CRITICAL LATTICE: THE COALITIONAL PRACTICES AND POTENTIALITIES OF THE
TUCSON YOUTH POETRY SLAM

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DEDICATION

For the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam
Thank you for your generous ways of talking, thinking, listening, writing, and performing. I can’t express how much I have learned about how to be better at life from you all.

And for my daughter, Fiona Cairene
You are intrepid, kind, and curious. I can't wait to learn what you have to say to this world, and how you might listen to it.
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In this dissertation, I use ethnographic observations, interviews, personal narrative, and analysis of youth slam poetry in conversation with theories of identification to demonstrate how members of the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam (TYPS) perform, inhabit, and develop a consciousness indicative of coalition and critical inquiry. TYPS poets demonstrate evidence of what I propose as critical latticework, an image and heuristic that brings together identificatory screen-work with rhizomatic and intersectional perspectives on growth and development. Through my analyses of poetry, interviews, and the activities of this youth slam community, I aim to illustrate the value of critical latticework as a perspective that can contribute to altering our perceptions of youth as developing in one direction, with one sense of healthy progression to adulthood. A critical lattice is another way of perceiving the activities of identification that take place in in-between-and-through-spaces, as well as the potential activism and labor occurring in those spaces, which act as more than screens but spaces of growth and significant chaos. I argue that an understanding of critical latticework is transferrable to writing classrooms, offering a practical image with which students of writing can imagine and move with fluidity to generate meaningful discourse and expand their perspectives on identity and writing.
CHAPTER ONE: NIGHTS AT THE SLAM

This room is a hot squeeze: words bounce and echo with the clank of mugs, the hiss of steam, the scrape of chairs. On the walls, there is artwork for sale, nailed against galvanized metal sheets or perching on wooden shelves. Behind the counter, a chalkboard menu. This is the kind of coffeehouse that serves organic foods and homemade pies, hangs up rotating artwork and anti-racism signs. Nestled between a grimy convenience store and a tattoo parlor in central Tucson, its most frequent customers by day are students and professors from the university, or people who make soap to sell at farmers’ markets, or tattooed elites. Once a month, it stays open for this poetry slam, regularly packed with high school students from all over southern Arizona, and their families, teachers, passersby.

I got here early, and I’m sitting in a corner. I’ve got paper, but I am not, like so many of the young people around me, scribbling inspired lines of poetry or working thumb pads overtime to punch out pith on my phone. Instead of spinning out poems, I am drawing details – the mood, what poets say to each other, what they slam about, how they respond to their scores. I’m writing a dissertation about these poets. It’s a study of youth discourse and activism, and I argue for the poets’ use of rhetorical strategies as suggestive of a specific kind of youth coalition or as a reflection of the ways they develop collaborative consciousness. It’s hard for me to write such words, to work my mouth and ear around academic terms, but this is what I try to do now.

The first time I came to this poetry slam, I didn’t listen. I looked for craft. Pristine lines. A graduate from a creative writing program, I had the MFA ear, so precious. And I did not wish to hear explicit teen angst. I came to my first slam with a friend, a writer who is working on a mystery novel, is a PhD student with three children who supports her family on her own, and
who runs at least a dozen miles every morning so, needing to eat constantly, totes cartons of blueberries and bags of spinach, bagels and nuts.

We are both researchers on a grant that is funding work with local youth organizations, and this poetry slam is one of them. Our interdisciplinary research collective\(^1\) meets in a building on campus that is far from my English department home. This is how far: I was shocked when someone suggested that I could ask for undergraduate help in transcribing and coding my research data, and then I got access to a bright, clean room with a refrigerator where I could place my lunch without admonishment from tenured faculty. In this research collective, we talk about the problems and activism of marginalized Tucson youth who have suffered from increasingly restrictive policies in Arizona. Tsianina Lomawaima, an American Indian Studies professor at the University of Arizona, called the barrage of state legislation in 2010 a “regressive suite” that included HB 2281, the “ethnic studies” bill targeting a Mexican-American studies class in the Tucson Unified School District, SB 1070, the anti-immigration bill giving police officers the right to ask for papers from anyone who appears suspicious (read: brown), and SB 1309, the “Parents’ Bill of Rights,” giving parents the right to determine what health and educational access youth have in regard to knowledge about sex and sexuality. At the university, we sit in clean white rooms with bright lights and melodramatic air conditioning and expensive technology. We sit, and we try to figure out how this room squares with all the other spaces of Tucson.

This doesn’t tell you what I am trying to tell you, which is that my friend hears what is beautiful about this space long before I do. That first time, she, also, has brought paper, but, while I listen for gems, she hears the pulse. She nods and furiously writes, transcribing as many

\(^1\) The Crossroads Collaborative website describes our work as “dedicated to advancing research, graduate training, public conversation, and ultimately social change in the area of youth, sexuality, health, and rights (YSHR).”
lines as she can. I know my forehead wrinkles skeptically as she writes. This issue with facial expressions has gotten me into trouble before. When I was a softball pitcher, it led to a public chew-out by an umpire who I had thought was making bad calls.

My friend and I squabble over awarding points because we have been asked to judge. Before the slam, we were handed a binder with scorecards numbering 1-10. At poetry slams, judges are chosen randomly from the audience. No one is assumed to be an all-knowing critic. Or, everyone is an all-knowing critic because poetry is supposed to be public, open, for the people. After each poem, my friend clutches her heart and wants to give everyone 10’s. More often than not, I insist upon a lower score, but no lower than 8.5 or we’ll get a big boo from the room. Sometimes she tosses up a 10 before I can object.

The problem with me is that I cannot yet bring myself to be generous, to love what is happening here. Writing has become a cool endeavor. For years, it has been difficult for me to look at my writing, at others’ writing, and be moved. This is not meant to be a quotidian lament about MFA programs, or the “workshop story,” or whatever else is, of late, a concern in creative writing. It is meant to suggest a simple question: how does writing move us?

Long ago, a New York Times columnist came to my MFA program, read one of my essays, and informed me I could not write a sentence. His pencil crawled over every line. I had felt that my essay was poetic. It had no meaning, no direction, sure, but it was a vivid narrative with comets and cornfields and a school field trip to the planetarium. Look how I’m undermining it. And the way I bowed to that creeping pencil. The way I agreed. The way I said it didn’t bother me while other students were weeping (he had done the same to all of us chosen to work with him). The way I thought my first publication worked because my favorite professor told me it was Chekhovian, and how that was the reason I figured I would submit it somewhere. The way I
fool with myself. The way I can shrug at writing I’ve spent days, or years, producing. The way I learned to pause, to sip the sentence, close my eyes, approve of its warmth. And then the way the sipping could dismiss.

A poetry slam is not for sipping. You have to chug. It took a few slams for me to begin to learn how to listen, to be open to what moves these youth poets. There’s as much posturing in professional slam as in “literary” work, but this local slam, in Tucson, is a different space. There are so many lines here, less the kind of lines that split than the lines that flow, a river of lines, a cacophony of lines, a supernova. Lines about racial tropes, familial bonds, the ideologies of citizenry, the notion of other. Lines tracing what it means to listen, to be heard, seen, felt. Lines of what it means to be young, genderqueer, gay, brown, white, poor, suburban, defined, confused, certain. Lines that cross, squiggle out past straight, open up the possibility of multifaceted identities, temporal identifications, complex humans. They write these lines before the slam, during the pre-slam workshop, or as the slam unfolds, anticipating their turn, almost—but-not-quite getting cold feet. They come here to write, to listen. They text each other after poems they like, or poems that baffle them; they give each other post-performance hugs. It’s not like the poetry readings of literary treasure. It’s not about “mmmm” or “mmm-hmmm,” the sharp intake of breath at a precious line, the expected silence or pregnant pause that signals we all are wandering in our separate, wooded brains. These lines call me to reconsider what it means to write and act. They write as if there were no time for anything else, as if their lives were not scrolls just beginning to unfurl.

Here, at the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam, there are transformations you can feel with the delivery of each line, the victories and stumbles, the hugging and pride, but also the conflict, the disappointments – such as when a poet who has performed several times tries just once more, has
focused in on the score and wants so badly to win, tries and does not score as well as he had hoped, and you can tell he has performed here for the last time. What makes certain people stay, others go? What peaks interest here? And then there is the poetry that is crazy good, the poets who just get better and better and are praised and admired. The community here prides itself on support, acceptance, and justice. The community prides itself on border-crossing, on connections, on lines and language that have permeated this echoing, overheated coffeehouse since 2011. Such language blows apart predominant notions of adolescence and calls for a rethinking of what it means for young people to write and perform. What it means for young people to write and act.

* 

The goal of this project is not only to describe but to critically examine a particular space of poetry, performance, and community in Tucson, and the ways that young people operate within it. I follow this community through its genesis during a time period of intensely regressive legislative acts in the state of Arizona, unfortunate actions that have affected youth and many others. Arizonans continue to see legislative attempts to limit, control, and further marginalize people who identify in non-normative ways. This includes SB 1062, vetoed by Governor Jan Brewer in February 2014, which would have allowed businesses to refuse to serve people with whom they disagree on religious grounds. The passage of this bill prior to its veto brought out a strong resistance from LGBTQ communities that argued that the bill was a proponent of LGBTQ discrimination.
The youth community described in this project has demonstrated a profound response to the social restrictions that complicate the ways they identify and are identified as young people. As the community grows and changes, though, both new and more seasoned youth poets take up subjects which at times speak directly to initial social justice-oriented concerns but other times do not take up these specific political and social issues, at least not directly. The changing nature of the community seems dependent on such factors as the funding that event facilitators receive to recruit specific youth populations, the human-power available to facilitate workshops about social justice, and the perspectives youth bring to the event about what makes poetry powerful and “good.” I am interested in what might shape these perceptions.

In order to understand more about the ways certain perspectives about the community might be shaped, I had to get to know a range of individuals and activities within the community. I accomplished this in a number of ways: ethnographic observation, interviews, working with a few youth on their poetry, supporting the youth poets through attending a national poetry festival, training youth in research methods and collaborating with youth on data collection and analysis, slam poetry and interview transcription, and a review of publicly available YouTube videos from slam events. I employed these methods to consider the following: In what ways do youth slam poets identify as poets and/or activists, and for what reasons? And, how might the dynamics among this community of youth poets inform a way of perceiving identification that is useful for exploring and articulating fluidities, a potential theory that is applicable in classrooms and other writing spaces? Through addressing these questions and offering an account of this youth slam community, I began to develop a theory of critical latticework, which is a way of describing the simultaneous structural and fluid performances that can be considered across rhetorical contexts.
I place value on multiple methods, interdisciplinary collaboration, and an asset-based approach through youth investment and participation in the collection and analysis of research about Tucson Youth Poetry Slam (TYPS) poetry, practices, and beliefs. For instance, some of the young people from TYPS contribute descriptions of their poetry, performances, and relationships to social justice and activism, and some have participated in critiquing my analyses of their work. Many generously offer their time to lengthy interviews and participate in identifying themes in their performances. Whenever possible, transcriptions of poems are checked with youth. In part, I borrow this approach from Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s articulation of indigenous methodologies, which includes the sharing of research design and findings with those who are being studied as part of a “principle of reciprocity and feedback” (15-16). Tuhiwai Smith’s methodology can be applied to encounters with young people, who are often not consulted with or included in research about the policies and practices that affect them the most.

* 

The first time that binder with numbers was shoved in my hands by an eager youth slam poet who didn’t yet know me, who probably saw an adult who was clearly not going to be laying down any truth on the mic, I was nervous, and skeptical. Slamming a poem is something I would never have done in high school, even though I carried around a purple notebook for my own compositions. A notebook I kept hidden. I was proud of my work and completely embarrassed by it. But I knew I wanted to write, and this carried me through to the ivory tower version of creative writing that crafts, chops, and chisels. The superb poets in my MFA program wrote crystallized obscurities, and it was difficult to talk with them in any practical way about
intentionality or message. For me, before the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam, that was poetry. Poetry was something I was not supposed to entirely “get.” Once, a classmate in a poetry workshop distributed a piece about a duck in a pond. When I began to discuss that duck in workshop, she looked at me incredulously and asserted that the poem was about an ancient Chinese symbol having nothing to do with a duck, or bodies of water, or any word that actually appeared in the poem. She drew the symbol on the board and shook her head at me.

As a first-time judge at a youth slam, I did not yet have an appreciation for what I was about to hear. I did not have much interest in what I imagined would be explicit rants and expressions of novice heartbreak and young love. When I think back now to the seriousness with which I took my judging duties, despite being told by the hosts that the judges are the most and least important people in the room, and that it’s not the points, it’s the poetry, I have to laugh. Of course I didn’t understand the paradox of judgment in slam, the utter importance of getting judged in terms of both creating a vibrant ambience and keeping people invested in listening.

At the youth slam, I found, above the necessary act of judgment, response. The response fed the community, and it was not about simply stating a personal story for introspection. It was about communion. After attending a few more slams, I began to understand that it went far beyond a discourse only meant to confirm the beliefs of its audience. This discourse was building on those beliefs, urging those beliefs along, while, at the same time, challenging those beliefs. Things that had nagged me about MFA-land, in spite of its many nice qualities, eventually re-opened some part of me to the beauty of slam poetry, a part of me that had been scrubbed away by craft and publication concerns, as well as the futility I had begun to feel in teaching composition. The duck looking smooth as it glided over the pond was paddling furiously beneath the surface. Look, it was a duck.
There are varied historical narratives of slam. While Nuyorican Poets’ Café co-founder Miguel Algarín traces slam back to ancient Greece and African griots, Tyler Hoffman argues that the American poetry context more directly grew the slam scene, using Walt Whitman as an example of American influences on poetics in relationship to the emergence of slam poetry. Whitman’s support of the performative element of poetry and the numerous revisions he undertook with *Leaves of Grass*, as well as his belief that democratic practice should be a companion of poetry, serve as evidence that Whitman’s “modalities” and commitment to community off the page carved out spaces for twentieth century poets interested in oral performance (Hoffman 21-54). In the twentieth century, while Beat poets such as Gary Snyder and Lawrence Ferlinghetti vocalized a desire for a public, accessible poetry off the page (126-7), Beat poet Anne Waldman worked toward “body poetics” (150), in which her commitment to “transformative poetics” was evident in a focus on naming and revising the “norms of identity and nation” (151). Black Arts movement poets such as Nikki Giovanni continued to bring identity to the forefront through oral performance and resisted “the whiteness of the page” – most notably the white publishing industry that controls who gets published and how (166). While Hoffman’s is a brief, incomplete summary, he demonstrates a few of the seemingly indivisible connections of slam to American poetic movements concerned with identity formation and culture. Some slam practitioners date slam to Marc Smith in 1986 Chicago, where poetry was reconceived as participatory and public, creating “an audience for poetry, bringing everyday workers, bus drivers, waitresses, and cops to a poetry reading and cutting them loose” (Glazner 11). This historical slam thread links the practice more broadly to socioeconomic class and is a direct response to the elitism associated
with literature and appropriated by the university through MFA programs, where such poetry, for instance, is viewed as something written and understood by a sliver of experts that create communities engaged in institutional rhetorics of inclusion and exclusion. So, for instance, writers emerging from these university programs might develop strong opinions about programs of writing; as Mark McGurl writes in *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and The Rise of Creative Writing*, “the mere attribution of institutionality” might be “enough to disqualify the work” of a writer (322). Smith and others actively resisted the institutionalization of creative writing at universities.

The most evident connection of American poetics to contemporary slam is through its relationship with hip-hop. Hip-hop, which encompasses both artistic production and a worldview, emerged from the social disruptions of postindustrial conditions and includes elements such as “‘breaking, emceeing, graffiti art, deejaying, beatboxing, street fashion, street language, street knowledge, and street entrepreneurialism’” (qtd. in Low 7). Hip-hop culture is rooted in social resistance, though rap and other genres that have grown from hip-hop are not always oriented toward social justice and are often critiqued for commercialism as well as sexist and homophobic perspectives. Slam, another outgrowth of hip-hop, is given a kinder breadth in that it is often seen as democratic and diverse in its population of poets and in its functions and intentions. And slam, like hip-hop, can be seen as a fluid genre in that, as Hoffman claims, it “lives a double life: even as it appeals to the masses through a slick commercialism, much of its poetry defines itself against commodification, and often in sharply satirical ways” (205). Hip-hop and slam have earned a fairly steady place in formal and informal educational settings. Bronson E. Low argues that, while educators and administrators might object to hip-hop “culture’s complex and contradictory politics of representation on issues such as gender, violence,
sexuality, materialism, race, and language,” these are the characteristics that make it a “pedagogically vital” curriculum resource.

Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz, slam poet and author of *Words In Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam*, discusses how “waves” in slam poetry over the last twenty years have influenced how poets value the scene. In the “first” NYC wave, poets would use the Nuyorican Poets’ Café as a way to establish themselves and eventually get published, as in the case of Maggie Estep; once they established themselves, they moved on from the scene into other writing and artistic gigs (Aptowicz 61-124). The second wave popularized slam poetry as a singular occupation rather than a jumping-off point, and a new group of poets, including Beau Sia, embraced this identity and tried to make a living from it. The second-wave influx of slam poets, coupled with the introduction of the National Poetry Slam competition and then the televised *Def Poetry Jam*, created a more competitive atmosphere and more tension in New York, contributing to extant infighting and aiding the creation of three major slam venues instead of one (Nuyorican) (Aptowicz 133-236). Aptowicz’s New York City narrative helps explain some of the complexities that accompany perceiving oneself as an artist, not only in terms of how poets come to choose certain subjects and claim certain identities, but also in how structural and communal limitations and possibilities influence this development.

* In collecting, analyzing, and discussing research data, I worked with TYPS participants/alumni Sheila Dong and Araceli Montaño, who have both gone on to attend the University of Arizona and maintain active relationships with TYPS. Sheila and Araceli joined the Crossroads
Collaborative research team and became IRB certified through the university. I have obtained their permission to use their writing, which I have not revised or edited, and their names.

At one point in our work, I asked Sheila and Araceli if they would be interested in writing about a typical night at TYPS. My experiences as, mainly, an adult observer at monthly slams are just that – mine. My perspective is influenced by a developing lens as a scholar in rhetoric and composition but also through the lens of a published creative writer and teacher who was trained in an MFA setting. Slam poetry was not the “poetry” I learned about as an MFA student; it wasn’t even the poetry I read and wrote as an undergraduate. I had/have never lived slam poetry like Araceli and Sheila have:

“A Night at TYPS”

Sheila Dong

Nights at the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam start at 5PM, with workshops led by guest poets, who are later the featured poet in the middle of the slam. Aspiring slam poets move chairs up to a long table at the front of the coffee shop and crowd in close, pulling out pens and turning notebook pages to blank sheets. Very often, there are new faces at the workshops, who go on to perform in the slam for the first time. The newcomers tend to sit apart from the group before the workshop, at a neighboring table, before they are invited to join the large table. There tends to be room enough for everyone at the large table, though, with busy workshops, the poets spill out to surrounding tables.

The guest poet goes on to lead the workshop in a casual manner. They provide writers with a prompt, a period of time to write, and a period of time to share, for those who want to. But the workshops also differ from traditional poetry classes. Nobody is judged for their perceived level
of poetic prowess, nor nitpicked on an element of style. The workshops are not “workshops” in the traditional sense in that people don’t critique the poems shared to the group – the emphasis is more on inspiring poets to simply write, so that they have something to expand on and/or edit if they wish. Some poets will end up using their workshop poem in the slam itself, especially those who came with only one poem, but made it to the second round.

There is an hour-long break between the workshop and the start of the slam, during which all people eligible to compete will be encouraged to sign up. Poets talk animatedly amongst themselves, acquaint themselves with new people, and order food or milkshakes from Bentley’s, the coffee shop which hosts TYPS. Before the slam starts, competing poets will be corralled outside for a pep talk from Logan and the slam hosts (two former members of TYPS who graduated). Numbers are picked at random to determine the order poets go in for the first round, and the whole thing concludes with a group high five.

As the sky grows dark, the lights inside Bentley’s grow brighter, and the energy is something you can feel. Several “judges” are randomly chosen among members of the audience to score each poet. With cheers, the competing poets are welcomed back inside, and take their seats in nervous/excited anticipation. The slam will start off with a “sacrifice” poet, who is usually a TYPS graduate, and occasionally Logan. This poet is not competing in the slam, but goes first to take the pressure off the first poet who really is competing. The performance of the “sacrifice” poet also gives the judges a chance to practice giving scores.

Then the slam begins in earnest. The name of the night’s first poet is called out, and the crowd responds with cheers, applause, and the occasional shout of encouragement. It is a custom of TYPS to keep up the applause until the poet reaches the mic, so they do not have to make their way up in silence. This reinforces the welcoming and enthusiastic atmosphere of the poetry slam.
As the poet recites, with the practiced air of someone who has been performing for a long time, or with the self-conscious restraint of someone who has never slammed before, or anywhere in between, the positive reinforcement continues. Audience members will snap their fingers at lines they find particularly powerful or beautiful, once in a while erupting into applause and cheers of agreement at a line they find exceptionally striking and truthful. Even when a poet forgets a line, fellow poets raise up a storm of snapping, calling out, “You got this,” or “You can do it,” until the performing poet recovers.

The conclusion of the poem is met again with animated applause, and the judges raise up their scoreboards. Hosts tell the judges to quickly decide, so that judges do not take the judging too seriously, and half-facetiously emphasize “speed, not accuracy.” TYPS organizers try to de-emphasize points, so that no one gets caught up in the numbers and loses sight of the true reason they are there – to share their art and voice with others. A favorite adage repeated by the hosts is that, “the points aren’t the point, the point is the poetry.”

Between the first and second rounds, the featured poet will perform. Sometimes they will be local poets; other times they will be poets from anywhere outside Tucson. The feature may be a single poet, or several poets that perform together in a group. The features inspire the youth poets in one way or another – with the way they perform, with a poetic form they use, with a theme in their poetry, or simply to demonstrate that slam is something that can be pursued throughout one’s life. Occasionally, a “sorbet” poet will perform – a TYPS graduate or any outside poet not competing, who requested to perform. In addition, the hosts or Logan will make an announcement encouraging donations from the audience, and circulate a donation basket among the tables.
Then, the second round takes place, and after that, the third round, the number of poets in each round decreasing each time. When the third round concludes, the scores are tallied, and the winners are announced. With cheers and applause permeating the air, the winners receive their prizes – usually a monetary prize for the first place winner and Bentley’s gift cards for the other winners. As the clapping continues, all poets who performed that night are called up to the front to have a group photo taken. Poets clap for each other, or exchange hugs, or compliment each other on their poems. The crowd begins to disperse, moving chairs back to their original places and helping to bus tables. The excitement and energy of the slam is carried out and dispersed into the night by everyone who performed in or witnessed it.

“A Typical TYPS Night”

Araceli Montano

There is never a definite “feeling” when it comes to these monthly events. It always changes, just like the poems and poets who spit them. Nervousness always filled my soul when I arrived at Bentley’s, but then again, that’s when I was the competing poet. As the coordinator and host, there is a completely different entity that fills the room. When walking into Bentley’s, I am obligated to greet the poets who walk in, new and experienced. I introduce myself as the coordinator and make anybody who steps through the doors feel welcome. Instead of using my poetry as a gateway to blend in with the crowd, I have to step out and run the logistics side of the event that is about to take place. I feel more excited, rather than nervous. Sure, being a host does come with the shakes, but it will never compare to the emotions that occur when one is about to spit a poem. I feel excited for them. I want every single person in the room to feel like there is something more to this coffee shop than just a bunch of poetry. I want them to realize that after
this experience, it will be more than that. It will be something to look forward to, something to motivate them to write, something they can use as therapy, as fun, as happiness, as sadness, as healing, as an indefinite.

I step back as the featured poet of the slam runs a workshop of their choice with the youth. Sometimes I am involved in the writing myself, but these days the time is used to figure out how to overcome the next couple of steps that are involved in making the event one to remember. Although, it is interesting being able to watch all of the poets scribble on their paper and in their notebooks, pausing once in a while for thought and seeing their face light up once they figure out how to continue a specific line. Some of the best poems can come from these types of workshops. A few poets share with the group, which is more intimate than performing for the crowd that will soon engulf Bentley’s -- consider this a warm up. We move onto the community meeting where we are able to get the poets involved on the side of TYPS that is not just the slam. We go around allowing poets to share what they have been involved in doing when it comes to community events, being published, etc. This is where we get to show them that starting from something as small as performing at Bentley’s can lead to major opportunities.

Break time. Poets, friends, family and bystanders begin filling Bentley’s and talking amongst one another. They find seats, order food or infamous milkshakes and some poets often go outside to recite a poem one last time before the competition begins. I spend this time greeting poets and finding volunteers to judge, scorekeep, video record, time keep, set up the sound system and run the Twitter handle. It’s a process, but a fun one. Soon enough, I hear myself on the mic asking all competing poets to head outside for the random drawing and rules. We end with a group high five, the most popular symbol of the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam. Everybody heads inside and it is time to start the competition.
“Nobody likes to go first.” We sacrifice an experienced poet to “spill blood” and they are scored, that way, the first person is not really going first. After that, poets go up one by one. Some are new, some are not. The poems are unique, they’re different, they’re raw. Everyone listens. The audience snaps at lines they like, they cheer at lines they especially like. The first round is half way done and I hate this part. Asking for money. It’s difficult to be confident in asking for money. But the basket gets passed around and it gets done. The competition continues and our featured poet performs before intermission. We have always had such great features. They’re experienced, they know the scene, they connect with the audience. It’s a great addition to our event. Usually, the feature will comment about how they haven’t seen an event quite like ours and it’s refreshing.

The competition continues, jokes are made, tears are shed, laughter is shared and before anyone can blink -- it’s all over. The final round determines the winner of the slam. Every person who was on the mic is called up for a group photo and for recognition. The winners are called, given their prizes and are on their way. In a matter of minutes, Bentley’s is empty of the voices that were just echoed through it. The event is over and I feel accomplished. With the help of my co-host, I just facilitated what used to be only run by adults. Every month is the same routine, but the new faces, poets, people, and energy always make it feel like a new experience every single time.

These descriptions by Sheila and Araceli capture what I cannot. I’m cinched to a past that I use as a way to counter-respond to the present – to contrast, compare, evaluate. Sheila and Araceli give a sense of the moment-to-moment excitement of TYPS, the investment of youth poets both
new and more seasoned, the commitment that both of them have developed to the significance of spaces for youth voice and performance.

This research is about a community of youth writers – what is at stake in writing and performance for them, how they have formed and sustained this particular community, acceptable themes for performance and writing in the community, as well as rhetorics within the community concerning slam, social justice and social activism and what it means to be a poet. A community literacy profile, inspired by the work of Deborah Brandt, David E. Kirkland, Julie Lindquist, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, Shirley Brice Heath, and Ralph Cintrón, emerges here. The research is an exploration of the ways that young slam poets, many of whom feel an abiding connection and/or dissatisfaction with the practices and policies of their communities, develop relationships with explicit and implicit questions of authorship, the role of a community of writers and performers, and a sense of agency in producing, performing, and perceiving their own work in slam poetry. Overall, I aim to describe how self-identifications as poets and/or activists within a vibrant youth community generate a youth consciousness invested in social transformations, and these descriptions are a way to understand critical latticework.

The next chapter reviews three major areas of scholarship that influence my research approaches and the development of a theory of critical latticework. I first focus on how some youth studies scholars have critiqued the limitations of conventional developmental models, and I situate these limitations in relation to rhetoric and composition scholars’ assumptions about knowledge(s) and positionality in the classroom. Next, I discuss how slam poetry is characterized in relation to its power to evoke and generate activism and youth critical literacies. Finally, I discuss how a theory of critical latticework must be seen as emerging, in part, from the concepts of the terministic screen, intersectionality, and the rhizome.
Chapter 3 describes my research methods and methodology in relation to the ideals of participatory and feminist research. I then turn to a narrative and thematic discussion of three sets of interviews conducted with TYPS members. Through analysis of these interviews, I report on the ways in which TYPS youth engage with gateway discourses, as well as the concept of social justice and activism. I note specific ways in which the declarative mode of slam poetry seems to influence TYPS poets’ notions of authenticity and discourse. This thematic profile facilitates my characterization of critical latticework in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 4 I develop the theory of a critical lattice, which is an image through which to understand the fluidity of identification and the temporary structures maintained and moved by youth as they perform identities. A critical lattice is a rhetorical strategy and heuristic that involves many of the strategies delineated by borderlands and queer scholars. I argue for the concept of a “critical lattice” in relation to the ways that young people compose and perform in highly charged sociopolitical contexts, specifically in regard to the production and performance of poetry at TYPS. I define a critical lattice as a dislocated screen through which TYPS poets develop a particular consciousness that might lead to engagement in coalitional strategies. The lattice itself is not simply a frame or vehicle for passage but a third space of activism and social transformation. This definition relies upon a critical conversation with Kenneth Burke’s notion of the terministic screen and Adela C. Licona’s notion of reverso, which focuses on the significance of refracting dominant narratives, going beyond an exercise in counternarratives and appreciating the fluidity of identifications. In this chapter, I focus on José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentification and Adela C. Licona’s theory of reverso as rhetorical strategies youth slam poets employ as part of their critical latticework. I then discuss how Chela Sandoval’s theory of differential consciousness and Karma R. Chávez’s examination of coalitional
consciousness offer multiple ways of viewing the kinds of social transformation and activism that take place in the TYPS context. I argue for a youth consciousness that emerges as a potentiality and fluid practice through this slam space, and I argue that critical latticework is a significant way for young people to generate and maintain radical involvement with each other and their community.

In Chapter 5, I discuss how a critical lattice can be a practical and theoretical tool across writing classrooms. In doing so, I engage with Krista Ratcliffe’s work on rhetorical listening and discuss its limitations and possibilities in relation to critical latticework and theories such as reverso.

* 

On a night in 2011, Enrique García spits a poem\(^2\) before the mic, reading the text from his phone. His performance is a litany of injustices. Playing, trying out words and gestures, not yet memorizing, he tries to modulate his voice to the rhythms of poets he has heard before, such as Saul Williams, one of his favorites. His poem calls up marketing and materialism in lines about “Chucks, Jordans, Vans.” He speaks about the border: “Now take a look down at the border/ our border, Juárez/ a place baptized in the name of peace, and respect/ now baptized in the blood of murder, drugs, and criminal intent.” He calls out the corruption of politics: “I have food, but the food of American culture/ cheeseburgers fat with politics/ fries greasy with ignorance/ and a large soda filled with lies/ with lies of freedom.” It is a poem about race and marginalization, widening its scope from southern Arizona to Africa. In 2012, Enrique, along with five other

\(^2\) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HA2XAzsZSOQ
TYPS poets, attends Brave New Voices, an international youth slam festival. He now spits from memory and continues to refine his performance skills. He is also involved in leading and managing TYPS. In 2014, he stands in the same spot, but this time as a sacrificial poet, an elder of the slam, supporting a community that continues to attract new and seasoned youth poets. I want to keep remembering that poets such as Enrique are the subjects, and the participants, of this study, this story.

3 A sacrificial poet is someone who slams as a way to warm up the audience and judges for the competition. The sacrificial poet receives a score but is not actually competing.
CHAPTER TWO: YOUTH DISCOURSE, SLAM IDENTITIES, AND BUILDING A CRITICAL LATTICE

In this chapter I will describe 1) ways in which rhetoric and composition scholars have not yet sufficiently attended to assumptions about youth development and knowledge, thus impacting engagement with conflict in writing communities; 2) ways in which youth slam poetry is a potent genre that can elucidate the power of particular literacies in youth lives; and 3) how critical latticework emerges from a rich theoretical framework that has set up the potential for useful heuristics and images that can address fluid identification work.

