

It's Lit: A Critical Qualitative Case Study on the Intersections
of Hip Hop Education, Spirituality, and Race

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is a qualitative case study exploring the understandings, beliefs, and practices of Youth Spoken Word Poetry (YSW) educators who work within the field of Hip Hop-Based Education (HHBE) and have grown from youth participants to adult professionals within an international YSW Network. This study examines how current YSW practitioners describe and understand their work, along with the multiple literacy practices they utilize related to spirituality and race. This study is framed by a sociocultural lens of education, includes a blend of qualitative research methods related to narrative approaches, and is inspired by literature grounded in Hip Hop-Based Education; Race and Education; and Spirituality and Education. It is a hope of this study that the findings lead to a more nuanced understanding of how HHBE functions within the landscape of education and impact how we approach HHBE moving forward.

Major findings revealed that the participants describe themselves as racialized and spiritual beings in implicit and explicit ways. YSW participants in this study described the field of YSW as grounded in African American lineages and acknowledged that the field currently functions as pluralistic and multicultural. YSW participants describe spirituality as personal, collective, and transcendent experiences. Though participants defined spirituality differently, they described it as something that is present, naming it as an important factor to be considered when examining YSW practice. Core literacy practices participants engaged with and enacted within the YSW community related to race and spirituality included acknowledging their voice as something that was expressed

individually, collectively, and universally and across time (past, present, and future).

These findings highlight the value of communities that support: (1) Reflection, or honoring individual identities; (2) Refraction, or honoring Communities of Practice that shape our paths; and (3) Dispersion, or the use of stories to support dreaming, sharing, and revolutionizing the world as we know it.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all those who have come before, and all those that will come after.

Chapter I

lit

Pronunciation: /lit/ slang term for “exciting” or “excellent”

*The party’s going to be lit // “Leslie Jones’s commentary on the Olympics was lit”
(Lit, 2018)*

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized.

This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless-about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.

As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny, and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us (Lorde, 1984, p. 36).

INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND, AND PURPOSE

Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. (Freire, 2000, p. 28, Back of BNV TShirt 2006)

When I attended the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Festival (BNV) in New York City in 2006, I was a White, 18-year-old, middle-class teenager from Madison, WI, being introduced to a network of spoken word and Hip Hop poets that was emerging across the country. I remember seeing hundreds of students from all parts of the world (from England to Guam and everywhere in between) huddled into groups, speaking, listening, and performing poems that spoke to our dual realities of oppression and liberation—all with Paulo Freire’s quote on the back of our shirts. I remember not being sure who Paulo Freire was and what this quote really meant. However, even though I had no theoretical framework for understanding my experience, I knew that as we spoke about our teenage views of injustice in our neighborhoods and our world, what I was experiencing was powerful, a process of learning and living that was being built in word, in work, and in action-reflection—or praxis, “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2000, p. 28). I left that experience with my eyes more open about the world, with my feet ready to walk for justice in a more authentic way, and my heart clear on the work I would continue to do for the rest of my life.

Over a decade later, while I am earning my PhD in English Education, our world is facing urgent environmental and social challenges that lead us to need critically conscious young leaders now more than ever. The United States had just come up for air from one of the worst storms in its history. Much of Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico were just beginning to see water recede from the damage of multiple hurricanes. Missing persons and death tolls were in the hundreds. Many were calling public attention to the

inequitable differences between support across the three locations in the wake of the storms. Some say it felt like “the end of times” (Fountain, 2017).

Not too long before the storms hit, there was a pro-White supremacy rally in Charlottesville, VA, where White nationalists marched in the streets carrying torches and screaming Nazi chants. When anti-hate protesters challenged the march, a woman was run over by an angry driver, and 19 more were injured in the clash (Fountain, 2017). In recent years, structural, institutional, and interpersonal racial divisions across all sectors of society seem to be as prevalent as ever. In the field of education, one need not look much further beyond disparities in educational achievement between races to see that, while things have changed since school integration in the 1950s, they have hardly improved, if not worsened (Noguera, Pierce, and Ahram, 2015). The historical causes of these social and ecological challenges are often glazed over in news coverage and popular understandings, yet they still impact our day-to-day social and psychological lives (Aizenman, 2017). This affects me personally when I sit to write and work in a PhD program in education. While I am learning more and more about the promise and possibilities of the work of poets and Paulo Freire, I often feel a sense of powerlessness every time I think about what can be done to address these challenges.

While we may feel challenged in these times of natural disasters and social unrest, we should also keep in mind that, although it may not seem like it, the United States has been through storms like this before. In fact, we may be able to chart that what are commonly known as “100-year floods” every few years or so (FEMA, 2017; Lind, 2017) and every political shift of the past few centuries have come with an almost predictable backlash (Chang, 2016). This may look and feel different than it may have to our parents and grandparents, but history has taught us that there has always been both oppression and liberation.

If I'm honest about that moment in 2006, I must share that even then I felt a similar sense of powerlessness. The United States was on its second term of president George W.

Bush, the fifth year of a war in Iraq, and it appeared as if officials had abandoned New Orleans and parts of the South in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. I watched classmates from less dominant racial and economic backgrounds receive inequitable and oppressive treatment in my diverse high school. Ten of my classmates, including my younger brother, had been sent to prisons across Wisconsin for a gun-related incident. I had recently become aware of my father's decade-long affair with my mother's best friend. I was enmeshed in an unhealthy romantic relationship, and at that time, there was little opportunity for me to productively address the situation externally.

However, one space I had the opportunity to face this powerlessness and access possibilities for liberation was inside the Brave New Voices community. There, I was uplifted to explore my understandings, define what I believed, and exchange thoughts with my peers and elders across the country. Through workshops, open mics, and slams, I was supported not only to read and write spoken word, but to engage, critique, and understand both the best and worst parts of what I saw and experienced in the world. The literacy practices I brought were valued, and I was encouraged to grow in my critical understanding of the complex privileges of my White, middle class identity and inequalities I saw every day. While spoken word poetry was valuable for my local community at that time in the early 2000s, over the past two decades, this movement of poets and artists has continued to grow and change the landscape of our nation, with a formal network of over 150 spoken word organizations across the world, formal spoken word and Hip Hop courses across the country, and an ever-expanding field of scholarship-grounded Hip Hop and urban arts. My high school went on to be the first in the nation to offer an advanced English class on spoken word, and I continued to pursue my passion and establish a career in supporting young people define their truths and share their stories through spoken word and Hip Hop.

It was when I was writing this dissertation that I again noticed a public and private search for liberation in the face of these recurring environmental, social, and political

challenges. People continued to engage in some of the most fundamental strategies for freedom or healing from these challenges, seeking practices like social engagement (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014), arts creation (Stuckey and Noble, 2010), and playing active roles in social or community institutions (Hope & Beale Spencer, 2017). Like me, one of the strategies people continued to engage in was the practice of writing and performing spoken word poetry (Craven, 2017; Fiore, 2013; Fischer, 2005). Spoken word poetry is understood as poetry written with the intention of performance; Youth Spoken Word (YSW) refers to an emerging field that includes an international network of organizations focused on poets under the age of 19 and is situated within the larger field of Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE). Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE) refers to the use of elements of Hip Hop culture as curricular and pedagogical resources (Hill, 2013).

Hip Hop culture, the basis for HHBE, often has widely varying definitions in literature; however, one way Hip Hop culture can be defined is as an encompassing, multi-dimensional culture that is expressed through five elements: (1) MCing (oral element—spoken word poetry falls within this category); (2) DJing (technological element); (3) Graffiti (visual element); (4) Breakdancing (physical element); and (5) Knowledge of Self and Community (existential element) (Rose, 1994). Hip Hop is often viewed as a way of life and extends into the realms of fashion, language, political sensibilities, and business (Kitwana, 2002). This greater field of HHBE, where YSW sits, has been the basis for much research in the field of education, grounded in multiple disciplines, ranging from science to public health to music and culture studies and beyond (Petchauer, 2009). Recent research has begun to make connections between HHBE and how it can act as a source of support for young people to deal with social challenges related to racial, economic, and social inequity (Craven, 2017), and even offer a sense of spiritual (Johnson, 2013) and psychological support (Travis, 2015).

Simultaneously, researchers have been calling for educators and scholars to deepen and expand how we understand the power of spirituality in the face of personal and

collective challenges. Drawing upon the work of many scholars, educator scholars Augustine and Zurmehly (2013), in their article in *Engaging Culture, Race and Spirituality*, describe two key components to how we might understand spirituality. The first theme is that spirituality refers to “a connection to a life force, source of higher power,” and second that spirituality refers to “a connection to self and to others” (p. 15). They define spirituality as “the innate need and conscious choice to seek connections including relationships with a higher being as well as with others” (p. 15) and tell us that a spiritual approach to education pushes us beyond simple acknowledgement of oppression and injustice, but leads us toward practices that engage healing and action rather than complacency or fear-based stagnation.

Addressing spirituality through a psychological lens, Lisa Miller (2013) has also named an individual's spiritual beliefs and practices as providing one way to address individual and collective challenges like those previously mentioned. In fact, Miller (2015) has written extensively on how spirituality is the strongest factor in protecting people of all ages, and particularly adolescents, from depression, risky decision-making, and low self-esteem. Bringing both of these understandings together, many scholars have also been exploring how YSW and HHBE may support spiritual development (Johnson, 2013). While, to most, it may not seem like there is an obvious direct link from HHBE to spirituality, many researchers, educators, and scholars of religion would beg to differ (Hildago, 2011; Johnson, 2013). Grounded in critical pedagogy, or pedagogical approaches that are student-centered, culturally sustaining, and intended to combat inequality (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), the field of YSW has grown over the past 20 years from a few small organizations to an international community that includes over a hundred formally recognized organizations that connect through formal and informal educational settings and only continues to grow through community and school-based programs (BNV Network Initiative, 2017). In addition to the many organizations and practices, scholars acknowledge the spiritual power and potential of this work. Vajra M.

Watson (2017) tells us that, through YSW, “something sacred transpires when students, teachers, and community-based poet mentor educators unapologetically and courageously bring their whole selves into the schoolhouse” (p. 15).

Also, currently young people are engaging with religion or spirituality in multiple ways. While fewer young people than ever before are choosing to affiliate with any formal religion, these same young people still report having regular deep spiritual experiences (Pew Research Center, 2015) and are building what Thurston and Kuilie (2016) call “deep community” through secular organizations that mirror many of the functions of religious institutions. At the same time, research shows that many students, especially students of color and students from low-income communities, retain strong connections to faith-based communities that often are overlooked and underutilized by educators (Shafer, 2017). A pilot study I completed in 2016, along with a tradition of scholarship connecting HHBE to religious and spiritual lineages, points to the possibility that HHBE is one such space that supports spiritual experiences and deep community. When these spiritual experiences occur within critical multiracial environments, such as those facilitated by HHBE, racial justice work often precedes or goes hand in hand with such work (Hildago, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Tochluk, 2016). Attempting to understand these connections among HHBE, spirituality, and race is what has led me to this study.

Overview of the Study

This dissertation is a qualitative case study exploring the understandings, beliefs, and practices of Youth Spoken Word Poetry (YSW) educators who work within the field of Hip Hop-Based Education (HHBE) and who have grown from youth participants to adult professionals within an international YSW Network. This study specifically looks at how current YSW practitioners describe and understand their work, along with the multiple literacy practices they utilize to navigate their individual spiritual and racial

identities. This study is framed by a sociocultural lens of education, includes a blend of qualitative research methods related to narrative approaches, and is inspired by existing literature, literature that omits the connections among HHBE, spirituality, and race, a pilot study completed in 2016, and personal experiences of the researcher.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how the narratives and practices of HHBE participants-turned-practitioners describe and define the work of YSW and HHBE and how these relate to understanding spirituality and race, especially in relation to the greater social and educational environments these practitioners exist in.

I approach this study utilizing a sociocultural lens that understands learning as situated within specific social contexts and communities of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This lens takes into consideration and honors the understanding that Hip Hop culture stems from a lineage of ancient African storytelling communities (Washington, 2014) and is grounded in what is popularly known as *the cypher*. The cypher can be illuminated in two ways: (1) as a literal artistic coming together, where people stand in a circle and offer rhythmic beats or rhymes; and (2) as a metaphorical gesture toward the greater Hip Hop community. This project investigated both the explicit, stated, visible practices and beliefs of participants within this community and the implicit, unsaid, or unseen views and practices. Keeping this in mind, I began this study with a qualitative approach, grounded in narrative inquiry that centers the study on understanding and telling stories to better explicate phenomena or experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2003; Reissman, 2008), and I utilized multiple data collection methods, including interviews, participant observations, and artifact analysis.

Rather than applying fixed definitions to my key areas of inquiry, I was open to discover how members of this particular YSW network named and described their own views of YSW, HHBE, spirituality, and race. While I entered in this study with working definitions and frameworks of YSW, HHBE, spirituality, and race (see end of this section) that were influenced by previous scholarship and popular definitions, I was also

open to a deepening and co-construction of these terms that influenced data collection methods and analysis.

While the field of HHBE is internationally broad and spans across many different regions and disciplines, there are multiple informal and formal networks within it. Within this study, I worked with 10 participants from one formalized international network of YSW practitioners that has been operating for the past 20 years, the Brave New Voices Network (2017). This network, founded and based in the San Francisco Bay Area, consists of over 150 nonprofit organizations and programs that work primarily in the discipline of YSW in the United States and six international cities. The leaders who run these organizations are often adult alumni of the programs and have participated in the field's growth from a few nonprofits in urban community centers in the early 2000s to an expansive network of organizations in formal and informal educational settings of all levels. While individual participants come from a broad range of geographic locations, participants hail from this formal international network that is considered the setting for this inquiry.

This study is guided by the following questions:

RQ1: How do YSW educators who have grown from youth participants (13-19) to adult practitioners (20+) describe and/or define the fields of YSW & HHBE?

What do these descriptions tell us about if and how they are making meaning of race and spirituality?

RQ2: What literacy practices are these HHBE practitioners describing and enacting as they negotiate the network?

What literacy practices are being enacted especially as it relates to New Literacies, racial literacy and spiritual literacy?

This research builds upon my pilot study project, which took place in the fall of 2016 and examined the general understandings and beliefs about the field of HHBE of

four Hip Hop educators. Maxwell (2013) tells us that pilot studies can offer valuable experience in testing out methods or instruments and support a researcher in refining questions or areas of inquiry. He states that an important use of pilot studies is to get a glimpse of the concepts and theories held by the people one is studying. In the pilot study, I noticed that in the discussions around HHBE, notions of spirituality and racial identity arose; however, they often did so in passing or as indirect references, which has led to a more direct probing in this dissertation. Schreiber (2008) adds that, in addition, pilot studies can support researchers in understanding the complexity in educational settings, or what they term “messy environments” (p. 625), and make adjustments to a design before implementing the study on a larger scale (Schreiber 2008, pp. 624-625). Although I was previously familiar with the setting as a current practitioner in the community, working with the participants in a formal research capacity supported my understanding of the complex ways HHBE engages with academic research in general, along with my own reflexive understandings as a researcher. Hip Hop culture overall has had a complex and at times contentious relationship with the academy and often views White researchers like myself as people who might appropriate, take advantage of, or misinterpret the culture in their research and publications. The pilot study not only supported my own reflexive research practice but also helped me navigate the nuanced relationship between research and the field of HHBE. Further, the pilot study phase was when I tested multiple research questions, methods, and conceptual frameworks and found great insight into what would be the final questions for this study.

Next, I’ll introduce a brief look at important definitions that shape how I understand and approach this study. As mentioned, these definitions have been shaped by the experiences and descriptions of the participants.

Definitions of Terms

Youth Spoken Word Poetry (YSW)—Spoken word poetry can be defined as “poetry intended for performance” (Poetry Foundation, 2018). The form is described as a polyvocal, polycultural, non-monolithic form of creative cultural expression that continues oral tradition and constitutes literary art and both an emergent and re-emerging living canon (Kim, 2013). Youth Spoken Word (YSW) refers to the orientation, practices, and network of organizations that support spoken word communities among young people who are under 19 years old. Saul Williams says, “I just call it poetry” (Ramseyer-Bache & Lucchesi, 2011).

Hip Hop-Based Education (HHBE)—HHBE refers to the use of elements of Hip Hop culture as curricular and pedagogical resources (Hill, 2009). Hip Hop culture, the basis for HHBE, often has widely varying definitions in literature; however, one way Hip Hop culture can be defined is as an encompassing, multi-dimensional culture that is expressed through five elements: (1) MCing (oral element—spoken word poetry falls within this category); (2) DJing (technological element); (3) Graffiti (visual element); (4) Breakdancing (physical element); and (5) Knowledge of Self and Community (existential element) (Seidel, 2011). Hip Hop is often viewed as a way of life and extends into the realms of fashion, language, political sensibilities, and business (Kitwana, 2002). This greater field of HHBE has been the basis for much research in the field of education, grounded in multiple disciplines, ranging from science to public health to music and culture studies and beyond (Petchauer, 2009). Recent research has begun to make connections between HHBE and how it can act as a source of support for young people to deal with social challenges related to racial, economic, and social inequity (Craven, 2017), and even offer a sense of spiritual support (Johnson, 2013).

Spirituality—Drawing upon the work of many scholars, this project encompasses the fluid, unquantifiable, and multiple definitions of spirituality, including those that

come from both secular and sacred communities (Hart, 2003). Secular understandings of spirituality may include references to benevolence and just morals (Moffett, 1998) or new ways of accessing spirituality that have little to do with formal gods or religions (Elkins, 1998). A more traditionally sacred lens discusses spirituality with reference to God or a higher power. Miller (2015) describes spirituality as “an inner sense of living relationship to a higher power (God, nature, spirit, universe, the creator, or whatever your word is for the ultimate loving, guiding life-force)” (p. 253). Relating this to education, we might expand this definition a bit to include the component of not only connecting to a higher power, but also a connection to others. Augustine and Zurmehly (2013) define spirituality as “the innate need and conscious choice to seek connections including relationships with a higher being as well as with others” (p. 15) and tell us that a spiritual approach to education pushes us beyond simple acknowledgement of oppression and injustice, but leads us toward practices that engage healing and action rather than complacency or fear-based stagnation.

Race—Race has multiple, varied definitions and is a complex concept that has held changing definitions over time. Racial categories in the 2017 United States census include: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. A person’s race can be defined in a myriad of ways, including referring to a combination of: one’s physical appearance, such as by skin color; social construction or human interaction/social situations that posit an agreed-upon definition within communities; ethnic groups related to common histories and countries of origin; a social class rank, where one’s class rank may define which racial category they ascribe to (where those of higher classes may be more likely to be referred to as “White”); and finally, by one’s own self-definition (Higginbotham & Anderson, 2015). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) connect race in education to Omi and Winant’s (1993) theories that link the development of the construct of race to the evolution of oppressive social structures and cultural representations in society. These

authors acknowledge that race has no biological basis, but the impacts of race and racism have real, measurable impacts in society.

Positionality, Limitations, and Delimitations

Positionality is described as “the situatedness of knowledge” (Finley, 2008, p. 98) and acknowledges that “people experience the world from different embodied, social, intellectual, and spatial locations” (p. 98). In this project, I recognize myself as someone with specific racial, gendered, academic, and economic positionality who has worked with the YSW/HHBE community for over 15 years. As a White, ethnically Irish, middle-class, cis-gendered female from the Midwest earning a doctorate degree, I also understand that my participants are not from similar backgrounds as myself and that I enter the work with bias.

My worldview leads me to have a linear lens toward projects or work timelines. Despite over a decade of working within the cypher of Hip Hop, this orientation toward linear analysis at times makes it difficult for me to see and understand the never-ending, non-linear nature of a cypher clearly, especially work like that of HHBE. I also know that, due to my upbringing, I may ascribe to certain middle-class value systems, such as valuing certain educational achievements or ways of being in the world that are politically acceptable among White women or others from a middle-class background. I also know that my orientation from the Midwest leads me to have a differing understanding than those from other regions. It is with great care that I receive the information or data from the participants and know that they have trusted me with their words, understandings, and work. That being said, I also believe that having a familiarity with this community has led my research to be informed by honest, personal interactions that may not have been possible if I was not in familiar, trusting relationships with the participants.

In order to address possible bias, I have followed Luttrell's (2010) emphasis on reflexivity being central to the research process. Luttrell encourages the researcher to approach reflexivity in research by interrogating the relationships between the following: Research Relationships, Research Questions, Knowledge Frameworks, Inquiry Frameworks and Methods, Validity, and Goals. I acknowledge that, as Finley (2008) describes, "it is never possible to fully understand oneself or one's relationships in the community, nor is it fully possible to understand the motivations, purposes, or hegemonic indicators that pull us toward particular understandings, positionalities, or worldviews" (p. 99). Furthermore, I followed interview protocol and gained informed consent for all interviews and observations (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). The participants agreed to have their real names included in the research and opted to not be ascribed a pseudonym. I have had two colleagues cross-check initial coding and findings and help me identify any shortcomings or spaces for opportunity and different interpretations related to analysis. I have had my findings looked over by the participants before publishing in order to avoid any unintended negative impacts of my work, should it not be in alignment with the true beliefs and understandings of them. I had my findings peer-reviewed by two colleagues who remain outside the HHBE community for insight on any inconsistencies, tensions, or incorrect assumptions that arose.

Further, this study looked at a very specific population within a very specific set of circumstances. With the field of education and HHBE being extremely broad, this sample does not represent the widest range possible of HHBE. Because this small sample is very individualized, the participants and methods of data collection may not be able to be applied to other settings.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Despite the limits of the study, the findings of this research have the potential to impact the ways in which YSW and HHBE practitioners, scholars, and community members define and understand the nuances of the field in which they work, especially as it relates to spiritual and racial identity development within educational contexts. It has been stated that spirituality and racial identity play major roles in students' everyday lives (Miller, 2015; Sue, 2003); however, the connections and differences between the two factors are often not explicitly discussed in tandem with one another, especially in an HHBE context. Having a deeper understanding of the explicit connections between spirituality and racial identity within this context could lead to new or more nuanced approaches to pedagogical practices within HHBE that take these factors into account. It is a hope of this study that findings will lead to a more nuanced understanding of how HHBE functions within the landscape of education and impact how we approach HHBE moving forward, as well as impact individual and collective practices in public education, communities, and cultural institutions.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into six chapters that cover the following: Chapter I covered an overall introduction, background, overview, and purpose of the study. This introduction acknowledged timely environmental and social contexts, overview of the study, purposes for the study, possible limitations, and introduced key terms.

Chapter II includes a review of key theoretical perspectives and relevant literature and histories. This chapter includes the introduction of a theoretical lens that is grounded in sociocultural lenses of education, including New Literacy Studies and Communities of Practice, and applies these lenses to the field of HHBE. Further, this chapter explores the

scholarship that the topics of this study build upon, including Hip Hop-Based Education, Race and Education, and Spirituality and Education.

Chapter III covers the critical qualitative research lenses that informed the methodology for data collection and analysis, along with descriptions of the participants and settings. This chapter includes sections on the narrative and case study approaches utilized and introduces the ten key participants, along with the three main data collection methods (semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and artifact analysis) and methods for analysis.

Chapter IV presents the overall findings of the research, introducing the biographies and social contexts of the participants, and also initial noticings of the participants' discussions related to the themes that emerged in participant data. Chapters V, VI, and VII present the analysis and interpretation of study findings, and finally, Chapter VIII offers conclusions and recommendations.

B Side

Before we jump into the next chapter, let's rewind to 1982, five years before I was born. One summer morning, in a suburb of Minneapolis, MN, my mother and my grandmother were whipping around the house, cooking and preparing for a group of very special guests about to join them for Sunday brunch. When the tour bus bringing New York City's Kitchen Tour pulled up in front of the house, my mother and grandmother suddenly stopped what they were doing and stared out the window in nervous anticipation. Out jumped my uncle, Tim Carr, followed by Fab Five Freddy, Crazy Legs, Frosty Freeze, Ken Swift, and 35 other emerging Hip Hop pioneers at the time. The morning included educating my suburban extended family about the elements of Hip Hop. Fab Five Freddy instructed my grandfather in how they created graffiti on the sides of subway trains by demonstrating with mustard on a napkin (M. Carr, T. Carr, B. Pirsch, personal communication, 2008). The morning was one stop in a seven-city tour that brought artists from multiple genres together and kicked off with a night of performances on the Staten Island Ferry (Rockwell, 1982), symbolizing the migration of Hip Hop culture across the country and later throughout the world.

The following year, my uncle wrote an article for Rolling Stone titled, "Walk That Walk, Talk that Talk" (Carr, 1983). It was the first nationally recognized article about Hip Hop. In the article, Carr explained for the first time to mainstream media what he had known about what Hip Hop was, who it was created by, and who it was for. He explained break dancing's history, the story of rap's emergence, and even comments on the commercialization of Hip Hop, saying, "Although it's been stylized for mass consumption, Hip Hop is hardly Broadway. It's still for and by the community it came from" (p. 22).

At this time, my uncle was definitely not from the community Hip Hop came from. He was a performance curator and carried somewhat of an Irish, Catholic, Minnesotan view of the world in that he acknowledged racial difference but didn't critically understand the many factors that played into how society functioned. However, he, like so many at the time, saw the power of what Hip Hop was becoming. Saw that he had a role to play in supporting the artists and arts spaces he was connected to. And saw that Hip Hop was a culture that would go on to teach him and others about critically understanding his role in his work and the world.

He later went to work A&R and signed many early Hip Hop acts, including Mantronix. He described much of his work with Hip Hop as moments that were serendipitous. He described Hip Hop culture both as something that was "in the air" (T. Carr, personal communication, May 2008) and as something that indirectly taught him about race (Walsh, 2013). He said, "I didn't know that there was a separation in color lines, especially at the level of music." He described how the Black divisions of the record companies were in charge of Hip Hop and when they found he was working with Hip Hop acts, he was told he had to shift focus to only performers he could designate as "pop," such as the Beastie Boys.

Decades later, ignorant of our uncle's work, my brother and I sat in an Anthropology and Hip Hop class at the University of Minnesota taught by Melisa Riviere. In the second week of classes, we watched the Hip Hop documentary, "Style Wars" (1983). To our surprise, a scene appeared with break dancers on the Staten Island Ferry and my uncle explaining how they were embarking on a tour across the country. I later wrote a paper about him, where he detailed much of his journey with the Hip Hop community in New York of the 1970s and '80s.

At that point, I was blessed to have begun to engage with Hip Hop at a young age, to be in spaces that taught me to critically explore what it meant for me to be a white person that was connected to this culture, but I still often felt insecure about my unique

path. In that moment in that class, my path became a bit more clear. Up until that point, I had never quite made sense of my interest in Hip Hop and the path that had led me to that point. My uncle spoke to this feeling in talking about people crediting him as a “Hip Hop talking head” in Style Wars, saying (sarcastically at first),

If we ever stop to think, "I don't really know what I'm doing," we'd all be in trouble. So we just plow on and we hope the musicians do too, because if they don't know what they're doing, they invent something new, which is the best thing that can happen.

So through this story, I recognize Hip Hop is something that guides people and teaches us—something that has guided people in my family and guides me today.

lit 3

Pronunciation: /lit/

Entry from British & World English dictionary

NOUN Short for literature. - Written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit (Lit, 2016)

Chapter II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study is informed by a sociocultural understanding of learning and is situated within specific histories of scholarship and practice related to Hip Hop, race, spirituality, and their intersections within the field of education.

This chapter begins by focusing on the histories and impacts of the theoretical lenses that ground this inquiry: critical sociocultural perspectives and the perspectives that are derivatives of sociocultural perspectives, New Literacy Studies, and Communities of Practice. I then introduce two applied theoretical lenses that inform how I am viewing this study: the two lenses of Hip Hop Communities of Practice and the Hip Hop Cypher. I will close this chapter with a brief historical review of literature in which this study builds on: histories of Hip Hop based education, race and education, and spirituality and education.

Table 1. Overview of Chapter II

Theoretical Lenses <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Critical Sociocultural Perspectives<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ New Literacy Studies○ Communities of Practice
Applied Theoretical Lenses <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Hip Hop Communities of Practice● Hip Hop Cypher● A Framework for Seeing
Relevant Histories and Literacy Practices <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Hip Hop Culture and Hip Hop Based Education<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Hip Hop Literacies● Race and Education<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Racial Literacy● Spirituality and Education<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Spiritual Literacies

Theoretical Lenses, Critical Sociocultural Perspectives, and Understanding New Literacy Studies and Communities of Practice

Critical Sociocultural Perspectives

Approaching this study with a sociocultural lens means that this study is undertaken while acknowledging that all learning is situated within specific social contexts (Gee, 2010; Moll, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Sociocultural theory first emerged in the early 20th century, specifically when psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) developed the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD was partially developed to expand how we understand psychological and intellectual growth, in opposition to static tests that might say people are smart or not. ZPD describes that through guidance from elders and support from more experienced peers, students are able to learn concepts that were not originally available to them, though this learning must have been within a specific “zone” of what they were able to understand (Moll, 1990). ZPD emphasizes that learning is produced through social interactions and cultural practice, that human interaction and pedagogy are central to the process of learning, and that there is no way one can separate the individual from the social (Moll, 1990).

