

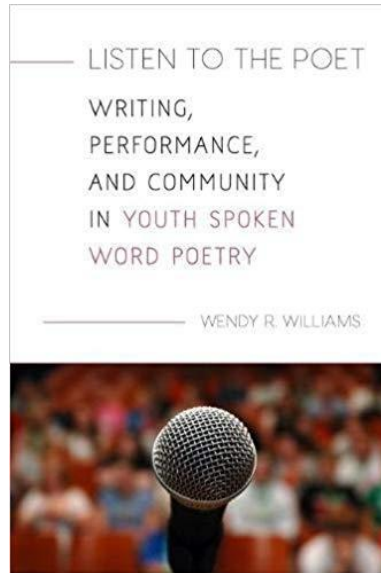
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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Review of *Listen to the Poet: Writing, Performance, and Community in Youth Spoken Word Poetry*

By Wendy R. Williams

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Citation: Williams, W. R. (2018). *Listen to the poet: Writing, performance, and community in youth spoken word poetry*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

ISBN: 978-1-62534-397-0

With *Listen to the Poet: Writing, Performance, and Community in Youth Spoken Word Poetry*, Wendy R. Williams (2018) gives readers a look into the workings of two related spoken word communities in Arizona: Metro poets' out-of-school gatherings and the after-school Palo Brea Poets club. At times scholarly, and at times intimate, Williams' work provides a welcoming starting point for educators interested in learning how to cultivate and sustain a spoken word community of their own.

Williams organizes her book into 10 sections—an introduction, seven chapters, a conclusion, and an afterword—each of which I unpack in greater detail below before concluding this review with my critical response.

Introduction: Listening to the Poets

Williams brings us in at the beginning of a poetry writing workshop in the city's public library. Though a core group of members remains consistent, newcomers are normal, so our "being there" through Williams' ethnographic lens serves as an inviting entry point. The workshop is led by Mark, the founder and visionary of Metro poets, a spoken word poetry organization that holds monthly workshops and poetry slams, sends teaching-artists into local schools, and coaches members for the national Brave New Voices poetry competition. Mark's process with the group is warm and deliberate. He takes the time to learn everyone's name and promises them that "the more you write and the more you speak, the easier it's going to be to find who you are and value that thing" (Williams, 2018, p. 3). His claim rings true for the poet activists described in Williams' book, and, eventually, for Williams herself.

We then delve into an exploration of spoken word poetry's multicultural influences. Connections are made between spoken word and testifying in Black churches, the sharing of Latin American *testimonios*, and the popularity of youth-made YouTube videos. Reasons are also given for spoken word's growing popularity and importance as a resistance literacy for today's young people. Williams concludes that, "To imagine poetry as inaccessible except to the

educated few is to close one's eyes to the magnitude of the current youth poetry movement" (p. 8).

A description of the aim and scope of the book ends the chapter. Williams hopes to add to previous scholarship by comparing the writing, performance, community, and authorship of two youth spoken word poetry groups and examining how these contexts transform adolescents' conceptions of themselves as writers. In addition to the voices of the poets and youth leaders themselves, Williams is also interested in what it means to engage with such practices in the political context of Arizona, which "has had an English-only mandate for schools since 2000" (p. 11), despite many of those studied having families with roots in Mexico.

Chapter 1: Guiding Research and Theory

Williams details connections between her work and research in community literacies, extracurricular writing, and youth literacies. These associations cohere into an educational philosophy grounded, most recently, in Paris and Alim's (2014) *culturally sustaining pedagogy*—that is, educating in such a way that explicitly "seeks to perpetuate and foster . . . linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 95). Although the communities explored here do not fall under the purview of traditional schooling, Williams argues that the literacies youth engage in voluntarily, on their own time, nevertheless offer insights into ways schooling in general might be made more meaningful for students.

In concluding the chapter, Williams briefly explains the sociocultural perspective she will be taking and her use of Wegner's (1998) "communities of practice" as a conceptual tool to explore certain aspects of the spoken word groups she hopes to draw attention to throughout the book, particularly in chapter 4.

Chapter 2: Studying the Poets

Chapter 2 concerns how Williams came to this work and went about designing her study. She recounts learning about Metro poets at an English teachers'

convention, reaching out, and establishing trust. She then unpacks her own stance as a white middle-class female who had relatively little experience with spoken word poetry at the onset of her study. Her strong teaching background in creative multimodal expression and investigating youth literacies, however, made exploring youth spoken word poetry feel like a natural progression for her.

She describes her work as a qualitative case study and details the sites in which she observed and conducted interviews. She then gives a brief comparative overview of the 6 youth participants she focuses on who are ethnically diverse, between 15 and 19 years old, and range from 3 months to over 2 years of experience at Metropoets. This demographic overview leads Williams to describe what she considered data and how she handled it to both maintain accuracy and ensure that multiple complex elements remained accessible to readers.

Chapter 3: Performing Poetry

Readers are then taken inside a poetry slam. The host of the slam, Gabriel, takes the stage to welcome everyone. He warms up the audience with an energetic call-and-response routine, explains the scoring system they will follow, and attests to the courage it takes for these young people to take the stage in this way.

