as Brave New Voices: The National Youth Poetry Festival, and in smaller arenas, such as open mics in most cities and towns from Bellingham, Washington, to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with their notebooks and stories to tell. As of November 4, 2008, with the election of Barack Obama, Chicago became the official center of the universe, something I have known and megaphoned about for sometime. But in Chicago, going on 10 years, the largest youth poetry festival in the world, Louder Than A Bomb, has emerged as a public pedagogy in order to hear many disparate voices in a radically segregated city and has served as tool to keep students in school in a failing public system where a freshman’s chances of graduating are 50/50. This is the story of how and why the youth poetry work in Chicago exists, how it is transforming public cultural and educational space, and why what the young writers are saying is freshly imperative in affecting public discourse and why we must all listen to their poems.

**Chicago in the New Millennium (Park)**

*Outta the city, they want us gone*
*Tearin down the ‘jects creatin plush homes*
*My circumstance is between Cabrini and Love Jones*
*Surrounded by hate, yet I love home*
*Common, on Black Star’s Respiration*

In 2001 it seemed the world was collapsing. Before the towers fell, young people of color around the country were being (and continue to be) brutalized, criminalized, imprisoned, disenfranchised, and failed by public institutions and public education. The Chicago City Council was working on cementing its anti-gang loitering law, a racist policy, similar to Proposition 187 in the California’s Bay Area, that denies basic rights to assemble if you are young and of color and live in certain neighborhoods. Teenagers were literally being ripped from their stoops for hanging out in groups of more than one on the suspicion they might be conducting gang activity.

At the same time Black and Latino youth were being round up for how they looked, Muslims and any Brown persons were suspects of terrorism. Xenophobic jingoism was at a red alert American high and the few who shaped public discourse encouraged the flag waving and a cessation of civil liberties. In the winter of 2001 a group of writers, educators, writing/educators, and courageous young poets, working with the not-for-profit organization Young Chicago Authors, responded to this historic and hostile moment by creating a public pedagogy, a cultural space, a radically democratic forum to air and profess and spit and kick what was on their mind. Louder Than A Bomb: The Chicago Teen Poetry Slam formed and gathered in the basement of a storefront theater. Since 2001, the festival has grown, attracting over 6,000 people during the course of the three-week festival to hear 650 young poets from more than 50 high schools and community organizations read poems. Louder Than A Bomb reaches into almost every neighborhood in a city of red-lines and viaducts to create poly-cultural spaces where young people can share the stories of who they are, where they come from, and what they feel about the world(s) around them.
Ground Work

In 1996, my best friend Eboo Patel invited me to teach a writing workshop at El Cuarto Año, an alternative high school on Chicago’s near west side. The school serves mostly Latino and Black students who failed, dropped out of, or were kicked out of Chicago Public Schools. I had never taught before, and never had an interest in teaching. Eboo knew of my participation in the emerging Hip-Hop and spoken word scene in the city and felt my presence would be helpful to his students.

The class and I spent the hour and half talking about The Score, the new and incredibly dope second record by The Fugees, the New Jersey-based Hip-Hop crew with Lauryn Hill. I was certain this was to be the first and last time I’d be invited into a classroom. Afterward, I apologized to Eboo for taking up so much time. To my surprise, he told me I was a teacher, said his students were engaged in a conversation about language and politics in a way he had not seen, and invited me back for my first poet-in-residence gig, teaching a couple of weeks at the school and trying to get the students to write their own rhymes/poems/prose about the spaces they inhabit.

I was 21 years old at the time, some of my students a few years younger. We shared a generational and cultural language via Hip-Hop. Though there were some incredible differences between and among us, we found a shared space, mad excited about breaking down Hip-Hop records and discussing the poetics of these emcees.

During this time, I began to hear about and meet some of my peers performing around Chicago, writers engaged in similar educational work. Avery R. Young, Tara Betts, Tyehimba Jess, Quraysh Ali Lansana, Peter Kahn, and soon I met Anna West, a tall, White girl from Baton Rouge, running a writing program for homeless youth and working with a not-for-profit organization Young Chicago Authors. Anna introduced me to Bob Boone, YCA’s founder, and Bob invited me to work with his organization.