Further, I approach the work via what Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) call a critical sociocultural perspective. The authors found that many approaches understanding sociocultural research, while powerful in shifting certain research orientations, were not explicit in their effort to address issues of identity, race, agency, and power. Applying a critical perspective to a sociocultural lens acknowledges and emphasizes the specific and complex institutional, historical, and cultural contexts of individuals and communities more than most sociocultural perspectives may take from the outset.

New literacy studies. While these ideas were first introduced in the early part of the century, they began to take hold and influence scholars and practitioners in the field of education in the 1960s and '70s. One subfield of education that was impacted by this is the field of literacy education. While early definitions of basic literacy may have simply

referred to the cognitive ability to read and write written texts (Morrell, 2007; New London Group, 1996), sociocultural perspectives offered an expanded view of literacy, exploring new and multiple literacies. More advanced or complex literacies might be defined as “negotiating a multiplicity of discourses” (New London Group, 1996, p. 61) and describe literacy as engaging in a set of sociocultural practices of participation and meaning making in various societies (Gee, 2010). However, there still remains little agreement on what the definition of literacy is. Even though scholars are now writing and exploring literacy-related issues, there still exist limited understandings, and there is no agreed upon “route to universal literacy” (Graff, 1988, p. 89).

Early ethnographic researchers of the practices of adolescent and family literacies, such as Heath (1983) and Lee (1993), explored the different literacy practices people engage in and found that people use extremely complex language and literacy skills in their everyday lives. Some of these expanded studies of literacy practices were positioned within a field of “New Literacy Studies” or NLS. NLS acknowledges not only the individual minds and cognitive developments of students but, more importantly, the “world of experience” or social practices they engage in (Gee, 2010, p. 11). NLS posits that “experience is almost always shared in social and cultural groups—as the core of human learning, thinking, problem solving, and literacy” (p. 11). The understandings of NLS have continued to develop through expanding scholarship and have inspired branches of similar work across the field of literacy studies, including Critical Literacies, New Media Literacies, Digital Literacies, Racial Literacy, HipHop Literacies, and more.

With the expanded understanding of the notion of literacy practices, it becomes most important to understand the nuanced application and reception of literacies, especially as they relate to political dynamics and power structures in society. Morrell and Scherff (2015) tell us, “At all times education is a political act, and schools are embedded within a sociocultural reality that benefits some at the expense of others” (p. xii). Literacy practices have been used as practices of freedom in oppressive

circumstances for centuries. Perry (2004) describes how the educational philosophies of African Americans were passed down from generation to generation, in service of claiming one's full humanity and to prepare oneself to be a leader in the face of social inequities: "You pursued learning because this is how you asserted yourself as a free person, how you claimed your humanity" (p. 11). Literacy can be a tool for freedom but also can be a tool in service of oppression, and it is important that all angles be explored in their complexity (Graff, 1988). Each new framing of literacy adds to the complexity and nuance of the field of literacy research, and each year more layers of how literacies can be used as tools of liberation are developed and unpacked. The expansive understanding of literacies birthed by the New Literacy Studies movement supports scholars and practitioners to understand and honor complex cultures and communities in a nuanced, multi-pronged way, as explored in this study.

Communities of practice. Similar to the expansion of understanding literacy, sociocultural theories expanded how people think about not only individual practices, but also how we conceptualize the communities and networks individuals who engage in related practices are a part of. Two scholars in particular, Lave and Wenger (1991), developed a theory or way to understand particular communities that engage in related practices, referred to as "communities of practice" or CoP. Wenger defines CoPs as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (wenger-trayner.com, 2015). Lave and Wenger began their work on this concept by first studying apprenticeships, and they still focus much of their work on learning that occurs outside the classroom. In attempts to explain and define the nuances of sociocultural learning in action, they began paying attention to what they call "legitimate peripheral participation," or how people in communities participate in "multiple, varied, more or less engaged and inclusive ways of being located in the fields of participation defined by community" (p. 59). They also state that, although the term "peripheral" might refer to an inside and an outside, there may actually

not be something as simple as “central participation,” or possibly that peripheral participation may be as central as one can be (p. 59). Wenger (2008) identifies three characteristics of a community of practice as: (a) shared domain, (b) community, and (c) practice, explained as follows:

- (a) **A shared domain** constitutes the identity of the group. A domain can be understood as a “joint enterprise” (Wenger, 2008 p. 77) or a mutual engagement among members that includes a specific set of skills or understandings.
- (b) **A community** is built by participants engaging in communal activities, discussions or sharing information for the development of all members. Interacting and learning together is a key component of community.
- (c) **A practice** is defined as actions that go beyond a simple shared interest. Members of a CoP are practitioners, people who interact in ways that develop their individual and collective learning (Wenger, 2008).

After defining the characteristics of *what* a CoP can be defined by, they go on to develop a working framework for the components that factor into *how* learning might take place within a CoP. They discuss the following constantly intersecting and interacting components as keys to the social processes of learning and knowing within a CoP.

- (1) **Meaning:** a way of talking about our (changing) ability—individually and collectively—to experience our life and the world as meaningful.
- (2) **Practice:** a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.
- (3) **Community:** a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence.

- (4) **Identity:** a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities. (Wenger, 2008, p. 5)

Understanding these components of sociocultural theories of learning, new literacies, and Communities of Practice provides a ground for which this study of HHBE communities is built. In particular, the ways in which sociocultural perspectives include both explicit measurable practices and allow for implicit, immeasurable practices to arise are foundational for how this informs this study. Applying these perspectives to a specific Hip Hop Community of Practice and the framework of a Hip Hop Cypher, I explore in this study how this informs my approach to the key focuses of inquiry for this study.

Applied Theoretical Lenses: Hip Hop Communities of Practice, Hip Hop Cypher and a Framework for Seeing

HHCOP

Applying this framework to Hip Hop culture, one can define the following components of Hip Hop Communities of Practice (or HHCOP) in the following ways:

- (a) **Shared domain** of HHCOPs might be considered the domain of all of Hip Hop's elements, or may be broken down more specifically between those that participate in specific elements. For example, a community of breakdancers who meet weekly might consider breakdancing as their "joint enterprise." Or, more largely, Hip Hop artists and educators who meet every summer at a Hip Hop-based education conference and connect weekly via the #HipHopEd twitter chat might consider the field of HHBE their "joint enterprise" (C. Prossnitz, personal communication, November 2012).
- (b) **Community** in HHCOPs is made up of Hip Hop practitioners who participate, lead, and curate Hip Hop events, programs, or workshops and usher in the next generation of leaders through these practices and the transfer of knowledge. One contained example of a community might be a group that

organizes itself as a specific “breakdance troupe” or group that meets regularly (C. Prossnitz, personal communication, November 2012). Another might be the organizers and participants of the #HipHopEd twitter chat (twitter.com/therealhiphoped). The global HHBE field may also be considered a “community,” with varying membership between artists, scholars, organizers and students—all united by the shared domain of Hip Hop culture and bound by the mutual engagement of practices (C. Prossnitz, personal communication, November 2012).

- (c) **Practice** is vital to HHCOPs and distinguishes them from groups of people who are known to simply enjoy or consume Hip Hop artifacts. HHCOPs engage and interact not only with the artifacts, but also engage with particular actions and practices with other members of the community connected to the domain. For example, breakdancers actively practice moves in regular practice sessions or compete in regular regional, national, and international competitions (C. Prossnitz, personal communication, November 2012).

Wilson (2007) and Love (2015) have outline the particulars of HHCOPs. Wilson (2007) discusses a need for scholarship to keep moving in the directions of considering HHBE based on the specific actions Hip Hop practitioners engage in community. Wilson states that, instead of merely looking at in-school practices, theory, or curricula, it is important to the continued development of the field for scholars, when researching particular HHCOPs, to look at

how they practice Hip Hop in their day-to-day lives, and how what they do creates meaning and identity. How youth and youth influencers utilize the Hip Hop community of practice to define, curate, and use artifacts, language styles, kinship norms, schooling methods, epistemologies of authenticity, and aesthetic practices to remix generational narratives about ideology, identity, race, class and gender. (p. 68)

Wilson discusses how the shifting identities of HHBE practitioners often include a shift for students to be aware of the connections between different social movements and

present day, especially as it relates not only to connections between practitioners of the Civil Rights Movement and activism initiatives today, but how they can reimagine and reframe these connections, identities, and future orientations (Joycelyn Wilson, personal communication, 2012).

Love (2015) utilizes a lens of Hip Hop communities of practice to describe the learning experiences of students in early education (K-8) environments. She describes her work as one of the first to engage with understanding HHBE for this age of students and calls for increased academic attention to the population she works with. She frames it in terms of the Hip Hop-based situated learning activities her students engage in, or what they “do” and how they form and reform their own Hip Hop identities while in an HHBE program.

The Hip Hop Cypher

When it comes to thinking about how we might understand *how learning occurs* within the HHCOP, it is important to take into consideration the explicit practices, along with implicit or unseen practices, especially as research aims to demonstrate how someone is learning through the set components laid out by Lave and Wenger of: (1) Meaning, (2) Practice, (3) Community, and (4) Identity. In addition, a complementary lens to engage in this project might be found in the Hip Hop understanding of the cypher. The cypher offers a culturally relevant lens that allows us to explore both that which is seen and that which is unseen.

In a literal, contained practice, the Hip Hop cypher is usually the home of freestyle sessions that can be based in movement or oral practices. In an oral, rap cypher, a circle of listeners lean in, bow their heads, their bodies bob up and down, and they offer encouragement or constructive feedback for a freestyle rap poet. Someone usually beats boxes (creates a beat with their mouth), and others add improvised musical harmonies (Perry, 2004). Rhetorically, the word “cypher” (also written as “cipher”) represents a type

of symbol. It describes “the ability to decode and encode” (Perry, 2004, pp. 107-108), which is deeply influenced by the history and legacy of the number zero (the word for zero in Arabic is “sifr”) (Kaplan, 1999, p. 93). The Five Percent Nation, a religious organization with roots in the Nation of Islam, defines the metaphorical cypher as “a mystical and transcendent yet human state” (Perry, 2004, p. 107). The cypher acts as a symbol for the larger community and provides an access point for one to get beyond the “codes” of knowledge, human connection, and understanding of self (p. 108). The cypher, literally as an artistic practice, and metaphorically as a way to frame a larger Hip Hop community, is considered to be the heart of Hip Hop culture because the cypher includes all styles, values, norms, and beliefs, and also provides a sense of community and identity that is exclusive, yet universally open. While Hip Hop may be open to all who wish to participate, it is not an open book without structure, and one must dedicate themselves to learn within the specifics of this structure in order to become an authentic part of the community (Morgan, 2009; Perry, 2004).

Further, dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson, in her 2009 dissertation, *Dark Matter in B-Boying Cyphers: Race and Global Connection in Hip Hop*, utilizes the physics concept of “dark matter” to act as a metaphor to understand the cypher, especially the unseen components. She tells us that “dark matter” describes “the non-luminous matter comprising the majority of the universe. Because it has no light, the force of dark matter is 'seen' and understood only by way of its gravitational influence on surrounding visible matter. It is thus a metaphor for the invisible force in cyphers that helps hold them together” (p. 23). In her multi-year study of Hip Hop circles and cypher communities across the world, she found this metaphor of dark matter to be appropriate to name the unseen components of the Hip Hop cypher her participants described.

Johnson (2009) discussed these points while keeping in mind that this framework “represents some aspect of a whole expressed as the collectivity of individual contributions” (p. 213). She continued to describe that these aspects are all fundamentally

rooted in a social experience and that they describe “possibilities that are enabled when people act collectively” (p. 213). She used this moment in her dissertation to go back to the fact that oftentimes these “possibilities” are unknown, hard to name, and often a result of unseen factors, or dark matter. She tells us that these components of the cypher, because they are enacted in social experience and community practice, “[remind] us that that which seems beyond reality, beyond possibility nonetheless plays a defining role in what we do” (p. 213).

A Framework for Seeing

When one takes into account a sociocultural approach to learning and especially the applied views of Hip Hop Communities of Practice and the Cypher, a framework for how we can see and understand how this all comes together emerges to connect the components previously described. Very simply, this research holds both the seen and the unseen. This research heeds the call of Wilson (2007), Love (2015), and Johnson (2009) to look not only into the actual physical and social practices engaged by participants, but also to look beyond what is measurable, seen and commonly accepted as HHBE practices. We must look to how these practices might be held together, spurred on by, or at least in concert with, an overarching dark matter or “invisible force” (Johnson, 2009, p. 23) that has the potential to impact the ways we continue to teach and learn, to understand HHBE and beyond.

Brief Histories and Literacy Practices: Hip Hop Education—Hip Hop Literacies, Race and Education— Racial Literacy, Spirituality and Education—Spiritual Literacies

The following brief histories present the fields and relevant literacy practices on which this study is built and contributing to. This research is built upon a myriad of lineages and trajectories; however, most salient to the purpose, histories, and aims of this

project are the following. Because this dissertation aims to impact practice, relevant literacy practices are included in connection to a corresponding history. These concepts include Hip Hop Culture and Hip Hop-Based Education (Hip Hop Literacies), Race and Education (Racial Literacy), and Spirituality and Education (Spiritual Literacies). These histories and practices are foundational to understanding the background and potential impact of this study. While these histories and practices all may deserve dissertation-length exploration on their own, this project aims to offer succinct acknowledgement and illumination of how these fields came to be and how they are currently understood and practiced, in efforts to understand the ground upon which the study is built.

Hip Hop Culture and Hip Hop-Based Education

Hip Hop culture, where HHBE is born, has a rich and complex history. Hip Hop often has widely varying definitions in existing literature; however, one way Hip Hop culture can be defined is as an all-encompassing, multi-dimensional culture, that is expressed through the five elements of:

- (1) MCing (oral element, also known as rapping; spoken word poetry falls into this category)
- (2) DJing (technological element, playing music from two turntables/record players)
- (3) Graffiti (visual element, also known as aerosol art)
- (4) Breakdancing (physical element, also referred to as BBoying, BGirling, breaking)

(5) Knowledge (universal element, knowledge of self and community, cypher)

Hip Hop is often viewed as a way of life and extends into the realms of fashion, style, language, political sensibilities, and business (Kitwana, 2002). Hip Hop historian and journalist, Jeff Chang (2005), tells us, in *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*, that Hip Hop culture was born out of the urban decay of the South

Bronx in part, as a result of the creation of the Cross-Bronx Expressway and its resulting disenfranchisement, displacement, and division of a stable, vibrant community. Because of the lack of resources that existed in this birthplace of Hip Hop culture, the culture is often credited as one that was *created from nothing* (Ariefdien & Abrahams, 2006) or that its founders were able to use what was considered nothing and turn it into something. People often cite the example of the turntable to illuminate this, saying that Hip Hop practitioners were able to take a record player, something that may have been used only for one specific or limited function, and turn it into an instrument with infinite functions by placing two turntables together and developing the art of DJing (Chang, 2005). The emergence of Hip Hop culture is directly related to previous and concurrent artistic and pedagogical movements, including African Griot Traditions, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Black Arts Movement (Chang, 2006; Coval, Lansana, & Marshall, 2015; Healy & Mata, 2008). While thinking about the lineage of Hip Hop, it is vital that participants and leaders in the community understand its origins as far back as the beginning of spoken language to African and African Diasporic griot traditions and spanning all the way to present-day Hip Hop culture (Joseph, 2006; Washington, 2014).

In the early 1970s, teenage DJs, such as DJ Kool Herc, were known for having parties in community centers and local parks (Chang, 2005, pp. 67-75). In addition to the DJ, these parties would often include what we now know as an MC (Master of Ceremonies) or a rapper to help guide the crowd and a crew of breakdancers to make sure people were moving (Carr, 1983). At this same time, graffiti art became the visual backdrop of the culture and was intimately tied to the creation of Hip Hop culture as a whole (Silver, 1983). In the decades that followed, the culture was developed, named,

and was continually being defined and redefined by its founders and journalists at the time, identifying the four core elements listed earlier (Kitwana, 2002; Seidel, 2011).

At the same time, or perhaps before the four core elements became established, early HHCoPs were deeply grounded in the fifth element, or “Knowledge,” which is an existential element, or the acknowledgement of knowledge of self and knowledge of community (Kitwana, 2002). This fifth element comes directly from one of the most prominent influences of Hip Hop’s foundations, an organization called the Nation of Gods and Earths, founded by the Five Percent Nation, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam. The Five Percenters offer a theological framework and name the element of knowledge as a part of the Hip Hop cypher, a part of the system of Supreme Mathematics, which lists the zero, 0, as the cypher (Miyakawa, 2005).

The Five Percent Nation was among one of the largest organizations that influenced those who participated in Hip Hop culture. The Five Percent Nation was created and practiced through a complex theology that included a Supreme Alphabet and Supreme Mathematics and was deeply influenced by Black Muslim traditions, black nationalism, Kemetic symbolism, Masonic symbolism and Gnostic spirituality (Miyakawa, 2005). The five percent of the population that the organization refers to as those who know and teach the truth may also be called the Poor Righteous Teachers (which was also the name of a popular Hip Hop group from the late ‘80s that played a major role in spreading the messages of the group). Another similar organization that play a major role in influencing the development of Hip Hop was the Temple of Hip Hop, founded by KRS-One. The Temple sets forth a series of spiritually inspired orientations to the world and to engage with Hip Hop culture. One of its core principles is in lifting up

the power and potential of Hip Hop to improve individual and collective lives and celebrates a universal week of Hip Hop every year (One, 2009).

Beyond these two organized groups, Hip Hop has also always had a relationship with a wide range of different religions, beliefs and religious institutions. Over the past three decades, scholars have examined the many ways hip hop, religion and spirituality are in conversation with one another, contributing not only to the field of Hip Hop studies, but also pushing the boundaries of fields like education (Banks, 2015) and religious studies (Miller, 2013; Pinn, 2003; Sorett, 2016), forming what Miller and Pinn (2015) call the field of *religion and hip hop studies*. While the iterations of this field take innumerable forms, major themes could be characterized as (1) examining Hip Hop's connection to religious lineages or aesthetics, (2) Hip Hop as being incorporated into formal religions, and (3) that the seemingly secular hip hop culture is an expression of religion (Miller & Pinn, 2015).

Additionally, when looking throughout history, scholars have pointed to the many ways religious and racial lineages intersect, particularly through the development of communities and through literary and artistic expressions. Further, Sorett (2016), in his recent work, *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics*, outlines the connections between African American literary traditions and religious visions, expressions and themes, despite an assumption that Black literary and cultural movements were secular. Miller and Pinn (2015) discuss the integral roles that both religion *and* hip hop culture have played in developing African American communities across the United States and provide an anthology exploring how Hip Hop culture embodies these lineages in its expressions.

Further, Hip Hop has also been explored as a tool or method for churches to connect with youth culture and remain an exciting, relevant place for different racial communities. A multiracial church I attended in Minneapolis, MN, incorporated Hip Hop in its youth ministry and held a “Hip Hop Sunday” once a month that incorporated Religious Rappers and speakers from across the country. The founding pastor of that church, Efre Smith, and co-author Phil Jackson (2006), in their book *The Hip Hop Church*, claim, “Young people in Hip Hop culture as well as their parents and ministers, need to be savvy about its elements and influence, its directive and reflective impact—both good and bad” (p. 34).

Additionally, Hip Hop has also been taken into account in conversations that push beyond our traditional understandings of religion. Miller (2013) discusses the ways religion and culture may be synonymously understood as sets of understandings and practices that guide ways of life. Theologian and hip hop practitioner Walter Hidalgo (2011), in *Beyond the Four Walls: The Rising Ministry and Spirituality of Hip-hop*, describes a Christian understanding that describes spirituality as a discourse that “comes from below” because it manifests itself in ordinary life situations and circumstances (p. 43). In this understanding, a freestyle cypher, an open mic, or simple day-to-day activities become just as important as formal worship practices like going to church or reading the Bible. Through these lenses, we understand the multiple different ways Hip Hop has been in conversation with religion. With this in mind, let’s continue our exploration of the histories and pedagogies around Hip Hop Culture.

In understanding the elements of Hip Hop, it is important to realize that a pedagogical frame, or way of teaching and learning, was always foundational to the practice and development of each element of Hip Hop culture (B. Love, personal communication, April 25, 2016). Much of the learning that occurs in these communities is student-centered (Hill & Petchauer, 2014), experiential, and built upon social learning experiences. For instance, in breakdancing circles, novice breakdancers often join circles

(or cyphers, as HHBE communities refer to them) that host a range of abilities. Expert and more experienced dancers often take new dancers to the side to help them develop their moves (C. Prossnitz, personal communication, November 2012). In academic scholarship, the practices of HHBE are often placed within the fields of sociocultural lenses of education, culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), and critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2009; Freire, 2000; Gosa, 2009, Petchauer, 2015).

Connected to these lenses, one important way this community engages praxis is through the intentional development of a pedagogy that prioritizes youth voice, critical orientations, and inclusion of the voices of a student and teacher. For example, one aspect of an HHBE workshop might prioritize understanding how individual experiences are connected to collective experiences. In one example, Joseph (2006) notes that one way of enacting this is to start with the understanding that a student's life is the primary text in any learning situation, and that all other texts are to be understood in relation to their primary, life text. So if a student were to enter a learning environment, their first task would be to understand their life as a primary text, thus creating learning experiences that are not only based in understanding the self, but also honoring the communal, or social, realities of learning (Joseph, 2006).

These ideas are not necessarily new to the art forms that have preceded them; however, these understandings among educators and scholars have gained prominence in virtually every major university in the country, along with countless high schools and middle schools (Diaz & Runnell, 2007). Petchauer (2011) describes the three ways educational institutions are utilizing Hip Hop culture in everyday student experiences, characterizing them as: (1) formal integration of Hip Hop culture into the curriculum via Hip Hop-related courses and learning communities, (2) producing scholarship that supports and preserves Hip Hop culture, and (3) students informally bringing a Hip Hop worldview to the campus and classroom environment. He also speaks to what he calls

“Hip Hop collegians” or college students who make their active participation in Hip Hop relevant to their educational experiences. In his 2011 book, *Hip Hop Culture in College Students’ Lives: Elements, Embodiment and Higher Edutainment*, Petchauer calls for more mainstream higher education institutions and educational scholarship to take seriously the contributions to educational communities of Hip Hop culture and its participants.

Further, the last decade of scholarship has shown us that HHBE is something that extends beyond the walls of a classroom, the borders of an individual’s notebook, and specific experiences of groups of people (Petchauer, 2015). HHBE is something that not only connects to individuals, but helps us see the collective nature of our individual experiences. We can understand that the nature of HHBE facilitates the work to always be explicitly or implicitly in conversation with issues related to community and social issues of the times—similar to the ways previous generations of artists and musicians have been. Spoken word poet and Hip Hop educator Marc Bamuthi Joseph goes as far as connecting to the origins of the oral tradition with biblical, or spiritual beginnings. He says, “‘In the beginning, there was the word.’ That’s the first lineage—that we are all a part of a spiritual tradition” (in Joseph, Bartlow, Forbes, & Reyes, 2006). More than simply beginning a tradition of spoken words, he tells us that the word was created to heal, uplift, and enlighten.

Editors of an anthology of Hip Hop Poetics, *The BreakBeat Poets* state, “In ways similar to how blues influenced the Harlem Renaissance, or the ways jazz influenced the Black Arts Poets, the music and culture of Hip Hop shaped this moment of American letters and created a generation engaged in similar and variant aesthetic principles and experimentations” (Coval et al., 2015, p. xix). In understanding this, one also begins to see how these historical movements have been influenced by social and political issues of their time, especially concerning racial tension and economic disparities; this is extremely similar for Hip Hop communities.

If we think about HHBE as something that is rooted in the social experiences of participants, and we understand individual participants to be inextricably linked to collective experiences, we can understand HHBE as offering a pedagogical framework not only to work with the elements of Hip Hop culture, but also to foreground a connection between something that we might often miss in traditional educational understandings (Hill & Petchauer, 2013). In the next section, I'll explore some of the nuanced understandings and applications related to multiple literacies and the development of what are known as "Hip Hop Literacies."

Hip Hop literacies. The fields of New Literacies and HHBE have given rise to specific literacies related to a Hip Hop understanding. Elaine Richardson (2006) describes Hip Hop Literacies as part of a lineage of African American language and literacy practices. She emphasizes that Hip Hop Literacies are the complex notions of the knowledge-making system prevalent in the "Hip Hop generation," or communities that engage with Hip Hop practices. Through a series of case studies, Richardson discusses the ways Hip Hop is in dialogue with and at the same time resists dominant discourses (p. xvi). She also examines the way Hip Hop spreads through "secondary oral contexts" (p. xvi), including music, media, video games, television, and internet chat rooms to help individuals better understand their worlds. She explores these literacies in multiple ways and highlights the importance of Hip Hop feminist literacies and international Hip Hop Literacies.

Hip Hop Literacies and their impact on students has been explored by multiple English education scholars through various mediums and methods. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2000) argue that teaching Hip Hop as a literary genre in connection to more traditional genres in English curriculums can be a successful tool for supporting students in their development of critical literacy skills, which they can then transfer to other texts. Alim and Baugh (2007) discuss a theoretical and practice-based approach to address the cultural tensions young people engaging with Hip Hop literacies face. The approach

allows students to utilize Hip Hop to directly address and engage internal tensions from dueling ideological views (of Hip Hop and school) and also the perceived limitations of institutions or educators who don't see or denigrate the value of Hip Hop literacies. He offers examples, histories, and a framework for the development of Critical Hip Hop Language Pedagogies for the benefit of student and teacher outcomes.

Similarly, researchers have explored the use of spoken word poetry in school environments as a powerful practice to challenge dominant social structures within classroom settings. Fisher (2005) and Camangian (2008) offer examples of how teachers who intentionally support spoken word poetry in the classroom help students find “purpose in literacy” (p. 128) and other outcomes that go beyond simple academic development. Fisher (2005) emphasizes the importance of incorporating elders of students: “The inclusion of intergenerational perspectives helped students find purpose in literacy while situating themselves in a historical continuum for literacy learning” (p. 128).

Hip Hop literacies may offer an innovative perspective of literacy learning that has been needed for some time. Marc Bamuthi Joseph (2006) describes Hip Hop and spoken word as spaces that center “the living word” in contrast to the “dead scrolls” that have dominated the field of literacy studies since losing its emphasis on oratory practices (p. 12).

Race and Education

Similar to the study of Hip Hop and education, scholarship on race and education covers a large spectrum of different topics, ranging from conversations on eugenics to segregation to psychology. Up until recently, much of this work has focused on addressing individual racial disparities in educational achievement. Over the last few decades, scholarship has focused more not only on challenging the complex histories that have led to such disparities, but also to practices, structures, and pedagogical orientations

that can shift the ways students learn, teachers teach, and schools function (Milner, 2015). The needs of these efforts are illuminated by the fact that today, students of color in public schools outnumber their White counterparts, and it is projected that by 2044 the United States will have a majority population of people of color (Noguera et al., 2015).

One way race and education has recently been taken up in scholarship is through the emphasis on the increasingly complex issues concerning race and education. Noguera et al. (2015) link the current state of racial disparity in education to the colonial, racist histories that have dominated American society, especially as they relate to ideological views of racial inferiority and the resulting practices and policies implemented as a result of such views. Further, the complex realities of today's schools are further compounded by more nuanced linguistic and cultural diversity that has arisen because of increasing immigrant populations and the lack of proper resources and training for schools and teachers to properly support these students.

Further, many scholars have also highlighted the intersections between class and race as they impact educational outcomes. In addition to class being an inherently racialized concept in the United States, with poverty often being experienced more by people of color, we must also remember that even when White and Black people both experience poverty, their experiences are often different, and social, educational, and political outcomes vary. As Noguera et al. (2015) state, "On every measure of achievement and attainment, race continues to be a salient factor in defining and dividing the American student population" (p. 4).

This push to focus on complexities of racial inequality may be considered as a response to the often simplistic views of a "post-racial" America, especially after Obama was elected and people often claim the common refrain of not seeing race. Perry (2011), in her work, *More Beautiful and More Terrible: The Embrace and Transcendence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, explores the question, "How does a nation that proclaims racial equality create people who act in ways that sustain racial inequality?"

(p. 3). She discusses the complexities of understanding racial inequality, especially in the context of multiple public initiatives concerning multicultural awareness; while the intentions may have been to expand the conversation around racial inequality, the effect may have been a detraction from a more direct discussion about racist histories between White and Black people in the United States. In referencing ideas of democratic inclusion (Anderson, 1999), Perry (2011) also reminds us that “there is no greater lesson to be taken from the civil rights movement than this: ordinary people acting together can usher in global shifts. Small, deliberate, courageous, and dedicated movement can lead to big change” (p. 184).

The aim of much research on race and education connects to the purpose of this study through what Milner (2015) describes as “to shepherd readers—educators—into reflexive, proactive and responsive spaces to move beyond complacency and beyond neutrality” (p. 11). He pointedly reminds us, “*There is no neutral space in this work*” (p. 11). There are multiple ways educators and researchers have begun to address the challenges of understanding race in education through intentional pedagogical strategies and lenses, one such being the lens of Racial Literacy.