Youth Studies Discourse in Writing Spaces

Youth slam poetry connects with rhetoric and composition through its emphasis on voice and composition, public arguments, and literacy profiles. Beyond these general connections, studies about youth communities outside of schools (such as youth engaged in self-sponsored writing) hold great value for composition pedagogy, and this is not simply because of a focus on age. The population of composition students in higher education does not always identify as “youth,” after all. However, many first-year composition instructors on campuses with a majority traditional population make assumptions about their students when generating curriculum, such as proximity in age to high school students. As such, composition instructors are (too) often called to focus on what it is that students failed to receive in their high school training rather than to seek the knowledges, acquired and expressed inside and outside of formal educational settings, that these students already bring.
Composition at the college level is an in-between space for many students, where instructors are called to prepare them for the multiple kinds of assignments they might face while aiding their adjustment to college-level expectations. Composition instructors are challenged to consider each student’s needs, even as they may teach 52, 75, 100, 125, or more students at a time. Composition instructors are often contingent laborers. At the same time, composition instructors are often working in conditions of imposed programmatic policy, the presentation of which can distance them from their students. The need for discourse that pleases an administrative body with budgetary concerns often trumps the material realities of writing classrooms. More pressing than faculty dynamics and budget desperation are the ways students are perceived when rhetoric and composition pedagogy attempts to focus on generalized student needs. When process is emphasized, writing can be perceived developmentally; writing is a series of stages often structured in classroom sequences. Write the outline, chip away, craft it. Writing as a process is a narrative of development, wherein we brainstorm, fill in our ideas, and revisit for revision. Rhetoric and composition scholars seeking to both respect and shift this dynamic should be engaged in, as Nancy C. DeJoy puts it in *Process This: Undergraduate Writing in Composition Studies*, “creating introductions to writing that are based upon more realistic assumptions about first-year writing students’ and teachers’ positions as literate people who can participate and contribute to, rather than merely consume or enact, composition studies” (69).

Youth are often the subjects of developmental discourse. The work of Nancy Lesko in *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* as well as Lesko and Susan Talburt’s *Keywords in Youth Studies: Tracing Affects, Movements, Knowledges* emphasizes how deeply embedded choices in discourse influence policy and practice that profoundly impact young
people. Lesko and Talburt, among other scholars in youth studies, argue for approaches to research and analysis that are not limited by the conventional narrative of adolescence that emerged in the nineteenth century.

In *Act Your Age!*, Lesko discusses how current policies and practices surrounding family and youth emerge from a history of restrictive thinking about youth, and she argues for a more progressive perspective. Discourse about adolescents often involves a narrative of young people in transition, which implies “an evolutionary arrival in an enlightened state after a lengthy period of backwardness” (3). Linear narratives about youth tend to emphasize a long process of confusion, chaos, and uninformed choices that, when handled in a healthy fashion, follow a predictable path to a clarifying outcome: adulthood, which is characterized, ideally, by healthy, responsible choices in line with a narrative of stability. As Lesko claims, discourse that characterizes youth as uninformed and unstable can seal youth into categories that create an “‘ideology of emergence,’ which is a belief that teenagers are naturally emerging and outside of social influences” (3). As a result, patterns of discourse about youth development inscribe patterns of action that can become inflexible to the diverse experiences and knowledges of youth.

Identifying developmental stages and patterns in youth is not unlike the way we approach the writing process, where moments of confusion are meant to elicit and encourage enlightenment, clarity, and discovery, leading to more polished texts that are better geared toward our audiences, purposes, and subjects. Process is messy, we declare! But here are some steps to make it easier. Do you think in structured ways? Outline. Do you need to be messy before you get clean? OK, but then outline – make your post-essay map. In composition studies, recursivity is a key lens and activity for students, even as we assign steps and stages to facilitate certain outcomes. It is an interesting challenge in the writing classroom to promote an acceptance
of the complexities of writing processes while providing tools that combat the mystique of writing.

In many youth organizational goals and outcomes, an enlightened or progressive state is part of the discourse that appeals to the public for funding and other forms of support. This type of discourse bleeds into policy such as DACA, where those who are undocumented childhood arrivals into the United States can join up with a progressive narrative and become well-behaved citizens accepted into the educational system. In cases such as this, Nancy Lesko’s claim that the discourse about young people is “homiletic” and thus will “confer greater authority on the author of the homily” seems apt (3). Homiletic discourse is delivered from on high and establishes the parameters of a particular narrative of hope and opportunity. For youth organizations, there is often a discourse about hope in youth opportunities, but its source, whittled by adult practices and policymaking, can limit the capacity for youth to generate meanings, stories, and policies that reflect their own knowledges, which are more complicated than conventional youth development narratives can allow for. Those who facilitate youth activities and upbringings, as authority figures, can also, unwittingly, limit innovations in youth activities.

Lesko calls attention to the differences that discourse analysis could make in shifting the ways in which youth are discussed and interacted with: “By paying close attention to language we can begin to see the cultural weights that are put on a particular way of understanding adolescence as portentous, uncontrollable, and naturally occurring, and we see how the speakers on adolescents’ transitions to adulthood are invested with authority” (3). Authority does not always spring from expertise and is often heavily vested with an inherited discourse that is rarely questioned. Even in fields where discourse is analyzed, normative discourse persists, or in many ways it must. The organization of information and genres allows for a practical understanding of
how to proceed together. This organization, however, is based on “social facts” (“those things people believe to be true”), and these social facts influence how a situation is shaped and organized (Bazerman 312).

Lesko’s call connects with the well-established movement in rhetoric and composition to draw together the notions of individual and social. As Karen Burke LeFevre puts it in *Invention as a Social Act*, composition practices are suited well to examining “the individual through a wider lens to see the inventor’s relationships with a social heritage of ideas and with other people both living and dead, in a process occurring through socially shared language and culture” (139). Complementing and adding to scholarship about the individual and the social, James Berlin identifies social-epistemic rhetoric, which also accounts for language and cultural relationships that are not shared, as “the study and critique of signifying practices in their relation to subject formation within the framework of economic, social, and political conditions” (83). In a social-epistemic framework, the writer and reader are aware of the multiplicity of selves that influence how each is positioned; in such a framework, the idea of finding one’s voice is less helpful than an examination of “power-knowledge formations of our historical position” (Berlin 88).

While rhetoric and composition scholars might find such conversations, in the abstract, old hat, when applied to the practices and articulations of youth slam poets, such questions breathe anew. In the face of a young person so clearly “owning” the space, the emergence, the performance of her words, it is difficult to know how to convey, Let’s stop here and talk about how everything you’re saying is the product of something else. With these perspectives about the individual and the social in mind, the critical latticework I will be describing is one way of providing a tangible, working image in writing spaces of “invention as influenced by the supra-individual entity of a social collective” (LeFevre 48).
A social-epistemic perspective helps complicate developmental narratives about youth and pursue a better understanding of the ways in which youth organizations that wish to improve the lives of youth and develop youth into leaders are susceptible to discourse that can perpetuate marginalization and silence possibilities for youth articulations. If youth organizations spring from perceptions about the “problems and potential of adolescence” (Lesko 5), this, in and of itself, is not necessarily a terrible thing – yet the impetus for these organizations is often fraught with the discourse of development, which links to a linear narrative of simplistic empowerment. It can lead to inflated and empty discourse about the ways in which youth become something better through these organizations: become leaders, become stable people, become something other than they were. Of course, change is the crux of fluidity. But the way in which change is articulated can often mean no real structural change. It is seductive to consider adolescence as “a handy and promiscuous social space” that inspires adult hand-wringing, or as a “very useful public problem” (Lesko 6). It feels pleasantly laborious to consider how “active, supervised activities” can create the leaders of tomorrow, but Lesko argues that these activities (e.g., team sports) are frequently a “prescribed path toward national progress and functional elites” (6). Such discourse can feel especially suspicious when the activities are designed for marginalized youth.

Significant, then, is the question: “What are the systems of ideas that ‘make’ possible the adolescence that we see, think, feel, and act upon?” (Lesko 9). Asking this question allows for those who write and think about and alongside of youth to consider other ways of interacting with the concept of adolescence. What Lesko asks, at times, seems impossible: “Can we work to improve youths’ life conditions without the hierarchy of adult over youth? Can we consider youth as more than becoming?” (13). These questions challenge academic and community texts as well. What is perpetuated, always, and what is changed, perhaps, with the production of each
text, and for whom, and why does it matter? The persistence of these questions encourages us “to reconsider our modern conception of linear, cumulative time” (14). Lesko’s method is to thickly describe a “history of the present” (195), and she argues for a “conception of growth and change as recursive, as occurring over and over as we move into new situations” (196). This is a way for perspectives on adolescence to be understood as both localized and situated in relation to other contexts (196).

Taking up Lesko’s challenge, Vivian Chávez and Elisabeth Soep propose a “pedagogy of collegiality” among adults and youth that emerged from their work with San Francisco-based Youth Radio, a nonprofit organization that trains youth in broadcasting (411). In “Youth Radio and the Pedagogy of Collegiality,” Chávez and Soep describe a “continual collaboration” between youth and adults that does more than provide a context for youth to speak up (413). This context allows for adults and youth to challenge each other and questions the idea that the mere presence of youth voice “counts as a form of progressive scholarship” (413). The pedagogy of collegiality they propose connects with rhetoric and composition scholars’ attempts to engage with cultural differences in writing classrooms, and it carries with it some of the same problems, such as the idea that it is difficult to erase the authority carried by simply being an adult. A pedagogy of collegiality requires that all involved in the production are “interrogators – of one another and of the conditions they jointly explore” (Chávez & Soep 418), an activity reminiscent of bell hooks’ claim that it is important in classrooms to “share as much as possible the need for critical thinkers to engage multiple locations, to address diverse standpoints, to allow us to gather knowledge fully and inclusively” (hooks 91). And so, being attuned to power and border crossings in the writing classroom is a source of much reflective pedagogy wherein teachers have implicated themselves in the dynamics of the classroom.
While hooks’ discussion of engaged pedagogy in *Teaching to Transgress* is compelling in its focus on the ways that teachers care for themselves to engage their students in self-care, reflections about border crossing and power are often taken up by teachers who are already discernibly privileged. For instance, in “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” Elizabeth Ellsworth, who identifies in the article as white and female, argues that terms such as “empowerment,” “student voice,” “dialogue,” and “critical” serve to “perpetuate relations of domination” (298). In critical pedagogy, open discussions about identifications are meant to lead to a critical public consciousness and movement toward social transformation, but the term “critical” often erases the reality of teachers’ specific agendas (Ellsworth 300-1). Ellsworth argues for more engagement with the partiality of narratives. She also, along with her students, concludes that the classroom cannot become a safe enough space for these kinds of interactions unless students are also interacting outside of that space (Ellsworth 316). Like most critical pedagogues, Ellsworth identifies the problematic nature of being already-implicated in the structures she proposes to change. This argument is also partial, for it does not go so far as to ask: whose self-care matters, and how should identification and experience provide a path for critical self-care for both teachers and students? My self-care, Ellsworth’s self-care, is a questionable practice. As Paolo Freire writes in *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, “Any ten centimeters of power between us easily becomes a thousand meters of power and of arbitrary judgment” (113).

Stacey Waite struggles as well with presenting the complexity of positionality in a role vested with authority. In “Action Literacy: Position, Movement, Consciousness,” Waite discusses the challenges and opportunities of facilitating a classroom space where students can “see themselves as moving, considering, and possibly even entirely uncertain” (108). Waite’s
struggles with gender fluidity are discussed in relation to student positionalities that “have ways of preventing or road-blocking their literacy” (111). Literacy, for Waite, is not a matter of reading and writing in an articulate manner; instead, Waite is concerned about students who are capable of writing and reading in polished ways but “cannot read their environments” or “imagine the kinds of nuances and complexities that many other students with less ‘skill’ or ‘ability’ can articulate and ‘read’” (111). “Action literacy” emphasizes fluidity (120).

The spaces described by Chávez and Soep, Ellsworth, and Waite seem to be, in part, what Krista Ratcliffe yearns for in her work on rhetorical listening or what Linda Flower seeks to create in her work on intercultural inquiry. Krista Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening is a stance of openness that involves presence in spaces where identifications pass over and under and around each other. Ratcliffe asks readers to visualize this space as an energy field that allows conflicting identifications to move like skeins. In building a theory of rhetorical listening, Ratcliffe notes that the field of rhetoric already associates listening with passivity, which is also a sign of gender, race, and sight bias in the field (20-2). Ratcliffe aims to shift these associations, balancing listening with speaking. To do this, Ratcliffe engages with Heidegger’s divided logos theory, in which Heidegger articulates that the original conception of logos included both speaking and listening. Heidegger explores the term “legein,” which means both “saying” and “laying,” and suggests that laying entails letting others’ ideas lie before us, which implies listening (Ratcliffe 194-214).

Intercultural inquiry is quite similar to rhetorical listening but is more focused on practical outcomes in a community literacy setting. Linda Flower’s *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* emerges from a lengthy project with Pittsburgh’s Community Literacy Center. The setting for intercultural inquiry involves “a deliberative community built
around discourse, shared concerns, and different perspectives on change” (29). Imagine a diverse group of stakeholders gathered around a table, all of them invested in resolving a particular problem. In an ideal space of intercultural inquiry, these stakeholders might include traditional authority figures, activists, and unexpected or rarely-heard voices, such as youth. In this setting, Flower urges a strategy of “rivaling,” or “rival hypothesis thinking,” in which stakeholders are asked “not only to construct strong rival hypotheses about hard questions but also to rival their own ideas” (49). Both rhetorical listening and intercultural inquiry rely on a desire for situated understandings. In Flower’s configuration, this can result in practical texts for social change and transformation. Flower, like Ratcliffe, is seeking understanding, coalition, and collaboration from the articulation of differences.

Since the ways in which youth are described and describe themselves is tied to available terms and narratives, theories such as rhetorical listening and intercultural inquiry offer avenues through which to critique discourse for social transformation. In Keywords in Youth Studies, Nancy Lesko and Susan Talburt invite youth studies scholars to contextualize the historical narratives and social implications of significant terms that fuel youth studies discourse. For instance, in “A History of the Present of Youth Studies,” Talburt and Lesko define “history of the present” as “a method of historical analysis that problematizes the very terms and concepts through which we know and understand a concept” (11). They describe a narrative of youth studies in which the term “adolescence” emerged in the 1880s-90s, a term that allowed for discourse about the nation’s future connected with how to create “modern citizens who were rational and self-disciplined” (12). This concept has developed based on projected cultural needs, such as the idea of the “teenager,” which emerged in the 1950s-60s with a focus on consumption, style, and leisure (13). Books such as James Coleman’s 1961 The Adolescent Society depicted
youth as interested in leisure over achievement, and the term “teenager” created an “incessant crossing of images between youth-as-fun and youth-as-potential-offender” (Talburt and Lesko 13). The 1970s-80s saw a focus on youth subcultures that drew from forty years of research on youth through the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. One implication of this focus was that youth are depicted by many sociologists as “trapped in ‘becoming’ and their bodies, actions, and emotions are read as evidence of their immaturity” (Talburt and Lesko 14). In recent years, emotional resilience training, which is meant to help young people deal with problems, is strictly focused on individual empowerment and “ignores the social,” which is an “act of forgetting” (17-8). The authors argue that interventions such as emotional resilience training must be challenged so that “discourses that universalize youth categorically” are not simply recycled in a seemingly different context (19). For instance, Lesko and Talburt both support and are slightly skeptical of Chávez and Soep’s pedagogy of collegiality for its “generative tensions” (20).

A pedagogy of collegiality, action literacy, critical pedagogy, intercultural inquiry, and rhetorical listening are in practice at TYPS and provide lenses through which to interpret the vibrant dynamics of the space and the potential of youth art and activism. For young people, slam poetry can be used as “a hermeneutic tool to wrestle with how they make sense of difficult life circumstances and critically examine structural inequalities and ideological conflicts” (Jocson x). The significance of this practice in contemporary settings is not because it is something new but, rather, that critical inquiry and community building are happening in youth slam poetry settings “in ways that do not take place in most institutional settings” (Jocson x). As Korina M. Jocson argues in *Youth Poets: Empowering Literacies In and Out of Schools*, “poetry can be used as a form of critical literacy” (3).
**Slam Poetry: Genre and Social Action**

Slam poetry is often described as a genre that generates social consciousness and activism, and it is a public rhetoric with ties to the interests of classical rhetoric. Accepting the connections drawn between slam and social activism is not a necessary action for understanding critical latticework, but the relative ease of these connections does help explain how TYPS youth articulate coalitional consciousness across the interviews detailed in Chapter 3. These connections also indicate ways in which rhetoric and composition scholars would benefit from more study of genres and performances that youth engage with outside of formal writing classrooms. Carolyn Miller writes, “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (151). Anis Bawarshi draws from Carolyn Miller’s work in *Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition*, where Bawarshi proposes a “genre-function,” which absorbs Foucault’s author-function in which the author is a subject position. The genre-function is meant to help us understand how the regulatory and generative aspects of genre can result in genre innovations even as genres constrain and shape social encounters. This implies a negotiation that speaks to Ratcliffe and Flower’s work, where such understandings are “not only one of the great challenges of this social and cognitive process […] but] its most creative act” (Flower 159).