Via the conversations among these poet/educators, we collectively realized we were meeting and hearing hundreds of young writers from many different sides of the city who were hungry for language and storytelling and engaged in the classroom in a new way. Initially, we wanted to provide a space where we the teachers could come together to share curriculum ideas and learn from each other about books to use, strategies, pitfalls, and other ideas. Through Young Chicago Authors, Anna and I started the Writing Teachers Collective in 1999.

The collective was a kind of community organizing tool. We had poets who taught and wanted to teach, teachers who wrote and wanted to use writing in their classroom, administrators who wanted to integrate creative writing into new and ridiculous state standards, community arts organizations engaging youth, and some senior students who showed interest in teaching creative writing/spoken word/Hip-Hop poetry to other students.

These meetings provided insight and glimpses into an emerging youth culture in Chicago, one focused on the delight of word play and the practice of real life documentary, of recording the experiences of overlooked neighborhoods and airing these reports in the classroom or an open mic. The writing teachers were beginning to share the potential for a new, public pedagogy, and the work being produced needed a central space to be heard and seen by its distant neighborhood cousins. Through the Writing Teachers Collective, the idea for a city-wide teen poetry slam emerged. More on that in a moment, first a note on pedagogy.

Fuck You and Your Heroes: Exploding the Canon

Used to speak the king’s English
But caught a rash on my lips
So now my chat just like dis
Mos Def
Poetry was a dead art to many eighties babies. Literally. Something, it seemed, only done by dead, White dudes. Boring as watching birchwood flake and fall, roses wither, and milk curdle.

My generation of writers was awakened by the public orality of Hip-Hop music and culture. KRS-ONE called himself a poet. The lyricism of Rakim, Chuck D, MC Lyte and other young, Black and some Latino, primarily NYC-based emcees (though big up to Ice Cube), astounded our ear drums as we memorized the words of these borough exports.

Most of these emcees were explicit in their participation in an alternate canon of verse. They shouted out and sampled The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, and Nikki Giovanni, which sent many of us, new skool Hip-Hop poets, running to the library to search and find Black Arts writers, exposing ourselves to Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, as well as Nuyorican School Poets, The Beats, among others. Hip-Hop opened the possibility of the poetic. A new generation of writers were digging on literature outside the academy and discovering our favorite writers were alive and fresh, not stale, dead or boring (Jorie Graham) crackers.

Through these meetings of The Writing Teachers Collective, we shared best practices around an expanding and contemporary, alternative canon. We found our students were responding to the poems of Willie Perdomo, Patricia Smith, Luis Rodriguez, and other alive writers engaged like Hip-Hop emcees in the location and poetics of place. We began to read these writers in the classroom along side the text of Jay-Z (and other emcees students listen to—Lil Wayne right now, for instance). If Jay was talking about The Marcy Projects and Willie was talking about Spanish Harlem, it is a very small leap to have the students reading and discussing this literature and eventually begin writing about where they (the students) live, whether it is on the West Side or in the Western Suburbs or West Coast. We were finding the poetics of place as an important and simple jumpoff point to begin the process of engaging young writers.

I have thought for some time Hip-Hop was Freirean before we (Hip-Hop generation folks) read Freire. It was and continues to be amazingly disconcerting how little of the students’ lives are asked into the classroom. Through the use of contemporary Hip-Hop poetry, we do just that. We invert the traditional and played paradigm of teacher-all-knowing and ask students what they think, see, experience in their lives. In Chicago we wonder why the public schools are failing, why students stop coming to school. It is because they are rarely if ever asked to be present, to present or represent their actual everyday lives within the walls of an institution they spend more time in than anywhere else. Yet the teachable moments are abundant. Chicago, like most major American cities, is undergoing a gigantic and ferocious process of gentrification. All of our students are affected by this process, which is tied to global economics, the history of urban labor and southern migration, and a billion other topics to study. Students negotiate the changes they experience on a near daily basis, how their home is shifting radically before their eyes, and yet we continue to have them to read and discuss Beowulf? Are you fucking kidding?