Racial literacy. Racial Literacy, a term coined by legal scholar Lani Guinier (2004) and later used by Twine and Smyth (2011), references an individual’s worldview and understanding about race in the United States. It “requires us to rethink race as an instrument of social, geographic, and economic control of both whites and blacks. Racial literacy offers a more dynamic framework for understanding American racism” (Guinier, 2004, p. 114). On the 50-year anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, she discussed that a legal decision can only make a limited impact if the populations affected are not able to understand the nuances of the society they work within. She calls for treating not just the “symptoms” of racism, but the disease as a whole, and that will take a different set of understandings than previously thought (p. 100). Racial literacy allows a better

grasp of the context of the world we live in, and comparing racial liberalism to racial literacy, she states, “is about learning rather than knowing” (p. 115).

Since Guinier’s introduction in 2004, a few scholars have brought Racial Literacy to the sphere of English Education. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2011b) defines Racial Literacy as a skill and a practice where “individuals are able to discuss the social construction of race” and also “probe the existence of racism and examine the harmful effects of racial stereotypes” (p. 25). Sealey-Ruiz describes that the desired outcome of racial literacy is for members of the dominant racial group to “adopt an anti-racist stance and for persons of color to resist a victim stance” (p. 25). She describes two studies in which utilizing racial literacies worked toward these ends. One study involved a college English classroom of undergraduate students and another in a pre-service teacher education course.

Sealey-Ruiz (2011b) names four recursive phases that students go through when engaging in the framework of racial literacy: She writes that the initial phase engages students to express actions and emotions of resistance, guilt, shame, and interest in discussions about race (p. 34). Following, students expand their interest in what they are learning and begin to offer more nuanced, original views of race and racism than previous (p. 35). She then describes a third phase where students’ interest begins to wane, in spite of previous interest (p. 36), then moves to a final phase where students become “reconnected” with what they are learning and begin to make connections to classroom texts and their worlds outside (p. 37). Sealey-Ruiz tells educators that intentionally teaching about the concepts of race “provides personal and professional fulfillment and insight into the ways in which students struggle to discuss critical issues that affect their lives” (p. 27).

Spirituality and Education

When thinking about the histories of education and spirituality within the United States, we can look back to the founding of our nation. Moffett (1998), in *The Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakening Through Education*, recalls that the founding fathers were all highly religious people and some were members of the esoteric religious society of Freemasons. Despite their religious affiliations, he discusses how they refused to mandate religious or spiritual intentions, for they knew the possible dangers of forced religion on society, which is connected to the many negative associations of spirituality we see today; however, they still maintained deep implicit spiritual intentions for the direction of the nation.

Further, as educational systems developed, spiritual intentions were often at the base of liberal arts education, even though there were often an elite, privileged few who could enjoy such education (Moffett, 1998). The discipline of English education, which was born out of the fields of oration and rhetoric, was known to prepare people to enter careers in “the church or for participation in the civil government” (Scholes, 1998, p. 5). The first professors of English in the 1700s to late 1800s were often in disciplines related to clergy or oratory, and it wasn’t until the 1860s that we began to see English professors focused specifically on something other than a religious or spiritual intention (Applebee, 1974).

In terms of educational research and practice, spiritual or “personalized, holistic, experiential learning” was advocated for and engaged with from scholars such as “Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Henrich Pestalozzi, and Friedrich Froebel” (Moffett, 1998, p. 9). These ideas were brought back to a practical and public forum, with a more direct and explicit spiritual intention by the movement of the Transcendentalists and educators such as Maria Montessori (founder of Montessori schools), Rudolf Steiner (founder of Waldorf education), and philosopher and educator John Dewey.

Beyond a historical lens, research on spirituality and education has taken many points of view over time, and most research has focused on the “God within” (Radford, 2006, p. 386), or ability for students to access their inner spiritual worlds (Radford, 2006). Recently, however, research on spirituality and education has expanded its focus and has begun more thoroughly looking with a sociocultural lens that views the internal spiritual lives of students *in relationship* to their greater outside world, or how those individual inner worlds are reflected and expressed in larger social and cultural contexts (Radford, 2006).

Further, as mentioned in the introduction, the spiritual lives of millennials are taking shapes drastically different from those of the past. While there is a growing number of millennials who are choosing not to identify with religious institutions, they still report having regular deep spiritual experiences (Pew Research Center, 2016). Elkins (1998) spoke to the ways that “spirituality and religion are not synonymous” (p. 15). Recognizing religion as only one path of many, he defines the core quality of spirituality as “the process and result of nurturing one’s soul and developing one’s spiritual life” and that spirituality available to all who engage in the nurturing of their own soul in whatever way they choose (p. 26). His work outlines the components of spiritual paths as including the following nine components: (1) “Transcendent dimension” or recognizing a transcendent dimension to one’s life; (2) “Meaning and purpose in life” or being on a consistent quest for meaning and purpose; (3) “Mission in life” or having a personal sense of vocation; (4) “Sacredness in life” or understanding life as infused with sacredness; (5) “Spiritual vs Material Values” or that one’s ultimate satisfaction is found in spiritual, not material things; (6) “Altruism” or having a call to help greater society; (7) “Idealism” or being committed to “the betterment of the world”; (8) “Awareness of the tragic” or acknowledging a “seriousness toward life”; and (9) “Fruits of spirituality” or that people have a sense of tangible (seen or unseen) outcomes that have come from a spiritual practice (pp. 34-35).

In addition to these components, Elkins (1998) also outlines the arts as one such path people may take toward nurturing one's soul. He describes art as "the natural and universal language of the human soul" (p. 122) and discusses that, in order to reap the benefits of a spiritualized path as an artist, one must be a creator and move beyond simple consumption of art. He tells us that, beyond creating art pieces that may last forever or offer a person a sense of "immortality," artists as spiritual practitioners are often able to reach the eternal spaces in our present material existence. He says, "Art is not so much an attempt at immortality as it is an effort to touch eternity now" (p. 126).

Further, not only are researchers looking at the multiple ways in which people are having spiritual experiences, they are also looking to justify the value and importance of having a spiritual intention when it comes to working with young people. In her book, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*, Miller (2015) shares with us that her research shows "that spirituality is the most robust protective factor against the big three dangers of adolescence: depression, substance abuse, and risk taking" (p. 208). In addition to describing explicitly psychological benefits of spirituality, she describes one way of viewing spirituality as a socially constructed "field of love." She describes this field like a picnic blanket, often guided by dedicated parental figures who extend this blanket to hold family members—biological or chosen—that offer a transcendent space for young people to feel an unconditional love where they are fully accepted, safe to learn, take risks, and grow into equivalently loving adults.

With these many explorations of spiritual histories and possibilities within education, Moffett (1998) offers the following call: despite the many ways we understand or struggle to understand spirituality, it is nonetheless a worthwhile endeavor.

In any case, questions about the nature of the world and the purpose of life should undergird education just as they underlie our routine activities. Whether avoided or confronted, these are not only issues but the issues. Our lives are profoundly affected by these questions, whether we

feel we have laid them to rest forever or whether we cannot rest for lack of answers. Humankind's greatest mental efforts have been exerted in science, philosophy, and literature to try to illuminate them. The ultimate ground of our being interests everybody. Consciously or not, the man in the street cries for meaning and purpose and will seek it in trivial or destructive ways if no framework exists through which to give significance to daily life. Education should make it possible to so continually and richly tie together experiences that making out in the world becomes the same as making out the world. (p. 31)

Next, one developing framework for engaging spirituality, Spiritual Literacies, will be explored.

Spiritual literacies. The term "Spiritual Literacies" was first used in the book, *Spiritual Literacy* (Brussat & Brussat, 1998). They define spiritual literacy as the "ability to read the signs written in the texts of our own experiences. Whether viewed as a gift from God or a skill to be cultivated, this facility enables us to discern and decipher a world full of meaning" (p. 16). They offer examples of how one might view every experience as sacred; however, their argument speaks most to independent applications and does not discuss potential application in the field of education. Further, only a few scholarly articles related to educational practices have used the term, none of which were set explicitly in the field of English or literacy studies. One is by a scholar (Parker, 2014) who explores the practices of writing at Christian writing centers. She discusses how, in looking at issues of diversity in language practices, understanding the nuanced ways religiously or spiritually informed people write may need to be considered as a lens for diverse identities.

Another was published by a group of scholars (Peñalva, Coggin, & Medina, 2014) who designed a qualitative study to explore transcultural literacies of a group of Latino youth. They describe that while they did not have an explicit intention to study the spiritual literacies of the young people, it was something that could not be ignored in their initial coding. Through their continued study, inspired by the work of Moll, hooks, Dillard, Paris, and others, they facilitate a space for young people to express their

spirituality through their interactions with artifacts, places and people. They cite Nieto in connecting the ways language practices are connected to the “soul of people”:

Nieto (2010) asserts that “doing away with a language, or prohibiting its use, tears away at the soul of a people” (p. 89), because our language contains the power to define our lived experiences. If we look at Nieto’s assertion in a broad sense and understand language as giving voice through a variety of semiotic avenues (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), then we can begin to understand the hegemony present in denying or invalidating a spiritual voice. (p. 105)

Further, when thinking about how spoken word poets might be connected to a legacy of spiritual and educational traditions, we might look to how speaking or using one’s breath and voice is an ancient practice. According to Moffett (1998), “vocalizing is a key to all spiritual traditions, which employ chanting and singing for altering consciousness, but which also emphasize speech as incarnation, the acoustical embodiment of mind through language” (p. 20). With an increase in scholarship relating to the spiritual lives of young people, the study and development of Spiritual Literacy will be a productive space for further inquiry.

Connecting HHBE, Race, and Spirituality

While these multiple fields of study have much overlap, scholarship has only rarely put them in conversation, especially as it relates to classroom pedagogies and practices (Dillard & OkPalaoka, 2016). In *Engaging Culture Race and Spirituality New Visions*, Dillard and OkPalaoka discuss how the integration of spirituality in conversations concerning race and culture in education has been a “missing piece” of pedagogical conversations thus far, adding that there is opportunity to radically shift education when we center these intersections. Outside of the classroom, Tuchlock (2016) has described the necessity for people, especially those in dominant racial positions, to engage both

their racialized and spiritual identities in order to serve efforts for racial justice in a holistic way.

Only once we begin to understand these the elements (of HHBE, race, and spirituality) individually can we begin to understand how they intersect or build a theory for what a Hip Hop Racial Spiritual Literacy could look like ... or maybe these elements can always be static, shifting, overlapping, and one such synthesizing lens need not be created. In any case, scholarship thus far has made the case that our students' spiritual and racialized selves must be engaged if we are to have healthy, productive classrooms moving forward, and HHBE offers a worldview that can help support the development of classrooms/cyphers from all parts of the world.

The study undertaken in this dissertation, aligned with the methodological principles of narrative research, is built upon critical sociocultural theoretical lenses, including those of New Literacy Studies and Communities of Practice. These lenses, applied to the specific perspective of the communities studied here, led to the development of Hip Hop Communities of Practice and the Hip Hop Cypher and deeply influence how the current research was conducted and understood. In addition, the fields of history and scholarship on which this study builds are Hip Hop Based Education, Race and Education, and Spirituality and Education and provide a space on which this study can build.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

This critical qualitative case study uses methodology guided by narrative inquiry to explore how HHBE practitioners understand their work, race, and spirituality within an HHCoP. In particular, this study looks at the narratives and literacy practices of practitioners of HHBE who have grown from youth to adults within a specific international network of YSW organizations. Because this study focuses on the work of poets, a narrative approach is appropriate and aligned with the intentions of the research. In this chapter, the following will be presented: (1) the research traditions from which this project draws (Critical Qualitative Inquiry, Narrative Inquiry, and Case Studies); (2) settings and participants and data collection methods; (3) my rationale for choosing such methods; (4) the research questions guiding this inquiry; and finally, (5) the detailed settings and participants of this study.

Because I have undertaken this research in the complex community of HHBE, it is important that the narrative and case study methods guiding the inquiry honor and remain inclusive of the community and nature of the work. To reiterate, the project is led by the following questions:

RQ1: How do YSW educators who have grown from youth participants (13-19) to adult practitioners (20+) describe and/or define the fields of YSW & HHBE?

What do these descriptions tell us about if and how they are making meaning of race and spirituality?

RQ2: What literacy practices are these HHBE practitioners describing and enacting as they negotiate the network?

What literacy practices are being enacted especially as it relates to New Literacies, racial literacy and spiritual literacy?

Research Traditions

This research is undertaken through critical, qualitative, and reflexive lenses. These lenses were chosen in efforts to best align with the histories, trajectories, and population the study engages with. The choices to utilize narrative and case study data methods, along with Critical Response Protocol as a tool to analyze data, were chosen in efforts not only to investigate the questions posed but also to honor the work of the participants and populations impacted. These choices are explained in more detail in the following.

Critical Qualitative Inquiry

For this project, I utilized qualitative methods, grounded in narrative inquiry, because they align most directly with the aims of my inquiry to understand people's experiences and meaning making. Luttrell (2010) describes qualitative research as “defined by an effort to highlight the meanings people make and the actions they take, and to offer interpretations for how and why” (p. 1). She continues by explaining that qualitative research is connected to what we might understand as “transformative research” (p. 2) or research that is used “to leverage social change through ... scholarship” (p. 2). Luttrell grounds her description of transformative research on what she calls the “Four Is” of qualitative research—that it is extremely important to (1) make explicit what is *implicit*, or make the implicit biases or assumptions visible; (2) know that research design is *interactive*, not only between researchers and subjects but also between the written documents or findings and the process of engaging in data collection and analysis; (3) plan for the research process to be *iterative*, or a negotiation between time, space, people, power dynamics, and more; and finally (4) “qualitative research draws on

imagination—the ability to form images, ideas, and concepts of things both seen and unseen—of forces not experienced directly” (p. 8).

Applying a critical approach to qualitative inquiry means that the researcher will problematize assumptions or stated truths and pay special attention to the relationship of the research to identities, institutions, communities, cultures, and power structures. Within today’s social contexts, scholars, such as Denzin (2016), posit that “there has never been a greater need for inquiry that addresses inequities in the economy, education, employment, the environment, health, housing, food, and water, inquiry that embraces the global cry for peace and justice” (p. 8). Not only is a critical approach important as we look toward how we will engage with different approaches, methodologies, and populations, but most importantly how we understand research to aid in efforts to make the world a better place (p. 8). The time in which this project is undertaken calls for all scholarship to move beyond simple understandings of the roles of research, methods, and results, it calls for scholarship, and this project in particular, to push toward making an impact that will improve the quality of teaching, learning, and organizing in the field of HHBE, and education more broadly.

Narrative Inquiry

This project is grounded in a narrative inquiry approach and methodology. Narrative research resists a clean definition, as it is practiced in many different ways with many different intentions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative is often likened to how we understand “stories”; however, narrative researchers often warn practitioners from the dangers of defining this type of inquiry under such simple terms. Riessman (2008) describes narrative inquiry as referring to the multiple texts and levels that interact and overlap with one another, that include complex, layered stories from participants, accounts interpreted by the investigator, and also the “the narrative a reader constructs after engaging with the participant’s and investigator’s narratives” (p. 5). Chase (2010)

characterizes narrative inquiry as “an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods—all revolving around and interested in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them” (p. 208). Like other qualitative methods, narrative stories often refer to specific individuals or groups, are often multimodal, and occur within certain boundaries or settings (Creswell 2007).

Aligning with sociocultural theory, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) tell us that narrative approaches look at both people as individuals as well as the social contexts in which they exist: “People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context” (p. 2). They liken the different approaches to narrative research as a soup, one that can have varying ingredients, recipes, and containers and has a fluid construction based on the interplay between researcher and participants. Narrative studies can be characterized as having four popular approaches, including (1) biographical studies, (2) autoethnographic studies, (3) life histories, and (4) oral histories (Creswell, 2018, pp. 72-73). These organizing categories often are collaboratively generated and have a specific give and take between the participant and the researcher, who may be viewed as the “narrator” in this instance (p. 73). This project will aim to combine all four of these categories, with the researcher not only engaging the biographies, observations, and partial life and oral histories of the participants, but also of the researcher and the lineages and histories that bridge these narratives from past to present to future.

Chase (2010) proposes a set of analytical lenses to approach Narrative Inquiry, including the following: (1) that narrative is a *specific type of discourse* or “retrospective meaning making” (p. 214). She describes narrative as communicating the “narrator’s point of view” (p. 214) and includes various factors such as emotions, thoughts, and interpretations of various events; (2) that narratives are verbal action or that participants engage in a complex act of creation when they share their own narratives; (3) that

narratives are shared within specific contexts or are “both enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances” (p. 214); (4) that narratives are “socially situated interactive performances” created and shared for a specific purpose at a specific time; and finally (5) that the researcher is herself a *narrator* who is co-creating situated interpretations or stories related to that which is being researched.

Some narrative inquiry approaches also have clear ties to critical movements, transformative research, and social change, as it has been noted that narratives not only support individual narrative-tellers, but also collective communities in which certain narratives are shared (Luttrell, 2010, p. 226). Johnson-Bailey (2003) discusses the ways feminist scholars have utilized the flexible structure of narrative methods to challenge power dynamics not only among research paradigms but also between researcher and participants. Further, Solorzano and Yosso (2002), within the field of Critical Race Theory, recognize the importance of “counter-storytelling,” which they define as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 26), and detail how this method of lifting underheard narratives as one of the most powerful ways to address the static permanence of racism, especially in the United States. This project engages stories that are often not-heard, prioritized, or centered in the HHBE or general education discourse.

Case Study

This project is also a case study in that it is studying one instance where a phenomenon may be occurring (Stake, 2010). Stake compares a case study to something like studying a leaf from a tree and tells us that a “case study is the study of the particularly and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). Case studies can draw on multiple qualitative traditions and aim to acknowledge and honor the multiple realities and contexts of participants of a particular case (Stake, 2010). The features of a case study include identifying a specific

case that is bounded and may either be *intrinsic* or *instrumental*. This case study is intrinsic in that it studies one unique case of a member of an international community of poets and practitioners. Case studies are often in depth and multimodal, utilizing multiple sources of data that will lead to the development of key themes of the case, and thus lead to conclusions or “assertions” regarding the case by the researcher (Creswell, 2018, p. 98). While a case study may have boundaries of one particular set of instances or communities, there is no single agreed upon requirement for what the boundaries of a case study may be (Stake, 2010).

This case study is a focused and semi-structured case selection and the case is selected based on a unique set of experiences or circumstances of the population (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). The questions, based on prior research and a pilot study, guided the criteria for selection (of HHBE professionals who have grown from youth participants to adult practitioners). In addition to naming the set of criteria and finding participants that fit, this study is also partially guided by purposeful selection. While I had a small group of participants to start, I allowed them to offer suggestions of other participants and continued to narrow down and expand my participant selection until the final sample was settled on.

This case, which is described in more detail in the following section, will look at 10 Brave New Voices alumni who are now adult professionals within the Brave New Voices Network who come from varying backgrounds and have worked for more than five years in the field. These participants, though from multiple geographical backgrounds, all have a common set of experiences and understandings related to the Brave New Voices network. While the boundary is set (as Brave New Voices alumni), there is also a great level of difference among participants, making the case somewhat fluid and expansive.

Now that we have gone through the multiple influences for how this work is approached, let us move to the specifics of the research site and populations and data collection practices.

Research Site and Population

Aligned with case study methodology, and since this is an intrinsic case of a unique situation, I utilized focused, purposeful sampling to identify specific participants that fit within stated criteria. All participants will come from a specific international network of YSW organizations that has been operating for over 20 years. While the greater field of HHBE is internationally broad and spans across many different regions, institutions, cultural contexts, and disciplines, there are multiple informal and formal networks within it. The specific network from which participants are drawn in this study is called the Brave New Voices Network and consists of one organizational leader (Youth Speaks) that formally brings the organizations together in multiple ways each year. This network, founded and based in the San Francisco Bay Area, consists of 80 nonprofit organizations and programs that work primarily in the discipline of YSW in the United States and six international cities.

The leaders who run these organizations are often adult alumni of the programs and have participated in the field's growth from a few organizations in major cities to an expansive network of organizations across the world. The Brave New Voices Network is brought together through multiple digital and in-person training and professional development sessions each year. There is one large convening (that is in concert with the youth poetry festival Brave New Voices) where organizations are invited to a full day of professional training, organized by the network leader. There are also unique funding opportunities offered to organizations that participate in the network. Any organization is welcome to join the network and must do so officially through an intentional request via

email to the organizational lead and subsequent membership steps to become an official network partner.

Participants and Settings

This study will particularly work with 10 participants from one formalized international network of YSW practitioners that has been operating for the past 20 years, The Brave New Voices Network. While individual participants will come from a broad range of geographic locations, this formal international network will act as the setting within which all subjects are acting.

Participants were chosen through a purposeful selection process. The criteria for selection were guided by the questions and included that participants: (1) participated in the Brave New Voices Network Organizations in their home state before they were 18 years old (many entered this community while they were younger than 16); (2) attended the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Festival as a participant or mentor at least one time (many participated 5+ times); (3) continued to remain active in the community as leaders in the organization in their home states or in other parts of the network after passing the age limit for participation in Brave New Voices (over 19 years old); and finally (4) at the time this study was undertaken (2017), work in some professional capacity in the field of YSW (either as a professional artist, educator, organizer, scholar, producer, etc). I began interviewing participants in the pilot study phase and even in informal mentions in professional settings and was referred time and time again to those who may be ideal participants for the study.

The participants are individuals who joined the network before they were 18 years old, are still active as educators, administrators, directors, or professional performance artists, and come from the following locations, Leeds, UK; Honolulu, HI; Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago; St. Paul, MN; New York, NY; Bay Area, CA; Chico, CA; and Seattle, WA.

Table 2. Study Participants

Name	Home City/State	Current City/State
Saju Ahmed	Leeds, UK	Leeds, UK
Will Nu'utupu Giles	Honolulu, HI	Honolulu, HI
Arielle John	Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago	London, England
Tish Jones	St, Paul, MN	St. Paul MN
Dr. Jamila Lyiscott	New York, NY	New York, NY
Shannon Matesky	Bay Area, CA	New York, NY
Isaac Miller	Chico, CA	Chicago, IL
Christina Nguyen	Seattle, WA	Seattle, WA
Hieu Minh Nguyen	St. Paul, MN	Minneapolis, MN
Danez Smith	St. Paul, MN	Minneapolis, MN

Data Collection Methods

This section explores the process of methods for participation and detailed data collection methods.

This research involved minimal risks for participants. All participants voluntarily participated and signed a detailed informed consent form to participate through interviews, participant observation, and artifact review. There was no compensation or gift incentive for participation, although participants were reimbursed for their travel or time. Participants were informed that participants names would not be confidential in the final publication of the research. This study will publish all participants' names and affiliations in order to give all participants proper credit for their accomplishments. Participants had the opportunity to end or shift their participation at any time through the research process. I informed them that they may request that I do not share certain pieces of information they shared.

Data collected remained on a privately owned external hard drive and an encrypted private computer. Before any of the data are published or shared publicly, participants will be provided summaries of the data relevant to their work, allowing for them to identify any pieces they do not want to be shared.

Data were collected from each participant in the following ways:

- (1) Through two semi structured interviews with each participant (once at the beginning of the data collection period, and again at the end once initial themes have arisen). Aligned with narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008), interviews were grounded in “open ended questions” with the aim of generating detailed accounts of participants' experiences, rather than “brief answers or general statements” (p. 23).
 - (a) Each of these interviews was audio or video recorded, and if they were not able to take place in person, took place via the phone or google hangout.
 - (b) In addition to taking written notes during the interview, after each interview, I took jottings on what I observed during the interview.
 - (c) I then had the interviews transcribed verbatim.
- (2) Through one observation of public events in which the participants were speaking at or participating. If location and time were prohibitive, the researcher observed events that have a public record and were publicly recorded or accessible via request from the participant.
 - (a) Each of these events was audio recorded if attended in person.
 - (b) In addition to taking detailed observation logs and written notes during the event, after each event the researcher took jottings on what was observed during the event.
 - (c) All formal presentations or events were transcribed verbatim.

- (3) Through artifact analysis of participants’ artistic archives (written poetry, journalism, scholarship, or recorded performances of a poetry) that was provided by each participant. If applicable, I asked participants to suggest any particular pieces they saw as most representative of their experience in the network (and if they had, as it might have related to race and/or spirituality).

These methods are displayed in Table 3 and are explained in more detail below.

Table 3. Corresponding Data Collection Methods and Research Questions

Methods of Data Collection	Methods of Data Analysis	Research Questions Addressed
Semi-Structured Interviews First Interview: 1 Hour Second Interview: 30min	Coding for themes Critical Response Protocol	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
Participant Observation 1 Public Event	Coding for themes Critical Response Protocol	RQ1, RQ2
Artifact Analysis of Poetry Archive	Coding for themes Critical Response Protocol	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3

Semi-structured Interviewing

The first method of data collection for this study was the semi-structured interview. Interviews are a valuable data set because the words people use in their stories/ interviews provide a window into their “consciousness,” and oftentimes these windows into their consciousness provide access to not only the concrete experience of people as it relates to educational and social issues but also how they make meaning of it (Seidman, 2013, p. 7).

Semi-structured interviews refer to a type of interview that “consist[s] of predetermined questions related to domains of interest, administered to a representative

sample of respondents” (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). I utilized semi-structured data collection in efforts, as LeCompte and Schensul say, to find patterns, themes, and variables that cut across multiple participants in a particular case. The interview process is also deeply informed by in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing (Seidman, 2013) that aims to reach participant partial life histories, details of their experiences, along with how they make meaning of these experiences within the field of HHBE. Questions were open-ended and aimed to allow the participant to “reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study” p. 14). While interviews were structured in a uniform way, with stated questions for interviewing, the interviews maintained a sense of flexibility, where both researcher and participants were able to approach the questions in an open-ended fashion.

The interviews were collected in the first two months of data collection and were audio recorded. Some interviews took place in person, while others took place via skype or google hangout. The first set of interviews were one hour long and investigated the key questions of the study (defining the field, race, spirituality) within the context of HHBE. The second interviews were 30 minutes long and not only offered an opportunity to review and check the accuracy of initial themes that had arisen out of the research but also check back on the core concepts of the study and to see if participants had any new experiences, understandings, or thoughts related to the key questions. The purpose of the interviews was to learn more about the participants' experiences and how they made meaning of their experiences related to HHBE, race, and spirituality (see Appendix for interview guiding questions).

Participant Observation

The next set of data collection methods was participant observation of one public event where each participant was either a presenter, organizer, or educator. Participant Observation, according to Lecompte and Schensul (2013), “refers to a process of learning

through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting” (p. 83). Because participants in HHBE often share, demonstrate, or teach in the public sphere, these experiences are extremely valuable in providing an important lens of how the participants engage in the field, especially as they relate to the literacy practices the participants employ within the field. Each of these events was audio recorded, detailed notes and observation logs were kept, and all were transcribed verbatim. In the event I was not able to attend the events in person, I relied on audio or video recordings of the events.

Artifact Analysis

Finally, the third method utilized for data collection was artifact analysis of participants’ artistic archives. Artifact analysis offers a new and alternative perspective that may complement other data collected while not impacting the social environment of the study (Hatch, 2002). The artistic archives I utilized were provided by the participants and most consisted of written poetry, journalism, scholarship, or recorded performances of poetry. If applicable, participants had the opportunity to suggest any particular pieces they saw as most representative of their experience in the network, race, and/or spirituality.

Data Analysis

Once data had been collected, I employed a blend of methods for analysis. Stake (1995) tells us that “the function of the qualitative researcher during data gathering is clearly to maintain vigorous interpretation” (p. 9). While there are no strict guides for how researchers can interpret data, there are “cues” in the data that the researcher can allow to guide the interpretation process. One must be humble and cautiously not make assumptions that might be too far off from the way participants intended, as the

researcher often has more power to shape the story. “Interpretations of the researcher are likely to be emphasized more than the interpretations of those people studied, but the qualitative case researcher tried to preserve the *multiple realities*, the different and even contradictory views of what is happening” (p. 12).

I utilized both holistic and embedded analysis (Creswell, 2000, p. 100), where I aimed to compile a vivid, detailed narrative of the story that was emerging from the research as it related to the larger picture of HHBE and also as it related to the specific views of spirituality and race. I will analyze data both on an individual basis among each participant and also then apply a cross-participant perspective to analyze the data in terms of the relationships, similarities, and differences that arise among participants.

The process of analysis I utilized is guided by my work as a practicing artist and educator. I analyzed each data set based on the Critical Response Process/Protocol that was developed by dancer, educator, and MacArthur Genius fellow, Liz Lerman (2003). The process, which was originally created as a way for artists to receive impartial feedback, has been adapted by education organizations as a way students can interpret different texts (Perpich, 2009). The process was guided by the following questions: (1) What do you notice? (identifying neutral noticings); (2) What does it remind you of? (identifying memories or other texts that might relate); (3) What emotions do you feel? (4) What questions does it raise? (5) Speculate the meaning or the intention of the artist. I used these questions as I analyzed individual artifacts. In analyzing large data sets (events or longer interviews), I utilized a subset of these questions or just one (such as noticings or speculation of meaning, etc.), depending on what was most appropriate for the piece or set of data. In addition to answering these questions for each individual piece of data, I also completed the Critical Response Protocol for each participant as a way to gain an overall view of each participant’s story or the “gist” (Luttrell, 2010), before moving forward with further developing specific codes.