In the work of Miller and Bawarshi, innovation can take the form of transforming and flexing genre, and this can translate to social transformation. In regard to TYPS, I also consider how specific traits of the slam genre often catalyze the social activism and coalitional consciousness of many youth slam poets. It is also useful to consider how these traits might ultimately discourage some youth slam poets from engaging in coalitional consciousness, while
being aware, of course, that identifying social activism or consciousness is not as simple as
drawing a line from slam poem to social action. In the slam group I am studying, the genre of
slam is, certainly, questioned, flexed, sunken into, performed, embraced. The subject matter and
the ways in which youth view the function of the performance likely contribute to potential
innovations of not only poetic form but also ideas about what constitutes social justice activism.
Innovation for TYPS youth may be evident through concrete steps taken outside of TYPS events
that qualify as social activism, or through the ways in which TYPS youth shape community and
act together. Or innovation could emerge through resistance to the form or community itself.

Slam, as it has emerged through hip-hop, exemplifies the aims of public, pragmatic, civic,
and epideictic rhetorics. While slam also connects with current interests in rhetoric and
composition in multimodal literacies, a relationship can be drawn to studies of classical rhetoric
and poetics. This relationship emerges through Jeffrey Walker’s work on archaic lyric and Jerry
Blitefield’s use of Walker’s work to make explicit connections between archaic lyric and slam
poetry. The connections between contemporary slam and archaic lyric are important to explore
because the comparison evokes questions about what might constitute the genres of public
rhetoric, as the implication is that the civic and the artistic are inextricable.

In *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*, Jeffrey Walker provides the potential for a solid
connection with slam when he argues for an alternative view of the roots of rhetoric, placing the
development of rhetoric firmly in archaic lyric prior to civic oratory. The “alternative” prescribed
by Walker here does not take into account rhetorics that have been recovered and explored, such
as the Mesoamerican rhetorics (e.g., Incan pictographs) located by Damián Baca long before the
emergence of rhetoric in ancient Greece, where “ancient” is certainly relative. However, the
focus here on ancient Greece and Rome is useful for understanding the relationship between the
civic and the epideictic, where practical civic oratory is considered primary, while “epideictic, poetic, or literary rhetoric” are “derivative” and “inferior,” made merely for performances that “rehearse, confirm, and intensify dominant ideologies” (Walker vii). Thus, one might conclude that the epideictic, poetic, and literary are not particularly transformative; they do not have the same kind of power as civic, public argument to persuade, beyond the power to persuade the masses to remain complacent as they observe a performance. Such a perspective demonstrates suspicion of the epideictic: it is trickery; it is meant to obscure; or, less maliciously, it is simply meant to entertain rather than “do” anything that moves human beings toward action. However, the epideictic and the civic cannot function without one another.

While Walker has little hope for contemporary poetry, Jerry Blitefield takes a more expansive view and sees explicit connections between Walker’s argument and slam. In “Populist Poetry or Rantum-Scantum? The Civil Disobedients of Poetry Slams,” Blitefield argues that a successful slam poem is able to not only confirm the social context of which the audience and poets take part, but it also, quite often, conveys a persuasive message that is explicit and civic in nature. Blitefield claims that slam audiences yearn for “the poetry of exigence” (109). In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal indicates that the demonstration of exigency is not enough and argues for audience control in theater productions. Boal critiques theater in the “classical” period because it rehearses dominant ideologies. As an alternative, he offers a transformative view of theater through the Spect-Actor, wherein the audience is “free to invade the scene and appropriate the power of the actor” (xx). This performance is connected to problem solving and activism, going beyond the rehearsal of dominant paradigms as well as the experience of empathy aimed for by Brecht. Boal’s activist exercises are a practical application of rhetoric, an application very similar to the civic oratory that is said to characterize our understandings of
classical rhetoric. The theatre as a “passive” expression of narrative is transformed into a space where participation is a requirement. Youth slam performance, in its emphasis on audience response, and in creating a context where many audience members are poets, could be seen as a version of Boal’s Spect-Actor, particularly for those youth who are compelled to use slam as a way to enact social justice. This could be interpreted through events at the slam, such as a group poem addressing a social issue and enacting a conversation among youth who identify differently from one another, or through the use of slam to facilitate concrete steps toward social change, such as the example of an undocumented student discussed elsewhere in this manuscript who used slam before a vote about DACA support at a board meeting for a local community college.

Explicit uses of slam for community activism support Walker’s idea that epideictic discourse should be perceived as more than ornament or performance, as well as more than a rehearsal of what is already part of the dominant paradigm (viii). Jerry Blitefield claims that “slam poetry is overwhelmingly interventionist, exigent to its core” (111) and that its primary function is rhetorical. Yet Blitefield’s claim may be fraught because it assumes that audiences come to the slams to be changed or transformed. Perhaps this is a large assumption, for much of slam is not meant to change or transform but to persuade and confirm. Yet those slam examples not directly connected to a tangible outcome are also connected to the development of ambience, community, and coalitional consciousness, which is significant to activism, specifically if we view activism as more than an end goal, but, rather, group changes in attitude and therefore policy and activity over time.

In *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, poet Miguel Algarín depicts slam as fiercely political, stating that “the aim is to dissolve the social, cultural, and political boundaries that generalize the human experience and make it meaningless,” and claims that slam poems
“yield new patterns of trust, creating intercultural links” (9). In *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, scholar and slam poet Susan B.A. Somers-Willett argues that poetry slams are “places where the possibilities of identity are explored…Instead of being windows on culture, poetry slams are culture; they are places where interracial exchanges are made and marginalized identities are invented, reflected, affirmed, and refigured” (9). These exchanges can become spaces for intercultural inquiry (Flower) and public arguments. Yet the ways in which identity performances are embodied and interpreted complicate such ideals. Tyler Hoffman argues that “what is performed at a poetry reading is necessarily both the poet and the poem,” a claim that is based in J.L. Austin’s performative utterance and modified by Judith Butler’s theory that performative repetitions and citations “both consolidate the force of identity and […] provide the occasion for its subversion” (6-7). At the same time, critics of slam note that the genre can be restrictive because its identity politics can limit the poet’s capacity to speak and perform beyond his/her apparent identity. In response to this dilemma, Karma R. Chávez urges audiences to avoid immediately interpreting slam performances as evidence of democratic empowerment and to be cognizant of the ways in which a community may encourage certain types of identity performances, while recognizing opportunities for evoking exchanges among audiences and poets.

A linked set of articles between slam poet Ragan Fox and academic and poet Karma R. Chávez illustrates some of these complexities of identity and performance. In “‘Ragan Fox is a Gay Slam Poet’: An Autobiographical Exploration of Performance Poetry’s Performative Implications,” Fox clarifies how the audience and his performances have shaped and sustained his image as a “gay slam poet.” He identifies three categories of encounter that have shaped this identity: the way in which his body is interpreted “to provide the proof of the truth that is
spoken” (421); the way in which he reads his own body by reading and listening in the performance space (424); and the way in which his body is structured by a shared poetics in slam poetry that includes a large acceptance of issues of identity as a subject (Fox 426).

In “Poetic Polemics: A (Queer Feminist of Color) Reflection on a Gay Slam Poet,” Karma R. Chávez breaks down Fox’s claims and critiques his focus on the phrase “gay slam poet,” which results in an “invisible deployment of Whiteness” (445). Chávez argues for the use of poetic polemics in the slam space. A polemic is “a queer form” because of the unpredictable connection between agent and action that it provokes (Chávez 445). Chávez writes, “For the poetic polemic, the queerness of the agency emerges from both [the agency of form and the content], rendering that agency even more indeterminate and risky” (445). A poetic polemic is engaged in “rattling the audience,” which generates dialogue particularly for those listeners who do not completely identify with the poet (Chávez 450-1). In a sustained community of slam poets, a poetic polemic can be effective in considering Dwight Conquergood’s use of Bakhtin and dialogism, where “the locus of meaning […] vibrates between performances rather than within any given performance” (37-8). Across the TYPS interviews, poets discussed the ways in which provocative performances that did not reflect their own identifications provoked them toward dialogue with those poets. A poetic polemic is meant to shake up community gelling and always make visible the differences that people carry, always make visible the fact that something and someone are being excluded from a community, or forgotten.

Jeffrey Walker’s discussion of “symposiastic insider discourse” seems applicable to this question of inclusion and exclusion. Walker argues that academic, literary poetry generates academic “products” that “do not necessarily determine the possibilities of poetic practice or the experiences of poetic practices in the civic or public space beyond the school” (329). Walker
includes literary poetry as a “symposiastic insider discourse: a rhetoric that serves mainly to 
ratify and intensify the group’s identity and solidarity and that therefore mainly serves the 
purposes of a factionalized identity politics, without having much capacity for speaking across 
boundaries persuasively or for mounting a culturally significant epideictic eloquence that does 
more than simply reconfirm the group’s existing pieties and hierarchies of value” (330). While 
Walker’s discussion of symposiastic insider discourse is limited to formal education, his point 
about discourse that does not go beyond the parameters of the community in which it originates 
is quite useful for considering the effectiveness and reach of youth slam poetry community.

Critical Latticework

Throughout this book, I develop a theory called a critical lattice, or critical latticework. Here, I 
discuss the main theories through which critical latticework, which is also an image and 
heuristic, can be traced. There are seemingly infinite possibilities for understanding and 
imagine the fluidity of identifications, but here I will focus on three significant identity 
concepts from which a critical lattice as a workable tool can be understood: the terministic 
screen, intersectionality, and the rhizome.

Kenneth Burke’s concept of the terministic screen emerges from dramatism, which 
understands language as an embodied practice of symbolic action. The terministic screen, a facet 
of dramatism, is a filter that influences how a message is received and performed; it clarifies how 
specific terms create a limiting perceptive frame for those who generate and receive those terms. 
As Burke writes: “Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a 
terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a 
deflection of reality” (45). A choice of terms influences the capabilities of audience
understanding in that it limits a complete depiction, even as it passes through audience members’ own filters, connotations, and contexts. Burke stresses that the understandings we develop of space, where we are in the present moment, become increasingly complicated the further we attempt to connect multiple layers of more distant context onto that space, which “dissolves into a web of ideas and images that reach through our senses only insofar as the symbol systems that report on them are heard or seen. To mistake this vast tangle of ideas for immediate experience is much more fallacious than to accept a dream as immediate experience” (48).

A terministic screen can allow for the complexities of terms to be understood as both inevitable and worth understanding for the sake of critique and social movement. The practical ways in which rhetoricians try to take apart the nuances and scripts of language are traceable to Burke’s articulations as forming a large part of composition philosophy. When I say to my students that rhetorical analysis is like taking apart a watch and putting it together, but not really, I am trying to get them to understand the ways in which writing is unpinnable and part of a knowable set of structures.

Critical latticework abides by similar ideas, providing a flexible structure that momentarily contains the rush of fluidity. A critical lattice, as an elaboration of a terministic screen, is dependent on queering the space of the screen. It is a simple image for enhancing our understandings of how terms operate to obscure and reveal and, second, how the space between performer and audience, or headspace and listening space, is a space of significant growth, activity, and possibility.

Intersectionality can help us imagine the critical lattice as more than a terministic screen, for intersectionality is also about praxis. Kimberlé Crenshaw proposes the term intersectionality to resist what she calls a “single-axis framework” through which issues of race and gender, for
instance, are distinguished as single issues (139). Crenshaw aims to describe Black feminism through the argument that black women are often forgotten in feminist frameworks that only focus on gender. Intersectionality is not simply a matter of adding identifications to the conversation but is an active concept for structural change. Crenshaw uses the metaphor of traffic through an intersection to point out that there are many directions or paths through which discrimination can flow, and that Black women often “experience double-discrimination - the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex” (149). These nuanced experiences are not accounted for in generalized discourse about discrimination (Crenshaw 149-50).

In Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries, Vivian M. May provides a poignant argument for the coalitional possibilities of intersectionality and critiques the broad use of intersectionality divorced from the context of Black women’s experiences. She calls intersectionality a “nodal approach” that demonstrates that “a politics of coalition” is necessary: “to contest shared logics across systems of domination, solidarities need to be forged via mutual commitments, not via principles of homogeneity or sameness” (May 4). The “interrogative, antisubordination impetus” for intersectionality is meant to expose the ways that those who resist normative paradigms are also implicated in their own hierarchical behaviors (May 3, 6). Intersectionality has a “matrix orientation” that understands that the connections among lived experiences and hegemonic systems demonstrate that identities and unjust circumstances need not also be placed in hierarchical relationships (1).

Nancy Lesko’s call for youth studies scholars to go beyond a developmental framework connects with intersectionality. If we return to the traffic intersection, there is a pattern to traffic, rules that are followed, or not, or bent, or changed. The intersection relies on the actions and
interactions of whatever passes through. A biker, texting, runs a red light. In one scenario, she is hit. In another, a driver yells at her. In another, some drivers notice, while others do not; the light changes; the traffic proceeds. The biker is already gone from this intersection, about to go through another. Perhaps the biker veers from the road, jumping the curb to the sidewalk, snaking through a yard. Lesko’s call for change asks for youth studies scholars to not only cease placing youth in restrictive categories that can affect the capacity for complex and respectful policies and support for youth but also to take into account the myriad ways in which youth identify, and how these ways are not necessarily indicative of the inflexible stages of development.

The heuristic of a critical lattice, too, contains crossroads moments, embedded in the image, while disrupting the notion of that moment of the crossroads as extending into the continued path of the road. Critical latticework, in other words, involves intersecting moments that do not go beyond the lattice or screen. These are spaces of interrogation that are never completed, and they may not ever go anywhere; rather, intersections can become entangled with each other, on the lattice, at turns influencing the terministic work of the screen in ways that can be articulated, and at other times seemingly hidden or silent. With this in mind, it is important to note that, while I am working with a performance space that is about words, and, quite often, loudness, a lattice is also about silences.

At the same time, critical latticework is both an elaboration of and departure from the rhizome, a concept reliant on multiple, non-dualistic, and non-hierarchical connections and frameworks. In interpreting the interviews and poems of the youth in this book, for instance, I attempt to describe many paths and points of departure for understanding some of the ways in which youth slam poets in Tucson seek to establish themselves as writers and activists. A
rhizomatic perspective intends to avoid hierarchy, or what Deleuze and Guattari call an
arborescent perspective that characterizes the articulation of most Western narratives, methods,
and ideas. Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of the rhizome is an alternative space for narrative
that is both structured and lacks structure. Points of identification connect and grow from each
other in the rhizome, but these points do not operate hierarchically and are visualized as plateaus
upon plateaus, where it is the plateau – the middle space – that is the site of innovation and
activity. A rhizomatic perspective is not reliant on dualisms, but it is not simply counternarrative,
which is reliant on dominant narrative as a reaction and a connection. Deleuze and Guattari use
the term “multiplicity” to describe the movement of the rhizome, and they caution against
“pseudomultiplicities”; a multiplicity “has neither subject not object, only determinations,
magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in
nature” (8).

Since the rhizome actively works to dispel hierarchy, it relies on constant movement, for,
without this movement, there is rootedness, and roots are arborescent, a state that Deleuze and
Guattari abhor. At the same time, the rhizome is structured; there is a reliance on imagining a
beginning, middle, and end, where the innovation is focused on the middle, the way the plateau,
elaborating, and-and-and, plateau-to-plateau, represents a line of movements not confined to the
straightness of a line, and, importantly, starting in the middle, not reliant on the conventional
logic of historical context or envisioning a future based on what has occurred. The middle does
and doesn’t do this, but the idea is that activity happens, again, in this middle space, very much
like what Adela C. Licona argues in regard to the activities that happen between and in fluid
border spaces. In Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric, Licona
writes, “third space need not necessarily be liberating or transformational. Instead, it is through
third-space consciousness that the lived experience of ambiguity can serve its coalitional potential” (68). Activities in the middle are not dependent on beginning or end. As Deleuze and Guattari write: “It’s not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left; try it, you’ll see that everything changes” (23).