Simply, we believe in the record, in pictures people paint, and the importance of the act of recording and keeping a public, communal, and multi-voiced narrative of time. If we continue to rely on the same people to pen novels and write history, they will continue to tell us Robert Frost is fresh and Columbus discovered America. And we all know better than that. If we want students to be whole people in the classroom, we should ask them about the lives they lead everyday. And how their lives are not only connected to history, but that they are vibrant actors within history. If we do not do this, we will get the same old—a broken public school system and a student body struggling to stay awake because the teachers and administrators are sleeping on the stories and bodies right in front of their nose.
What is a Poetry Slam?

The Poetry Slam began in Chicago when a poet/construction worker named Marc Smith, who writes in the tradition of Carl Sandburg—realist portraits of people who work—stood on top a table at a bar on the northside of Chicago, recited a poem and received scores from his fellow workers as if he were an Olympian. Since this night 22 years ago, Marc has hosted the longest running open mic in the country, every Sunday night at The Green Mill at Broadway and Lawrence in Chicago’s Uptown neighborhood.

Marc Smith is an organic intellectual in the tradition of Gramsci who practices a radical democracy through The Poetry Slam. The Slam’s rules are somewhat silly and flexible, but basically anyone and everyone has the opportunity to read a poem within a three minute time limit. Top scoring poets will advance to the next round, and the winner at the end of the night receives $10. This night at The Green Mill has been a blueprint for other slams and open mics around the country and has helped shape the stage for a National Poetry Slam, which occurs at the beginning of every August.

Implicit in the inclusive, democratic principles of the open mic and poetry slam is an active listening. Slams may take up to two hours, a poet may read as many as four poems, therefore during most of the “bout”—the other 108 minutes—they are listening to the stories of others who may not come from the same places they do. The National Adult Poetry Slam can become a dungeon and dragons convention, a kettle of minutia and rules, boiling over in dorkery. However, as a public pedagogy in a segregated city among youth who rarely leave their neighborhoods, the poetry slam has exposed thousands of young people to the power of their own voices and to the realities of others who look nothing like them and come from distant lands like the suburbs or Westside.

The trick of the poetry slam is to use the guise of competition to attract interest in orality. The slam builds a natural drama in a short time span while showcasing the multiplicity of stories and voices in a given venue or classroom. In the slam, a common phrase shared among hosts and poets is, “the point is not the point, the point is the poetry.” And though the merit of some poems in the slam is debatable (as it is debatable about the merit of some of the poems in the Norton Anthology and Poetry Magazine) Marc’s intention was to build an audience for orality, poetry, literature, and storytelling. And 22 years later there are slams and open mics in almost every large and mid-sized city in the country as well as many slams emerging overseas. Perhaps audience members come for the novelty and competition of the slam, but on a good night they receive an articulated truth from someone they have never met before. They participate in a public pedagogy, a radically democratic forum to air the concerns and dreams of a polity via prose. The open mic becomes the missing town hall, the absent square in city center, the ancient and indigenous need we faintly recall to hear his/herstory(s) from the mouths of those who experience them.

Why Louder Than A Bomb?

Louder Than A Bomb: The Chicago Teen Poetry Slam was named after the Public Enemy (PE) song on their 1988 record *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Jacking the title from PE serves several functions. First, it tributes perhaps the most important Hip-Hop record ever made. This is contentious among Hip-Hop heads. The record is an aesthetic manifesto, a mash-up masterpiece from PE’s production crew, The Bomb Squad. Their sampling and sonic symphonic thickness is the soundtrack of what some would call post-modernity, and others the
awakening consciousness of the largest, global youth culture in the planet’s history, constructed and made by people history typically and systematically denies. Public Enemy was, and remains, an assault on the aural landscape of White supremacist America.

Second, Chuck D, the group’s main emcee, was one of the first poets I, and many of my generation, felt. He challenged my vocabulary and sent me running to the library to decode his verse. His percussive syntax and base-heavy voice enriched the polyphony that is a PE record. Chuck D was my gateway to literature, to an engaged poetic, to what KRS-ONE calls, “lyrical terrorism,” the power of spoken words, meticulously crafted, conscious of audience, but trusting in their flexible ear and ability to grow.