After utilizing the CRP process, I employed an open coding method, allowing codes or themes to arise from these different pieces of data and my interpretations. Initially, I found dozens of tentative codes, which included “different but unified,” “adults and youth,” “opportunities for schooling,” “tensions with spirituality,” “race matters/doesn’t.” After further reading and analysis, I narrowed the nine major themes down to be coded by each question. These themes are fully fleshed out in Chapters V, VI, and VII.

As mentioned, I had all recordings professionally transcribed, and I also entered these transcriptions into NVivo software. I then arranged data in different clumps or chunks that speak to the themes that have arisen. After these clumps had been identified, I then investigated the amount of times certain themes arose from individuals via keywords or phrases, which informed the organization of the findings chapters (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013).

Reflexivity

As mentioned, I followed Luttrell's (2010) emphasis on reflexivity being central to the research process. Luttrell encourages the researcher to approach reflexivity in research by constantly interrogating the relationships among Research Participants, Questions, Knowledge Frameworks, Inquiry Frameworks, Methods, Validity, and Goals. Reflexivity requires a researcher to be in acceptance that there will be an “ongoing analysis of relationships, power dynamics, and purposes” on the part of the researcher” (Finley, 2008, p. 98). As I undertook this research journey, I was in constant reflexive process with myself, with my mentors and colleagues, and with my participants when appropriate in order to maintain integrity in the undertaking of this endeavor. I engaged in internal validity checks with myself through journaling, reflection, and questioning of my own assumptions and latent ideologies that were arising in my practice. I also identified two colleagues who are not a part of the research process that checked in with

my work monthly and noted any ways they could support the project in having full integrity. I was also in regular communication with my participants, sending them any writings where I made interpretations or analysis related to their comments, practices, or documents.

Trustworthiness

I followed the designated interview protocol and gained informed consent for all interviews and observations (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). All participants maintained the option of confidentiality and anonymity (although all agreed to be named publicly) and participated voluntarily. I had two HHBE colleagues cross-check this work and help identify any shortcomings or spaces for opportunity and different interpretations related to analysis. I had my findings looked over by the participants before publishing in order to avoid any unintended negative impacts of my work, should it not be in alignment with the true beliefs and understandings of those who participated. I also had my findings peer-edited by one colleague who remained outside of the HHBE community.

In summary, this chapter explored the influences and lenses that guided the study, the specific narrative and case study methodological traditions the study exists within, detailed data collection methods, and a description of participants and settings, and explained the multi-pronged approach to analysis utilized in this study.

Literati: plural noun *li·te·ra·ti* \ ,li-tə-'rā-(,)tē \
persons interested in literature or the arts (Literati, 2018)

Chapter IV

LITERATI: INTRODUCTION TO FINDINGS AND PARTICIPANTS

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how the narratives and practices of HHBE participants turned practitioners describe and define the field of YSW and how these relate to understanding spirituality and race, especially in relationship to greater social and educational environments these practitioners exist in. In the following three chapters (IV, V, and VI), I present the findings of this study, followed by the closing chapter. In this chapter, I introduce and describe the 10 participants and the contexts they exist within. Chapter IV offers background and descriptions of each participant that will lay the groundwork to best understand the findings and analysis included in the following three chapters. In Chapter V, I analyze the data related to the first group of research questions concerned with the descriptions and definitions of YSW, race, and spirituality. Chapter VI explores the second group of research questions related to the literacy practices of the participants. Chapter VII ties these two chapters to relevant theories and the notion of becoming.

Recap of Methods

This study explored the beliefs and understandings of 10 YSW practitioners who have grown from youth to adults working in the field of YSW, through collection and analysis of interviews, artifacts, and participant observation.

As described, I conducted two interviews with 10 participants. The first interviews ranged from 50 to 150 minutes and probed participants' descriptions and definitions of the field of YSW and the intersections (or lack thereof) of race and spirituality within their definitions, descriptions, and experiences in the field of YSW. The second

interviews were optional and much shorter, ranging from 10 to 30 minutes, offering a review of the pieces of the data collection that included participant stories in draft form. Participants were given the opportunity to request that information be changed, omitted, or anonymized and also to offer any further information, perspectives, or thoughts based on what they read in the draft. Changes requested were rare (only 4 people out of 10) and related to descriptions, titles, and clarification of ideas. I also analyzed a portion of the participants' written archives (creative, journalistic, or scholarly artifacts), along with the analysis of one participant observation event. While I was able to physically participate in six events with the participants, I was able to "virtually participate" in events with the remaining four, through videos submitted to me and conversations regarding context.

The analysis you will see in the following chapters is based on the process outlined in Chapter III, where I employed both a holistic and embedded analysis looking at the larger stories or ideas that were being expressed and also the data in terms of relationships, similarities, and differences that arose among participants.

Introduction of the Context and Participants

To better contextualize the environments, contexts, and experiences of the participants, I will briefly explain how these individuals came to participate in their local and national YSW experiences.

To start, the organizations of local YSW communities all have their own creation stories, which vary between school district-wide support to grassroots writing workshops starting in a garage, to one single English teacher starting a club and everything and more in-between. Each local YSW community also functions in a multiplicity of ways, but generally, they have a regular, recurring time of convening, such as a weekly writing workshop or after-school club, along with a yearly slam poetry competition series and intermittent cultural, educational, and arts community-based events. At the time the

participants were becoming interested in YSW, local YSW organizations had already been developed in their cities.

For the participants, introduction and participation in the YSW communities occur in a series of steps. The following describes the specific steps that were taken to join the community based on findings from the interview data. These steps are not finite and not necessarily representative of everyone in the community; however, for the purposes of this study, they offer a sense of the general background the participants experienced while joining the YSW community.

Some participants explicitly mentioned the data pieces that follow, and some did not. So even though some of these statements have less than 100% consistency among participants, it is not because they did not have a similar experience (although that may be the case); it is simply because it was not explicitly named in the interview.

- (1) The first step on the path to being introduced to the YSW community is that 7 out of 10 participants explicitly stated that before they were introduced to YSW, they had an overt or covert interest in writing, poetry, the arts, and/or Hip Hop. This interest was at times cultivated by institutions such as schools, community centers, or churches, but also at times was not. In fact, 6 out of 10 participants described a lack of interest and enthusiasm in formal schooling in this stage of interest.
- (2) The second step included an adult mentor (teacher, parent, older sibling, or community member) introducing a young teen (100% of the participants were under 16 years old at the time) to a public or in-school event such as a slam or open mic.
- (3) Participants has some sort of affirmative experience, either by themselves or with an adult mentor, that encouraged continued participation.

- (4) Participating more frequently and regularly in YSW activities. At this stage, some participants begin to describe their experiences as integrated with their racialized or spiritual identity.
- (5) Transition from youth to adult, while continuing work with YSW—most said it “did not feel like a choice.” At this stage, some participants begin to describe their awareness of how they understand race and spirituality as they engage more with youth younger than them.

The what, how, and why of this path to the YSW field, especially as it relates to spirituality and race, is the purpose of this study and will be explored more deeply.

Introductions

To start, I want to offer that I met all of these people on my journey in the YSW community that began on that day in New York described in the introduction. The people described in the following are what I would call a *Youth Spoken Word Literati*, or group of poets and people who are not only deeply engaged in the work of YSW, but are those who carry the torch of the movement for those who walk beside and behind them, in aims of honoring those who came before. The participants listed here are much more than research participants, offering valuable insights and considerations for this growing field of practice and inquiry. These people are my friends, colleagues, and people who I trust to faithfully carry forward a movement that has changed our lives and will continue to shift and shape the world ahead of us.

The sample consisted of 10 participants whose geographic, professional, cultural, and racial demographics varied greatly. Of the 10, 9 participated in the Brave New Voices Festival as a youth under 18, with one participating in local YSW communities and then attending Brave New Voices as a coach. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling methods and initially contacted through email. Interview formats

varied based on availability and best methods for the participants. Two of the interviews took place in person. Seven of the interviews were conducted via video conferencing, and one was conducted via phone. A few notes on the participants:

- (1) Most retain poetry-centered professional lives (10 out of 10 with flexible professional lives—such as working in academia or as an independent artist), and some (3 out of 10) are currently “transitioning” professionally to positions with more responsibility and varying levels of freedom in their work.
- (2) Fifty percent (5 out of 10) officially work in a staff capacity at the YSW organization they previously attended as a youth participant. One hundred percent work with their home organizations or YSW organizations in their respective city in an on-and-off basis.
- (3) One hundred percent of the participants have incredible lives beyond the worlds I am describing here. Labels are limiting, and these introductions, descriptions, and roles describe an incredibly small sliver of all they are and represent in this community and the world.

Table 4 presents descriptive data on the participants, their hometown, year they entered the YSW community, and their current role.

Table 4. Descriptions of Participants

Name	Home City/State	Current City/State	Year Entered	Current Role
Saju Ahmed	Leeds, UK	Leeds, UK	2006	Mentor at Leeds Young Authors, Organizer and Host of the The Sunday Practise Open Mic
Will Nu’utupu Giles	Honolulu, HI	Honolulu, HI	2006	Transitioning Arts Coordinator for Pacific Tongues and Traveling Artist

Table 4 (continued)

Name	Home City/State	Current City/State	Year Entered	Current Role
Arielle John	Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago	London, England	2008	Transitioning from post graduate student at Goldsmiths, University of London into full-time Art Administrator/ Performer with the Two-Cents Movement
Tish Jones	St, Paul, MN	St. Paul MN	gradually from elementary and notably in 2005	Poet, Founding Executive Director TruArtSpeaks
Dr. Jamila Lyiscott	New York, NY	New York, NY	2001	Assistant Professor of Social Justice Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst
Shannon Matesky	Bay Area, CA	New York, NY	2002	Transitioning out of Youth Engagement Coordinator and a Future Corp Fellow into a Local and Youth Poet Laureate Local and National Production Director
Isaac Miller	Chico, CA	Chicago, IL	2001	PhD Student in African American Studies, Northwestern
Christina Nguyen	Seattle, WA	Seattle, WA	2011	Team Leadership Coordinator at Youth Speaks Seattle. Mentor, organizer, activist.
Hieu Minh Nguyen	St. Paul, MN	Minneapolis, MN	2006	Full Time Poet, Writer, MFA Candidate at Warren Wilson College
Danez Smith	St. Paul, MN	Minneapolis, MN	2004	National Book Award Finalist, Full time Poet, Teacher, Artist, Curator.

Below, I provide brief introductions of the participants, including an excerpt of their written work, their background, and the overall content of their interviews, writings, and events, along with how I came to know these poets. I close each introduction with a haiku dedicated to the participants.

Saju Ahmed

Our Rebellion isn't in English, it's Patwa, it's Bangla, it's Hindi, it's Panjabi, it's Polish, it's Yoruba, it's Urdu, it's Cantonese (Ahmed, 2016)

Saju Ahmed is a Mentor at Leeds Young Authors, organizer and host of the The Sunday Practise Open Mic with Rheima Robinson. He identifies as Bangladeshi, Bengali, British, and Muslim and says that he is a quarter Irish but that he doesn't really identify with that portion of his identity because "people don't recognize me as mixed." He is from Leeds, in West Yorkshire, England, and has traveled extensively across the world through sharing his story through poetry and through the meaningful connections he has made as a result. As he describes, his introduction to the local YSW community was at a time when he was disengaged in traditional schooling, but had a mentor, Kadijah Ibrahim, who introduced him to the idea of poetry by making connections to Hip Hop. Specifically, Ibrahim encouraged him to look at the poetic nature of rap lyrics that he was already interested in. He describes his understanding of spirituality as being influenced by his diverse upbringing, with influences from Christian, Muslim, non-religious spirituality. His poetry challenges assumptions and stereotypes and challenges the reader/listener to listen to the world in a new way that honors those who often go underappreciated and underserved. He describes his most meaningful experiences with the YSW community as times spent in informal gatherings where participants would cypher (beatbox, rap, sing, share poetry) outside of the Brave New Voices festival. His greatest hope for the community is not only that more students would have the opportunity to engage in poetry in the ways he did, but also that youth poets from the United States and beyond could experience the communities of the UK.

Saju is the hype man everyone needs in their lives. I met Saju first as a participant in Brave New Voices and then as part of the young adult YSW leadership program called "Future Corps," where 19 year-old+ alumni are charged with supporting the festival events and logistics. Saju is an incredibly passionate poet who tells his story across the

*world in as many places as possible, from a street corner cypher in San Jose, CA, to the
A train subway platform in NYC, to the International Peace Summit in Chicago, IL.*

*Light is like arms stretched
raising invisible arch
family is held*

Will Nu'utupu Giles

*as some of the tallest trees in the world
redwoods can grow to over 350 feet above the earth
yet their roots, on average only travel 10 feet into it
in isolation, it should be physically impossible for them to stand
however, these enormous trees do not grow in isolation
their roots, each only a single inch thick
wraps around the roots of it's neighbors
a stubborn foundation of brown fingers
clasps an underground stand
and grows
my family is a group of redwoods
that sought god instead of ground
...
we have always learned from the earth around us
so now I do not lament my lack of roots
instead, I grow them myself
so every day I am a windblown seed (Giles, 2016)*

Will Nu'utupu Giles is a Poet and Workshop Coordinator for Pacific Tongues. He identifies as 'Afakasi Samoan (half Samoan and half White) from Honolulu, HI, who, like Saju, identifies most strongly with his Samoan side because of how the public sees him first. He has won awards and prestigious fellowships for his work and traveled extensively across the Pacific and mainland United States. His poetry work often explores navigating the multiple, complex histories and identities we carry within ourselves, our families, and our communities. He describes his introduction to the community as through his older sister, who brought him to a poetry slam when he was a young teen. He describes his definition of spirituality as having a backdrop of his family's engagement with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and his own

individual, more unifying and complex notion of spirit. He likens his notion of spirituality to that of water, and specifically the coming together of people, hopes, and stories. He describes his most meaningful experiences with YSW as those that involve the loving support and kindness of mentors and friends as he dealt with his own trepidations about performing and sharing work. His greatest hope for the community is that YSW would become a subject in school and that students would have the opportunity, through school, to explore and establish their purpose, a sense of self-awareness, or life's work.

Will Giles is the brother in the family we were all meant to be born into. I met Will as a fellow Brave New Voices participant in 2008 and again that following fall when I spent a semester at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. There, I had the incredible fortune to join Youth Speaks HI (now Pacific Tongues) in weekly workshops, open mics, and slams and supported building YSW community at the largest public high school in Hawai'i. My knowing of Will is that he is one of the kindest, most loving poets and people one will ever meet, and we are all brighter because of his light.

*Humility lives
in breath of found family
caught across the sea*

Arielle John

*Good Catholics do not believe in horoscopes
I just happen to be Aries and called Arielle.
The left corner of my grandmother's bed,
Near the paint-peeling wall:
Is a stack of prayer books filtered by dried hibiscus petals
Under a string of wooden rosary beads
And a folded monthly astrology book hidden below.*

*My mother says she named me after a fragrance she liked
from a Vogue magazine by the hairdresser.*

...

*My parents found each other on an island
that generations of settlers had to journey to.*

*In 1994 my parents married and my last name went
From Johnson to John.
My mother reminds that she dropped the son because
She had a daughter.*

*Who she
Named after a fragrance she could not afford.
Named after the saint she thanks for a miracle,
Named after an angel who protects the planets
Named after a country that no man is promised*

I am settling into my name, sometimes a difficult pregnancy (John, 2018)

Arielle John is currently transitioning from her role as a post-graduate student at Goldsmiths, University of London into full-time Art Administrator/Performer with the Two-Cents Movement. She identifies as Caribbean Black and is an internationally touring poet, educator, and organizer. She says she began performing and writing before her introduction to the Two-Cents Movement and the Arts in Action YSW organization. She describes that the organizers of the Arts in Action organization had attended a theater conference with Khadijah and others from Leeds, where they were told about Brave New Voices and encouraged to start a team and attend. At that time, the leaders were already familiar with Arielle as a young poet and so reached out to her when they began organizing to bring a team to the upcoming festival in Washington, DC. She describes spirituality as pertaining to the reconciling her “very human and earthly existence with everything that is less earthly,” or something she might call a connection to a “divine.” She describes her growing up in a very strict Catholic home and in the past few years exploring different ways to express spirituality. She describes her most meaningful experience with the YSW community as a time she performed at Brave New Voices after taking a break from writing for a year or so. She said that one audience member/co-participant was so inspired by her work that he had a line from her poem tattooed on his arm. It read, “Your voice is more resource than reservoir.”

Arielle is the supportive cousin we all need in our corner. I met Arielle as a fellow participant at Brave New Voices and also as co-Future Corps members, where we had the opportunity to co-facilitate performances and workshops for the young people who joined BNV after we turned 19 years old. My experience with Arielle is that she is someone who lives poetry in every moment of her life. Arielle is her best self at all times. She reminds you that you are too.

*Grace is a found poem
dusted with smiles and laughter
we are never lost*

Tish Jones

*My name is Tish Jones and I have been called here to represent
Ancestors
Whose blood sift through the palms of my little brother's hands
As he plays in the sand and they bless him
Forefathers
Who existed before my four fathers
And raised men to raise men
Hence the sun and the raisin (Jones, 2011)*

Tish Jones is a poet before anything else and the Founding Executive Director of TruArtSpeaks in the Twin Cities, MN. She identifies as a Black, queer woman coming from a historically disenfranchised group of people. She is an extremely accomplished poet, educator, organizer, and thought leader in the field of YSW. She describes her being interested in poetry and offers the example of how as a second grader she advocated for her class to perform the musical of “Rap-punzel.” While she was unable to get the class to perform “Rap-punzel,” her teacher supported her efforts and got her a copy of the play so she could explore the work/style of this blend of traditional and contemporary writing/performing, which she continued to do through participation in Hip Hop Theater organizations and initiatives. Later, through her experiences in high school with a multi-organizational, multi-school partnership across the Twin Cities, she became a participant in Brave New Voices and has held local and national leadership positions in the field

since. She describes spirituality as a complex notion (with complex and often oppressive histories) that refers to a sense of connection that is inextricable from every life experience she has. She describes her greatest hope for the field as hoping that the current generation of leaders (of which all of these participants are a part of) can come together and “pass the torch to the next generation,” in efforts of “creating more space for more folks.”

Tish Jones is the leader that we all need beside us. I met Tish Jones as a high school student when a group of poets came from Minnesota to Wisconsin for a poetry performance at the University of Wisconsin. We met again when I attended the University of Minnesota and had the opportunity to work with the YSW organization there. We have since collaborated on multiple projects, festivals, and workshops, where I have come to know Tish Jones as powerful in purpose, in spirit, in action and integrity. We are called to walk in alignment with our best possible selves because of her example.

*Onyx is a stone
that reminds us who we are
May we be mirrors*

Jamila Lyiscott

*In the year 20-and-17
When the putrid stench of polarized politics tried to render us broken
Tried to block our seat at the table until we broke in
Tried to asphyxiate our choices
Tried to Ursula our voices
We the People
Believing in the possibility of a more perfect union
Stood at the precipice of pandemonium and fought for a palpable peace
We stitched together a quilt of hope out of every fiber of our being
We juxtaposed our journey with a history of healing
We organized for all types of equality
Restructured the economy
Uprooted false ontologies and toxic ideologies
We the people
Loved each other like the broken skin of a god*

And by disarming any disease to our true democracy we beat the odds (Lyiscott, 2017)

Jamila Lyiscott is a Assistant Professor of Social Justice Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She identifies as Black, Afro-Caribbean. Her professional work focuses on Youth Participatory Action Research, Critical Pedagogy, and Black Literacies in the field of Social Justice Education. She describes her introduction to the YSW field as the day an English teacher dropped a flyer on her desk for a poetry slam when she was 15 years old. She describes her spiritual background as being deeply religious and that her faith has informed every step of her journey, from poet to professor. She describes her most meaningful experiences with YSW as times she was able to build community with her peers. “Just being together, laughing, talking, sharing, being all over each other, just being like so in love with each other was to me the most significant thing about that.” She continues, “And we were so different! Like it was radically different people, and we were just like so into each other, and we're still friends now. Those are friends for life. That's family.” Her greatest hope is that YSW can be a part of everyday curriculum in schools.

Jamila is the train conductor who reminds us to never forget our origins and destinations. I met Jamila first through her poetry, when her mentor teachers brought her TedTalk to a conference I was attending as a freshman in college. I re-met her when she joined her mentor teachers later as co-facilitators of that same conference, where she brought together all the powerful ways our language, memories, and futures are interconnected. She also was the first poet I knew in the Brave New Voices community to earn her PhD. My experience with Jamila is that she is grounded in both roots and wings and lifts all she can while she climbs.

*songs are like lightning
striking toward our best selves
Open and listen*

Shannon Matesky

*There's something magical about making sadness danceable.
In my life it's been the only way to shake it off.
Put a beat to it and dance it out.
An outlet to work out teenage angst, broken hearts, ever changing technology
Folks were pressed but at least could dance about it. (S. Matesky, personal
communication, December 6, 2017)*

Shannon Matesky is transitioning out of Youth Engagement Coordinator and a Future Corp Fellow into a Local and Youth Poet Laureate Local and National Production Director. She identifies as biracial and queer and is from the Bay Area, CA, but currently lives, performs, and works in New York City. She describes her introduction to the community as connected to her path of applying to a high school for the arts. After her audition, an English teacher suggested she look into current spoken word poets of the time and gave her a book. Later in the year (though she ended up focusing on acting), she slammed with the YSW organization and worked with them on and off until now. She describes spirituality as a “connection with a higher power, higher being, a connection with mother earth, a connection with now.” She describes her most meaningful experience with the community as the ability for her to build her own legacy. She describes the power of this work to not only explore who she is and what that means, but to provide opportunity and space for other young people growing up as well. She describes that, like her story, no one can take away her legacy.

Shannon Matesky is an open mic host of not only the stage, but of life. She offers her story as a space that invites others to join her. I met Shannon as a Brave New Voices participant and in multiple staff capacities of the festival. My experiences with Shannon have allowed me to know her as an enthusiastic leader of the field of YSW, grounded in personal experience of knowing what is best for one's self on the path to healing. She is someone who reminds us to speak up, even when we don't know where to start.

*We can't ignore burn
So why not dance with the flame
Fire equals Water*

Isaac Miller

*I was born to a season of wildfires.
On the highest floor my mother cradled me
before hospital windows where
through plumes of ash
we beheld the cauterized plain. (Miller, 2017)*

Isaac Miller is a PhD student in African American Studies at Northwestern University. He identifies as a White, Jewish, Chicago-based poet, educator, organizer, and scholar who was born and raised in Chico, CA. At the time of this writing, he was earning his PhD in African American Studies at Northwestern University and the Coordinator for the Poetics Cluster in his Academic Department. He describes his introduction to YSW as being through his older brother, who first attended open mics in their city and brought him along. Once he attended, he describes fully engaging in the community as a student performer and participant in Brave New Voices for multiple years. He describes the poetry mentors he had as a teenager as being complex individuals, often with troubling pasts and practices that negatively affected him and his peers as they were growing within the community. These challenging experiences led him to leave the YSW community for a time as he faced issues with mental health. He describes his spiritual background as being Jewish and that his experiences with YSW played a pivotal role in supporting his own understandings of the multiple identities he holds.

Isaac is the poet who remains true to himself no matter what the season. I met Isaac while we worked together for two years of the festival and later co-organized conference meetings and presentations at academic and social justice gatherings across the country. My experience knowing Isaac is such that when he meets new experiences, locations and communities, he remains grounded in his authentic self throughout it all, despite challenges or uncertainties that may be present. Isaac is always traveling both to and from home. He reminds us there is no such thing as a wrong turn.

*stars shoot across time
sky beckons us toward home
grounded feet lift us*

Christina Nguyen

One of the philosophies I believe and want to uphold this year regarding art is a quote that goes “an artist is a child who survived.” ... In addition, I want to bring to conversation that creating art causes humanity to become a more majestic place. To show that it is acceptable to have emotions and validating our feelings from the memories, moments, and experiences we endure daily. We are in dire need of becoming socially awake and holding spaces for communities to survive through these rough times. We need to do so by providing healing mechanisms and essentially share the many stories that we carry with us for these years to come. (C. Nguyen, 2015)

Christina Nguyen is the Team Leadership Coordinator at Youth Speaks Seattle and is also a mentor, friend, organizer, and activist (art/activist). She identifies as Vietnamese-American and as non-binary. She describes her introduction to the community as when two YSW mentors were visitors in her sophomore language arts class when she was 15 years old. She describes her experience slamming as something that was positive and led her to today, even though she didn't win in that first year. She describes the slam as the catalyst to her continued involvement with Youth Speaks Seattle and led her to the work she loves today. She describes her family's religious background as Catholic in the past few generations but as personally having explored other spiritual practices in the past few years. She describes spirituality as “self healing, divine infinite power or the universe and unconditional love.” She describes a meaningful experience with the Youth Speaks Seattle community as times when she and the other youth poets and mentors would “write, share works and share feelings and then after that go into the kitchen and cook. So we would make spaghetti or top ramen and then after that just eat together, like dinner, like a family.”

Christina's humility reminds me of the moon. Reflecting back all that we shine. I met Christina while organizing a series of events across the country that tasked teen poets to rethink and reimagine high school. Christina embodied so much more than an alumni staff and mentor to the youth poets she led. Christina lovingly supported the shine

of all the people around her, especially the young, hesitant poets who were trying out new experiences under her guidance.

*Breath is reminder
never get too far away
Story reels us home*

Hieu Minh Nguyen

*The opposite of hunger
is not satisfaction, it is birth. It is what makes a man chisel a face into stone.
It is what drives the body to lie in the fresh snow. It is what quiets the world*

*when she pulls you in close. It is the winning pass, the crowd too busy
counting down to notice. The world puts its mouth on you
& you don't say a thing. The world digs a hole in your yard*

*& it's up to you to fill it, up to you to find something useful
to do with your sadness. (H. Nguyen, 2018)*

Hieu Minh Nguyen is a Full-Time Poet, Writer, and MFA Candidate at Warren Wilson College. He identifies as a Vietnamese-American, queer child of immigrants. He is a nationally touring poet, educator, organizer, MFA Candidate based in the Twin Cities, MN. He describes his introduction to the community as through an in-school slam that was connected to a multi-school, multi-organizational initiative to support youth poets in the Twin Cities. Hieu describes spirituality as something that has an energy, something separate from religion, something connected to understandings of ancestors, karma, friendship, kinship. He describes his background as not very religious, but that he grew up in a low-income neighborhood where a Baptist church would pick students up in a van and take them to church. Because it was a majority of his friends, he said he would board the van and go there just to spend time with his friends. He describes his most meaningful experience with the community as being the process of expanding his network, or getting to learn and realize “there’s a whole world out there.”

Hieu is a heart in the form of a human. The love he carries in his everyday being is unmatched. I met Hieu when he was a high school sophomore performing his first poems. I worked with him for years as a mentor/administrator for the Minnesota poetry organization and have seen him grow into not only one of the best poets in his high school but also the best in the state of MN and the nation. My experience knowing Hieu is that he is a person true to his purpose. He takes one step in front of the other, and then another, and shows us to do the same.

*Magic comes from hearts
Sticks to our shoes when running
Kick snow and we rise*

Danez Smith

*let us not be scared of the work because
it's hard
let us move the mountain
because the mountain must move*

*let us, oh lords above us and within
let us be useful to our neighbors
& tender their wounds
let us be more bandage than blade
unless the blade is needed
let us be a sword against what does not
bring us closer to home*

*let us be dangerous to that which fails us
and bring us a world good to us, all of us
all us all us
amen (Smith, 2017)*

Danez Smith is a National Book Award Finalist and a Full-time Poet, Teacher, Artist, and Curator. Danez identifies as Black and queer, uses the pronouns "they/them," and is based in the Twin Cities, MN (classmate to Hieu and Tish). They have won numerous awards for their work and were recently a 2017 National Book Award Finalist. They are one of, if not the, most successful professional poets to have been raised in the

YSW community. Their work often focuses on their identities, living in a racist, oppressive world and how we can find spaces for liberation through naming and exploring our realities. They describe their introduction to the community as being through their high school theater class and a cross-city partnership with other schools and organizations that were eager to send poets to Brave New Voices when only a handful of cities participated. They describe spirituality as a “force that emanates from and around people” and that it can manifest in numerous different ways. They were raised in a Christian home but refer to multiple ideas when it comes to ways spirituality can manifest, including at poetry events and festivals. Their greatest hope for the community is that, in addition to ensuring all youth are physically, emotionally, and spiritually protected and safe in YSW environments, the communities continue to grow, change, and evolve.

Danez reminds us to live better. I met Danez when they were a high school senior and I was a freshman in college and new to Minnesota. I remember that their mom was the first person I randomly ran into at Target, marking one of the first moments Minnesota felt like home. When they went to Wisconsin for college, they began teaching at my former high school and I continued working at theirs. My knowing of Danez has led me to see their shine as something that started way before our time on this earth and something that will stay for much longer. Their life and work are almost like guides, helping us all in our quests to live out our purpose.