TYPS is both a rhizomatic and arborescent space, and these characteristics are significant to understanding the possibilities and limitations of critical latticework as a heuristic and image for youth coalitional consciousness. The slam organizers recruited youth in workshops that not only introduced the concept of slam poetry but also educated youth about social injustice that affects the youth and their families. The story of TYPS has a beginning, where adults educate youth about their circumstances, and youth respond – they counter-narrate. In the case of TYPS, the story is begun with a regressive policy context that leads to poetry in reaction to that context – poetry that is angry, resistant, frustrated, hopeful, active, inspiring. These activities are about speaking up and out; they are about counter-narrative and resistance, meant to empower youth to feel as if they have a right to speak and that they will be heard – by each other and by others who might also desire to make change and listen. TYPS as an organization, however, changes with each entrance and departure of youth slam poets as they attend, cease attending, age out, and take on other responsibilities in the organization. The ambience of TYPS also changes based on the resources (funding is limited much of the time, and at other times TYPS receives a grant or other forms of support from interested parties) afforded to organizers to educate youth, as well as the current legislative climate and the extent to which there are public outcries about specific issues. So, for instance, in the interviews, older TYPS poets, who were introduced to slam as a way to learn about and resist such legislative measures as SB 1070 and HB 2281, have expressed some
regret at the ways that TYPS seems to be shifting toward poetry subjects that are more directly about mental health, specifically depression and anxiety, and less directly about the social issues that might create those circumstances. At the same time, the way this is talked about in the interviews can be rather gendered, in that the personal poetry that is most prized in more current seasons is seen to be related to a group of female-identifying poets; it is seen as confessional, less forceful, and is perhaps underappreciated as a result. What happens when the confessional is not identified as significant in contrast with, say, a poem that may draw upon personal experiences to make a statement about an issue such as the prison-industrial complex? How do poets identify with the purposes of the space when TYPS does not prescribe subjects, or when TYPS is specifically engaged with social issues? Since the organization does not prescribe subjects, one could argue that it is a potentially rhizomatic space. And it is within a rhizomatic space that youth are encouraged to examine and perform multiple identifications. I would argue that the most successful spaces for coalition have arborescent and rhizomatic characteristics. In *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton works to queer perspectives of youth, which connects and departs from Deleuze and Guattari’s delineation of the rhizome. Stockton works to move Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptions of metaphor beyond “translation…but also in terms of transport and time, a transport inside a kind of hung time…[which] makes metaphor a moving suspension” (53). This imagining of identity and fluidity helps explain how a critical lattice is a space of screens, intersections, growth, and movement.

As an example of rhizomatic multiplicity, genderfluid perspectives demonstrate how the performance and embodiment of identifications is potentially transformative. In TYPS, a growing number of poems reflect this desire for and embodiment of multiplicities. According to
Deleuze and Guattari, a “multiplicity” has “only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature” (8). As an example of an attempt to practice and explain genderfluidity: an Etsy vendor makes genderfluid pronoun necklaces⁴, a chain on which there are pronoun squares one can choose to reveal and wear: “he,” “she,” “they,” “zie.” While the pronouns are assigned typical gender color assignations (pink for “she,” blue for “he”), an item such as this can be seen as reflective of rhizomatic multiplicities. And, while the choice of pronouns is connected with a top-down structure, this necklace allows for the declaration, realization, and possibilities of multiplicity in identifications while generating rhetorical encounters that hold possibility for critical inquiry. A necklace such as this can invite inquiry but also stymie insensitive inquiries. It does not control interaction but generates possibilities for other kinds of interactions not always dependent on binary constructs. Again, while the necklace is a story that stems from binary constructs, and while the necklace presents a counternarrative, it also potentially goes beyond counternarrative. Now, if only there were a necklace that held all four pronouns up at once. Critical latticework is meant to hold these complexities up at once in a way that is meant for the individual to explore, safely, the implications and temporality of identifications while positioning the individual as always performing through a terministic screen, but a terministic screen that is a fluid space and a space of activity itself, where growth and movement occur in ways that are not easily defined.

Deleuze and Guattari also rely on the image of lines to build the concept of the rhizome. The rhizome is or has a structure, but its strength is in movement, adaptation, and the capacity to form new lines without dependency on hierarchy. They write: “There are not points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines”; “A rhizome

⁴ https://www.pinterest.com/pin/362399101237939156/
may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (8). Lines are associated with breakage, threading, and segments; “Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees” (9). Because of the movement of lines and segments, Deleuze and Guattari argue that dualism is not a foundation of the rhizome while admitting that dualisms are “an entirely necessary enemy, the furniture we are forever rearranging” (21).

In a critical lattice, the lines are the living and growing things on and around the lattice. The lattice itself is a structure. Yet it also consists of lines that are part of a rhizomatic perspective. A critical lattice is a structure, but is temporary. It may hold broken pieces, may be added to, may migrate. Deleuze and Guattari’s descriptions of the rhizome include beautiful images such as a sheet of music, images that are often patterned but also represent the flattened nature of a rhizome, emphasizing the notion of the plateau. The rhizome avoids a top-down structure with roots. Any image, even one of chaos, has elements of structure. The critical lattice is certainly reliant on threading in and out of this concept of the rhizome, since it is an image that is structured yet flexible. It is laid horizontally but not flat. Plants can grow up, around, down, throughout the screen. Living, growing things can move and shape the screen and shape intersectional possibilities. “To be rhizomorphic,” write Deleuze and Guattari, “is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new uses” (15). As I discussed in the last section, scholarship focused on mestiz@ experiences, third space, and postmodern sensibilities continues to call for “new” and alternative spaces, those “strange new uses” that might be made possible through the rhizome.
The rhizome also helps frame a discussion of performance in relation to youth slam poets and can inform how performance connects with critical latticework. In particular, how does a rhizomatic perspective converse with coalitional consciousness? In one way we could say that coalition is about these multiple “lines of flight” that Deleuze and Guattari talk about, but at the same time it cannot be because coalition is about finding connections that grow together. On the other hand, these connections may occur from disparate vantage points in a non-arborescent fashion, and, since coalition is often temporary, it seems rhizomatic. Coalitional consciousness, however, is about something that is built or malleable across multiple contexts. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb ‘to be,’ but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and…and…and…’”;

“Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle” (25). Unlike the rhizome, a critical lattice can be dependent on an arborescent structure. However, roots may extend to a critical lattice, while the lattice, and the latticework itself, need not be rooted.

Imagine plants on the lattice, or weeds, unanticipated, or planned, or trained, or weaving in with other plants. How can we imagine the work that is done there, its temporariness, its articulations and impossibilities? Or, is it work? Labor? Activity? The mind’s labor is difficult to realize. It is not the energy of finger on key, of arm swinging sledgehammer, of my grandfather washing his hands with Lava soap in the basement of the farmhouse, showering, combing his hair, putting on a fresh pair of suspenders before creaking up the stairs for dinner and the news. How can we imagine it so that, for instance, our students can imagine it, so that we can also
present a workable heuristic for public discourse about how we can open our minds about identifications? I want to (and will, throughout this book) think about how to imagine this, and the first way, for me, is by thinking about story, narrative – the narratives told through dipping into moments in time in the stories of these youth: the live performance of a slam poem, its archived version on YouTube, interviews and conversations, the labor of writing and thinking that some of these youth agreed to engage in for this project – these all tell a story about the possibilities of critical consciousness and coalition, how this space, and spaces like it, not only develop leaders that are also storytellers, so crucial – these stories that feel real, that aren’t too tinny or canned – but also can be one avenue through which to make more tangible and workable the queering of identifications while, simultaneously, allowing a space, perhaps, for the dualisms so difficult to shake to be challenged, or even to disappear, if momentarily, in the everyday. The lattice could represent this struggle that accompanies the desire to live fluidly; it provides an imaginative frame that can help us accept our capacities for fluidity and our limitations, and how these are in constant flux. Further, the critical lattice is a way to imagine the multiple identifications often attributed to youth, and this way can help scholars and everyday discourse move from limiting narratives and language choices and tones about youth, from the restrictiveness of developmental narratives about youth.
In this chapter I will describe three sets of interviews conducted with TYPS poets. These interviews reveal information about TYPS poets’ relationships with poetry, performance, and social justice and activism. I will first discuss the purpose(s) of these interviews, as well as methods and methodology. I will then turn to prominent themes that emerged through the interviews. I organize these themes into three sections. First, TYPS youth reveal differing relationships with the concept of social justice as connected with slam performance and community. Second, TYPS youth clarify the significance of declaration and testimony in slam. Third, TYPS youth – as poets and as community collaborators – describe complicated relationships with the concept of authenticity and the relation between this and the comfort and sense of community in the space. The discussion of authenticity is broken into a few sections: first, checking privilege and being critical about what it means to be an ally; and, second, how notions of authenticity complicate classroom and community spaces. These three sections contribute to a description of how coalition is generated in TYPS, as well as build a foundation for understanding critical latticework in Chapter 4.

Constructing the TYPS Interviews: Feminism, The Everyday, The Privileged

In *Strange Encounters*, Sara Ahmed argues for the importance of face-to-face interactions that take place outside of a main, sanctioned event – those moments, for instance, when a side conversation is had at a pub after a conference presentation. These encounters are about “collective activism, but a collectivity understood in different terms, beyond the reification of the social group” (Ahmed 179). Ahmed’s description of collective activism is indicative of the
dynamics of the TYPS space, which is both event-oriented and works across and through face-to-face encounters among youth. Such encounters seem a key part of critical inquiry and resistance.

In conducting interviews with TYPS youth, I initially wanted to understand more about how these encounters might play a role in sustainable connections and activism. My research questions were about the relationships young people have to the concepts of poet and writer, and how those relationships might manifest in discussions about social justice and social activism. These broad questions emerged from the theoretical underpinning of the Crossroads Collaborative and were influenced by my attendance at several slams, as well as casual conversations with TYPS community members:

1. In what ways do slam participants articulate their relationships to the slam community and their development as slam poets and activists? How do the young people in this space define and/or practice activism?

2. What do the subjects and performances reveal about the connections of this community with the policies and practices that affect them?

3. How does identifying oneself as a “poet”/”slam poet”/”youth slam poet” contribute to an understanding of poetry as a public rhetoric with consequences?

The resulting interview protocols, which are appended, and my approach to facilitating the interviews were also partially motivated by an experience co-conducting a member check with TYPS poets in 2012. Along with Dr. Elizabeth H. Tilley, who was a Crossroads Scholar and PhD candidate in Family Studies and Human Development at the time, I presented the results of a coding process to TYPS poets and their two adult organizers.
The coding process consisted of analyzing the subject matter of a selection of poems from two different months in one TYPS season. This coding was undertaken by Tilley and two research assistants, Lana Dionne and Casey Heinsch. The original codes were initially drawn by Adela C. Licona, Tilley, and myself in a pre-coding meeting, and they can be seen in the below table. Many of the themes are borrowed from LatCrit; for instance, the phrase “holders and producers of knowledge” is from Dolores Delgado-Bernal’s 2002 article, “Critical Race Theory, Latino Critical Theory, and Critical Raced-Gendered Epistemologies: Recognizing Students of Color as Holders and Creators of Knowledge.” The themes also emerged from Drs. Licona and Russell’s specific interests in youth sexuality, health, and rights expressed through the Crossroads Collaborative research project:

IDENTIFIED THEMES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YOUTH:</th>
<th>SEXUALITY:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holders/Producers of Knowledge</td>
<td>Objectification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technologically Aware</td>
<td>Material realities / working-class consciousness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Consciousness: Consumerism/Materialism</td>
<td>Limited / Restricted expressions of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Non-participants in Am. Dream
- Frustration / Anger
- Interveners in deficit-driven assumption
- Identity
- Emotions

HEALTH:
- Addressing historical trauma/s
- Violence vs. well-being
- Access to knowledge
- Limited Options
- Addiction

RIGHTS:
- Right to be educated w/relevant knowledges
- Right to liberty / freedom
- Rights vis-à-vis borders
- Labor rights
- Right to be heard and respected

One of the purposes of member checking is to demonstrate the validity of research data. Research participants are asked for verification about whether researchers have described, interpreted, and theorized their experiences accurately and credibly, and in ways that “do justice to them” (Sandelowski 502). Member checking can take many forms; in our case, we wanted to see if TYPS members viewed our analyses of prevalent poetry subjects at TYPS as accurate. We also wanted to collect ideas about what they felt were the most important themes.
Member checking is not a clean practice since it brings up several questions about how experiences are conveyed and to what extent research participants can be considered valid judges of the interpretation of the experiences of a group (Sandelowski 502). Participants may revise previous narratives, aim to please researchers, or become bored and unresponsive. All of these situations can be problematic for the ways in which member check is used as a method of validation. As a result, many researchers have suggested, “member checking is less about optimizing validity and more about an opportunity for further reflecting on members’ own experiences and for self-transformation” (Sandelowski 503). At the same time, such an assessment perpetuates an attitude about how knowledge is gathered and who decides the significance of certain articulations of knowledge. When research participants do not validate researchers’ interpretations, researchers must decide to what extent their interpretations should be altered or done away with; they must decide the extent to which participants’ feedback will be considered as grounds for altering the analysis (Sandelowski 503). Of course these complexities come into focus when thinking about youth expressions, particularly if the fallback perspective is to view youth as novice learners and imitators with specific developmental tracks that limit their capacity to engage in critical thinking and activity to the same extent as adults.

These complexities were on our minds as we arranged the member check with TYPS, and they influenced the attention paid to specific comments from TYPS members. After receiving permission from TYPS facilitators to proceed, we recruited TYPS youth through mentioning the member check at a pre-TYPS community meeting. We provided the incentive of food and drink and relied on the TYPS facilitators to encourage youth participation. Seven TYPS members, all of whom were regulars at the monthly slam, attended the member check. There, we presented our findings – the themes we felt were prevalent in the poetry we had analyzed – and asked
TYPS youth for their opinions about whether these themes were an accurate representation of the poetry they see and write in TYPS. We also asked what themes they felt were missing, which of the identified themes did not seem to reflect TYPS poems, and what questions they had about what certain themes meant.

Overall, TYPS youth felt that we had accurately represented many of the poetry themes. They suggested adding themes such as “family” and “school.” They also did not feel that “health,” a Crossroads theme, came up in TYPS performances. Finally, they questioned some academic terms, asking for clarification about meaning, such as “heteronormativity.”

This member check helped us consider how the terms we choose as researchers can be part of a reciprocal exchange, so that we can work to create a space for discussion where we can not only speak to each other in familiar terms but also learn about the kinds of terms different stakeholders might use, and why. It also helped us consider how certain terms are deemed relevant by youth; for instance, the term “health” is relevant across all of our Crossroads research, as it applies to physical and social well-being in a variety of contexts, but the term was not coming across that way to youth in our presentation of research data. The member check facilitated a critical dialogue about why the research existed and what it had to do with youth slam poetry. As a result of TYPS input at the member check, we initiated another round of coding with additional terms and categories that reminded us to reflect on the many ways youth perceive their experiences.

A member check also relies on observing the dynamics of a group and thinking about how researchers are imposing data while, at the same time, asking for feedback about that data. Our initial analysis was done without the knowledge of TYPS youth. At the member check, I felt that TYPS youth treated the data with curiosity and that a major and unspoken (by the youth)
question was: Why are you doing this? What’s the significance of breaking down a poem into lines, and assigning topics to those lines, and then saying, “X number of poems are about heteronormativity?” I had been asking these questions, too. In addition, at the member check, one of the TYPS facilitators directly questioned the point of the research. At this stage in my development as a creative writer turned academic, I was confused, but, more importantly, I became interested in how this moment of critique could fuel a change in the way I approached research about and with TYPS. How, in other words, could I work to co-facilitate spaces for at least some of the TYPS youth, at least some of the time, to engage in research and reflection as a reciprocal exchange?