As the slam commences and the youth poets take the stage in turn, Williams shares glimpses into their backgrounds. We learn, for example, about the early loss of Jorge's father and the slow acceptance of his stepdad. About Stacey's Catholic upbringing and her autistic brother. Shawna falling through the cracks at school and her abiding love of cooking. And Rafael's older brother inspiring him to become an activist.

Williams argues that these vital elements of students' lives are not given meaningful space for expression in traditional essay assignments, and that giving them opportunities to imagine audiences that they will perform in front of one day during the writing stages imbues their craft with an energy and

purpose that we educators must take into account more thoroughly.

Chapter 4: Participating in a Community of Practice

Using Wegner's (1998) "communities of practice" as a heuristic, Williams details the "purposes, practices, and tools that define the Metropoets group" (p. 50). In addition to improving members' writing ability and developing their emotional literacy, Williams details how Metropoets encourages active citizenship, celebrates marginalized voices, and provides a safe space for competition. Workshop and slam practices are then touched on alongside routine use of tools such as social media and music.

Members' various forms of participation are considered next as Williams examines the inbound trajectories of core members who are cultivated for competition versus the outbound trajectories of those whose attendance is inconsistent or are beginning to age out of the program. The community is nevertheless built around norms that create a safe space for storytelling for everyone, including intentional language use and practices such as snapping and guided mentorship.

Chapter 5: Writing and Authorship

In chapter 5 we are taken inside the writing lives of the Metropoet youth. Shared excerpts bring readers in as a secondhand witness to the meanings and tensions these youth engage in their poetry. Their words contend with the death of a biological father, anxieties about graduating, the vulnerability of coming to love someone, the senselessness of war, and the perpetuation of systemic injustices such as poverty and police brutality. Williams continually underscores Metropoets' belief that teenagers have ideas worth sharing, writing that, "Too often teachers in schools dictate what students must write about, removing not only choice but also the chance for a student to care deeply about the writing that he or she produces" (p. 92).

Williams then goes on to examine the habits and attitudes of the poets. She weaves together strands

of interviews to explore how they record their thoughts, how they “get in the zone”, and when and where they do their best writing. All of the poets interviewed felt they wrote their best while writing alone at night, a pointed contrast to the crowded early morning or middle-of-the-afternoon classrooms most students are made to write in.

The productive spells of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) “flow state” and the frustrations of writer’s block are also touched upon, lending credence to the notion that youth—like adults—sometimes experience difficulty writing quality words on demand. Williams also asks Metro poet youth how they came to think of themselves as writers and what experiences they draw upon for inspiration. She learns that each of them imagines writing, in some form or another, playing a significant role in their personal and/or professional futures.

Chapter 6: Weighing the Benefits and Challenges

Not to depict an entirely rosy picture, Williams discusses in equal measure the many benefits and challenges that Metro poet faced during her yearlong study. As a direct result of their involvement with Metro poets, the youth all reported feeling considerably more confident wielding figurative language, speaking up, and sharing their vulnerabilities with others. At the same time, independent literacy groups such as Metro poets take a great deal of time and energy to sustain. In addition to looming threats, such as securing funding and finding a reliable space to hold poetry slams, internal tensions such as surprise rule changes, dealing with growth, and striking an appropriate balance between community and competition all made preserving and cultivating the spirit of the organization a difficult task to maintain. Such constant attenuation often proved exhausting, and Williams is keen to point out that organizations such as Metro poets deserve far more recognition and support than they typically receive.

Chapter 7: Exploring a High School Poetry Club

In Chapter 7 Williams hones in on the Palo Brea Poets Club, which is run by teachers and meets after school, to unpack key similarities and differences between it and Metro poets, a comparison which “can be useful for considering the possibilities and limitations of literacy learning in different contexts” (p. 146).

We meet Ms. Sanderson and Mr. Casale, the club’s teacher sponsors, and Brian, a Metro poets-teaching artist who conducts weekly writing workshops on site at the school. While the routines and supportive structure of Palo Brea Poets Club are quite similar to Metro poets, added difficulties such as strain on the teacher-sponsors’ already limited time, member recruitment, and dealing with paperwork all make this a more bureaucratic context to operate within. It was also challenging, at times, to tread the fine line between inviting sincere self-expression and taking the time to discuss what would be appropriate in a school setting. The teachers, relatedly, sometimes struggled with their role as mandated reporters. On the other hand, the school’s many classrooms and enormous auditorium made securing convenient, reliable space a far simpler matter when compared to the struggles of Metro poets to find suitable places to meet.

Conclusion: Rethinking Writing Instruction

Williams drives a few key points home in the final chapter, namely, that “Sharing stories in a supportive community is incredibly powerful” for young people (p. 149), and that oftentimes, as teachers, we need simply to “put the red pen away and listen” (p. 151) to what young people have to say.

She also adamantly states that students should not be compelled by teachers to read their personal work in front of the class when they do not want to and that teachers, themselves, should seriously consider engaging in authentic writing alongside their students.