*Laughter is prayer
like running down high school stairs
We were all born free*

* * *

In conclusion, these introductions have offered brief snapshots into the lives of the participants of the study. These individuals often are connected to one another and the field of YSW personally and professionally. Many of the participants engage in spoken

word-related competitions or open mics, including the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI), the National Adult Poetry Slam, the Individual World Poetry Slam, and many others. These participants also often organize, speak at, or attend YSW and HHBE conferences related to education, including the PreEmptive Education Conference, The Hip Hop in the Heartland: Hip Hop Educators Institute, and the Brave New Teachers Conferences.

After introducing the second half of this dissertation and laying out the remainder of the document, this chapter offered introductions and descriptions of the diverse group of participants who gracefully shared their stories, art, and hearts for this study. The participants' backgrounds varied across geography, race, class, gender, sexuality, beliefs, practices, and experiences. It is my hope that the reader hold these brief introductions with them as I continue to discuss with the key findings and greater narrative of this study.

As you will see in the following, the unique backgrounds and upbringings of the participants have greatly influenced their views on YSW, race, and spirituality. In the next chapter, I will introduce findings of this inquiry that analyzed the narratives, practices, and descriptions of the YSW community and understandings of race and spirituality.

lit 1

Pronunciation: /lit/ Past and past participle of light¹, light³.

Light- The natural agent that stimulates sight and makes things visible: the light of the sun (Lit, 2016)

Chapter V

MAKING THINGS VISIBLE—FINDINGS PART 1

In the previous chapter, I introduced the 10 participants in this study with brief descriptions on the context of their identities, locations, introductions to YSW, and current work. In this chapter, I will answer and speak to what was “visible” from exploring the first of the two research questions that guide this study, “How do YSW educators who have grown from youth participants (13-19) to adult practitioners (20+) describe and/or define the fields of YSW & HHBE?” and “What do these descriptions tell us about if and how they are making meaning of race and spirituality?” In exploring these questions, participants had varying answers to how they describe and understand the concepts proposed. However, there were a few themes that arose that reflected general patterns among the participants' descriptions and definitions relating to the three core components of the question: (1) the field of YSW/HHBE, (2) race, and (3) spirituality. While the questions were inclusive of the broader field of HHBE, where YSW sits, the findings that follow focus primarily on YSW as a piece of the greater HHBE field. This is with the exception of the first questions, which discuss the explicit connections and distinctions between YSW and HHBE. To be clear, the following chapter will primarily refer to YSW, and in this context, YSW is understood as a part of the greater field of HHBE. In addition, for the purposes of clarity, I have separated the findings related to race and spirituality as two distinct concepts. But it should be noted that it was clear in the process of data collection that the participants perceived the two concepts as interconnected and often so enmeshed into a person’s life that it is difficult to recall memories or experiences that speak to one without the other being present implicitly, if not explicitly.

These themes will be presented in this chapter and are as follows.

- (1) YSW and HHBE are fields that (a) are interconnected, (b) position young people as brave leaders, and (c) are multicultural and pluralistic.
- (2) Descriptions of race within the field of YSW are described as (a) grounded in unity across difference, and (b) centered on people of color.
- (3) Descriptions and definitions of spirituality within the field of YSW are described as (a) honoring that which came before, (b) grounded in energy, higher power, and purpose, (c) expressed through community, and finally (d) offering opportunity for critical analysis of complex religious or spiritual concepts.

A grid-view of the themes and subthemes is provided here and is followed with a detailed explanation.

Table 5. Themes and Subthemes by Question

Question	Theme	Subthemes	Mentioned by #	Subsubthemes
RQ1	1) Describing the fields of Youth Spoken Word and Hip Hop Based Education	1a) as interconnected	6/10	ai) YSW as extension of oral tradition in Hip Hop aii) YSW as new tool to connect to old traditions aiii) Must allow for range of interpretations
		1b) positions young people as brave leaders	10/10	bi) support individuals gain confidence bii) youth positioned as brave leaders w freedom biii) caring adults playing key support roles
		1c) as multicultural and pluralistic	10/10	ci) YSW goes beyond poetry and performance cii) YSW as across the digital world ciii) micro-communities abound

Table 5 (continued)

Question	Theme	Subthemes	Mentioned by #	Subsubthemes
RQ1	2) Descriptions and definitions of race within the field of YSW	2a) grounded in unity across difference	10/10	ai) physical proximity to difference aii) maintaining a critical awareness of difference aiii) poetry as safe way to learn about others
		2b) centered on people of color	10/10	bi) POC in Afro-Centric space bii) White people in Afro-Centric space biii) critically examines interracial relationships
	3) Descriptions and definitions of spirituality within the field of YSW	3a) honoring that which came before	10/10	ai) spirituality as honoring ancestors aii) spirituality as honoring lineage aiii) spirituality as honoring rituals
		3b) as energy, higher power or purpose	7/10	bi) spirituality as energy beyond physical bii) spirituality as higher power by many names biii) spirituality as connected to purpose
		3c) expressed through community	8/10	ci) spirituality as friendship cii) spirituality as communing with others ciii) spirituality as sharing and listening exchange
		3d) opportunity for critical analysis	5/10	di) spirituality connected to religion dii) spirituality as a highly personal experience diii) spirituality & religion as challenged in YSW

1. “We are Hip Hop Poetics”: The Fields of YSW and HHBE

Throughout the process of analyzing the multiple sources of data, I was able to find patterns in the way participants and documents describe and refer to the fields of YSW

and HHBE. In interviews, I explicitly asked, “How do you define the field of YSW?” so some of the examples below are in direct response to that question. I also paid attention to how participants referred to the network in passing or indirectly. In bringing together these multiple sources, the data showed that (A) YSW and HHBE are fields that are intimately connected in the origins, practices, and communities of Hip Hop culture; (b) YSW has functioned as a unique opportunity for young people that positions them as brave, independent leaders; and (c) the field of YSW in particular is one of micro-communities with fluid boundaries that extend beyond a simple understanding of direct practitioners and participants.

1a. Tracing Traditions

While how YSW is linked to HHBE and Hip Hop culture is discussed briefly in the literature review, I will explore here how the data offered detailed nuances in those connections or disconnections. In short, YSW is connected to HHBE in three ways: (i) YSW is an extension of the oral element of Hip Hop, (ii) YSW acts as a new tool to reconnect to ancient and literary traditions, and (iii) these connections must allow for discrepant interpretations, and also the justifications we present for connection must be critically examined.

(i) Before completing this study, I was aware of the presumed connections of Hip Hop and spoken word poetry as it is understood as a form of oral, spoken poetry that is connected to the work of the MC or rapper in Hip Hop communities (see Chapter II for detailed definitions on the elements of Hip Hop). In the pilot, a key observation was that participants often used the words “Hip Hop” and “spoken word” interchangeably. In cases where I noticed participants using the terms in that way, I inquired about how they see the connections or disconnections between Hip Hop and spoken word. One participant, Shannon Matesky, exemplified this straightforward connection of the oral elements by saying, “Spoken word is very Hip Hop. Even though we aren't one of the

official five elements, I think we belong in the rap category.” She continued to explain her understandings by connecting how we might understand rap as poetry, by saying “rapping is a form of poetry and we just poet different.”

Further, as noted in Chapter II, the oral element of Hip Hop culture is also deeply connected to ancient storytelling and oral traditions of multiple cultures across the world, and in the particular lineage of Hip Hop, which stems from West African griot traditions. The participants in this study, while not all descending directly from West African lineage, all acknowledge Hip Hop’s role in helping them reconnect to their own personal lineage of ancient traditions and storytellers. Will Nu’utupu Giles, who was born and raised in Hawai’i, exemplifies this point when he says, “It just goes back to tracing the oral traditions for whatever cultures that you were a part of. I feel like very much so, for most of the United States, their cultural touchstone for spoken word is directly Hip Hop. It directly grows out of African griot tradition.” He continues, “In contemporary Hawai’i, most of the ways that people identify spoken word is also through the cultural lens of Hip Hop.” He explains that even though his own lineage as a Pacific Islander has a different lineage traced back toward the specific oral traditions of the Pacific, spoken word, by way of an American Hip Hop context, was something that helped his community reconnect to an ancient practice. “For a lot of native Hawaiians, for a lot of native Pacific Islanders, and even me, discovering spoken word was very much this new thing, but it was also just a new way of interpreting what my people had always done.” KRS-One echoes this thinking of Hip Hop as being something that is new or “outside of oneself,” yet also something that is very ancient and familiar or “inside” people. He describes Hip Hop as something that “came from within us, but we still had to learn it—Hip Hop came to us from within us” (One, 2009 p. 26).

(ii) Connected to this, spoken word can also be linked to a much more recent literary tradition, often acknowledged or not by literature scholars of today, Shannon Matesky offers the question, “What is different between Shakespeare and Jay Z?” While

there might be a lot on the surface that differs, if we look historically at the ways someone like Shakespeare was able to push the boundaries of how we understand literary/oral traditions, we can see that they might not be too different after all. We see this reflected when looking at the history of English Education, where oral presentations and performances were prioritized over traditional written text as they are today. Scholes (1998) tells us that over the history of the discipline, “the good old days when students wrote ‘correctly’ never existed.” He describes that educators “were oriented to the oral performance itself and regarded the written texts primarily as rough drafts of the real thing: the oration” (p. 6). So a comparison between Shakespeare, someone who was known as “the Bard,” to Jay-Z, a prolific emcee who is known for never writing down his raps, makes sense when Shannon makes this connection.

(iii) Despite the ways these connections can be drawn, there is room for nuance or discrepant interpretations of these connections. Participants also acknowledge that people have varying non-Hip Hop “touchstones” to spoken word, or that sometimes the connections are brought together in a way that doesn’t acknowledge the power of the culture. Hieu Minh Nguyen illuminates this point by describing how people who may not be from Hip Hop-connected communities may disagree with the fact that Hip Hop is a precursor to spoken word. He describes that people may either be ignorant of the history of the form of spoken word, which leads them to connect to a different lineage, possibly of storytelling, confessional writing, or otherwise. He also acknowledges that, although he, like Will, was introduced to spoken word through a lens that includes Hip Hop culture, others may not see it that way, and see their connection to the form as something that predates Hip Hop. “I think some people might also come to it as like an oral tradition that is outside of like Hip Hop, that it's just before Hip Hop, but I think it all kind of connects eventually. I think there's a line, and different points ... but some people go further back. Some people's entry point to it is something that is before.” He is careful to not only acknowledge his own understanding, but aligned with the practice of a true poet,

allow for other realities to exist in addition to his own. Parmar and Bain (2007) speak to this when they explain the concept of spoken word as a form that honors ancient cross-cultural traditions of “oral poetry.” They discuss that spoken word stems from cultures across the world, “from the meditative poetry of the Eskimo to the medieval European and Chinese ballads” (p. 134). So while a majority of the work in this dissertation connects spoken word and Hip Hop to a specific ancient African lineage and Black American arts, it is best to, like Hieu, acknowledge and honor the multifaceted influences and lineages of oral poetry throughout time that people may or may not link to spoken word poetry.

Another important lens one must have in making connections between HHBE and YSW is to critically examine the *ways* people are making the connection. Shannon Matesky warns us to not take lightly the histories and purposes of these linked practices and not to “cheapen” the work by simply calling both spoken word and Hip Hop as connected because they are both “urban” or something similar.

We are Hip Hop poetics. I think that can be perverse sometimes by only selling the similarities in dialect and colloquialisms. I feel like that's the cheapest way, is oh spoken word is urban. Spoken word is hip. So it must be Hip Hop. I feel like those are the cheap ways, when actually, good rap is good craft. It's good literary devices. And good poetry is good craft and good literary devices. So yeah I feel like we can get cheapened and belittled and simplified, but I think that also is to belittle and simplify the impact of Hip Hop as a whole. Hip Hop is cool. Hip Hop is a culture. The more I can make it just of a cute little colloquial thing, the less serious that I have to take its impact and its importance on a people. And again, I think the spiritual connections actually make it very Hip Hop too, what we are doing it for. Hip Hop was meant to bring communities together and to give voices to communities who didn't have one. And I think we're doing something very similar.

Shannon speaks directly to a historical tradition of dominant academic institutions undermining the invaluable contributions of Black culture, art forms, and ideology to the world, to our schools, and to our everyday way of life. She warns that if we are to truly honor and recognize the value of the links between YSW and Hip Hop, then we must do

so with a critical eye toward our and others' justifications for such connections. Tricia Rose (Elliot-Cooper, 2012) emphasizes this thinking when she tells us that “the study of Hip Hop suffers from the kind of response that the study of music and culture that comes from people of African descent always suffers from, and that is first and foremost a profound disregard.” She goes on to explain how people in the academy often make limiting assumptions about Hip Hop and simplify it to something like a limited notion of “urban” as Shannon describes.

1b. Caring Communities

Through interviews and analysis of document archives, participants described the field of YSW in a variety of ways. One theme that arose in the data included how YSW supports individual development through a caring community. The data showed that there are multiple ways this support of individuals through community manifests, including three that I will highlight in the rest of this short section. These ways are (i) grounded in supporting individuals to gain confidence; (ii) youth positioned as brave leaders with freedom to express and explore; and (iii) that caring adults play key support roles.

(i) Participants described different ways young individuals were supported to gain confidence through the field of YSW. One of these was by simply being introduced to the work through an open mic or a slam. Will Nu’utupu Giles speaks to the ways his life shifted from being a shy young person who “hid from the world” into someone who could share his voice after being “tricked” into going to an open mic with his older sister.

I had always been really in love with poetry, mainly because it was a way of hiding from people. It was a way of living in cipher.... Really, I was tricked into it. I was shocked at the ability, one, to be vulnerable, and two, to use language to connect rather than run away. From there, I was hooked ... I was just like, I want to learn how to be this brave; I want to learn how to be this vulnerable, this open, and I want to learn how to be this, just this.

Will describes not only how his view of himself was able to change, but also how the way he viewed poetry was transformed in this instance. He went from utilizing poetry as a way to hide from the world, as a way to dive toward it. In addition, while in most instances participants discuss their experiences with this through a first-person lens, there were also times when participants discussed their own role in supporting shy students struggling with insecurity to assert their power and find their own voice. Christina, after also explaining her own experience as a shy teenager, explained how powerful it was to see students after she became a mentor realize their own power through the support of the YSW community. She says it's "like igniting the power within them that was there all along, they just needed an extra push or an extra person to just realize that it was there and that they can see that it was there too. So it's just like seeing a shy person go on stage and basically rip a poem and everyone be like 'oohh!'"

This notion of "caring communities" struck me in particular while writing because I recognized that there is no age limit or restriction on where or how this caring nudge can manifest. Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Watson (2016) and Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) highlight Valenzuela's notion of "cariño" or "authentic caring" as an important foundation for educators and extend this notion to educational researchers. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, in an effort to encourage what might be considered "authentic caring" for oneself as a researcher, tell the reader not to accept the same old educational research traditions and to continue pushing for what might be more difficult, but ultimately more impactful for students in the future. "This demands of us the recognition that just as success for educational practitioners is predicated upon the development of caring relationships with students, so educational research should be grounded in authentically caring relationships" (p. 139).

(ii) In addition, another way participants recognize the YSW community as supporting individual development within the context of a caring community is through the intentional positioning of young people as brave young leaders with freedom to

discover who they are and lead their peers of their same age and younger. Jamila Lyiscott discusses how this was quite a different experience than other youth communities she was a part of. “I’d been a young person across multiple spaces and multiple organizations and it’s usually a more controlled experienced where people are constantly policing the way you show up, where you are, how you are.” She said something about the YSW community was different. “When we were walking down the street we were singing, and laughing, and spitting. It was just very free, it felt very free.”

Connected to this freedom of being able to move and act how you wanted was also a sense of how sharing your story as a poet is a practice of bravery and importance, especially in contrast to what students often receive in the education system. Will depicts this point when he says,

Being introduced to a world where my voice mattered was a weight that I had never carried before. It had just been hammered into me through the public education system that your opinions don’t matter.... I’d never really heard my own voice until I encountered slam and that community ... it made me realize the volume, power and responsibility of my own convictions.

He and other participants connect this freedom to not only to the practices of performing but also to the quick timeline in which youth are able to turn from student to teacher. In my experience in Madison, WI, I was organizing and teaching workshops in the local middle schools and elementary schools within the same year I was introduced to YSW. Jackson et al. (2016) echo the importance of the caring relationships as one of the key factors that allowed both educators and youth to gain experience as Jamila and Will described, or the ability to “feel both vulnerable and free” (p. 990).

(iii) Further, as I began to hear the ways the participants described the community, I wondered why and how these communities came to be. Especially as youth participating, it is often not the clearest what is curated and intentional and what is not. It is probably a mix of both, but one thing participants agreed on was that adult mentors were the ones credited with the creation of the community. In some instances, I directly

asked participants, and in some they described it on their own. When I asked Jamila directly to what she might credit the energy of freedom she described, she responded with “I guess it had to be like the adults. I guess it had to be mentors.” Saju Ahmed, from Leeds, UK, also echoed this sentiment. Speaking of his poetry mentor and the experience of the Leeds team to go from barely having a poetry slam to being one of the top in the international poetry slam, he said,

Kadijah always believed in us and gave us that confidence.... We always questioned our abilities. Like are we really this good? Are we really good enough to go BNV? Why are these guys saying we're good? We're not even that good. How can I be the best in the city? How can I be the best in the country?... I can't thank them enough for that, to give me the belief that I am the smartest person in my own life to make my own decisions.

Saju, iterating this point, aligns with multiple participants in the study when he describes his own transformational process in this community, while also speculating on the motivation of his mentors.

They did it because they actually care, because it was all of the communities that came together that cared about the kids. For 14 years of [Kadijah]'s life. She dedicated her Tuesday two hours every fucking week to make sure we got writing.... She's the only one that believed in us on the real.

Saju echoes a major theme of this study, that the YSW community is held up by the adults who support and facilitate the development of young people. The support Saju described is reminiscent of what Ware (2016) calls reciprocal “warm demanding” (Jackson et al., 2016), or a practice that supports students toward aiming for high achievements and standards, while maintaining a sense of culturally relevant reciprocal love in educational environments.

1c. Many Faces, Many Places

At times, practitioners of YSW can be simply defined as people who “write poetry to perform it.” While this may be true, there is a whole host of other ways YSW as a

community can be defined and understood. The theme that arose related to this is that participants described the field of YSW as an inclusive, pluralistic, and expansive community. The data showed that there are multiple ways this pluralism manifests, including three that I will highlight in the rest of this short section: (i) that YSW goes beyond poetry and performance; (ii) that YSW expands across the world and to the digital realm; and (iii) that YSW is a field with micro-communities and micro-cultures.

(i) First, this pluralistic and expansive nature of the field is expressed through intention of the leaders that goes beyond the writing and performing of poetry and also through the expansive professional opportunities. Related to poetry, Shannon portrays this notion fairly succinctly when she says that the field of YSW “can do so much more than just give me three minutes of a message,” stating that the impact of spoken word can extend far beyond the page and the stage. Moreover, YSW can be understood by many of the tangential professional opportunities related to the field that so many of the participants described.

At times, growing up in the YSW community, there are very few professional options to aspire to beyond becoming a professional poet, but through this study, the data were able to show that the field of YSW can be understood as connected and inclusive of many different aspects of youth work, poetry work, education work, work connected to the greater field of the arts, and beyond. Isaac Miller, from Chico/Detroit/Chicago, described this understanding for himself: “To me, it is unimaginable the things that I'm doing in my life right now. If I would have sat down with 13-year-old Isaac and told him that I would be a professional poet and scholar ... I would not know what that meant. I would not know how to even conceptualize what that was.” He exemplified this feeling that many people in the network share, that there are often limited professional opportunities presented in such a clear trajectory to YSW poets; however, the connections and possibilities for moving into those expanded roles is quite clear and accessible.

The possible trajectories understood by youth poets as possible could be expanded through a more intentional interaction between adults and students in the field. Wenger (2008) discusses the importance of adults and students interacting *outside* of the formal classroom, allowing adults to model for young people what adulthood in the community of practice might entail. Echoing Isaac, he says, “What students need in developing their own identities is contact with a variety of adults who are willing to invite them into adulthood” (p. 278).

(ii) In addition to being expansive in terms of how one might think of the field, the boundaries of the field go geographically across the world—and digitally, potentially to every person’s home and pocket with access to a phone. Will describes how part of his introduction to the work of YSW was partially through “trolling the depths of” YouTube. Now the field has multiple digital, social, and commercial media platforms, including documentaries published by HBO, media companies dedicated to producing high-quality videos of poems, and social media chats and pages to share information, practices, and ideas.

In today’s world, this digital realm expands beyond traditional methods where media is developed by adults or companies for consumption. The era of simply watching YouTube has come and gone, and we see more and more students, educators, and researchers pushing to support students to be more than consumers, but to be co-creators of digital media. Mirra, Morrell, and Filipiak (2018) support the framework that students should be supported not only to critically consume media, but to be critical producers, distributors, and inventors of digital media. In the world of YSW, this expansion has begun, with youth media teams being present at almost every event, and there is ample opportunity for the next phase of growth of YSW to be intimately tied to the digital world.

(iii) Another theme that arose is that YSW contains a multitude of different communities that exist within the greater field. This is related to the different racial,

economic, social, geographic, and cultural backgrounds people are coming from and also how they have uniquely developed their practices and relationship to the network over the years. Danez Smith, of the Twin Cities in Minnesota, spoke to this when they said, “The community is made up of so many different micro-communities that each have their own cultures or that don't necessarily match up.” Though the “field” more or less holds different YSW communities together in the same space for a festival once a year and for various workshops and trainings, there are many different iterations and manifestations of this work as a whole.

Jabari Mahiri (2017) discusses this idea of honoring multiple communities and cultures. People from different racialized backgrounds experience and call our attention to understanding these “micro-communities” as an important lens in which to see people. He goes so far as to say that “micro-cultures, or any idea that similarly captures the significance of human variability in identity constructions, should replace the idea of race” (p. 161). Mahiri, who explores the notions of race (or micro-cultures) across different communities, pays special attention to the powerful space Hip Hop offers for people of micro-cultures to build. He says, “Hip Hop is something of a rhizome with myriad points of connectivity for identification, participation, and belonging” (p. 168).

2. “In Search of Darker Planets”: Describing Race

I've left Earth in search of darker planets, a solar system that revolves too near a black hole... I've left Earth to find a place where my kin can be safe, where black people ain't but people the same color as the good, wet earth, until that means something (Smith, 2017)

Throughout the process of analyzing the multiple sources of data, patterns also arose in the way participants and documents described and referred to the concept of race within the field of YSW. In interviews, I explicitly asked participants their racial identification along with an example of how race may or may not have been prevalent in

their experiences in YSW. In bringing together these multiple sources, the data showed that YSW practitioners refer to race in YSW as a field that is (a) grounded in unity across difference and (b) centered on people of color.

2a. “We were so different!”

Participants demonstrated that YSW practitioners think about race in a variety of ways. As discussed earlier, experiences of race are often intertwined with much or all of participants’ experiences, so the data and themes explored here are an attempt to synthesize constantly moving and interconnected understandings. In short, YSW practitioners described their experiences with understandings of race in three main ways, including that YSW (i) offers physical proximity to people who are different, (ii) maintains a critical awareness and acceptance of difference, and (iii) offers poetry as a safe method or tool for learning about others.

(i) First, a key finding that emerged related to understanding difference was how participants described their experiences with the major international poetry festival. Every one of the participants (10 out of 10) described the impact of attending an international festival with peers from all over the world. This theme is directly connected to race and also expands beyond race. The shared experience of being at a festival with the intention of writing and sharing poetry also offers a space for connection. Tish described this when she said,

What I remember feeling was awe.... Feeling connected to a bunch of folks that are like me and unlike me. I can see the similarities and the differences. I can see the ways in which we are explicitly connected. The ways in which we have been made to think we are not connected and look at what's possible. Look at just building together and dreaming together was one of my favorite aspects of the festival. We dreamt together that year and all thought about what was possible with the different dreams that we had.

Jamila echoed this sentiment of feeling connected across difference by describing her time with other poets in community. “Just being together, laughing, talking, sharing,

being all over each other, just being like so in love with each other was to me the most significant thing about that, and we were so different! Like it was radically different people, and we were just like so into each other, and we're still friends now. Those are friends for life. That's family.” While there are extensive roads for deeper understanding and fleshing out the hows and whys of this feeling of connection, this feeling of connection across difference in itself was a powerful finding of this study. For scholars of Hip Hop culture, this finding is no surprise. Chang (2005) described the “The Hip Hop Generation” as bringing “together time and race, place and polyculturalism, hot beats and hybridity.... Whom does it include? Anyone who is down” (p. 2).

(ii) In addition to affirmation and connections of diverse community through physical proximity, the YSW community also maintains and is grounded in a critical awareness of racial difference, and difference of all types. Much of this could be credited to the foundations of critical pedagogy and orientations to knowledge and education that is held by the adult leaders of the field. Saju illuminates this theme through his discussion on the YSW community being “woke.” He describes,

I feel the spoken word scene has been woke before there even was a thing to be woke.... It gives you a place to speak up, speak out.... That's another thing that you learn within this culture, you learn all aspects of fight and oppression.... You learn that in every aspect of identity and every aspect of community there is a struggle that we don't hear about.

Saju describes this notion that, as a unified group of diverse people, YSW teaches participants not only to learn and speak out about one’s own in relationship to other cultures and dynamics of oppression, but also to learn about the cultures and fights for oppression of others and speak out in support of your differing peers.

(iii) Further, the third way participants spoke to the notion of race is in relationship to how the mode of poetry functions as a tool for teaching about different races and cultures. Participants often described a poem or group of poems that led them to learn something new or different about a different race or culture that proved helpful in their

future understandings. Isaac Miller, speaking to making connections between his own Whiteness and the cultures of others, described a time when poet Chinaka Hodge shared a poem at the Brave New Voices festival that was about gentrification and the echoes of slavery that still exist in West Oakland.

That was nothing like my experience of growing up in a majority White small town in Northern California. But I fucking understood power and race and inequality and class and gender and sexuality, all of these things, in a way that I had never understood before through hearing that poem and through the emotional, collective experience of that room, of that collective experience.

Isaac shared with us that although one can learn about things like gentrification or different experiences through multiple ways, poetry is a mode of learning and sharing that is unique and powerful. Hip Hop culture has been well documented as a space that offers a critical lens for diverse groups of people to explore and understand their own understandings on race (Akom, 2009). Hip Hop, like many different arts, in many ways acts as a common language for people to communicate, especially about topics that are often difficult to discuss (Petchauer, 2009).

2b. POC Centered

Though YSW has many manifestations across the country, the case study of this project is centered on the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry festival, in which all the participants participated, and many of which referred to in their interviews and archive of work. I want to note that much of this section concerning the centrality of people of color to this particular community of YSW refers directly to the experiences of Brave New Voices and local communities that are aligned.

An analysis of the data collected demonstrated that YSW is a community that centers people of color. I will share three particular nuances of this assertion:

(i) descriptions of people of color, (ii) descriptions of White participants, and (iii) the critical examination of multiracial interactions within the field of YSW.

(i) First, in asking the question around racialized experiences within YSW, I was surprised that a majority of the participants were unable to recall specific examples or just didn't see too much need to discuss race. This was surprising to me because often in education studies or studies around the experiences of students in educational environments especially focusing on race, I often hear about how White-dominant spaces affect students of color in a variety of ways. So when participants began describing a space where they didn't feel explicitly "racialized," it was powerful and made perfect sense. Throughout the history of the YSW field (and before that with its origins within Hip Hop and the Black arts movement), the most successful poets, educators, and practitioners have been people of color. Danez Smith discusses this notion of a POC-centered space and describes the space as Afro-centric. Participants also describe this as credit to the key organizers, who were a small team of Black, Brown, and White people. Danez told me,

I think it's a good question because I think my race is what maybe allowed me to feel so comfortable within BNV because I think BNV is a very Black space and Afro-centric.... I think there has been a very Black lens applied through the pedagogy and everything and also, a shit ton of Black kids come.... I didn't feel race at BNV because it is a Black space.

The Brave New Voices/YSW community can be understood as a space that flips racial power dynamics from a majority of the United States context. Research has shown that Afro-centric groups that have a majority of African American participants are positively impactful (socially, academically, culturally) for African American students on college campuses (Harper & Quaye, 2007). This YSW community, as offering an Afro-centric and POC-centered space, might offer similar benefits for this international high school-aged group.

(ii) In contrast to the experiences of participants of color, White people have a similar understanding for how race operates in YSW, and also have greatly differing experiences. While in this particular study, there was only one White participant, I

include my decade-long experience in arriving at this theme as well. White people experience race in Brave New Voices/YSW communities as a space that highlights their own racialized reality as White people in the multiracial context of the United States and of working within the tradition of a Black art form. Isaac describes his experience related to this:

That space politicized me. That is the reason that I understood what Whiteness is. I understood I was White because of Brave New Voices.... I knew, okay, yeah, racism is bad. Oh yeah, Martin Luther King.... But it was very abstract until I got to Brave New Voices.... There's a through line between reading and building friendships and relationships with Black and Brown people really for the first time in a very real way. It was transformative. That changed my fucking life. That was my first experience with ethnic studies, Black studies, feminism, all these other things I was exposed to through Spoken Word.

Isaac describes the way his understanding shifted in a way White people rarely experience in traditional educational environments and that it was an extremely valuable experience for him. Further, recent studies have shown that, especially in educational contexts, people of all races may in fact prefer to have teachers of color over their White counterparts (Kamenetz, 2016). Similarly, we have seen a deep desire among some White communities to engage in more direct efforts for racial justice and more spaces that are Afro-centric and POC-centered, such as those experienced with YSW.