The third reason we jacked the title was the political/cultural moment we inhabited. People of color in Chicago and around the globe were, and are, criminalized in the suspicion of their skin. America was, and is, dropping bombs, detaining bodies, creating McCarthyism on Muslims and persons of color who organize themselves into communities resistant to hegemonic ideals. The young writers we were meeting in the classroom, at the open mic, in the community centers and homeless shelters, the public and alternative schools, lived very differently than how dominant culture portrayed, betrayed, and treated them. We were, and are, living in a historic moment where more money is spent to house their bodies in prisons than in schools.

We named The Chicago Teen Poetry Festival, “Louder Than A Bomb” because we are Freedom Dreamers like Robin Kelly and believe the stories and words and voices of young people are more powerful than weapons, more influential than government, more monumental than any war memorial, more impressive and brilliant than a commander-in-chief. We feel what young people have to say about the world they inhabit and inherit and hope to construct is more useful than armament, tougher than leather, more complex than prison industrial systems, louder than any bomb.

Poems and Poets

The writers who participate in Louder Than A Bomb are 13 to 19 years old and come from all over the city, repping every neighborhood, socioeconomic class, race, and sexual orientation. It is about a 60–40 split in terms of gender, 60% young women and 40% young men.

Poets write original pieces and work as a team to create a group piece for the final round of competition. The content is open and the poems broadly reflect the spectrum of human experience; the mundane, the brilliant, the beautiful, and the brutal. Within the hour and a half of a poetry slam bout, I have usually cried, laughed, and shook my head in disbelief at the absurdity and profundity of the teen mind.

I’d like to share three of the poems from the 2008 Louder Than A Bomb Festival. They are poems I remember hearing at the festival and being moved by not only the language but also the ability of these writers to move an audience solely with what they felt and imagined and took the time to craft.

Tim “Toaster” Henderson has been around Louder Than A Bomb and Young Chicago Authors, for a number of years. In basketball they speak of gym rats, players who live for practice and being around the culture of the game. Toaster is a poetry gym rat, an intensely dedicated young man, whose ability to empathize is immense, as you will see in his poem, The Pink Triangle. Tim’s poem can be heard at: www.wbez.org/Content.aspx?audioID=19358
The Pink Triangle
Timmy
Are you sure you want that
particular
necklace?
Yeah ma
I want that one
It looks cool.

Well Timmy that
particular necklace

yeah?

Means you’re gay.
Are YOU gay?

No I,
I don’t think so.

(To my mother.)

No,
I still don’t think I’m gay
But there’s something
That I found out
That I should probably tell you
Ten years after you told me
that necklace symbolized homosexuality.

In the late thirties
Early forties
While the Jews had their stars
Sewn
Deep into their jackets
Into their chests
Into their skin
And their history
Just up a sleeve from their
Bar codes and
Wounds of oppression
Of
Lost homes
And droves of lost children

Mom, in Germany,
In the late thirties
Early forties
While there were Russians
Blacks and Christians
As well as those who tried to save them
Killed
Gassed
Shot buried burned and torn apart by German Shepherds,
Most
Either dead
Or scarred for life-MOM

Through piles of
Beaten stacked rag dolls
Beneath some called
Mother
Teacher
Abraham
Lover
There’s this,
These few
This miniscule pack of men-
Wronged,
And murdered,
For loving men
With these,
Little pink
Triangles
Pointed downward
Sewn into their jackets
Their chest
Their skin
And their histories
As the silent.
As the dead.

Mom,
In the late eighties
And early nineties
Around when
I almost bought that
That little
that little pink triangle
dangling
So beautifully from that
Rack
With its point facing the sky
in that
Lesbian book store I grew up in
In the early nineties
That pink triangle
Stood for a campaign to push our government
To stop AIDS
An epidemic that seems to reach every ethnicity
Other than of course
Hitler's dream race
And to jumpstart activism
In minority communities.
To reach out and say
HEY
BLACKS AREN’T THE ONLY ONES BEING WRONGED
IN OUR SOCIETY!
FIGHT!
FIGHT FOR WHAT’S YOURS!
AND FIGHT
FOR YOUR CHILDREN! MOM!