It is the formulaic and impersonal writing assignments of today’s classrooms that Williams

feels spoken word poetry has the power to counteract. She is quick to point out, however, that many Common Core standards are easily fulfilled by designing lessons or even an entire unit featuring spoken word opportunities. In short, Williams suggests that adolescent educators have little excuse not to engage young people in the transformative potential of spoken word. “After all, we can show students the power of their words, encourage sharing and listening, focus on community building, and acknowledge that students are writers with something to say” (p. 161).

Afterword: The Paradox of Emotional Vulnerability

Although playing the part of the detached researcher throughout most of her text, Williams admits, in the afterword, that the more she observed and was welcomed into the Metro poets community, the more “it seemed wrong for me to listen without giving them a story of my own (p. 162).

Still recovering from the death of her mother a few years before and inspired by the bravery of the Metro poet youth, Williams decided to compose and share a poem of her own, one that both reckoned with her mother’s passing and expressed awe and admiration for the Metro poet youth. She concludes that the process of working up to and finally reading her poem aloud at a poetry slam event “helped [her] to reflect on participation in Metro poets from a different vantage point” (p. 167).

She ends by explaining the lesson she learned, what she calls “the paradox of emotional vulnerability”—namely, that “strengths can come out exposing, and grappling with, deep personal wounds” (p. 167). Williams suggests that we develop the courage to share what is most important to us when we feel the sincere invitation from a supportive community of people who care about us and what we have to say. It seems no coincidence then that the closeup image of a microphone on the cover is positioned toward the viewer in beckoning fashion. As the young Metro poet Nicole says to encourage her fellow poet activists on stage in this surreal do-or-die moment, “*Streetlight’s on, poet*” (p. 43).

Response

Williams’ *Listen to the Poet* certainly proves to be a thorough and sincere exploration of the Metro poet community and, to a lesser extent, the Palo Brea poets club. Her straightforward language and analysis will prove both relevant and accessible to educators who are curious to learn more about spoken word poetry and are perhaps considering embarking on their own spoken word journey with their students.

Williams also provides practical suggestions when she is able and never strays too far into assertion or speculation. It is here, however, in suggesting the far-reaching cultural force of spoken word that her own expressive energy feels almost too obliging (she only goes so far as to call it a “resistance literacy” for young people). Regrettably, *Listen to the Poet*, for all its merits, sometimes reads like a traditional doctoral study turned book rather than a sincere reckoning with the power and possibility of the medium it describes. I turn to Kim’s (2013) description of spoken word to fill in where I feel Williams’ text falls short:

Spoken word as an activist form reveals itself as a generative cultural force and capacity. It is a restless kind of literacy that can teach us much about the possibilities for decolonization in the cultivation and preparation of a next generation of writers, arts activists, critical educators, and community organizers. (p. 394)

How spoken word might provide “guidance against the culturally hegemonic logics of coloniality/modernity, global capitalism, and neoliberalism” (Kim, 2013, p. 403) plays a significant role in why spoken word deserves attention. Though providing a faithful, heartfelt account of two spoken word communities, a dutiful exploration of how spoken word can “configure new discursive arrangements and cultivate new contours of social relation” (p. 403) never manifests in Williams’ work. I was especially let down when early mentions of the how the conservative context of Arizona affected the

young poets' writing sensibilities played no explicit role in the final two thirds of the book.

Secondly, although Williams' text provides a solid entry point for educators wanting to know more about this topic, readers will find much of what is said to be relatively unsurprising. We are likely to be aware, for example, that students often feel unmotivated by traditional writing assignments, that they value opportunities to write about what is important to them, and that having an authentic audience to write to is meaningful. This potential frustration is exacerbated by the fact that, throughout much of the book, Williams' suggestions as to how schools might learn from Metropoets' example feels largely secondary and, at times, tacked on. Usually we are given a sentence or two at the end of a chapter about what schools might learn from these spoken word communities, but hardly any attention is paid to the conditions of possibility that might bring these changes about. We see, for instance, out-of-school and after-school instantiations of spoken word communities but are never given a practical glimpse into what during-school spoken word practices might look like. Such an absence is strange for a book that frequently gears itself toward secondary teachers. As a result, the work occasionally feels like an attempt to qualitatively triangulate what is meaningful about

spoken word communities in educational contexts without the third and most vital side: the classroom itself.

Nevertheless, as a former high school English and Creative Writing teacher and current literacy scholar, I do feel that I can easily endorse the sentiments Williams shares and the suggestions she makes throughout her book. Early in my teaching, I often suspected that the latitude I was afforded in my creative writing courses helped students to become better writers—real, motivated writers—when compared to the demanding, fast-paced assignments I felt pressured to ask my students to do in my ELA courses. As self-evident as it may seem, changes in how and why we teach writing with young people are necessary, and the truth of the matter remains that the ubiquitous five-paragraph essay continues to reign supreme in most secondary classrooms nationwide. This fact alone is reason enough to recommend Williams' book, especially to those who feel it might give them the necessary nudge to experiment with spoken word (or some related, personally-motivated creative or participatory practice) in their own classroom.

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