Interviews were one space to begin thinking about reciprocity and engagement, and I felt that I could continue establishing a rapport with poets through conducting them. Partially, these interviews would take place without the participation of TYPS facilitators who, rightly so, served the role of gatekeeper and kept me at a distance even while supporting the work of our research collective. Understanding the parameters and negotiable spaces in these relationships helped clarify how I might enter the space without being a nuisance. In “Talking and Listening From Women’s Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis” Marjorie Devault urges feminist researchers to look for “clues to social relations” (101). The social relations of gatekeepers in relation to youth and researchers were fairly unmistakable (and understandable) in the TYPS member check. The poets did not “know” either one of us, though they may have seen us at the slams; they may have cheered and/or booed our hasty scores. Most did not know much, if anything, about our research ahead of time, or they had worked with Crossroads in other capacities but did not sense the connections. At the same time, TYPS facilitators were being asked to navigate a relationship with a research collective while ensuring that youth were not
encroached upon. The TYPS facilitators had obviously encouraged TYPS youth to attend the
member check, but they were also testing our research game. They were encouraging in that they
tried to fuel useful discussions, or explain the value of what it was we researchers were up to.
They also encouraged critical inquiry by wondering about the significance of the research in
relation to the material circumstances of generating and performing poetry. In retrospect, it was
important to take steps such as conducting a member check, as well as to arrange interactions
with TYPS youth through the TYPS facilitators, because it helped me begin to establish a rapport
with TYPS youth that was a result of the trust established with the gatekeepers. My subsequent
attendance at the Brave New Voices international youth slam festival\(^5\) was met with enthusiasm
by TYPS youth and adults alike, but this was after a substantial amount of time invested in
slowly building trust.

The member check was a key part of how I began to think about the value of conversing
with youth, one on one, to begin to practice my own forms of reciprocation and collaboration. I
had to learn about myself to become legitimate to TYPS youth. At some point I realized that I
could probably help create a fairly comfortable interview atmosphere for TYPS poets because I
had listened and supported for a sustained period. I knew their poems, I knew their names, and it
seemed that my research interests were clear. Some of them were intrigued by the notion that I
was archiving their story, to some extent. One poet said in an interview: “it’s really cool to have
someone document this even if it’s just to show that the bigger picture is that youth do have a
voice.”

I want to recall here Sara Ahmed’s discussions about the possibilities in encounters that
are not sanctioned by an organizing event. This strikes me in relation to research methods

\(^5\) Funded by the Crossroads Collaborative.
because institutional permission processes do not often allow for those sometimes most
important of encounters to be officially sanctioned. I think of the discussions I have had with
TYPS poets about their work, or the unexpected phone calls I have received asking for some
feedback on a poem. The side conversations when the recorder is on or off, when the research is
not official. The way, for the first time, I felt moved enough to shout, stand, and clap at the Brave
New Voices final in Oakland. TYPS youth accepted me slowly and solidly, as a useful and
interesting and supportive adult. And “slowly and solidly” describes some part of my approach.
These face-to-face encounters contributed to the interviews and the willingness of the poets to
talk with me whenever, wherever. Yet these actions do not say something simply about my
particular project or anything I did; instead, these actions reflect the community understood and
sustained by these youth, and perhaps the ways in which coalition may be formed and performed
in various rhetorical contexts and meeting points facilitated through TYPS.

In regard to the pre-interview communications, my memories of the actual interviews,
and post-interview communications, I have tried to incorporate a feminist approach that values
the processes and meta-discourse of an interview dynamic as much, perhaps, as the “data” that
emerges from a flat transcription. According to Marjorie Devault, feminist methodology is about
strategies more than “a single model or formula” (96). Devault’s use of the term “strategies” is a
reflection of the balancing act required of feminists who wish to be innovative while
within/among/hanging-onto traditional academic methods rooted in male privileges (96).
Devault’s concern is with sociolinguistics, and she calls feminist researchers to question their
wording in interviews as grounded in male power and privilege. In addition, Devault considers
the interview work of “constructing topics, listening, editing, and writing” in relation to what it
may mean to “talk or listen ‘as a woman’” (97). I am not a sociolinguist, so my aims are different
here, but, as a rhetoric and composition scholar, and as a person interested in how we are
influenced by and imitate modes of articulation within and across specific communities, I
considered some of the questions that arise in Devault’s work in relation to how the language of
an interview space is complicated when participants don’t perceive themselves as belonging, in
part or in whole, to the space, and when participants try to find ways to clarify their thoughts to
those who appear to belong in the space, only to feel that they fail (97). This seems especially
pertinent when considering the perceived divisions between youth and adults.

Such questions of belonging are dear to me and resonate with my interview approaches.
Listening, and the indication that I am listening rather than simply being silent, is usually
beneficial in the interviews. I try to connect where I can connect, perhaps through identifications
with class or through a desire to research and report research in terms that are not obscure, in
addition to identifying as a creative writer. I can trace this in the way I ask and introduce
questions, and in what I choose to reveal about myself in the interviews. For the most part, the
transcriptions reveal that I am able to communicate fairly easily with youth about my research,
and they tend to express an interest in the questions I ask, which are usually about something
they are already excited about. I try to allow for silent spaces for thinking or reflection when
these moments can be viewed as comfortable rather than imposing or pressurized. I try to create
an embodied sense of comfort with silence. I’ve co-facilitated interviews before where it feels as
if the researcher will never stop talking, and I wanted to avoid that. My rural upbringing has
resulted in a perhaps curious mixture of everyday interactions that mixes hyperbole and
taciturnity (though, surely there are plainer terms for “hyperbole” and “taciturnity,” I hear my
family say). Being aware of these tendencies as potentially antithetical to purpose while
considering how I might use them is an example of how I reflected upon my interview persona.
In addition, when I ask questions, I attempt to be as cognizant of my privileges as possible but find that trying to keep discussions of privilege afloat can also stunt the questions and responses.

As I embarked upon the interviews, the TYPS space continued to evoke questions about the divisions articulated between individual and social, as I observed the great seriousness with which many youth slam poets worked as individual artists while growing in their commitment to the social construction of this community and contemplating its implications. In the latter two interview sets, then, I have integrated more direct questions about how youth identify. I do this as a result of the first set of interviews, where youth would often imply certain identifications but I did not feel comfortable asking them about it point-blank. The way I ask these questions depends on the vibe I am getting from the interviewee, but sometimes I don’t read the situation well enough, or, at the least, I sound awkward. I worry about sounding invasive. It’s difficult for me to ask personal questions such as this, and I suspect this stems from the shame I feel in asking direct questions about marginalized identities from a perspective of white privilege (How could you not ask?/Don’t ask) but also from a cultural (and regional) (and ethnic) tendency toward viewing such questions as not my right to ask. A cultural-regional-ethnic-familial belief in how listening is a matter of being quiet enough to hear, being quiet enough for people to work their mouths around the hardness and ineptitude and threat of words, being quiet and intent enough to demonstrate your openness to the fumbling and beauty of stories that are not your own (But your silences make you complicit.) (But you must listen.). And, with this, a cultural-ethnic-regional-global-white inability to perceive racist and homophobic infrastructures, at least not at first. So – it is all well and good to admit to these things but also to shut up and understand that talking doesn’t make your privileges any less invasive. Sometimes it makes things worse. It’s an internet trend now to publish listicles about how X group of people should or should not talk with Y.
group of people about Z privileges. These are informative, but it’s never so simple. Feminist
texts and methodologies, according to Devault, can “reflect the conflict and messiness of talking
and listening together” (98). Listicles can’t (or usually don’t).

I wanted to conduct semi-structured interviews because it would allow for a more organic
discussion to take place with youth. Devault clarifies this potentiality: “It is the interviewer’s
investment in finding answers, her own concern with the questions she asks and her ability to
show that concern, that serves to recruit her respondents as partners in the search: the things said
are responses to these words of this particular researcher. The researcher is actively involved
with respondents, so that together they are constructing fuller answers to questions that cannot
always be asked in simple, straightforward ways” (100). Further, there is a story to every theory,
and that story can be over-thought before a single word is written. I wanted the story to emerge
through slow and organic work, and I did not want to impose my ideas. For instance, I do not
offer a definition of social justice to interviewees but specifically ask how they define it (and
activism, and change). At the same time, I try to discern how poets’ views on social justice,
change, and/or activism might be connected with a communal sensibility, and how this emerges
from/through/within the TYPS space over the time and space of my research activities. I support
the social transformations that many TYPS youth seek regarding race, ethnicity, class, sexual
health, sexuality, and gender orientations; and the dynamic across the interviews demonstrated
that TYPS youth sensed this support. I believe that not being declarative about such things likely
helped me avoid leading youth toward certain responses. Certainly, however, I cannot know the
extent to which they answered questions in ways they thought I might have wanted to hear.

My desire to understand the rhetorical and social context of TYPS gave me grand
intentions to thickly describe the interview space, listen with care and deliberation to the
interviews, and think carefully about the act of transcription and its attendant issues in regard to interpretation, such as how dialogue looks on the page, whether one should include verbal tics or revise passages, etc. Once I began to transcribe, I understood quickly that my fantasy of meticulously listening and re-listening to the recordings and transcribing not just for exact wording but, also, tone, was unrealistic. In an ideal version of this research project, I would have transcribed every word. I was lucky to be affiliated with a department that could provide transcription help. But this, of course, means that the comprehensive feminist approach to analyzing talking and listening discussed by Devault is not to be.

Further, the way I approached research and data collection is indicative of my own reading and writing processes, which are not linear. I did not bring ideal codes into the interviews, and look for specific themes; rather, I, quite messily, pulled from my memories at first. The categories you will see in this chapter, then, emerged slowly and inefficiently. The way I approach academic writing, I began to discover, is similar to the ways I approach creative writing. I’ve spent several years working on a novel in which the setting, location, place, space is often articulated by my critical readers as the central character. I write my way within space and place to find characters, action, movement. Plot’s a real bane.

Academic research and writing also beg for plot – what is the argument, how is it supported, what are you adding to the conversation? (They might also assume a conversation.) *Troubling the Angels: Women Living With HIV/AIDS* and *A Place to Stand: Politics and Persuasion in a Working-Class Bar* offer atypical models for arrangement and, thus, involvement of research subjects, demonstrating a potential for participatory collaboration. These two books shaped some of my thinking in relation to including personal narrative, using
composite motifs to analyze the interviews, and including some writing by TYPS youth who helped with the research.

Patricia A. Lather and Christine S. Smithies’ *Troubling the Angels: Women Living With HIV/AIDS* reads outside of the academic box at first; in some ways, it reads like a creative nonfiction book. *Troubling the Angels: Women Living With HIV/AIDS* is an ethnographic narrative that emphasizes the voices of twenty-five women with HIV/AIDS. In this book, the conversations and writing of women participating in the research and telling their stories make up the main body of the text. The researchers’ reflections and analyses are formatted like a running footnote on the bottom half of many pages and are published in a smaller font. The researchers’ voices and articulations of scholarship, as a result, are often deemphasized so that the women who are living with HIV/AIDS might be viewed as controlling the perspectives emanating from the text. In their reflections, Lather and Smithies often express the challenges and opportunities of attempting to change the landscape of feminist scholarship. They want scholarship to be more accessible and more upfront about the partiality and complexity of analysis and research conclusions. The result is to critique the tendency toward myth and pathology and to include more than scholars in conversations that are hardly ever about scholars. And they challenge the reader to disrupt a traditional approach – to move through the text associatively and with a sense of agency about what portions of the text might deserve more focus than others. Other elements of the text that contribute to this reshaping and rethinking of scholarship include interim passages about angels and information boxes about HIV/AIDS.

The arrangement is, of course, devised by the researchers, so it is ultimately their voices that prevail. This methodological structure physically demonstrates approaches and belief systems underlying the presentation of the research. And the presentation of the research is
evidence of the ways in which research subjects have been treated and included or excluded, as well as of a certain treatment and understanding of audience. This is useful for many reasons, but it speaks to the attitude researchers might convey about whose expertise is most valued in conversations among academics. What is very useful about this book is how it shows one way that ethnographic scholarship can become more accessible to research subjects and the larger public. In relation to my project, it struck me when a TYPS participant said he viewed what I was doing as a way to archive the story he had been living with TYPS, and he was interested in seeing that story. While this is not a narrative or history of TYPS, I do work for accessible language and attempt to disrupt the notion that such a project is less about my conveying a particular expertise and more about describing how certain practices are useful for addressing the needs and concerns of youth and especially marginalized youth. And I believe that the desire to convey research in this way helps bend the genre of scholarship in a way that needs serious bending. For, in the case of Lather and Smithies’ book, it is not merely that the voices of the women living with HIV are highlighted while the research is subdued. The book bends genre, reconstitutes it, and, in the way Bawarshi suggests, moves academia one more painfully slow step forward in broadening its audience base, in becoming legible and intelligible and, most importantly, interesting to people who blink in the light, or to that imagined “public”; it can appeal to material practices and feelings that can be understood and felt in the reading. In this version of this book, the poetry and interviews of TYPS youth are not highlighted above the analysis. I suspect the hierarchy will shift, even if just a bit, in the next version. And I say this here because we know that a dissertation can be more than what it is now; it is a living document, and a commencement of sorts.
Julie Lindquist’s *A Place to Stand: Politics and Persuasion in a Working-Class Bar* is another model that inspires a more flexible and intuitive structure for ethnographic and feminist scholarship. The book focuses on how a working class, mostly white population express their sociopolitical experiences through debate in a neighborhood bar in Chicago. Lindquist draws out the contradictions of class through a study of individuals’ perceptions of their material conditions and a description of the local context. As a result, Lindquist generates a description and analysis of argument that emerges from the intimacy of the community (i.e., the regulars) and her articulation of conversational motifs as connected with rhetorical tropes. Underpinning her analysis is a belief in argument as a method of invention and persuasion that serves her working class subjects in terms of identification and life narratives.

Lindquist also implicates herself in the research. She, as a bartender, is part of the community, but she is also outside of it as a graduate student who is open about her research. While there are several differences between my position and hers (e.g., she came from the working class community she is studying, while I am not even from the geographical region of the community I am writing about and with), she is direct about the (dis)connections that characterize her position as she researches the community of bar patrons. Lindquist also incorporates narrative into the text; for example, she writes a vivid description of a typical night at the bar. I used this description as a model for my own descriptions of TYPS, and I modified Lindquist’s approach by soliciting such narratives from TYPS researcher-poets. Like Lindquist, I place narrative at the beginning of the book. This approach helps solidify that poet-researchers are valued in this text, and that I consider their narratives and opinions an exchange rather than a display to be gawked at for limited purposes. I think this is a crucial attitude to convey not only out of respect for youth but also as a contribution to composition scholarship in terms of a
textured understanding of young people who write and who choose to adopt an activist approach to their writing and performance. Further, as I have indicated, such an approach emphasizes the living, changing nature of the text, the details, and the analyses. Writing runs deep in my identity, and part of that is my dissatisfaction with finality in any piece of writing.

My discussion of the interviews in terms of motifs is inspired by Lindquist’s approach, and my interview questions attempted to draw out responses about:

- Self-identifications regarding class, race, ethnicity, culture, gender and sexuality
- Attitudes about the community, about learning and performing poetry, about relationships among the community members
- Attitudes about and working definitions of social justice, social activism
- Attitudes about what it means to be a writer and a performer

I felt that understanding such attitudes and identifications could evoke an extent to which youth slam poets articulate coalition but also an extent to which they may develop, simultaneously, modernist attitudes about writing. And I wanted to think about how these articulations might relate to the particular social actions within and outside of the community that each poet has taken. This, I speculated, might lead to a theory of youth consciousness. At some point as I conducted and analyzed these interviews, I remembered an image that has captured my imagination since writing my masters thesis, a collection of literary nonfiction: the lattice. In Chapter 4, I will say more about why this image began to thread into my work about TYPS.