(iii) In addition, in alignment with YSW orientation of being critically aware of the different ways races interact, one theme that arose was the differences in power dynamics between White leadership, White donors, White audiences, and youth of color. Participants noticed this, mostly through the lens of being a young POC and having White leaders, donors, or audiences when performing or working for an organization. Something unique about the space of YSW is that young people were encouraged to explore and understand these critical reflections. Jamila spoke to this:

So this racial dynamic that would play out where we would start to feel like, "Wait, are we performing for White people to give us money? What is happening?" And like are people who are White leaders

orchestrating this? And just that was a national trend. And like I think was important because it wasn't like a closed conversation. We would have those conversations with adults, which is cool because they would allow for that in a very organic way, but it's a tension.

It is no surprise to anyone who pays attention to racial dynamics that racial hierarchy plays out in even the most progressive educational spaces. However, participants in this study describe an orientation to race that not only affirms and accepts racial difference (among other differences) but also encourages young people to be critically engaged in all facets of what this means for them and their communities, even when White leadership is implicated in participating in and possibly perpetuating a racial hierarchy.

The title of this section takes its name from a poem by participant Danez Smith. In their poem, they discuss rejecting the White dominant spaces that perpetuate violence and murder against Black people and express traveling to “darker planets,” where they won't have to endure White violence, ignorance, or disinterestedness in the face of the horrors of anti-Black violence. While Danez's influences for this poem were many, I can't help but wonder if a POC-centered space, like the YSW community described by the participants in this study, can lend itself to supporting poets (and all people) to imagine worlds where anti-Black violence can be illuminated and eliminated in the same breath, such as it is in this poem by Danez.

3. “Some Kind of Magic”: Describing Spirituality

In looking at how participants describe and define spirituality, the data demonstrated that these descriptions and definitions could be categorized by multiple themes. The four overall themes that arose included spirituality described as (a) honoring that which came before, (b) being energy or higher power, (c) expressed as community or friendship, and (d) having critical or contested definitions and implications, especially as it relates to notions of religion. In efforts of maintaining clarity in answering the questions this dissertation set out to, this chapter focuses on descriptions and

understandings (RQ1), and literacy practices (RQ2) will be more thoroughly fleshed out in the following chapter.

3a. Honoring That Which Came Before

As described by participants, YSW practitioners think about spirituality in a variety of ways. Like with race, experiences of spirituality are often intertwined with much or all of participants' experiences so the data and themes explored here are an attempt to synthesize constantly moving and interconnected understandings. For this reason, many of the examples provided may address more than one finding. For this first theme, YSW practitioners described spirituality as honoring that which came before and described this aspect of spirituality in three ways: spirituality (i) honors our ancient ancestors, (ii) honors a living or recent lineage, and (iii) honors a tradition of practices or rituals.

(i) YSW is a tradition that derives from a very specific lineage of ancient ancestors and more recent practitioners or practices. Participants describe their understanding of how YSW may be understood as spiritual, as connecting to these very specific ancestral and more recent lineages. Tish describes how understanding herself as a spiritual being is integral to the way she moves as a person and practitioner through the world. This sense of spirituality is inextricably tied to her connection with ancestors and the perpetual fight for liberation.

Every time, all day, every day my spirituality plays a role in my work. Every time, all day, every day. There's not a moment that my sense of spirit and spirituality ends.... My ancestors sacrificed and survived so that I could do this work and my personal work is the work of liberating and educating black children, right? That's a huge priority to me because of my ancestral lineage and that collected liberation is a huge priority to me because that includes liberation of my people and I ... It always a part of my work every day.

Tish speaks directly to this idea that ancestors and ancestral lineage are carried with us every day.

(ii) In addition to this, participants describe the different ways they call upon people who are more recently a part of the YSW lineage. One way participants did this is by calling the names of the adults, older classmates, and friends who became their first mentors or teachers in guiding them through their introduction to the network.

(iii) This is also intricately connected to how participants view certain practices they engage with as carrying on ritual as part of a spiritual tradition. Shannon portrays these multiple understandings when she not only calls the names of her first teachers but also how they taught their students to remember the lineage we individually carry and also that the work is connected to a much greater lineage, that of the griot. “From those early moments of connecting with artists like Jason Mateo and Chinaka Hodge, and Bamuthi Joseph, there has always been a connection of ancestry.... With the writing exercises there is ritual and ritual is spiritualistic.... I always say and really feel comfortable in the title of not just poet but griot.” This brief quote and section demonstrates the multiple ways YSW practitioners honor “that which has come before” through honoring ancestors, lineage, and practice.

Josef Sorett (2016) discusses that although popular understandings have not overtly connected African American literature to religious and spiritual practices, the connections are there. “As much as it has been largely overlooked or obscured, religion has haunted the black literary imagination, often hiding in plain sight” (p. 6). Through his work, *Spirit in the Dark*, Sorett offers a genealogy that “links language, culture, and politics across history, time, and place” to something that reveals the multiple ways spirituality has played a role in the development of racial aesthetics or African American literary traditions. He, like the participants of this study, acknowledges that these influences range from a variety of sources, and his work “reveals the markings of a multitude of spirits” (p. 10).

3b. Energy, Higher Power or Purpose

Further, participants described their understandings of spirituality as being connected to notions of (i) energy, (ii) a higher power, and (iii) as having a sense of purpose. These understandings are also inextricably linked to one another and also to some understanding of ancestors or ritual practice.

(i) The idea of spirituality being connected to energy, as opposed to physical force, takes many different forms in the YSW community. Most participants (7) describe this energetic connection or force as connected to notions of a higher power. Arielle describes her view of spirituality as “how I reconcile my very human and earthly existence with everything that is less earthly.” Danez describes not only the multiple ways they understand this sense of energy or higher power, but “I understand spirituality as a force that emanates from and around people, and I think every one of us manifests it in different ways.” They go on to illuminate how a space like Brave New Voices might be similarly conducive to engendering that type of energetic experience. “It's a space that allows for both vulnerability and an adrenaline rush at the same moment in the body, you know? I think about BNV as a space where you can be as open as possible, as naked, but all that is done with the spirit of joy and excitement and possible change.” Further illuminating how these senses of energy or higher power take many names, manifest within the YSW community, and support the sense of purpose in one’s work, Arielle tells us,

It's a connection to a divine source. It's a connection to whether some days I want to call it my "higher self," other days I want to call it my "angel," some days I want to call it "spirit guides." It's just a connection with a higher entity that I understand within my experience to be of assistance to me, that guides me that just kind of shows me how to navigate my space.... And I now feel like I follow more integrated part that acknowledges all of me and is able to take me from where I am into a more higher version of myself. An even more complete version of myself, more freed version of myself. And part of that definitely includes the work that I'm here to do. The work that I was brought on this Earth to do. And whatever I'm meant to help with in this time that I have here.

Arielle, like the other participants, explains the notion of spirituality as something that is not only connected to a very personal sense of energy or higher being but also as something that guides us all toward our best selves. Miller (2015) supports these descriptions and describes what she calls the core of spirituality, the transcendent relationship. She describes this relationship as “a dynamic sense of connection with a higher power or sacred presence. To feel transcendent is to know ourselves beyond the limits of the physical or ordinary self, as part of the greater universe.” She acknowledges that there are a variety of ways people can experience this relationship, “regardless of those variations, the transcendent relationship opens us into a sense of a sacred world with direction and connection that gives us meaning and purpose” (pp. 53-54).

However, despite the variety of ways, one of the important facets of spirituality is the notion of individual authority over one’s own experience, Miller (2015) tells us, “What makes spirituality meaningful is personal choice and ownership” (p. 9). Next, we will explore the ways spirituality is described through community or friendship.

3c. Community or Friendship

Continuing, another way participants describe spirituality within the field of YSW included as expressed through community or friendship. The three interconnected ways participants portrayed this expression as spirituality are: (i) as friendship, (ii) as communion, and (iii) as an exchange of energy or speaking and listening between others.

More often than not (6), participants described their sense of spirituality as someone as inherently tied to friendships or a sense of coming together or “communing.” Hieu describes the way he came to this understanding as through attending religious services with his friends, though he never considered himself formally religious.

I grew up in a neighborhood where every Sunday there would be a bus that picked up the kids from the hood to drive them to this Baptist church, and all my friends would go, and so I would hop on the bus even though I wasn't religious, even though I really didn't know what I was doing there, so I'd just go there to hang out with my friends.... A lot of my

spirituality comes from like confrontations with my friends, and feeling the energy of friendship and kinship.

Connected to this notion of friendship being spiritual, Will describes his own views of spirituality and likens it to the metaphor of the ocean, or of “attuning to something larger,” something he also experiences through the practice of participating in slams.

My own personal spirituality is that listening and that kind of communing.... I think in that same way, when I go to the beach and I'm body surfing, every bit of my body is attuned to something larger than myself, something that is speaking non-verbally to me. The way that I respond, that I move, is dictated by listening to the ocean. I feel the same way when I'm at a slam. When there is crowd and someone is performing and everyone is listening, we are all one ocean in a room. We are vibrating. We are moving together. The words, thoughts and emotions of one person can shift the tide so much.... That's why I love slam. I feel like that's why people are so moved by their congregations, concerts, and sports arenas. I love all of these things that bring us together, because we are so interconnected, whether or not we see it. Whenever we are gathered in a large group, it's so beautiful how we merge into one body of water, and we can communicate with each other without speaking, without moving. My spirituality believes we are all one ocean.

Will's quote combines previous ways of understanding spirituality together, as friendship and communing offering not only an opportunity to access an energy or higher power, but something beyond our understanding that can bring us all in a unified alignment.

Connected to this idea of communing is the notion of sharing, exchanging, speaking, and listening. Through workshop and performances, YSW practitioners relate these ideas to practices of spirituality. Shannon, expanding upon the connections of practitioners being in the lineage of the griot, tells us that her training and experiences in workshops and stages are parts of her spiritual understandings. “The practice of being that storyteller and training to be that storyteller, I think it's very ritualistic and takes a lot of discipline.” Then, referring to the multiple practices attached to that training, she describes modern-day griots as writing “in that workshop, taking the moment to choose the share, and then being brave enough to practice it and share it in front of thousands of people.” Connected to writing and sharing, she discusses the power of a stage as being a

holy place: “Stages for me have been holy place. And even in those places, we can be in a really big venue, but to think about how many people have touched that venue before and then here is one, solitary body on a stage at a time speaking to an audience.”

Illuminating this point of audience, Isaac describes his first experience at Brave New Voices, with thousands of people supporting him and his team: “There's no feeling in the world like that. To have 2000 people cheering, giving you standing ovation, chanting ‘Chico’ [his home city], this place that probably most of them never even heard of before. That kind of high is unimaginable.” Hieu echoed this, implicitly implying there is a spiritual or greater origins for that feeling or energy: “You have to feel like there's some kind of magic to that, and it has to come from someplace.”

Miller (2015) describes a “spiritual community” as something that might lend itself to the ways the participants described their experiences with YSW. She acknowledges that this community need not be specifically religious or spiritual in order to have a spiritual impact.

What does spiritual community look like? From campgrounds to the sanctuary, all of these spiritual communities create opportunities that are beneficial to our children: intergenerational company, support, memories of those who have died, time for quiet reflection, ritual, song, friendship, and other spiritually engaged families. A spiritual community adds to the field of love, is an extended family-by-choice that shares spiritual values, celebrates you for your spirit, and cheers or prays you through challenges. Together we sing, play, pray, learn from and tend to one another. We express our shared humanity in food or clothing drives, community service projects, car washes and benefit performances, meals, or visitations to the elderly or homebound members of the community. Spiritual community commits to the well-being of all, embraces each unconditionally, values all for their inner being, and includes them irrespective of outward merit. (p. 189)

While the expressions of spirituality through community or friendship vary in how they come across, some include overtly religious activities like prayer, and some not; there is something powerful we all must pay attention to, especially as we hope to build more spaces for diverse groups of young people to feel communities centered on love.

3d. Critical Definitions and Implications

Participants also described how they understand spirituality as having a few different considerations when it comes to critically examining spirituality and how it functions within YSW communities. These three ways include: (i) spirituality as another connected to but not under religious framework, (ii) spirituality as a highly personal/curated experience, and (iii) spirituality and religion overall as challenged in YSW communities.

First, as reflected in the literature and much of a popular discussion concerning the connections and disconnections of spirituality and religion, spirituality is, at times, understood as taking something that usually falls into a religious framework. Jamila illuminates one reason why this removal of a religious framework might take place, in efforts to not align oneself with the oppressive and complicated histories of religion. She describes spirituality as a “force that must exist because there's evidence of it everywhere without committing to any particular framework or religion because of how destructive those frameworks and religious institutions have been.” This was only mentioned by a few participants (3 out of 10) but is important to note because it especially aligns with a more popular discussion concerning religion and spirituality.

In addition, participants also describe how the presence of overt spirituality as it shows up in events, practices, and festivals is heavily dependent on who the individuals are that are in charge of curating them. More clearly stated, despite the different spiritual interpretations of experiences within the YSW community, there is no overt intention in the planning of YSW practices and events, unless brought up by the individual who is leading such event. Tish describes this when she says that in planning the Brave New Voices festival in particular, there is not an overt spiritual intention, but spirituality has arisen “when there has been a curator who has a strong spiritual sense or ancestral connection or etcetera.” This is also expanded upon by the way participants describe certain events as being curated by special guest performers or curators. Walter Hidalgo

(2011) echoes this notion of individuals being the ones who inject spiritual intentions into Hip Hop communities when he discusses Hip Hop language, such as the words “cipher,” as having roots with the Five Percenters. He says, “Although Hip Hop has no official affiliation with any particular religion or doctrine, reference of God, or Allah, in Hip Hop lyrics is as common as these MC’s who produce them” (p. 9). Telling us that although the culture is not officially affiliated, the individuals who contribute, guide, and shape the community are, and this is visible in the language produced by the artists.

Even then, the type of spiritual experience, or comfort with the experience, varies among participants. Arielle, who described herself as a Christian person as she attended Brave New Voices as a youth, calls the names of a few particular performers and leaders (Queen GodIs, Dennis), even though she may not have fully aligned with the spiritual angle being put forth. “And even though I did not at all agree with her spiritual angle then, there was no forsaking that she was magic. That was such a massive performance for me. Massive.” This quote speaks to a larger understanding among the participants in this study that viewed spirituality as a highly personal experience, despite the generalizable, unifying qualities of such experiences.

Connected to this personal sense of spiritual experiences is also the context of YSW communities being critical toward particular views of religion. Participants also describe experiences of being pushed to rethink or question their own religious views as a result of some experiences criticizing religion in the YSW community. While participants did not describe these experiences as particularly pleasant, they all, in retrospect, offer appreciation for the community to offer critique of religion in ways they had not experienced before. Arielle describes the time she heard a poem at Brave New Voices that she describes as the "Fuck You, Jesus" poem. In hearing that poem, she says, “That was like, 'What am I doing here?' and it was a 'Fuck you, God' poem, and well, he started off with Jesus and ended up with God, and then he like looked up at the sky and was like, 'Fuck you! Fuck you!' And I'm ... so that made me cringe a whole lot.” Similarly, Jamila,

who also was a (as she describes overzealous) Christian at the time of Brave New Voices, describes her experience in contrast to her racial experience by saying, “It was so easy to be unapologetically Black, but not as easy to be unapologetically Christian, and that made me feel a tremendous amount of guilt.”

Despite these experiences of cringe and guilt as youth participants, participants still describe the challenging, critical exploration of religion as a productive practice that supported them in being able to explore different sides of their sense of spirituality or religion and be prepared to either shift or “dance” (as Jamila describes) with the conflicting beliefs that continue throughout their lifetimes. Jamila illuminates this by saying, “The pushback was important, being forced to rethink things ... it would keep refining my thinking and pushing me forward. I never left my spiritual Christian home, but I think that I'm a much better person now because of it.”

Related to this, Isaac also describes his understanding of his Jewish faith as being supported by his experiences with YSW. He describes that his experience in his Jewish community growing up wasn't as clearly connected to the ideals of social justice he experienced with YSW and what he felt in his own growing up. He describes that as a young poet, he was deeply conflicted with the complex views of support of Israel and Zionism that he didn't quite align with. Then, through an opportunity to write a poem for a large poetry event (Bringing the Noise), he was able to work through his own tensions and reach a point where he was able to feel at home in the complexities of his experiences.

To me, justice and spirituality are fundamentally interconnected. And so, if I'm standing on the side of life, and of God and of the universe, and of justice, then I'm siding with the oppressed. Period. And that's what Brave New Voices taught me. That's why I turned to poetry at a time when I was stepping away from organized religion. I think in a way poetry brought me back to Judaism, ... that poem that I read at Bringing the Noise was a big part of me coming back into Judaism and claiming Judaism after feeling so alienated from it.

Notions of spirituality and religion have complex presences as a part of YSW communities that are expressed and experienced through different ways. Participants show that, at the very least, these are topics worth discussing, especially the way they relate to students later in life.

These dueling experiences of the participants speak to the fact that African American artists have always called for religious communities to commit more authentically to the aims of social justice. Sorrett (2016) also offers a history where artists have always called for accountability from religious communities and offers the example of Benjamin Mays, author of *The Negro's God*, that offered a first text that deeply explored the dual trajectories of the fields of African American literature and religion. Sorrett describes that with this text, he also made a “call for a more radicalized form of religious activism for racial equality.” Quoting Mays, Sorrett says, “‘Unless liberal prophetic religion moves more progressively to the left,’ he warned, African Americans would increasingly continue on a path toward atheism” (p. 2). Acknowledging this history, one might wonder how and if the “F-- God” poems in the YSW community might be necessarily connected to the dual histories of religion, spirituality, and African American arts traditions in the United States.

Summary of Chapter

In summary, in analysis of data in reference to RQ1, “How do YSW educators who have grown from youth participants (13-19) to adult practitioners (20+) describe and/or define the fields of YSW & HHBE?” and “What do these descriptions tell us about if and how they are making meaning of race and spirituality?” found three major themes:

- (1) YSW and HHBE are fields that (a) are interconnected, (b) position young people as brave leaders, and (c) are multicultural and pluralistic.

- (2) Descriptions of race within the field of YSW are described as (a) grounded in unity across difference, and (b) centered on people of color.
- (3) Descriptions and definitions of spirituality within the field of YSW are described as (a) honoring that which came before, (b) grounded in energy, higher power, and purpose, (c) expressed through community, and finally (d) offering opportunity for critical analysis of complex religious or spiritual concepts.

In the next chapter, I will explore the findings related to RQ2, which asks, “What literacy practices are these HHBE practitioners describing and enacting as they negotiate the network?” and “What literacy practices are being enacted especially as it relates to New Literacies, racial literacy, and spiritual literacy?”

Chapter VI

MAKING THINGS VISIBLE—FINDING PART 2

"Your voice is more resource than reservoir." (Arielle John)

In this chapter, I will offer findings that speak to the second of the two research questions that guide this study, where I ask, “What literacy practices are these HHBE practitioners describing and enacting as they negotiate the network?” and “What literacy practices are being enacted especially as it relates to New Literacies, especially Hip Hop literacies, racial literacy, and spiritual literacy?” In exploring these questions, participants had a wide variety of practices in which they engage as they navigate the concepts proposed. While the question very clearly separates the different literacy practices that offer a framing for this work, in this chapter I do not delineate between which literacy practices are framed under each category. However, as mentioned previously, participants viewed the different literacies as intricately connected. Despite the fluid nature of literacies and literacy practices, presenting findings in the way they are set forth herein, a somewhat linear way will be most informative for the purposes of this dissertation.

The core findings that will be illuminated in this chapter include the following themes that are all connected to the larger theme of “Voice,” or what I describe as “literacies connected to voice.” The themes under the overall theme of voice are: (1) Voice with self, (2) Voice with others, and (3) Voice with Spirit.

The concept of voice has been studied by multiple disciplines and at times is something that is “fuzzy, slippery, hard to define, and nearly impossible to teach” (Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard, & Freedman, 2011, p. 71). Within the field of literacy studies and aligned with the frameworks of this study, Sperling et al. define voice as “a

language performance—always social, mediated by experience, and culturally embedded” (p. 71). They go on to explore the ways voice is described as something that is understood as an individual accomplishment, as something that is socially or culturally constructed, and as something that is ideological. The findings in this study certainly align with the claims made by Sperling et al. and offer different nuanced perspectives for how we can understand voice. The opening quote, *"Your voice is more resource than reservoir,"* reminds us that, while much has been said, explored, and studied, the resource of voice is something that is unending, where possibilities abound.

A grid-view of the themes and subthemes that will be discussed in this chapter is provided here.

Table 6. The Power of Literacies Connected to Voice

Question Answered	Theme	Subtheme (Literacy Practices)	Mentioned by #	Subsubtheme
RQ2	1) Voice with Self	a) writing for self	8/10	ai) as tool for processing aii) as creative tool for self-discovery aiii) as a tool to address challenging experiences
		b) defining self in context	10/10	bi) as space of safety bii) as process of accountability biii) as expression of indescribable
	2) Voice with Others	a) giving and sharing	10/10	ai) as powerful way to be seen aii) as way of pushing through stagnation aiii) as path to external support
		b) receiving and listening	6/10	bi) as breaking down the 4th wall bii) listening as an act of love
		c) collaborating	9/10	ci) as the power of co-creation cii) as tool to find common ground

Table 6 (continued)

Question Answered	Theme	Subtheme (Literacy Practices)	Mentioned by #	Subsubtheme
RQ2	3) Voice with Spirit	a) calling upon the past	10/10	ai) as way to tell ancestors stories aii) as practice for knowing possibilities
		b) calling upon the present	8/10	bi) as bridge from past to present to future bii) experience in present as prayer
		c) calling upon the future	6/10	ci) as path to healing cii) as incantation ciii) as quest to manifest liberation

1. “The Standard is Yourself”: Voice with Self

Throughout the process of analyzing the interviews and artifacts of the different participants, I was able to find patterns in the practices they experienced and described in relation to the research questions of this dissertation. Similar to the findings in the previous chapter, I also began to notice that these practices are extremely interconnected, and at times the distinctions made here are almost arbitrary. However, in an effort to demonstrate the practices most clearly, I have organized them in the following ways to make the most sense with what aligns with how they were presented, how they were described, and how they were understood. Related to the theme “voice with self,” the two major themes that arose were (a) writing for self, and (b) defining self in context. Each theme will be explained in detail in the following.

1a. Writing for Self

YSW practitioners engaged in practices related to notions of voice with self in a variety of ways. Three ways the data demonstrated most clearly were (i) as a tool for

processing, (ii) as a creative tool for self-discovery, and (iii) as a tool to address challenging experiences.

(i) First, participants described their solitary writing practices in ways that all pointed to the understanding that writing was bringing them toward a *process* rather than a *product* of great writing. Jamila illustrates this practice while reflecting on the so-so quality of her work as a youth and how it not only allowed her to process the ways she felt and understood the world, but also what type of work and path she would continue to take in her life.

My poetry wasn't really good, it wasn't good at all. I was saying things that now I would be like, "Why in the world would I say that?" But, having the space to process that and to be affirmed did something for me in terms of my confidence, I guess? Right now, I'm a speaker and I'm a speaker because I probably put in my 10 thousand hours across the spoken word scene.

More or less, she relates this practice of being able to process through writing as something that not only helped her flesh out her ideas, but also supported her confidence and gave her the opportunity to invest her time toward what would eventually be a huge part of her professional career (as a speaker and professor). Jamila captures this theme and credits that the field of YSW was able to offer years of opportunities for her to engage in professional practice before she even considered herself a "professional."

(ii) Connected to the processes Jamila describes, another way participants engage with writing for self is through a journey of self-discovery. Tish speaks to this directly in describing how writing a poem can be a power individual process. "The process of writing a poem is deeply critical, introspective, and informative. It affords the writer an opportunity to learn more about themselves, to play and imagine, while simultaneously giving us a safe space to challenge, critique, and ask questions about the world through a creative process." Before a poet even brings their poem on to a stage, Tish illuminates this internal, complex process that writing a poem affords.

(iii) Taking it a bit more specifically, some participants also referred to the process of writing a poem as a space where they were able to attempt to address challenging experiences and concepts that had not quite been put into words. In the following, Isaac explains this concept through telling me about his attempts at addressing instances he had not fully processed or healed from regarding difficult interactions with his mentor by picking up a pen.

When I started to be like, "This experience doesn't make sense, why do I have to make sense in writing about it?" It never made sense when I told people about it. It never made sense when I write about it. It never feels right. What if I turn that feeling of not feeling right into a form, a poetic form.

Isaac describes his experience of writing as freeing, once he embarked on expressing himself through different forms. From this, we can see that there is no one way for this solo writing to take place or what effect it may have and that different people experience this process and development differently.

1b. Defining Self in Context

Associated with this idea of solitary writing as being a practice one might engage with in the YSW field is that it is connected to processes of self-definition within a cultural, political, and social context. Some of these contexts exist beyond the self, the page, and the pen, and participants in this study discuss the ways they (i) ensure a safe writing context, (ii) engage in a process of accountability for themselves, and (iii) move through putting words to the indescribable.

(i) Solo writing, before and after it is shared, supports individuals in their defining of their own beliefs within a safe context. Exemplifying this concept, Hieu describes his experiences as a teacher, and how in his workshops how he is careful to acknowledge the difficult interpersonal topics that often arise in performances. He also never forces people to share what they have written. "I always say write the poem, but you don't need to share it until you're ready. You don't need to put yourself on that stage until you're ready. If

you're never ready, that's okay too. You don't ever have to share it, but writing it is important.” Participants described their role as solo writers, and as workshop facilitators, there is much value placed on ensuring a safe environment and experience in the process of writing.

(ii) Beyond this individual and collective space of safety, participants also described writing with self in the YSW community as offering a sense of awareness and accountability—to oneself and to others. Will expresses his experience of this by describing how YSW was different from his schooling experience or anything he had engaged with before.

Poetry showed me how to be confident, showed me how to be brave, showed me how to be vulnerable with my own voice, which is never something that I had encountered in this world before. Just that, that level of awareness, one, awareness of my own voice, and two, being introduced to a world where my voice mattered was a weight that I had never carried before. I had just been hammered into me through the public education system that your opinions don't matter, your plans don't matter.... I'd never really heard my own voice until I encountered slam and that community. It was eye opening in so many different ways. Yeah, it made me realize the volume, power and responsibility of my own convictions.... Nothing teaches people how to think critically like telling them their voice matters.... Radical self-awareness is so beautiful, and it's something that I've discovered through this art form.

Will describes how the process of writing his story and sharing it in YSW communities taught him to be able to see himself and also hold himself accountable through the process. He describes that, in direct contrast to his experience in traditional schooling, he was able to feel valued and important in YSW communities. He also connects this expression of his own voice to the powerful experience of it forcing him to become accountable for what he chooses to say.

(iii) In addition, another way participants describe the power of defining self within a greater context might be this concept of putting words to that which cannot be described. Hieu, on a panel discussing the power of spoken word, shared a story about experiencing poetry break the silences of a grieving community.

I live on the same block as the precinct that killed Jamar Clark in Minneapolis. When the protestors shut down the block, they were there for a whole month, ... even through Thanksgiving. People had Thanksgiving dinner in front of that precinct. People brought out tents so that people could have a meal together for the people who are occupying that street. One thing I remember the most was hearing young people in this group of people who are grieving break that silence with poems.... Poetry was the translation of a moment or a feeling. In that space, these young people were doing poems that translated the indescribable, something that translated this grief, that translated this trauma and they put it into language.

In his description, Hieu speaks to this notion that there are many human emotions and experiences that may not be easily put into words, but at times, the words that are offered can be viewed as “translations” of that which is indescribable. Hieu is also discussing how the methods of poetry, writing, and healing offer a shared language and experience within larger social and cultural contexts, especially as they relate to movements for racial justice.

Winn (2016), in an article about a group of what she names the “Power Writers” over a ten -year period, discusses the many paths through which these students-turned-teachers find pride with their work and writing. An important distinction she makes it that the individuals build upon “others sources of pride while also demonstrating their unique pathways” (p. 24). A key noticing of her work is this notion of a collective community composed of unique individuals on their own paths. This reminds me that often one of the core rules of YSW practice is “The Standard is Yourself.” With this rule, you are encouraged never to compare yourself to anyone else and only to compare yourself to yourself. Everyone in the YSW community is on their own individual path, discovering their unique ways in which they will “write for self.”

2. “Call and Response”: Voice with Others

A second theme connected to the idea of voice is this concept of the practices related to “voice with others” or how we might understand one’s voice in the context of a

community with others. Aligned with sociocultural theories of learning, we will look at voice here as something that is “essentially the result of a social and cultural mediation with the individual” (Sperling et al., 2011, p. 73). The practices related to this theme will be explored in the following section and can be understood in the following three interrelated ways: (a) giving and sharing, (b) receiving and listening, and (c) collaborating.

2a. Giving and Sharing

While many of the previous descriptions and examples may have spoken to this idea, I describe how YSW practitioners experiences can be understood as connected to “giving in sharing” in a few different ways. These ways can be organized by way of the following concepts: (i) as a powerful way to be seen, (ii) as a way of pushing through stagnation, and (iii) as a path to external support.