I’m not angry that you didn’t know this
Or that you told me
A common misconception
Because you didn’t know
And not many people do
And that’s why I now have this necklace
Dangling proudly
From my neck
Pressed against my chest
Sewn into my skin
Into my history
Not far from my skin tone
And my wounds of oppression
That have just now…started to heal.

Deja K. Taylor is now a student at Oakton Community College and a graduate of Oak Park River Forest High School. A poet, actor, singer, emcee, and force of nature, she will be soon be killing mics at a cipher session near you. See Deja perform her poem at www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNB1HQjgdNI. To hear more from Deja and to book her at your school please visit www.myspace.com/dejavoodootaylor.

Ode to a Female MC
Deja K. Taylor

Epigraph,
“...Even after all my logic and all my theory/
I add a 'mothafucka' so you ignorant niggas hear me...”
—Lauryn Hill
You recycle magenta placentas for 28 days
Center the drippage on a pad
And then spit it on a stage
She'll get X' X'd out - Y?
the gender of ink
Group polarization
cats is all groupthink
and Yes Yes Y'all!
She got mo swagga
in a fitted shirt
Than these pants saggaz have
spitting over a written verse
But in the middle of her rhyme
They'll contemplate her thighs
And her hips
They're chicken of woman with a gift
They'll step over her waistline
gawk at her waste-maker

Don't respect her wordsmith
All the dudes will try to take her
Drinkin Ethel Waters
When she's Josephine bakin up
The best way to make-up
For her 40 double D-cup
Boobie trapping
In a cipher
ignore her and smite her
honest, earnest, coal-burnin, feminist-furnace,
Serena, Venus,
reppin' for us daughters of the phoenix
Bi-generational Joan of Arc
from girlfriends
they're after her Africa
she's decipherin diasporas
marauding merengue
pronouncing "e's"
as “a’s”
Theatrical thespian
assumed as a lesbian
Prideful big balls
Hidden by two thigh-high walls
Overtly ovary
'gainst noose
Hangin rosaries
fightin feminine or masculine
Mary Magdalene
With some Vaseline
Acrobatic flippin over bars
Like an Olympiad
In her fuckin pad
Period. Feel her grammar
Liable to get enamored
Screw at all these open mics
And then whack em’
With her mc hammer
She spits for all her mirrors
Her girls that lack shaft
Got swagga like Sam Jack
got Mo’ Jo than most Joes
she’s eye-candy and snacks
their eyes get candy-coated
and hung-up on her rack
to he she spits nympho
she’s always comin-back

she’s a
Revolution against Revlon
A tyrant with a tampon
A melanin martyr un-muting
All words that have been stepped on
Microphone minister
Madame and sister
Up against the misters
She’ll hawk loogies
goin harder than the spitters

Get on the mic like:
Test, test, 1, 2, 3,
Will these turntable titties
Make you listen to me?
Do my HIPs swing wide enough
For you to HOP in the beat
Or will you beat-box your mic stand
Pick me up at 16 bars
MTV Unplugged me with your ignorance
and now you gotta record
You can’t rub me
You gotta scratch the vinyl
Lionel
Or whatever the fuck your name is
we
be spokesperson for many
she
her vocab is essence of plenty
we
take a lot of shit without the porcelain
You can’t get more lyrical
than Luna miracles
We match the expectations of the moon
With a womb to hold the scars
Of the stars when it turns into a tomb

and yes yes y’all
She got mo swagga
In a fitted shirt than these pants saggaz
Have spitting over a written verse
But she’ll get X’d X’d out - Y?
the gender of ink
Group polarization
cats is all groupthink

Nate Marshall was born and raised on 116th St. near Ashland Avenue on Chicago’s Southside, primarily by his Grandma who made him stay inside and read the dictionary to keep him away from gangs. Nate came to Louder Than A Bomb as a seventh grader and has participated in every festival since. He chose not to go out for his high school basketball team, so that he may participate in LTAB. After six years of competition, he won his first slam as a senior and represented Chicago at Brave New Voices: The National Youth Poetry Festival in Washington, DC. He is a first year student at Vanderbilt University, where he received a full academic scholarship. Nate’s poem is a farewell of sorts and exemplifies the dexterity and inventiveness of word play. To hear Nate’s poem visit www.chicagopublicradio.org/Content.aspx?audioID=19376 and to watch Nate visit, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgZAb3eWIG0.