The desire to involve youth in the research is also complicated by protection discourse perpetuated through human subjects permissions. I name TYPS youth, with their permission, in parts of this manuscript as I use their particular poems or other pieces of writing to inform my analysis. However, I do not attribute interview quotes to particular youth. I de-identify interviews
through organizing them based on theme and otherwise not characterizing interviewees beyond relevant self-identifications. While there are rich discussions of specific poems in all of the interviews, I do not include those that could easily be found in this manuscript or connect them to specific interview quotes. This makes for complicated work because it adheres to an ethic of protection regarding human subjects but does not always allow for the words of these youth to be attached to their names. But it is also advantageous because it keeps me from the temptation of stagnating youth on the page through descriptive interpretation. It keeps me from writing limiting descriptors and characterizations: “Under the fluorescent lights, she slouched and bit her fingernails.” This is important because it keeps me from imposing typical descriptions of youth, and from checking off identity categories in a way that simply supports my assumptions. While I am cognizant of how self-identifications influenced the group of poets I asked to interview, and the poets I requested to interview are all poets that I thought seemed passionate and dedicated in one way or another to this poetry community, I also did not simply choose to interview poets who would tell me what I wanted to hear. I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to hear. All I knew, truly, was that I wanted to understand something about the magic of this space for young people.

Sheila Dong, a TYPS alumni and student at the University of Arizona, contributed greatly to the labor of these interviews, including thinking critically about research methods. Not only did she transcribe most of the interviews, she created a document that broke up each interview by name, detailing her observations about emerging themes, pertinent quotes, and anomalies. It was immensely helpful to have a former TYPS member, who knows names, acronyms, etc., as a transcriptionist and to check my impressions against hers. Sheila helped me pare all of the
interview material enough to find useful themes. About her experience transcribing and analyzing the interviews, Sheila writes:

I got to hear each poet's story and get a better picture of who each poet is as a person. I especially enjoyed hearing about how passionate each person is about social justice. For example, one interviewee talked about skipping class to attend Take Back the Night, because she heard Brother Dean would be there protesting the event, and she wanted to counter-protest against Brother Dean. I thought this was a wonderful thing to do and really admired her for doing this. Two other interviewees talked about their involvement in a campaign to restore school buses to their high school. They would do things like attend meetings with TUSD officials and collect signatures for petitions. The large majority of poets did not solely write poetry, but were also active in their community. I aspire to be more like them. Another thing that was unexpected were some poets' opinions of the relationship between slam and social justice. Going into the transcriptions, I sort of expected that everyone would have unequivocally positive views of slam poetry, and talk about how they thought slam was the best thing to happen to social justice since civil disobedience. And yes, most poets emphasized the capability of slam to raise awareness and change minds on social issues. But one poet said that the people who attend slams are mostly those who agree already with the viewpoints being slammed, which is a valid point. Another poet said slam influences social justice through the community outreach that Spoken Futures does, rather than through the awareness raised by the poems themselves. A third poet thought slam was overly focused on social justice, and wished for other poets to vary their subjects more.

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6 Brother Dean is an inflammatory “preacher” who publicly insults passersby, particularly those he perceives as female, on the University of Arizona’s campus. His hate speech is protected on campus.
Insights such as those provided by Sheila helped confirm and complicate my analysis, but they also deepened my understanding of the complexities of university-community collaborations and sharpened an awareness of some of the ways I failed to achieve what I would have liked to. University researchers who develop community partnerships must be aware of how attempts to develop reciprocal exchanges can be fraught with unintentional consequences. Unless university researchers are prepared to lose the privileges of university status, there will always be limitations to this work. Communities can be “helped” or “served,” but the status quo in the form of the hierarchical university – its top-down positions, its normative discourses, its policies tied to legal language and the perpetuation of certain programs and positions – is recirculated through discourses from academic texts to grant reports. Not to mention practical issues such as the inevitable endpoint for most financial funding for research projects, or the relocation of workers on such projects – such as graduate students. We have to think about several issues when we work in the community, and a whole host of other issues when we develop reciprocity with our community partners. What we can try to do is circulate many kinds of texts that reach many kinds of audiences but report on similar things and motivate audiences to engage with findings in whatever ways seem possible.

The Interviews

I conducted eighteen interviews with TYPS poets. The first set of interviews is with six TYPS poets who attended Brave New Voices (BNV), an international youth poetry festival, in 2012. The second set of interviews is with five of these six poets and is meant to be retrospective. The final set of interviews is with other dedicated and, in a few cases, newer, TYPS participants. All
interviewees are or were regular participants at some point between 2011-2014. I did not collect demographic data beyond what interviewees revealed, and TYPS does not collect demographic data. In the final two sets of interviews, I did ask interviewees how they would identify in terms of race, sexuality, gender, class, or any other identifiers they saw as fitting, as well as their preferred gender pronoun, but it was the interviewee’s prerogative to provide these details. Many of the interviewees have since “aged out” of competing at TYPS. Many are still involved in facilitating TYPS events. Some no longer attend TYPS, for various reasons. Some still participate.

In the first set of interviews, with the Brave New Voices attendees, I wanted to find out about the poets’ experiences with TYPS and how they perceived slam competition at the national/international level in relation to their purposes and processes. The selection process for these interviews, then, was already made by TYPS facilitators, who had chosen which poets would represent TYPS at BNV. In the interviews, most of the TYPS youth state that they were chosen based on their commitment to TYPS and the energy they had brought to the local slam; therefore, they were asked to attend not only based on the relative merit of their poetry but also based on faithful attendance and devotion to the group.

I had begun to be on friendly terms with a few of these youth prior to Brave New Voices, but my attendance\footnote{My attendance at Brave New Voices 2012 was funded by the Crossroads Collaborative.} at the TYPS bouts and at the 2012 Brave New Voices final in Oakland’s Fox Theater served to further familiarize some of the poets with me. I was present throughout the bouts, and TYPS facilitators invited me to sit with the team during the finals. TYPS youth were surprised to see me, and they were welcoming and inclusive. After returning from Brave New Voices, I generated interview questions, waited for IRB approval, and then approached these
poets for interviews. All six agreed. The protocol for this interview consisted of six questions broken into sub-questions, but the interviews were semi-structured to allow for digressions and off-protocol questions.

The second set of interviews was conducted in spring 2014 with five of the six poets who had attended BNV in 2012. I intended to learn about how these poets’ relationships with poetry, the TYPS community, and community justice issues had been sustained and/or changed. One of the poets did not respond to my request for a second interview. The protocol for this retrospective, semi-structured interview also consisted of six questions broken into sub-questions.

The third set of interviews was conducted with seven more members of TYPS who had not attended Brave New Voices. I contacted members who I felt had influenced and been influenced by the TYPS community through consistent attendance and whose performances had resonated for me. When I say “resonated,” I don’t necessarily mean that I asked the most-rewarded (in terms of points or community love) poets to interview with me, or only the poets who focused on social justice issues poignant to youth in Arizona; I simply mean that the poems and performances of each person I interviewed had stayed with me well beyond the slam event. Sometimes the obvious struggles a poet might have had with a particular performance influenced my request to interview them. At the same time, I was not too interested in poets whose primary concern was love poetry or mental health, though one of the poets I interviewed approaches these topics with impressive lyricism. While love and mental health certainly fall under the purview of the interests of the Crossroads Collaborative, much of the poetry emerging about these subjects did not speak as much to my interests about writing development, community, and coalition. In this third set of interviews, the ten-question protocol is a combination of the questions I asked
TYPS poets who had attended Brave New Voices – in which I ask for a narrative of their involvement in TYPS and their relationships with the social justice aspect of the community. The main difference in this third set of interviews is that I selected the poets from whom I requested an interview.

**Interview Themes: Gateway Discourse and Declarations of Self**

The themes below include: discourse about slam as a gateway to other activities, poets’ relationships with the concept of slam as social justice, how slam serves a declarative need that connects with coalition building, and poets’ relationships with the idea of authenticity. I describe these themes to help build upon the theoretical framing for a critical lattice.

**Slam as a Gateway**

Two threads through the interviews support and help characterize how a critical lattice dialogues with extant discourse about the screening aspect of performance and the development. First, many comments indicate how strongly “screen” language works in discourse by and about youth, which supports the idea of a stable yet temporary structure invoked through critical latticework. In relation to this, interviewees often described what it might mean to be active in a space that feels safe and inclusive. The frequency with which interviewees brought up slam poetry as a space for community and safety, as well as a gateway involving skills acquisition, is crucial to understanding both the structural and fluid elements of critical latticework. Screens in critical latticework are not fixed but offer stability; in other words, critical latticework is about temporary moments for expression that allow for a stable screen for those expressions, and this
screen is, at the same time, an exploratory space on which developmental and identification work takes place.

When I refer to “screen” language, I am drawing from Burke’s concept of the terministic screen, a filter that demonstrates how choices in terminology reflect and deflect our social and cultural perspectives. Burke does not always seem to view concepts such as the terministic screen in an expansive way, which also, as many have pointed out, may be a function of the era in which he was writing and lecturing, pre-World War II and in the time of the Holocaust in Europe. For instance, Burke argues for Socrates’ point about dialectic: “there is composition, and there is division” (50). Burke asserts, “All terminologies must implicitly or explicitly embody choices between the principle of continuity and the principle of discontinuity” (50) and indicates the ways in which terminologies serve to divide or bring people together. The use of continuity and discontinuity can create a context for a “scapegoat, as a device that unifies all those who share the same enemy” (51). This perspective is useful for thinking about identification, but it has been complicated by other scholars, for instance, in work on coalition, which relies on the kinds of moments of constrained agency described by Carl G. Herndl and Adela C. Licona.

However, through a discussion of the unfolding of action, Burke urges his audience to realize that action is related to drama, which involves conflict, which follows with “victimage”: “Dramatism is always on the edge of this vexing problem, that comes to a culmination in tragedy, the song of the scapegoat” (54-5). The community work described in this book is dependent on a construction of action as related to drama and conflict, for action is inspired and initiated through the realization of conflict and the desire to move against it. In Burke’s construction, victimage has to do with the ways in which blame is placed on anyone but the victim. In our current conservative climate, the notion of victimage is something to guard
against, and it can be trotted out as a rhetorical device especially when one group does not (or refuses to) understand the basis of another group’s grievances or be implicated in those grievances. In regard to criticisms against such frequently polemic genres as manifestoes, it seems important to note how perceptions of victimage may influence how the message can initiate the assumption that simply naming and describing the conflict is scapegoating. This is a problem we can see in recent and ongoing social resistance against racial profiling and subsequent violence by the police, where individuals who do not perceive the invisibilities of racial discrimination view race “rioting” as an excuse to make trouble, scapegoating the victim, rather than as part of a crucial expression of histories of trauma and oppression.

The TYPS performance space is often described in ways that evoke a progressive narrative of movement, forward and beyond: it is a gateway toward something else. When youth talk about their boredom or despair in school, and how slam or other community organizations feed their joy and creativity, it is within the parameters of a logic focused on change, in a way that allows youth to imagine themselves within an extant developmental narrative. If school doesn’t work, go here. Go to this place. You will develop public speaking skills, for instance. Alternatives can lead one back to a script of success. As one TYPS poet puts it, poetry is a “steppingstone” toward other ways of using one’s voice. These are observations, not necessarily a critique. This is only one way of seeing it. Upward mobility and success are not always the main attractions of the steppingstone. One can step toward or move within alternative narratives: convoluted, non-linear. This, too, is possible. This is why the concept of a critical lattice is useful, as it allows a sense of structure that is flexible, moveable, that can accept certain logics but be aware of their arbitrary restrictions. Alternatives, or different spaces, provide ways of perceiving and interacting with and against normative, linear scripts.
Several of the interviewees described TYPS as a space where youth learn how to speak up and out through poetry, which leads them to other activities in which they feel confident enough to express themselves. One poet said: “Poetry is the gateway art form […], one of the many, many resources our youth have today. I mean, we have blog sites, internet communities, memes, all these different thing that we can put research into, and also teach and learn. You know, the possibilities are endless.” TYPS poets view slam performance as part of skills acquisition and a key part of building community. One poet, for instance, discussed how her experiences with TYPS encouraged her in public speaking: “If it wasn’t for TYPS, I probably wouldn’t have made a speech at my graduation, and I did. I was like completely satisfied once I was done, and I was like, I feel like I can talk to anybody now.” Another poet said that slam has allowed him to explore language, emotion, and form, improving his communication.

Some poets discussed the skills TYPS has taught them that have been applied to leadership roles. Beyond the positive effect of performance on further public speaking, those poets placed in leadership roles in TYPS discussed how they learned deeper social interaction through hosting or other coordinating activities. Poets also mentioned having more confidence in learning how to speak publicly, talk to teachers, perform class presentations, memorize for class recitations, and collaborate with schools and in the community. One poet said she is “really flexible in group work and individual work” and feels comfortable speaking with both youth and adults as a result of her TYPS experience. Another talked about how TYPS teaches about what it means to be an “active citizen,” “active in the community,” to “take ownership and leadership over things in their community that are wrong and then like get them to work towards fixing it, like that’s how they’re gonna be when they grow up in their everyday lives.” Another poet talked
about learning what it means to be a “community leader” and how TYPS taught them to “be brave,” “to be loud,” “to be crazy,” “to be silly.”

Poets felt that TYPS has specific goals that go along with these progressive narratives about acquiring and applying skills in leadership and community roles. One goal is to give youth leadership experience in the TYPS community and other community events. Along with this, TYPS community members gather knowledge about community rules and learn to facilitate events that were initially run by adults. One poet had moved on to college at the time of the interview, and we discussed how they had gotten involved in working to start a slam program for elementary school children as well as volunteering in other capacities in elementary schools. For this poet, working with children is “doing for them what slam poetry did for me. Like slam poetry gave me my voice and I was like wow I’m actually like really powerful.”

These specific skills and confident feelings are related to descriptions of community and cohesion across the interviews. Poetry performance, said one poet, is happiness. Another discussed how she learned to care about people more and get along with different types of people through working to improve her poetry. One poet described how connecting slam to social justice increased his desire to be a “humanitarian.” The poets take the growth of the TYPS community seriously; as one poet said, “I think the slam movement here is growing and the community is just getting tighter and tighter.” Even a poet who was less excited about TYPS and had stopped attending said: “What made me start coming back was just the community […] I fell in love with everybody who was there.”

Most TYPS interviewees felt that a goal of TYPS is unity, and unity is achieved through providing a nonjudgmental space for expression. One poet said: “TYPS is like if you want to slam we will give you the opportunity, and we will show you the love, so I feel like the
community has grown in terms of how we respect each other.” This is important in terms of understanding the development of a coalitional consciousness while maintaining difference.

“TYPS really encourages people to become their own person and to respect other people being their own person,” said one poet. It is, as another poet said, a space to speak, listen, and create. It seems that the coalitional consciousness possible in TYPS can also be related to developing a perspective about bringing the community, the social, and the individual in connection. As one poet put it: “writing for a community isn’t exactly what a poet does. It’s a poet writing for himself or herself that benefits the larger community.” Before getting involved in TYPS, one longtime poet “didn’t really understand what community was. […] [With] slam poetry […] you care more about your community and what others are going through ‘cause you hear these stories and you make these connections.” Another poet felt that poetry in TYPS was a conduit for healing, catharsis, and laughter, and this helped in coping with the issues that youth brought to the event. Some poets who had a longtime relationship with TYPS discussed how the personalized poetry they initially performed grew in relation to community-wide subjects. One poet talked about how she learned through TYPS to try to change the things she does that might be problematic for others while being careful not to speak for others. One poet said: “A lot of these kids aren’t going to be slammers or long-time poets but for the time that they do come to these workshops or are interested in writing or if ever their career path takes them somewhere else and they use poetry to grasp life and this hectic world we live in, I kind of feel like that is good enough.”

Most of the poets also described TYPS as a space where active listening and respect for personal stories inspires community and coalition. Many of the poets discussed how TYPS both solidified their sense of themselves as poets and helped them commit themselves to larger social
causes. One poet puts it like this: “TYPS is a very positive, beyond positive, sometimes scary positive place and I feel that’s what youth need especially when tampering with such delicate emotions, you know. Diabolical minds, delicate hearts.” Youth poets also tended to describe a capacity for rhetorical listening and coalition in terms of narrating their struggles with an understanding of their own sets of privileges. These understandings often came from getting to know other youth through performances, community events, and social contact outside of TYPS.