(i) One way practitioners describe the processes of giving and sharing through YSW is through the experience of performing on stage. More often than not, practitioners describe their first time on a stage performing a poem as being extremely powerful, supportive experiences, despite their newness to the craft. Danez exemplifies this when they describe their first time performing at Brave New Voices. Their descriptions, like those of their peer participants in this study, go beyond what we might think of when we think of teenage poets performing for the first time.

It had already been such a magical day. I had seen some of the best poems I felt like I had ever seen at that point in time. I was in wonder at everything. Then I got to do this poem. I wasn't that good of a performer at the time. I was just very shy and actually nervous a little bit at poetry. It was even something about the room, the people who were there. I think everything froze in that moment.... I felt very safe, protected, seen, and possible, in a way that I hadn't before. It felt other-worldly. I felt outside of my body.

While Danez speaks to the many other aspects of his experience, the experience of feeling seen in a world that so often erases young people must be one of which to take

note. Danez is describing the multiple factors (of being inspired, of being brave enough to share despite nerves, of the feeling in the room) that allowed them to grace the stage and in turn feel “safe, protected, seen, and possible.”

(ii) Connected to this, Arielle explains another theme that arose of participants describing their performing as pushing them through stagnation, especially as connected to the process of sharing a poem and being validated by the audience. She describes the way she pushed herself to perform after having a long period of writer’s block.

So I was like, "Okay, okay, okay, get rid of the blocks and just write it." And when I finally got back up on that stage, it felt like the beginning of something for me. It felt like I was ready to shift back into performer mode, into sharing my work again mode, and it was kind of a homecoming. And all the love that people gave and I think somebody tattooed a line of mine on them. It was just really beautiful and endearing. It was like one of those family, hold-you-close moments. And that for me, I could never, I can't forget that.

She said that after months of not writing, she shared a poem, and a member of the YSW community was so moved that they tattooed a line of hers on their arm. When I asked her what line it was, she shared with me the line that opened this chapter, "Your voice is more resource than reservoir." She describes this moment as key in how the YSW community has motivated her to write and continue writing despite how difficult it may be at times.

(iii) Further, another way the practice of voice with others/giving can be understood is through the concept that the act of sharing functions as an opportunity for inviting external support. Christina, in a blog she wrote about the practices of the team at Youth Speaks Seattle, described different ways the youth poets, through sharing their pieces, opened doors to external support they had not previously had access to. In her post, she describes the process of a young person sharing their piece and receiving support from a poet mentor to try something.

It wasn’t until Kim shared her poem about male rappers, a poem she wrote to male rappers and the rap industry; she raps as she shares it and it

is always mind blowing each time. Once she shared her poem, Dako'ta [the alumni poet mentor] suggested to test different mediums and added a beat into the mix. Kim then added her poem to the beat and that was when gears started to turn. We found out that not only was Kim a poet but she was secretly a rapper in the making.

Christina, along with Danez and Arielle, describes how the process of sharing one's voice with others acts almost as a call to a community, to be seen, to be pushed forward, and to be supported. For all three, community is a vital component on how they express this theme of "giving and sharing."

2b. Receiving and Listening

In addition to the ways "voice with others" is expressed through "Giving and Sharing," it also can be understood through "Receiving and Listening." While these two concepts are deeply interconnected, there are a few ways they can be distinguished. In the following, I discuss two ways practitioners described this process as (i) breaking down the Fourth Wall and (ii) listening as an act of love.

(i) The first way we can understand this subtheme from the practitioner's view is through this idea of "breaking down the fourth wall." While only one participant used this exact term (Tish Jones), it was expressed by multiple participants. Tish describes the fourth wall as "this imaginary line between the performer and the audience. Meaning, I need to hear from you." She describes that, while she was giving a TedTalk lecture, at one moment there needed to be a "Call and Response." She instructed her audience, "If you hear something that resonates with you, in any way, at any time, snap your fingers. It's true to the poetic tradition and it will let me know that you're rocking with me. Cool?" The idea of call and response is fleshed out in Chapter II and will be further discussed in Chapter VII, but in this example, Tish illuminates the idea that as a performer, one is always receiving from the audience. In YSW especially, it is an intentional practice.

(ii) Next, the ways one practices receiving or listening is integrally tied to a practice of love. Participants describe the power in which their own work is listened to and the power in which they embark on listening to their colleagues' or students' work. Will, while presenting a workshop at Barnard College, had two requests of the audience before he began his performance, which was leading into an open mic. In addition to engaging the audience in a practice of call and response, he said there were two rules of the night. The first was "Be the best listener in the room," and the second was to "Love harder than you listen." In discussion about this in his interview, he described how he began saying that at his events because he wanted to explicitly draw people's attention to how love can be expressed through intentional listening practices, especially in YSW communities and events.

2c. Collaborating

In addition, YSW practitioners describe the practice of collaboration as a powerful component to how voice with others can be expressed. Practitioners demonstrated that the two nuanced ways this can be understood are (i) as the power of co-creation, and (ii) as a tool to find common ground.

(i) A common practice among YSW practitioners is the workshop. Many practitioners discussed that they had powerful experiences through engaging in workshops with diverse groups of people, especially through Brave New Voices. Participants' experiences with others by using their voice in the process of co-creation proved to be a powerful theme that arose in the data. Will's experience exemplifies this theme when he describes his first time competing in a slam as a Brave New Voices participant. He discusses how the process of "competing" was of relatively little importance compared to the powerful co-creation and community-building experience he had had in a workshop with the same competitors a day prior.

We ended up at a workshop the day before with most of the Denver and Seattle people [teams he was competing against], and it wasn't like, oh, we're boutting against you tomorrow. It was just like, "Hi, I'm really excited to meet you. Let's write some poems today. Let's share, let's experience this together. Let's just build." That was such a wonderful way to walk into that space, so when we saw each other at the bout and the competition the next night, we still brought our poems. We really performed and poured our hearts out on that stage, but it was all out of a place of love. Where we could say I want to show you the things that I've crafted with my heart and experiences and memories and time. I want to show you this.

Will describes the power of this process of co-creation as something that not only builds community, but also as something that links people together through a shared process. This shared process of co-creation proves to be something that can override the feelings of separateness and division present when such diverse groups of people come together and possibly is correlated to the feelings of unity described in the previous chapter.

(ii) Another way participants employ this practice of using their voice with others is as a tool for finding common ground among those who are different. Multiple participants discussed the process of using YSW as a shared language among people who are different. Saju offers an experience that speaks to this theme when he discusses his first time coming to the United States for the Brave New Voices Festival, when he was held back in the airport by a border patrol agent. In this story, he describes the part of airport officials saying that they can't find him in the booking listings and that he ran a security risk. The part of this story I want to emphasize here is how he was able to use poetry (rap) as a unifying practice that linked him and the agent, which supported the issue being resolved.

First the guy spoke to me in Spanish, assuming that I was of some Hispaniola or Hispanic, or Latino descent.... Then he's like, "You're not on the system."... He's told the guy that he can't find me, potential threat, this, that. They cuffed me, took me to a high security office, kept me there for a few hours and then they took me to a counter. The guy asked me, "What are you here for?" I told him for a spoken word slam, Brave New Voices. He goes, "Oh you're a poet?" I go, "Yeah, a poet and I rap." He goes, "Spit me a verse. Spit me your meanest 16." I spit him a 16. They question me

about the [experience]. He apologized and he goes [...] He goes, "They shouldn't have brought you here. They should have questioned you. I can see your name's here anyway." That was like two and a half hours wasted.

Although the resolution may have not been directly linked to this practice of sharing art, Saju describes that it is important to note that this process of utilizing one's voice with others is a powerful practice that should be explored further.

Winn and Ubiles (2011) discuss ideas related to this theme and offer the lens of "worthy witnessing." While their study includes a multiphase process that applies primarily to researchers, it can be applied in in this instance as well. They discuss the many stages of "worthy witnessing" as being (1) Admission, or being "admitted" to a community as a research, (2) Declaration, or introducing oneself to the community, (3) Revelation, or a mutual relationship having been established, and (4) Confidentiality, or honoring the information shared in an exchange. I think about the different stages Saju and the security officer went through or that Will went through in his workshop spaces. Because I know they didn't have this lens of "worthy witnessing" before describing these stories, I wonder if both Winn/Ubiles *and* the participants are speaking to something much more fundamental to human nature and possibly our cultural, racial, and spiritual selves in the process.

3. "The Missing Piece": Voice with Spirit

"I have been called to represent the missing piece." (Jones, 2017)

A third theme connected to the idea of voice is this concept of the practices related to "voice with spirit," or how we might understand one's voice in the context of understanding the notion of spirit. While, as we know, spirit can be defined in many different ways, the practices related to this theme are organized as follows: (a) as calling upon the past, (b) as calling upon the present, and (c) as calling upon the future. Again, these themes are interrelated and will be fleshed out in the following sections.

3a. Calling Upon the Past

This notion of calling upon the past is framed in part by the way YSW practitioners engage with the stories and storytellers of the past. YSW practitioners engaged in practices related to notions of “calling upon the past” in a variety of ways. Two ways the data demonstrated most clearly were (i) as a way to tell ancestors’ stories, and (ii) as a practice for imagining possibilities.

(i) One way practitioners engage with the practice of calling on the past is through the practice of telling the stories of our ancestors. Tish Jones exemplifies this theme through her poem, “Tracks,” throughout the entire piece and through this excerpt:

My name is Tish Jones and I've been called to represent
ancestors whose blood sifts through the palms
of my little brother's hands as he plays in the sand and they bless him.

In exploring this piece in a TEDx Minneapolis talk, she discusses each part of the piece, and one theme she discusses is the power of poetry to speak to and “incorporate the absent narrative.” She describes the many ways people, especially young people of color from non-dominant cultures and communities, are often left out of larger conversations that directly impact them.

You see, disenfranchised people often have their stories told for them. We’re studied. By researchers, reporters, missionaries and the like. Rarely do we get a chance to tell our own stories in our vernacular, from our perspective, unabashedly. Spoken Word affords us that opportunity. Keeps us in the tradition of our ancestors and frees us from threats imposed upon us by external and dominant narrative about our communities. It combats erasure and omission. It allows us to write and keep our history. The people’s version.

While her commentary in this quote centers on the present, this attention to the present is directly tied to the tradition of ancestors and sense of calling to represent what has come before.

(ii) Another way participants engage with this practice of calling upon the past is by using old texts or stories as practices for imagining what is possible. Saju described his experience with multiple religious and cultural texts as experiences that supported his

ability to imagine what could be possible and also gain a sense of what is right from wrong. Again, in the stories he shares below, we see this calling upon the past as deeply connected to a function of the present.

Before even I got into poetry writing, I've been influenced by faith or stories of the past. Like I say, I was lucky to grow up in Leeds where it's a diverse community where a Muslim lives next door to a Christian [...] Like on my street I remember there was a religious woman, a Christian woman that lived on our street. She'd give us toys to play with, badminton sticks. She'd tell me about Jesus Christ all the time but also my grandma used to tell me about Jesus Christ all the time, so it was cool. [...] Most of the time my mum would send me to say a Quranic class for two hours a week to learn the Islamic text and listening to the stories there. The Islamic versions of the Old Testament and listening about Moses, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac. You know, It's the same old stories we all get. Then growing up in a house that Bollywood had a big influence as well being South Asian. My family watched a lot of Mahabharat. Yes, a Muslim family watching Hindu text in video form, learning about the Hindu scriptures.... It fascinated me. It was good for the imagination.

Saju describes that his interaction with these multiple stories of the past offered a lens for him to explore imagination, to explore questions of culture, morality, and spirituality, all things he considers to be influences on his work and life today.

3b. Calling Upon the Present

This notion of calling upon the present is framed in part by the way YSW practitioners engage with the stories and storytellers of the now. YSW practitioners engaged in practices related to notions of “calling upon the present” in a variety of ways. Two ways the data demonstrated most clearly were (i) as a bridge from past to present to future, and (ii) as experience in the present as prayer, or as proclaiming one’s power in the present.

(i) In our calling upon the past, we act as a bridge from past to present to future. As referred to in the previous with the examples from Tish and Saju, participants demonstrated that they actively and explicitly refer to themselves as one who is holding connections between the past, present, and the future. Christina illustrates this point when

she introduces herself and describes her work as part of Youth Speaks Seattle (YSS) on their website.

My name is Christina Nguyen and I am the new Teen Leadership Program and Youth Speaks Seattle Coordinator. I am very humbled to be carrying on the legacy of the past mentors of Youth Speaks and upholding the generation from before and after.

Where I stand right now, I am the bridge that connects the future youth coming into the program and the ones who left a legacy. I feel as if I'm the Avatar or Guardian by carrying on legacies I've witnessed and add more to the life and journey of YSS ahead until my term is up. Right now, I am thrilled to pave new ways to help deepen the meaning of Youth Speaks among new communities.

In this quote, Christina illuminates how participants often view themselves as the intermediary between the past, present, and the future. In these instances, there is an understanding of time that is not rigidly adhered to in a linear sense. These examples speak to a cyclical nature of time.

(ii) Related to this is this idea that participants demonstrated the concept that I refer to as “experience in the present can be a form of prayer,” especially as it relates to the process of creating and sharing. Again, participants maintain a sense of continuity between the moments they spend “in the present” to that which has come before and that which will come after. Christina describes the ways she feels that, in the process of going on stage, and expressing one’s power, in a way, this can be likened to prayer or a holy experience. She says, “In a way it’s like a prayer, you’re going up and [...it’s...] a moment where you’re speaking, and everyone listens.” She continues, “In a way, poetry is like a prayer, people are going up on stage and sharing their story of what they went through but also sharing what they want to see as well in re-carving their world.” Similar to this, Shannon also describes the experience of being on stage as a holy occurrence. Shannon says, “Stages for me have been holy places.... I’m very grateful to have had my feet in so many holy places.” While these descriptions slightly differ in how participants

described what they understood as the “present,” the repetition of this theme in the data showed that it is something that demands attention.

Scholars throughout time have attempted to be the ones who create a bridge that honors the past to the present. Sorett (2016) speaks to this idea of seeing his work as something like a bridge and acknowledges that these literary traditions always incorporate both secular and spiritual sides, especially as related to African American literary traditions and defining the multiplicity of influences that undergird notions of Blackness or African American literary arts.

Saturday nights, Sunday mornings. Sacred spaces, secular places. Black congregations, white audiences. Other-worldly preoccupations, this-worldly powers. Converted souls, financial gains. Religious salvation, racial transcendence. Old-time religion, modern literary visions. All of these modes, moods, and meanings were entangled, along with many more, in the history of racial aesthetics—a genealogy of spirit (in the dark). (p. 219)

So even if a poet might not explicitly pull the past into the present or a future imagining, there always remain what Sorett describes as “entangled” racial aesthetics connected to how (African American) spirit is manifested through art.

Part 3c. Calling Upon the Future

The third subtheme of “Voice with Spirit” of calling upon the past is framed in part by the way YSW practitioners engage with their voices in relationship to the future. YSW practitioners engaged in practices related to notions of “calling upon the future” in a variety of ways. Three ways the data demonstrated most clearly were: (i) as a path to healing, (ii) as incantation, or spell to impact the future, and (iii) as a quest to manifest liberation.

The first way practitioners engage this practice of “calling upon the future” is through an intention of healing ourselves and our communities from current challenges. Jamila exemplifies this theme when she leads workshop participants through an exercise

in speaking to themselves “from the other side of their pain.” She first offers the outline that she is using the tool the singer Adele uses in her song, “Hello from the other side,” where she reads that song is about a single person saying “hello” to oneself from the other side of a challenge. She immediately connects this exercise to her view that eventually she will be someone’s ancestor and leads a group of participants through this exercise. She also frames this as utilizing fire as a power to define us, which I will explore further in the following chapter.

I'm embracing the mindset that I'm going to be somebody's ancestor.... The inspiration for framing this piece in the future actually was inspired oddly enough by Adele. So, Adele's song, "Hello From the Other Side," I read an interview about it. And I'm thinking this is a long song, cool. Adele says, "That's one level, but another level of this song is that I'm actually speaking to myself from the other side of my struggle."... When we think about what it means to speak to ourselves from the other side of our struggle, what this does is, it helps us to imagine the power of leaning into the fire not as something that has the capacity to defeat us. But something actually that has the capacity to develop us. Right? What would it mean even in terms of content to have a classroom space where you normalize struggle? Right? We normalize and de-stigmatize struggle as a natural process to our growth.... But if I visualize triumph in the future, I get to do something that I ask my young people to do every day. I get to author my own narrative of victory, right now.

Jamila offers the workshop participants the experience of “calling upon the future” through viewing it as a path to healing, not only for individuals, but also for participants to be able to pass on the experience to students in their classrooms.

Connected to this, participants engaged with the practice of using voice with spirit more specifically with the intention of an incantation, or of setting a spell. Danez shared their understanding of this theme when I asked them about the spiritual connections within YSW. Their description, again, calls upon ancestors and the past in direct relationship to the present and the future.

Yeah, I think it's very spiritual because you can't have that much energy and literal spirit in a room together without it bubbling over in some way. I don't think it's tied to any necessarily like, anything about nationality, but I think there is something ancient and ancestral about

gathering folks in a room in that way where we're actually chanting these poems. It's incantatory. I think because of the more woo-woo and magical and spiritual ancestors that poetry has, I think poetry is very much like spell making in a way. I think because you have all these incantations being spoken into a space in a concentrated amount of time, I think it reaches in its later days, a fever pitch.... You can't ask that many people to come and to speak lyrics and power and truth in that type of way and not have it be some type of spiritual event.... A lot of the poems are future focused and focused on what we've been fucking up on and also where we want to head. I think people are showing up and saying what they want and I think that practice of speaking into the world their intentions is a very special thing that God just shows up.

Danez speaks to this idea that the process of speaking one's truth may be considered a practice that is inherently spiritual or incantatory, and deeply connected to how we understand our own interactions with spirit. Tish echoes this when she says, "I believe that there are different ways in which we are connected to our ancestors and connected to spirit in different ways and different things could be intoned and called into space to guide us and move us forward." She connects these intonations or practices that might connect us to spirit as not only practices that connect to the past, but also to practices that help "move us forward."

The final way participants engage with this practice of "calling upon the future" is as a practice that aids individuals and communities in the quest for collective liberation. Tish discusses this theme while discussing this idea of purpose in her talk. She tells us, "Spoken Word is a radical tool in the quest for our collective liberation. It's a way for the voiceless to reclaim language, to reclaim words and re-shape the world." Isaac Miller's (2017) interview with Danez Smith, titled "Imagining Better Gods," explores how this practice of using "voice with spirit" can be a tool for us to look at our past, call upon the present, and imagine better futures. In the interview, Danez says, "To imagine better gods helps us imagine ourselves as better people, and as better communities, and as better societies."

There are many ways participants in YSW might engage with what I name "Voice with Spirit." These include how participants (a) "call upon the past" through intentional

connection with ancestral lineages, (b) “call upon the present” through viewing oneself as a bridge between what came before and what comes after, and (c) “call upon the future” by imagining, hoping, and dreaming for a better future.

Summary of Chapter

In summary, in analysis of data referencing research questions 2 and 2.5, three major themes of findings arose connected to the overall theme of voice. As a reminder, the guiding questions were “What literacy practices are these HHBE practitioners describing and enacting as they negotiate the network?” and “What literacy practices are being enacted especially as it relates to New Literacies, racial literacy, and spiritual literacy?” The core findings that were illuminated included the following themes that are all connected to the larger theme of “Voice,” or what I describe as “Literacies connected to voice.”:

- (1) Voice with self and how YSW participants engage in literacy practices of
 - (a) write for self and (b) define oneself within a community context.
- (2) Voice with others, and how YSW participants engage in literacy practices of
 - (a) giving or sharing, (b) receiving or listening, or (c) collaborating with others.
- (3) Voice with Spirit, and how YSW participants engage in literacy practices of
 - (a) calling upon the past, (b) calling upon the present, and (c) calling upon the future.

I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Genesis 9:13 New International Version (NIV)

Chapter VII

DISCUSSION: TO THE END OF OUR OWN RAINBOWS

As people, we are always in a process of becoming who we are and who we are called to be. This dissertation has demonstrated ways YSW, as a Hip Hop community of practice, supports people through this process of becoming.

This process of becoming (as described by Emdin, 2010, 2017; Greene, 2010; and Pinn, 2003) is something that is intimately intertwined with the goals of much of our work in education, to support revolutionary change in society. This process of becoming is also something that occurs under a certain perspective or “quality of light” by those who are experiencing this process. Or, as described by Audre Lorde (1984) at the start of this dissertation, "The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives" (p. 36). She goes on to describe that the outcomes of this process of becoming, especially as it relates to utilizing poetry, is powerful in impacting the world.

It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless-about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.

As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny, and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us. (p. 36)

Lorde describes this powerful process of “scrutinizing” one’s life as occurring directly through the creation of poetry. While she may refer to the very literal process of sitting down and putting words on a paper, I suggest that her analysis can be extended to a community like the YSW field, a community that, while grounded in the writing and reading of poetry, is also committed to a way of being, living, and coming together that is analogous to the creation of poetry.

That said, one way to refine “the quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives” could be understood as the same process that a rainbow goes through. A rainbow is created by light going through three key processes—three key processes that will help illuminate the major findings of this dissertation. These three processes are: (1) reflection, (2) refraction, and (3) dispersion.

The journey the light goes through to become a rainbow begins when a ray of light meets a droplet of water. It is first *reflected* by the layers of the droplets of water (the front layer and the back layer—see Figure 1). At the same time that it reflects off the back and the front of the drop, it is also *refracted* (or its course is slightly changed) as it goes through the boundaries of the drop. The light is then *dispersed*, creating the colorful landscape of the rainbow, which is when you or I will be able to witness it in the sky. Rainbows are created from water that results from multiple causes, such as rain from above, a sprinkler in a yard, or the splash of a waterfall. The arc-nature of a rainbow is created based on the angle of the witness in relationship to the sun (lumencandela, 2018). This becoming process of a light ray in a rainbow is a multi-tiered process that can also be viewed as a metaphor for the major findings of this dissertation. These findings highlight the importance of (1) Reflection, or Individual Identities, (2) Refraction, or Communities of Practice, and (3) Dispersion, or dreaming, sharing, and revolutionizing the world as we know it. These ideas will be explored below as a way to summarize and discuss the findings in a unified way.

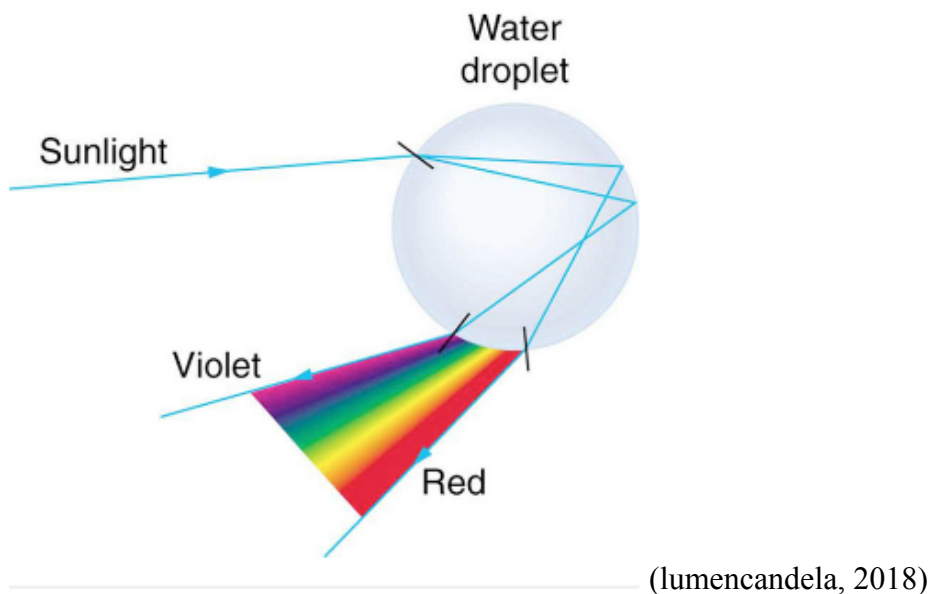


Figure 1. Rainbow

Reflection—Individual Identities

“Revolution begins with the self.” (Bambara & Traylor, 2005, p. 133)

One key finding across the study was understanding the importance of reflection, or for individual identities to be honored in all of their complexity. This reflection can take place in multiple ways, and the data in this study show that this process of honoring individual identities is intimately connected to collective goals, to complex histories, and shared through individual stories or myth creation.

Emdin (2017) re-introduces the notion of becoming in his article, *On Innervations and Becoming in Urban Education: Pentecostal Hip Hop Pedagogies in the Key of Life*, tying Maxine Greene’s notion of becoming to the processes of changing oneself and the world, exemplified by the sequence of Stevie Wonder’s albums—beginning with “Innervations,” or “inner work,” and moving then to “Songs in the Key of Life,” or when a person begins to make change in their personal and collective environments. Emdin tells us “the work of becoming is necessary for both teacher and student and requires a

deliberate process of looking inwards (innervisions), focusing outwards in the key of life, and releasing tensions/imagining new possibilities" (p. 107). Other scholars have also pointed out the necessary links one must make between the personal and the collective. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) speak to this and offer their lens of how Critical Pedagogy (often thought of as a basis for HHBE) can be such a space that ties personal and collective revolutions together.

Revolution remains an important ideal at the individual, psychological, social, and institutional levels. It remains a potent and motivating concept to believe that collective action can fundamentally transform what has stood as oppressive and total in our lives. Critical pedagogy can play a fundamental role in contributing to revolution on all of these levels. Raising individual academic performance among students attending urban schools is itself a revolutionary act..... The only way that young people can become informed and empowered consumers of larger social collectives is if they are self-actualized and if they have begun the process of healing and loving themselves. Of course, these transformations can be concurrent, but it is unconscionable to deal with one without the other. (pp. 189-190)

Emdin and Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, like the participants in this study, always engage with their personal, inner work as being directly connected to collective or outer work.

Further, this study has shown that this reflection, or individual, inner work, must also occur while acknowledging and honoring the often unspoken and embedded religious and racial lineages present in our individual identities and practices. Maya Angelou (1991), in her poem "Grandmothers" and in interviews, succinctly shares this notion by saying that while she may arrive as one person, she stands as 10,000, referring to all those who have come before her. Shannon Matesky discusses her connections to lineage by adhering to "the title of not just poet but griot." Angelou's quote and Shannon's naming of the griot speak to the ways our individual identities are tied to our pasts. Sorett (2016), in *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics*, ties together the many ways African American literary traditions occur as embedded with

religious and racial lineages that influence the field of YSW today. Sorett, while detailing a century of a tradition backing up his claim, says, “Despite arguments to the contrary, African American literature has since its advent and across its history been cut from a religious cloth.... In short, black literature is religious” (p. 2).

These literary traditions, while explicitly engaged with commonly understood religious traditions, also implicitly deal with the big-picture questions about life and the search to find one’s “complex subjectivity,” something Pinn (2003) describes as the aims of African American religious traditions throughout time, especially as it relates to what has informed Hip Hop and individual becoming. He says,

Religion’s basic structure, embedded in history, is a general quest for complex subjectivity in the face of the terror and dread associated with life within a historical context marked by dehumanization, objectification, abuse, intolerance, and captured most forcefully in the sign/symbol of the “ghetto.” The quest for complex subjectivity that is the elemental nature of religion involves a desired movement from life as corporeal object controlled by oppressive and essentializing forces, to life as a complex conveyer of cultural meaning with a detailed and creative identity. This subjectivity is complex, holding in tension many spaces of identification by making them vibrant components of a larger and tangled reality. In this sense, it is the struggle to obtain meaning through a process of “becoming.” (p. 86)

Pinn and Sorett, through the exploration of these religious traditions and efforts, speak to the notion that one’s identity must always be understood in relationship to these complex histories and traditions carried within an individual. So when participants like Tish, Arielle, or Christina described to me their racial and spiritual memories as difficult to extract, it was important to see that race and spirituality (or religion) have always been concepts that were intimately connected, especially in a context of spoken word and Hip Hop.

Further, this process of “reflection” takes place when these complex individual identities can be named and understood through the power of story or myth. African American religious and literary traditions have often been some of the clearest examples

throughout history of how individuals took on the task of telling their own story, or creating their own myth, not just for themselves, but for those in the community who would engage with their work. Sorett (2016) says, “Writers were uniquely qualified to provide frameworks through which the masses could make sense of their deepest existential questions and reignite a revolutionary struggle once led by preachers.” Speaking about Richard Wright’s (1980) “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” he says, “Richard Wright invited black writers to take up the burden of the preacher and become myth-makers for their communities” (pp. 77-78).