Look!

LOOK
I got all these other poets
SHOOK
lift my hood they better jet
or get wet with my new book
villainous villanelles
I write jail mail for the crooks

…true story
your new stories
do bore me
pour out for the homies
ambrosia flavored savory new 40s
Yep!
my grizzle I’m on it
y’all don’t really want it
’cause I concuss ya wit just ya mama jokes
written as new sonnets
pen damager iambic pentameter
spin freakish flows as prose
I been slamming nerds
I'm a word wizard
I merk this sure
there's been a rumor around the slam like
"He works berserk"
"Yo, I heard that
Nate been writing
80 poems a day,
since age one eight
he made 8 great
anthologies and locked 'em all away"

...Damn straight
I'm Sirius like satellite radio frequencies
I'm speaking scenes
Superhead of any open mic
you see, I freak MCs
I'm a geek you see,
Allen Ginsberg when I spin words
a beat poet
...no really, I beat poets

So come against me
it's essential that you'll lose
because I'll leave your dreams
my ego is Langston HUGE
I bang bruise the pad with pens
and leave 'em black and blue
stay strapped with stanzas shots
and cat I'll pull the gat on you
I had to do it
you knew what I was concealing
cause I'm a big bad gangsta cool kid who writes about his feelings
a mama's boy
a bastard child
a geek who has a rapper's style
a sensitive thug
a kid who's all grown up now doesn't have to smile

look
these other poets got me shook
their stories move me
and I don't deserve my name up in that book
I've been here long enough to know
where slam is strong enough to go
just understand there's more than that
and focus long enough to blow
cause I remember being 13
feeling not so satisfied
in the next 5 years I got jumped seen friends
and both my grandmas die
but a mic, a stage, a pen, a page
helped end my rage and mend my days
and I’ll admit I been afraid of leaving this
’cause when I stayed
I found my voice but now my time is up
I gotta get away
so excuse the couplet cockiness
I ever showed when rocking this
just trying to show my everything
for everything I got from this
Kevin Coval told me I could write
my slam coach told me not to hype
I’ve loved and lost on finals stages
the fates told me it’s not the night

but still I thank this forum for help making me so strong
for letting me talk about
sex, drugs, basketball, and moms
found farewell to this chapter and to all the joy and laughter
this for every kid, whose voice has been
louder than a bomb.

These poems and poets represent some of the voices at Louder Than A Bomb: The Chicago Teen Poetry Festival. There are thousands more we have heard on stage and in the classroom. During the course of a poetry slam bout, we will hear disparate voices from all over the city. Alone they are powerful unto themselves, collectively they come to sound like the city itself. And the city sounds like the country, and the country is vast. And this is what we think democracy sounds like. And we believe in democracy, the open-air public practice and pedagogy. We believe our problems and celebrations should be heard in the sold-out music hall or open-mic coffee shop or egalitarian classroom. Louder Than A Bomb is a form and forum of youth culture that seeks to showcase the poly-cultural reality we inhabit.

Implicit in the construction of this public pedagogy is the consideration and knowledge that the world is inhabited by narratives of folks who might live on our block and folks who may live neighborhoods and lifestyles away, but in this form and forum is the desire, the assuage, the monotony of hegemony, to challenge the common sense and dominant cultural practice of silence and segregation. Everyone has a story to tell, a grandmother who cooks ethnic foods, an embarrassing moment, a humanizing realization, a gross tidbit, all survive the horror and humor of existence that make the poetry of our everyday lives. The details and language of these experiences, we crave, publicly, our internal visions and utopian dreams manifest in the spaces we seek to create and kick it in.

Notes

1. For more info about Young Chicago Authors and Louder Than A Bomb: The Chicago Teen Poetry Festival please visit: www.youngchicagoauthors.org and to watch a 10-minute clip of a documentary film about Louder Than A Bomb please visit: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueXKjhcr8Y8&feature=related.