Similarly, throughout psychological and psycho-spiritual histories, the power of myth has been acknowledged as a powerful tool in the process of individual and collective transformation. Speaking to this, shaman and doctor Alberto Villoldo (2015) tells us, “Myths aren’t just plotlines for comic books and summer blockbuster movies.” He describes the power myth has in affecting how we understand our journeys on this earth. “From a very young age, we fall under the spell of powerful myths that influence the way we perceive the world and, consequently, the choices we make every day” (p. 110). When we, as poets and people, are supported in writing and designing our personal or collective myths, we have the power to speak to humanity’s deepest understandings, to explore the complex histories and legacies we carry within us and support perspectives that serve all of our best outcomes. “Mythologies represent the beliefs and values of particular groups or cultures.... The most enduring myths involve ordinary people embarking on heroic quests, often against their will, and overcoming apparently insurmountable obstacles to perform extraordinary deeds” (p. 110). While the process of becoming is multi-layered, this study has shown that the process of “reflection” or honoring one’s complex individual identity in the process of becoming is a key, necessary step in moving forward.

Refraction—Communities of Practice

“We were like family.” (Jamila Lyiscott)

Another key finding across the study was understanding the importance of refraction, or the communities of practice that cause refraction through a process of becoming. Refraction, again, refers to the subtle change of course that occurs when a light ray hits the edges of a raindrop. Refraction can take place in multiple ways, and the data in this study show that this process of honoring the communities of practice, including the peers and elders that support and impact one’s process of becoming, is an important factor in the work of YSW.

As described, Lave and Wenger’s (1998) explanation of communities of practice is guided by a sociocultural view that “engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are” (preface). This social practice is dependent upon multiple factors, one of the most important being “mutual engagement” (p. 86). One might think that as someone becomes an expert in a field, one of the most important factors is the amount of time one spends on the practice. While that may be true, Lave and Wenger offer that in order for one to truly become a part of a community, mutual engagement is key, allowing participants in a community to then base their relationships not on a shared skill set or ideas, but on “shared histories of learning” (p. 86). The participants in this study, while sharing a set of skills, practices, and understandings, most importantly shared a “history of learning” together that includes the festivals, workshops, open mics, and more. Lave and Wenger explain that the creation of a community of practice is “a matter of sustaining enough mutual engagement in pursuing an enterprise together to share some significant learning. From this perspective, communities of practice can be thought of as shared histories of learning” (p. 86). So not only are the skills, practices, and beliefs something of note for this specific community of practice focused in the study, but the shared history of learning together is as well.

Like the literary traditions this work has come from, these practices of convening together as described by the participants also have religious historical precedence. Hidalgo (2011) connects and compares seeing Hip Hop communities gather to his studies of ancient churches. “I saw churches that were being developed in the streets as they gathered people in the name of God through the use of the streets’ native tongue—Hip Hop.” He describes the Hip Hop communities that led him to his own study of theology as comparable to those of the first century. “This gathering of 'Hip Hoppers' in the community reminded me of the early churches of antiquity that Paul the Apostle tried to establish.... These early churches consisted of groups of diverse communities who would gather for fellowship and dialogue about their daily lives and God while enjoying a meal.” His descriptions of the informal foundations of churches are reminiscent of the many times participants described their forming of YSW communities as gatherings that included food, informal conversations, and support.

In addition to honoring the social learning process and historical lineages of gathering for a common purpose, we must also look to the importance of adults or the role elder community members played in supporting participants’ experiences of becoming. Lisa Miller (2015) describes a comparable phenomenon in young people’s spiritual development as “the nod,” which she says is an exchange between an elder and young person where the adult offers support, acceptance, and a mutual sense of spirituality. This does not always occur within specific religious circumstances and can be applied to YSW communities. Miller introduces the idea of the nod through an example of a grandmother and grandchild on the train, deciding whether or not they want to engage in a conversation with a loud, imposing train member asking people to join him for lunch. Through a nod, the grandmother and grandchild chose to sit next to and engage the train rider that others had avoided. She describes her experience discovering and naming this “nod” as follows.

The nod, or what the nod represented, was the missing piece to the research puzzle. Greater than the spirituality of one or the other, the nod represented a shared sensibility, a shared spirituality.... There was more resilience, health, and strength in that nod between grandmother and grandchild than in any theory I'd studied in academic psychology. That grandmother was spiritual and she was making sure that spiritual sensibility reached her granddaughter. The nod was spirituality shared between child and beloved elder: spiritual direction, values, taught and received in the loving relationship. I felt I was watching the passing of a sacred torch, the intergenerational transmission of spiritual connection, a flame passing through generations of family and humanity. This was the very heart of spirituality: in the nod was recognition of a shared understanding of this ordinary moment, right there in our subway car, as sacred ground. (pp. 85-88)

Miller describes how this discovery of “the nod” led her to find a nuance in her own work about spirituality. While her initial data showed that spiritually oriented mothers or children alone demonstrated protection against depression, she found that when a parent and child shared a spiritual orientation, especially during a child’s formative years, the additional protection against depression was dramatic. “The spiritual nod was far more powerful than all of the family risk factors for depression combined—genes and socialization.... Nothing radically lowered the risk for depression like a shared spirituality” (p. 88). While this “nod” is related to a specific spiritual psychological understanding, I can’t help but think about the ways participants like Christina and Will described being supported by YSW leaders in similar ways. There is certainly more room to explore how this lens might apply to a community of practice like the YSW community.

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) discuss the need for educators to remain extremely clear in their responsibility to support and push students to reach capacities and expectations they may have not set for themselves. They especially share this in relationship to supporting students’ learning of and engaging with hierarchy and power. They say, “Critical educators of urban adolescents cannot abdicate our responsibility to nurture, to guide, to support, to cajole, to correct, and to demand from students what they

may have been socialized not to demand from themselves.” They describe that students “require educators who love them enough to push them to their limits, to inspire in students the revolutionary and liberatory outcomes they could not previously have imagined given their prior experience in schools” (p. 102). When considering the experiences described by the participants, the science of the “nod,” and the critical pedagogies laid out by Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, it is exciting to think about how these might be put in more conversation with one another moving forward.

Emdin (2017) has already begun this process, outlining how “Pentecostal Pedagogy,” or teaching and learning that is born out of practices of the Black church, can be engaged with when thinking about HHBE and supporting students’ “inner visions” and beyond. He argues that Pentecostal pedagogy is “by no means religion based, prescriptive, or regimented.” Instead, he offers that this pedagogical framing calls for “a deliberate enactment of new practices that set the context for activating innervations, releasing the imagination, and becoming” (p. 115). In order to do this, Emdin argues that “we value the exchanges within the church that have powerful cultural significance to the Hip Hop generation” and allow African American literary and religious traditions to be seen as “a model for how to activate innervations” and support students’ processes of becoming moving forward.

With this exploration on refraction, we see that through honoring the communities of practice, including the legacies, peers, and elders that support and impact one’s process of becoming, the lives of participants in YSW are impacted and the course of becoming is encouraged and supported in important ways.

Dispersion—Dreaming and Sharing

“Awe inspiring is the best word I can use.” (Tish Jones)

Before we discuss how one might “disperse,” or dream and share in and with the world, it is important to understand explicitly *what* it is we are talking about sharing. Connected to participant descriptions, a simple way to understand *the what* might be by thinking about a student’s *transcendent* realities, or sense of magic, wonder, or awe.

We could say that the goal of the process of becoming that has been described throughout this chapter is beyond an individual outcome, and the ultimate goal of becoming is to not only to impact personal lives but to impact the world. Lorde (1984) describes this as: “It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized” (p. 36). This connects to what Emdin (2017), inspired by Greene, describes as the goal of a teacher. “The goal of the teacher should then be to create spaces where youth experience a form of transcendence,” or what he compares to “catching the spirit” in a Pentecostal church (pp. 110-111).

Similarly, when Miller (2015) describes spirituality, she offers the definition from the *American Journal of Psychiatry* as “a personal relationship with the transcendent” (p. 7). Though the language participants used throughout the study varied, such as the terms “awe,” “wonder,” or “magic,” there were multiple instances of HHBE supporting participants in experiencing “a form of transcendence.” Miller honors the varied expressions of this transcendence, acknowledging that it “comes in many different forms and has many different names. It can take the form of spirit, the natural world, God, or a sense of oneness with the world, the larger community of which we are a part” (p. 25). She describes young people’s natural spirituality as “a direct sense of listening to the heartbeat of the living universe, of being one with that seen and unseen world, open and at ease in that connection” (pp. 25-26). With all this being said, I understand that the goal or intended outcome of becoming oneself, or becoming who we are called to be, is to

experience transcendence. I link this sense of transcendence as being deeply connected to our ability to imagine, dream of better worlds—or let’s say “disperse” this magic unto the world as a rainbow is dispersed through the sky.

For the participants in this study, YSW, through HHBE, has been a key community of practice where one is able to access these spaces of transcendence and then disperse them to the world. This space of transcendence is created within what is connected to Miller’s (2015) “Field of Love,” or an “evolving, interpersonal space that we both discover and create in relationship with one another” and also experience a “transcendent presence” (p. 138). This field of love has been intentionally supported and created by the founders of the YSW movement. One of the founders of the Brave New Voices network, in describing his work, says,

First and foremost, [...this work is...] motivated by love. When young people come, we hope to make it clear that we love them. Not in those words, always, certainly not always right away. But we say: I love you enough to push you to think deeper. To listen harder. To read more. To be braver. To challenge you to write in ways about things that you are scared to speak out publicly in ways that make you and others uncomfortable because you need to. Urgently. And we will be there when you stumble, and we will be there when you succeed. (Kass, 2018)

This field of love can be thought of as a community of practice or space where people are supported not only to figure out who it is they are becoming, what they believe, but also be pushed to go beyond the boundaries of what they once thought they were capable of, or to share their magic with the world.

When thinking about poets and writers, this call to share is not new. Pinn (2003) discusses the many ways some rappers, such as Tupac, were looked to as carrying the roles of prophets or preachers in some communities. Emdin (2017) discusses how in an HHBE context, this act of speaking out takes the form of sublimation, or a process where negative or socially challenging expressions are made, and through the process of expression, the content of the emotions or the reception of them are shifted into

something that is more socially acceptable, positive, and potentially transformative. “I argue that the contexts where one is allowed to use their tools for sublimation are the places where innervations are fully activated, and imaginations run wild” (p. 115). He discusses, “Here, we once again see how Hip Hop embraces the process of reflecting deeply, and then activating the imagination—in this instance to make wrongs right—to envision a different future” (p. 115). Emdin describes that students might write, imagine, and share stories that speak to what is lacking or needed in one’s community, that Hip Hop in communities offers tools, a community, and a field of love that supports students in their creation of their new myths. Tish Jones similarly describes YSW as “a radical tool in the quest for our collective liberation. It’s a way for the voiceless to reclaim language, to reclaim words and re-shape the world.” What she and the participants also share is that these tools and spaces are often not found in traditional classrooms as they could be.

Elkins (1998) describes art as “the bringing into existence of something that did not exist before. This is the god-like quality of the creative act” (p. 129). When students or we ourselves are creating in any form, when we are sublimating or re-writing and re-creating the myth that guides our lives and our communities, we are experiencing and enacting the god-like or transcendent quality of the creative act. In all, it’s hard to say *where* these stories come from, but in the process of this study, I have come to see the work of YSW as divinely inspired, as something that is in touch with the transcendent parts of ourselves and our world. “This is the secret of authentic art: it comes not from oneself but from the creative fire that blazes in the depths of the soul,” Elkins says. “Whether we locate this force within ourselves or say that it comes from the gods, as the ancient Greeks did, it is the same creative power” (p. 129). So it might not matter too much whether or not the rainbows, or stories we speak of, are credited as coming from our own light or the light of God, as in this lens, they are one and the same.

In Irish mythology, it is said that there is a pot of gold at the end of every rainbow. However, when we look at how a rainbow is created in the sky, as the reflection, refraction, and dispersion of light from the sun into raindrops, there is no such thing as *the end* of a rainbow. A rainbow is a complete circle, although this circle can only be seen from pilots in the sky. From the ground, we see the rainbow as an arc, based on our angle to the sun. This complete circle does not negate the fact that there is still gold to behold. It begs us to see the gold in the journey of the rainbow; like in understandings of the Hip Hop Cypher, the gold that exists is the chance to go around the process of becoming again and again.

B Side

It's five years after my uncle Tim passed.

I watch a Youtube video of him on describing his career in music to a documentary film producer from Minnesota. His hesitant mannerisms, the nuance in his references, the run on stories, are things I see in myself. Things I sometimes don't love.

I read the email he sent detailing his days working with Hip Hop. His disbelief in his part of a movement is humbling. So humbling I wish he'd take more credit. but I understand where he's coming from.

When he pushes his cigarette to the side and says "you know," for the 6th time like a true Minnesotan, I smile. See my mom. Hear my twin sister's affirmation.

I realize I am a product of all the people before me that weren't sure but pushed forward. I realize my process of becoming who I am called to be is because they became who they were called to become. That the becoming of my children will depend upon mine.

35 years since my uncle supported the Kitchen Tour or wrote for Rolling Stone, Hip Hop is on Broadway, in colleges, and across the world in ways many of the founders never dreamed possible.

Hip Hop has taught the world about community, about love, about the power of stories.

The afternoon I found out my uncle died, I was working as an education research assistant at the Hiphop Archive at Harvard University. I had left the archive in the early afternoon and walked to the Charles River for a breath. It was mid-April. It was unexpected. He was in Thailand. Our family was spread apart. The snow had just melted and the birds were back. I remember the sun reflected across the river. I squinted to try to see the people's story on the other side.

Since that day I have always remembered to pay attention. To the story of the ones who came before. To tell the story of becoming who I am.

*Holy or broken
flickers of the sun remind
us we never leave*

lit 2.

Pronunciation: /lit/ make (something) start burning; ignite.

synonym set alight, set light to, set burning, set on fire, set fire to

Chapter VIII

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Lenape called the Hudson River Shatemuc, meaning “the river that flows both ways.” (NMAI Smithsonian, 2010, p. 3)

I write this dissertation while only a few hundred yards away from the Hudson River in New York City. Water, like fire, like Hip Hop, is something that guides people toward themselves, toward each other, and to notions of something greater. I include the meaning of this name of the river by the Lenape people, who are native to New York City, because this “river that flows both ways” offers a metaphor for how I understand this study.

This dissertation began with understanding this work within the context of the elements of fire and water. While the beginning of this document started with both of these elements as potentially destructive agents (as fire and flood are destructive to communities and property), I want to call attention to how these elements can be considered both destructive AND constructive. Fire can burn material, yet it is also the force by which new land is created through volcanoes or can be used as a way to support the development of forest, farms, and prairie land. It is also acknowledged for its alchemical functions, for its ability to turn metal into gold. Water, though in excess can overwhelm and destroy communities, can also wash away that which needs to be cleansed, or provide nourishment for all life on earth. How we understand these things or the light with which we view them is what matters most.

This dissertation began with my teenage self starting to understand this notion of praxis or “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2000, p. 28). The process of praxis that leads to such transformation is one of both interaction, of give and take, of call and response, and of destruction and construction. There are both simple and complex ways of understanding these concepts, and this dissertation offers one lens for us to understand the nuances and complexities they relate to understanding the field of YSW, HHBE, race, and spirituality within these fields. This dissertation has been called forth as a reminder for us to embrace this give and take, to honor the difficult, destructive times, while knowing that constructive times, or our rainbows, are also ahead.

The Hudson (Shatemuc) River flows as a symbol of a journey of give and take, of destruction and construction, starting from before my uncle and the group of artists went on the Staten Island Ferry kicking off the journey of their tour and the many places Hip Hop would go over the following decades, continuing to now and beyond this day and page.

This dissertation has taken us down multiple paths from its start until this final chapter. Here, I will summarize the study questions, recap the findings, offer a few limitations of the study, and close with implications for further policy, research, and practice.

Summary of the Study

This dissertation is a qualitative case study exploring the understandings, beliefs, and practices of Youth Spoken Word Poetry (YSW) educators who work within the field of Hip Hop-Based Education (HHBE) and who have grown from youth participants to adult professionals within an international YSW Network. This study specifically looks at how current YSW practitioners describe and define their work, along with the multiple literacy practices they utilize to navigate their individual, spiritual, and racial identities.

The questions that guided this inquiry were:

RQ1: How do YSW educators who have grown from youth participants (13-19) to adult practitioners (20+) describe and/or define the fields of YSW & HHBE?

What do these descriptions tell us about if and how they are making meaning of race and spirituality?

RQ2: What literacy practices are these HHBE practitioners describing and enacting as they negotiate the network?

What literacy practices are being enacted especially as it relates to New Literacies, racial literacy and spiritual literacy?

This study builds upon histories, literature, and theory from multiple fields, including New Literacy Studies and Communities of Practice, and the histories of Hip Hop, Race and Education, Spirituality and Education, and the intersections between these fields and histories.

This study was guided by a critical qualitative case study methodology. In particular, this study utilized narrative methods to look at the narratives and literacy practices of a specific case of practitioners. Because this study is focused on the work of poets, a narrative approach was most appropriate and aligned with the intentions of the research. There were 10 participants from seven different cities in the United States, Trinidad and Tobago, and England.

The methods for data collection included interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Analysis was completed by employing the Critical Response Protocol (Lerman & Borstel, 2003) and by going through a series of thematic assessments to land on the themes and codes presented in the findings.

Findings are found in reference to both questions relating to participants' descriptions, definitions, and practices in the field of YSW and the concepts of race and spirituality. Because this study is framed with a lens of sociocultural understandings on

literacy practice, the findings are rooted in the specific social, cultural, and political contexts of each participant. Further, these findings often refer to concepts and practices that have fluid definitions and boundaries, so it is of utmost importance that anyone view these findings within context. The findings can be summarized in two parts—the first being in response to participants’ descriptions and definitions and the second referring to practices—which are repeated here.

Major findings revealed that the participants describe themselves as racialized and spiritual beings through implicit and explicit ways. YSW participants in this study described the field of YSW as grounded in African American lineages and acknowledged that the field currently functions as pluralistic and multicultural. YSW participants described spirituality as personal, collective, and transcendent experiences. Though participants defined spirituality differently, they described it as something that is present, naming it as an important factor to be considered when examining YSW practice. Core literacy practices participants engaged with and enacted within the YSW community related to race and spirituality included acknowledging their voice as something that was expressed individually, collectively, and universally and across time (past, present, and future). These findings highlight the value of communities that support (1) reflection, or honoring individual identities; 2) refraction, or honoring communities of practice that shape our paths; and 3) dispersion, or the use of stories to support dreaming, sharing, and revolutionizing the world as we know it.

Limitations

This study has multiple limitations, and a few must be pointed out. These limitations include the demographics of the participants, the locations of the participants, limited scope, and limits of the specific case of the study. Here, I will briefly explore

these limitations and offer suggestions for engaging with and pushing against these limits in future work.

One limitation of this study is related to the demographics of the participants. The ways the participants identify in terms of identity markers was very diverse, although not as diverse as it could have been. Because of the limits of the timing of the study, I was also not as able to offer an intersectional or longitudinal lens as would have been ideal to offer a more holistic view of the participants. In future work, a researcher may want to allot more time to do longer life-histories research, along with more deeply engaging with the nuanced and intersectional realities of identities as they function within the world.

Another limitation of the study is related to the locations of the participants. Because the participants hail from seven different geographical locations and are unified by the common experience of attending Brave New Voices and participating in specific YSW organizations in their home cities, it is difficult for this study to be replicated. In the future, a similar study could be approached in two ways: (1) with a more clear lens of geographic diversity and an attempt to work with multiple participants from more different locations; or (2) with a regional lens over time, offering the opportunity to identify nuances, similarities, and differences of particular locations and communities and compare them to the larger community.

A third limitation of the study is related to the limits of the scope. This study was focused solely on YSW communities that operate within the field of HHBE, and related to a very specific set of concepts and communities. If one were to implement a study similar to this in the future, one might want to either focus more in depth on one or two of these concepts, or focus on more of an overview of what concepts arise more organically.

Another limit of the study included the limits of the specific case. The specific case of Brave New Voices festival and network is a unique program with very few, if any, comparable events or networks. Further, each local and regional community has its own unique expressions of this community. This limit of the specific case may have played a

role in multiple factors of the study, and research moving forward must keep in mind these specific contexts of a case one might choose to explore.

These limitations, along with many that may not be acknowledged here, must be taken into consideration in understanding the results of this study.

Implications

Despite the limits of the study, the findings of this research have the potential to impact the ways in which YSW and HHBE practitioners, scholars, and community members define and understand the nuances of the field in which they work, especially as it relates to spiritual and racial understandings within educational contexts. It has been stated that spirituality and racial identity play major roles in students' everyday lives (Miller, 2015; Sue, 2010); however the connections and differences between the two factors are often not explicitly discussed in relationship with one another, especially in an HHBE context. Having a deeper understanding of the explicit connections between spirituality and racial understandings within this context could lead to new or more nuanced approaches to pedagogical practices within HHBE that take these factors into account. It is a hope of this study that the findings will lead to a more nuanced understanding of how HHBE functions within the landscape of education and impact how we approach HHBE moving forward, as well as impact individual and collective practices in public education, communities, and cultural institutions.

In short, these findings add a critical layer to understanding YSW and HHBE and how this community describes and engages with the field of YSW and HHBE, race, and spirituality. This matters because these findings show that (1) YSW and HHBE have the power to support and impact the trajectory of young people's lives, (2) race and spirituality are key integral factors in young people's lived experience, and (3) often, exploring one's racialized or spiritual self can occur in meaningful ways through the

practices of YSW and HHBE. This dissertation demonstrates the need for these concepts to be considered in future scholarship, policy, and practice moving forward.

Recommendations: Renovation, Reverence, and Revolution

Research

At an NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) panel, past-president of the organization Ernest Morrell (2015) asked the audience to think about the discipline of English Education with the metaphor of a mansion built in the 1800s. “What would happen to that mansion if it remained untouched until 2015?” he asked the panelists and crowd. “It would crumble into ashes.” He continued, “In order to maintain the luster of the mansion, it has to be renovated.” He tells us, “Even to maintain the ethos of that amazing structure of 1880, which is about the birth of our discipline, it has to be continually renovated.” The history of the field of education (and I would add to this the field of the greater academy) has been marked by continual renovation. We see throughout history the ways scholars and educators have engaged with questions of how we produce and understand knowledge and what is most important as we continue to develop in our relative research fields. But where we stand today provides more opportunity for possibility than not. Morrell continued by saying, “The question is not whether we renovate English,” and I would add the greater field of education, “it’s what do these renovations look like?” He warns us that these changes are not optional and tells us that if we do not change, we will destroy the very disciplines we have strived for so long to build.

The academy I want to continue to be a part of is one of renovation and rainbows, one that continues to push the edges of the boundaries of what we already know, and to continue to value knowledge and wisdom in the academy. Spiritual teacher Marianne Williamson (2018) reminded us in her weekly talk that the “End of times” were not just a

time of endings, they were also the times of “signs and wonders,” or that while the Bible speaks to elements of destruction in our world, it also speaks to the great, miraculous actions, or rainbows, that are manifested in our time of being on this earth.

While this study is situated between many fields of study, ranging from Education to Religion to Psychology, we must continue to engage with and create scholarship that is interdisciplinary, or that creates the bridges between these interconnected yet siloed fields. Research moving forward must hold these dueling notions together as scholars and practitioners push to renovate the walls of the academy to best suit our changing world.

Policy

Further, in addition to renovation at the level of research, I recommend that policymakers embrace and implement this notion of reverence. Reverence means to have a “deep respect for someone or something,” and in this case, I call for policymakers to revere not only themselves, but the whole students and teachers they support going into classrooms every day. One prevalent recommendation that came from participants was that the pedagogies engaged in with YSW should be a part of every student’s daily experience within schools. Some specified that these practices should become a part of everyday English curriculums or just a part of every subject. The core meaning of this recommendation is for policies and schools to be anchored in honoring the multiple pieces of students’ lives and utilize pedagogies like HHBE to support them.

I see this as a very important recommendation as we see resistance at the policy level more and more to support students' racialized and spiritual selves. In the days of writing this, I saw a principal in the Bronx who intentionally removed Black History from a teacher’s classroom, and in the wake of another school shooting, an image was circulating on the internet that was an exchange between “God” and a student. The student wrote, “Dear God, why is there so much violence?” and in this image, God

replied, “I’m not allowed in schools.” In these two examples, individuals or institutions have worked to remove racialized history and a sense of spirituality (i.e., God) from schools, two concepts and parts of a student’s identity engaged with at very intimate levels every day. What we see in the research and in this study is that racial histories, especially Black histories, and spirituality are two things that are actually not ever completely removed from schools. Students, as they bring their whole selves into classrooms, incorporate notions of race and spirituality, and the policies made around schooling and curriculums must reflect that.

Practice

The final recommendation that comes out of this study is that we must embrace the notion that “the revolution will be live,” as Gil Scott Heron said, and that we must embrace a sense of revolutionary love in our everyday practice. Revolutionary love is a love that is strong enough to bring about radical change in individual students, classrooms, school systems, and the larger, often oppressive and inequitable society we exist within (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Such forms of love require individual and collective courage to address the needs of underserved students and students with non-dominant identities. Revolutionary love encourages educators to create spaces that nurture students’ multiple identities, are reflective in practice for both practitioners and their students, and promote institutional reforms that are equitable and self-affirming (IUME Committee on Revolutionary Love, 2017). While love is not a concept that is easily measurable, the superintendent of Des Moines Public Schools said in relationship to why he supports YSW, “We can tell when it’s missing” (T. Ahart, personal communication, April 10, 2017).

For teachers, the aim of this work is to support pedagogical approaches that are student centered, critical and culturally sustaining. This can be implemented through grounding our work as educators in a way that honors the primary text of students’ lives –

and honors our own as educators. In thinking about the ways we can bring love into our classrooms, we have to create the conditions where students can shine, or rainbows can occur. This can be done through thoughtfully creating lessons that honor student's whole selves in an equal or higher regard to the content of the curriculum.

Connected to this, participant Dr. Jamila Lyiscott recommends that educators and practitioners embrace the heat of challenging times, or to allow one's pedagogy to be set on "fire," toward the aim of allowing one's classroom to be developed by the first. She tells us,

When our struggles develop us, we visualize success and face them despite the inevitability of process pain. If your classroom is being developed by the fire of our political moment, it is sharpening your pedagogy. Much like the purification process of metals, which shine brighter in the fire as impurities melt away, the heat of this moment is refining your classroom. Your students have had time and space to process and wrestle with issues that directly threaten the personhood of marginalized communities, in your classroom. If you have chosen to be developed by this moment, your pedagogy is infused with constant reflection and refinement to better uphold the aims of true equity for your students.

Jamila, like all of the participants, echoes this sense of embracing the challenge. The YSW community taught me as a child not to run away from pain, discomfort, or conflicting views or experiences, but to embrace them and allow myself to become the best person I can be, in conversation not only with my past, present, and future, but also with all who have come before and all who will come after.

Put Your Lighters Up

In conclusion, I offer this dissertation and these recommendations in the spirit of what it means to be a Brave New Voice. When I was a teenager, I learned the value from my teachers, peers, and colleagues that there is no room to shy away from our bravery when there is life or death at stake. And that in times like these, life and death are always

at stake. I learned that we all have the power, through the power of using our voice, to speak, to stand, to shine light and shift the way the world is working to better renovate, revere, and revolutionize how we live and work with love.

The quote that I began this dissertation with, the one that was on the back of our shirts in 2006 as I engaged with my new colleagues and friends about how we were going to change the world, began like this:

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. (Freire, 2000, p. 88)

The process of this dissertation is the greatest effort I have ever given in offering what I would say are my “true words.” We must all go through a process of exchange with ourselves, our communities, and our work, to engage in thoughtful praxis and to transform the worlds we live in for the better. I am now clear that the work described in this dissertation speaks to humanity’s need to not be “silent,” to be a light in the dark, and that what I was experiencing when I was 18 was one example of how Freire’s words manifested into action.

A popular way people use to describe spoken word and Hip Hop is “best understood through experience.” I remember my teachers and professors often scoff at this notion, telling me that there has to be a way to define it without experience, referring to that description as something like a copout on behalf of the practitioners. Through the process of writing this dissertation, in my pages upon pages of effort to describe the power of YSW and HHBE, I would say I believe that statement more than ever. So while I appreciate your thoughtful reading, I also encourage you to keep the cypher moving, to read and write poetry, to pick up wherever I leave off. I understand this dissertation offers only inches to the miles we have to go in continuing to develop scholarship in the fields

of HHBE, race, and spirituality and education. I am grateful for all those who came before. I am excited about the road ahead.

little prayer

let ruin end here

let him find honey
where there was once a slaughter

let him enter the lion's cage
& find a field of lilacs

let this be the healing
& if not let it be

(Smith, 2017)

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Appendix

Interview Guiding Questions

Introductory questions:

1. How many years have you been a member of the HHBE/YSW Community?
2. What is your current professional role?
3. How do you identify in terms of race and/or ethnicity?
4. Are there any other aspects of your identity (socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, etc.) that you would like to disclose/share? (Optional)

Open-ended questions:

1. Can you explain how you came to the work of YSW/HHBE?
2. How would you describe a typical experience in HHBE work? Can you reconstruct this typical experience/day in the life of your work?
3. What does it mean for you to be a part of the HHBE Community?
4. Are there any times in particular your race played a role in your experience of HHBE?
5. How do you define spirituality?
6. Are there any times in particular spirituality played a role in your experience of HHBE?
7. How do you make meaning of these experiences/or your experience within the HHBE community overall?
8. Can you describe an example of your most meaningful experience with HHBE?
9. Can you describe an example of a meaningful experience with HHBE that incorporated spirituality?