**Slam and Social Justice**

I threaded questions about social justice and community into the interview protocols since this was one of my main areas of inquiry. I wanted to know how poets perceived the concept and in what ways they connected their slam poetry activities to community justice. Many of the poets were specific about how the legislative policies of Arizona directly affected them and their communities. For instance, a poet who identifies as undocumented talked about how her Native American teacher was pulled over in the initial days of SB 1070, and how this experience “was one of the first things that I saw.” Experiences such as this influenced her family’s activities: “we kind of just stopped going out afterwards, my family, so we don’t really drive anywhere, we don’t really travel, we don’t go to, like, parties anymore, so, just stay inside.” And her family considered it risky for her to perform about being undocumented: “they used to be really conservative about it, they didn’t want me to do it, because they thought that somebody was going to come into our house because they found out or something like that.” She continued to perform about what it means to be undocumented and felt empowered by the capacity to narrate the experience when so many people in her situation felt afraid to.
For this poet, social justice activities were distinctly defined around a clear political issue and experience, and her poetry was one method through which she aimed to both narrate the experience and change the perceptions of others about what it means to be undocumented in the United States. Other poets had more abstract views about what constitutes social justice. One interviewee explained that social justice activities consist of “looking at the small stuff because, you think it’s going to make a bigger change, or it’s going to grow into something. So kind of, if you did something that was problematic before, you know, you would change it, you would change, you know, the way you speak, you know, some words that you shouldn’t say, or some things that you shouldn’t, you know, do because it’s problematic, then you would change those, and then you would, you know, call out your friends on it if they do it, and, you know, it’s kind of like a pass it on kind of thing.” Some poets questioned whether one is born or becomes an activist: “some people have told me that, you know, you’re an activist, you know, the moment you start existing. So, if you’re kind of a part of a group that is marginalized, you’re automatically an activist, and I can see that, a lot.”

Poets’ perspectives on what counts as a social justice issue and expectations for social justice issues to arise at TYPS seem to influence their commitment to the community. Overall, TYPS poets tend to see poetry as a way to express their stance on a particular issue and bring about change, and more than one poet discusses the performance of poetry to an older audience of voters as one way of bringing about change. The performance about a social issue from a young person allows others to understand specific effects on youth, and it is also a way for youth to speak on behalf of others with similar experiences. Poets generally feel that slam fosters awareness and critical thinking about social issues but that practice and action are required, too. However, poetry has significance in the local community because of its helpfulness in raising
awareness. Several of the poets rather abstractly mention raising awareness as the primary significance of slam poetry and put it on the listener to do something about the issue. Still others feel that there is a place for a range of emotion in terms of getting things done on a practical level: “As much and as beautiful as anger can be incorporated, I feel we should incorporate healing...to provide...a new dialect, new dialogue between people.”

While several of the poets feel that social change is the main reason for their participation in slam, others feel that social change is a side effect of self-expression. Some express that slam is a tool for social justice because it exposes one to different viewpoints and allows connections between people. One poet has observed that newer poets at TYPS tend to be writing about more individualistic issues, while more established poets are writing about their communities; the suggestion here is that poetry shows growth when it goes beyond navel-gazing. While poets did not offer a hard and fast rule about what constitutes a social justice subject versus navel-gazing, there was some critique of a potential limitation in scope of poems that are directly about social justice issues: some poets were bothered when problems or issues were performed as if they were confined to one particular group. One poet lamented that TYPS poems that do not point out the underlying tears in social fabrics are underappreciated. And an emphasis on what were perceived to be social justice poems prevented some youth poets from sustaining an involvement in TYPS.

I find these points, which are unique to a set of interviews that are overwhelmingly positive about TYPS, to be crucial for understanding the critical lattice perspective I will discuss in the next chapter but also in relation to my earlier discussions about the ways in which the discourse of human rights, social justice, and privilege must do a delicate dance in relation to inclusion and exclusion. Let me pause, because I suspect it will matter to readers, to say that I am
not quoting cisgendered, white, or upper-class youth poets when I refer to interviewees that expressed some discomfort with the emphasis on social justice. For instance, one poet says: “I would never talk about social justice...so people considered me naive and ignorant...that’s not it, this is...an environment where I don’t have to get stressed out about these things, ‘cause I hear a lot about that stuff at home.” Her impression was that she was perceived as “naive and ignorant” because she did not slam about the same kinds of social justice issues as others, even as she had experienced oppression in relation to her racial, ethnic, and sexual identifications. It was not the kind of environment this poet craved for poetic expression because she wanted to use her poetry for something other than confronting what she experienced in her daily life. What I also take from this point, however, is the question of how discourse surrounding social justice might exclude or have an unintended effect, and how, in the experience of those who stopped attending TYPS, this may also be evidence of the development of a critical lattice perspective.

Some “older” TYPS poets expressed concerns in the interviews that TYPS is changing – there are fewer poems, for instance, about the pressing social justice issues surrounding SB1070, HB 2281, and more recent legislative efforts. Instead, poetry about mental health, body image, and confessions is taking center stage: poetry that is focused on the self in a way that, in the view of some TYPS poets, does not necessarily look outward toward community activism. An older poet was dissatisfied because he felt that TYPS had shifted dramatically from a social justice orientation to something more “flowery.” Some of the older poets stated that they were at first uneasy about this shift but that they began to broaden their perspective about what could qualify as a poem identifying a social justice issue. For instance, many of the newer poems at the time of the interviews were about mental health issues, and the increase in these types of poems might be an indication of solidarity around the subject that could lead to activism. Another perspective
given by a longtime TYPS participant is that the newer performances are planned out more instead of being “open venting.” There is a sense of practice and refinement, perhaps less spontaneity, to the poems. These newer poems may be less about speaking out (e.g., “open venting”) and more about the way solidarity can be generated among youth who both share and learn about these experiences.

These older poets were/are now working out what is acceptable, what is popular, and what they want to be critical about but cannot quite be critical about in a space that is supposed to be about empowerment and the sheer significance of voice. Another way to describe this anxiety about subject matter is through the perception of a shift toward “literary” poetry that is confessional in nature. There may be a difference between this type of crafted confession and the confessions emerging from a pain that is radiated outward and clearly connected to systemic problems. Neither type is better than the other. The point is: how does this affect the way the community members perceive the purpose and breadth of the slam, how it walks with them in their daily lives, in their ways of being in the world, in their ways of interacting about issues of concern and importance to them?

In a retrospective interview, one poet discussed the changes he has seen in TYPS. The focus used to be more on challenging oppressors, he said, and now the space is more about supporting the oppressed while still calling out privileges. It is a space, many poets indicated, where people are free to show their vulnerabilities and can develop, as one poet put it, their own kind of “emotional activism.” In TYPS, there seems to be a shifting consciousness where poets are questioning what it means to enact and understand social justice. One poet, for instance, was weighing the idea of social justice activities as gaining purchase in spaces of power, but he critiqued this against the idea of social justice as a space of unification and change for those who
are oppressed, much like Augusto Boal articulates in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. The idea, as another poet put it, is that empowering others to make change is the crux of social justice.

Perhaps two contrasting post-TYPS experiences can help elucidate the complexity of how people and communities come to understand the parameters of social justice and change. One poet, who relocated to attend college, joined a thriving adult slam poetry community in a new city. This poet was not pleased, however, by the overly competitive, score-focused, “cliqueness” aspect of the new slam poetry community and was bothered that there seemed to be little focus on being socially engaged. The poet also felt that the new slam community was less diverse than TYPS and that poets would imitate those who were scoring the highest, which indicated that they were more interested in winning than anything else. For this poet, conveying some truth about the self is a main purpose of slam: “It’s not like to get a high score or like impress the judges or impress your girlfriend. It’s to get up and speak your truth and like be real and be who you are and say what you need to.” It is important to note that this poet clarified how, in TYPS workshops, the goal was to educate youth about social justice issues but not to force any one subject or issue as a preferred theme in slam poetry. And many of the interviewees conveyed something similar – that TYPS events facilitated knowledge about these subjects without demanding that these subjects be the only focus. This poet felt that TYPS, because of its focus on social justice, was an important and welcoming space that facilitated the capability to create social change.

The perceived emphasis on social justice caused another TYPS poet to leave the event, however. This poet also joined an adult slam poetry event and described it as more welcoming than TYPS because it did not emphasize social justice poems. For this poet, poetry about social justice issues at TYPS was limited in scope; poets only had credibility (in terms of being
rewarded through both points and peer appreciation) when they conveyed a particular dissatisfaction with an experience connected with systemic problems. While this poet had experienced social oppression through perceived race and sexuality, the poet argued that one had to perform about oppression in a specific, “negative” way. This poet perceived members of the new adult slam community to be more welcoming, inclusive, and helpful in understanding how to improve poetry and performance. The particular way this poet defined social justice poetry, as not “positive,” for instance, seems to have affected the ways in which this poet experienced critique or feedback from TYPS versus the adult slam. Being critiqued for poetry at TYPS was difficult for this poet, whereas the poet perceived criticism at the adult slam much differently.

Still other poets narrated how the skills they have learned through slam initiated concrete actions resulting in evident change for them and their communities. The most striking examples from TYPS include an undocumented student who slammed a poem at a community college school board meeting ahead of a vote to determine if undocumented students could receive in-state tuition (the vote was yes), and the poets who organized a community forum focused on getting back the school buses that had disappeared from their route one day with no explanation from school administration. The forum organized by these youth attracted at least a hundred community members and school board candidates, and they opened it with a slam poem. The youth got their school buses back.

While the mission of TYPS does not directly include the term “social justice,” it is implied as a goal on the TYPS website: “The Tucson Youth Poetry Slam advocates literacy, critical thinking and youth voice through poetry competitions, workshops and community showcases.” One longtime participant said TYPS is “focused on youth involvement in the community, taking youth with different strengths and putting them into places in the community
and events and places where they’re able to speak out where they will be really effective.” What youth speak about and why they speak out seems dependent on how they perceive those individual strengths.

In the interviews, there was a back and forth in youth messages between feeling empowered to take action in the community and relying on the effectiveness of what youth could convey to adults, where youth feel that their voices and sense of empowerment can only go so far and, as a result, they rely on garnering the support of adults. One poet pointed out that slam poetry connects to social justice through what it demonstrates to its audience about youth. She said, for instance, that slam shows the ways in which youth care about social issues. Several of the poets talked about how their slam poetry speaks to those who can do something about certain social problems, meaning adults. A space where collaborative action and inquiry can result in youth-initiated activities is difficult to generate and sustain, as Chávez and Soep have pointed out in their description of a pedagogy of collegiality, but worthwhile even in glimpses. Being able to articulate what they care about among community members and outside of the community requires a rhetorical fluidity that many of the TYPS poets connect in the interviews to skills acquisition and activist accomplishments. The TYPS space is flexible, evoking multiple interpretations from youth, and this flexibility is indicative of critical latticework. The poet who was unhappy with the focus on social justice, for instance, expressed a complicated love for TYPS, a movement of critical inquiry that leads to questions about what social justice expression consists of. She makes firm declarations about how she views what it means to be a poet, as well as what she wants from poetry. The presence of “social justice” as a concept in TYPS provokes such questioning, and so it is possible to view her departure from TYPS as significant evidence of the effectiveness of the space beyond the sometimes bare-boned feelings of exclusion or
inclusion that she also expresses. It is more than the continuity or discontinuity of Burke’s terministic screen. For a time, this poet moved in the TYPS space, on a lattice, where her identifications came into contact with an overarching mission of support and critical inquiry. The other TYPS poet who was unhappy with the adult slam community in a new city, on the other hand, made use of a perspective about what slam should be and became determined to alter the community, not through addressing it with adults but through educating elementary youth about slam. Another poet still heavily involved in the TYPS community describes the critical significance of the work done there as “a way to identify certain issues within the community or within your own life or within the whole country or whatever, and justify why those things are not working in the way that they’re working, and addressing that, whether it’s in politics or as they do through voting, or through slam poetry.”

TYPS youth who take on leadership roles and no longer compete at the monthly slams are also in an in-between space where they navigate the expectations of younger youth whose experiences they now facilitate, even as they, themselves, are still being mentored by other adults with more experience in, for instance, hosting an event or running a spark event. One of the poets discussed how her relationship with TYPS poets has changed as she has taken on a leadership role. For instance, she feels less able to create a bond with younger poets as a poet; she is more of an authority figure to new poets still young enough to compete. While longtime TYPS poets in leadership roles may have strengthened their connections to the community, they may also feel a sense of loss. This applies not only to their ability to maintain relationships with newer poets but also to their opinions about what an engaged and dynamic TYPS space looks like. The older TYPS poets I interviewed had, after all, emerged as slam poets at a very tense time in Arizona. It is not as if this tension has gone away, but many of these poets were also involved in
youth programs specifically aimed at discussing, clarifying, and responding to the regressive legislative tactics of many Arizona politicians. Many of those programs have been defunded or put on hold in the face of budget shortages. As a result, fewer TYPS poets are entering the space for the first time through venues directly focused on social justice.

Slam Poetry as Declaration

No matter the subject, slam is frequently about declaring who you are, and, often, what this might mean for you and for others. Overall, the youth slam poets I have interacted with believe in the notion of voice, of speaking up and out, as related to declarations about identity, beliefs, and ways of resisting. While not all of the poems are in the first person or strictly confessional, most declare certain aspects of the poets’ identity/ies and beliefs. “We need to be able to give a testimony,” said one poet. Another poet expressed the intensity of this need: “[…] some people go out there and like it’s kind of like all they have, like, to speak their voice.”

This desire to share story and narrative can be understood through the Chican@ movement, where history is strongly connected with political contexts and the movement is associated with “a revisioning, a different way to look for and at the histories of marginalized peoples” (Leyva, “The revisioning…” 4). Slam poetry is a conducive genre for the “overtly political” nature of the Chican@ movement (4). In the context of the Chican@ movement of the 1970s, Yolanda Chávez Leyva writes, “We responded, in the classroom and outside of it, with growing pride, a new understanding of our individual and community histories, and a sometimes-overwhelming anger” (4). TYPS poets articulate their feelings about slam in a way reminiscent of Leyva’s and fitting for a context in which Chican@ narratives continue to be marginalized, impacting many of these youth slam poets’ lives on a daily basis. Their feelings
and experiences are put into a larger and implicating context – a space for anger, activity, connections, and coalition.

This is a space where the majority of youth slam poets are also youth of color, and so there is a unique opportunity (unique, given that TYPS is a space open to all and TYPS spark events happen all over Tucson) for historical trauma to be narrated unimpeded by the feeling of being the minority in the room. It is an uncommon space where the feelings and belief systems of a majority population are not pressing tensely, tightly, against the performance of alternative narratives. Rare. In “The revisioning of history es una gran limpia: Teaching and Historical Trauma in Chicana/o History, part ii,” Yolanda Chávez Leyva describes how, in classroom discussions about historical trauma, “some Euro-American students respond defiantly, others with guilt, some with a desire to know more and others with a plea not to know” (5). It is all too common to contend with majority responses such as this. This differs from the TYPS context in that there are few white poets, and most of those identifying as white also identify as female or genderqueer. If there are self-identifying white heterosexual males in this community, the number is so low as to be barely noticeable. This is advantageous for the space in that youth of color and youth who lack other specific privileges connected with whiteness are less likely to encounter moments where they must deal with how white youth respond to those who may be speaking out against the privileges they often possess. One of the only white, male, heterosexual slam poets I observed in this space used it as a venue to ask his girlfriend to prom and promptly left once that task was completed. The TYPS community was very supportive of this poem, applauding wildly, but, to me, and to put it politely, this performance was not a generous way of perceiving the space. More frequently in the TYPS community, white privilege-sourced conflict is connected with white, straight, female-identifying poets. Those poets who interact with these
conflicts can find themselves in murky waters, where inquiry must be undertaken with care, where those who are the subject of inquiry have complicated relationships with what sort of responsibility they may have in educating white people or attempting to prevent more heedless racism and pain. Later, I will discuss the depth with which TYPS youth engage in discussions about privileges and allies, but, first, I want to return to Yolanda Chávez Leyva’s descriptions of how important it is to provide spaces for narrating historical trauma.

In “‘There is great good in returning’: A Testimonio from the Borderlands,” Leyva argues for the importance of narrating trauma and understanding its location “in the heart area,” which holds “emotion, memory, and knowledge” that includes the present trauma as it is understood in relation to years of trauma endured by a group (5). Leyva likens historical trauma, as well, to a “soul wound” that emerges from “colonization” (“‘There is great good…” 5). Understood in this way, when we hear TYPS poets speaking up and out, it is not simply their voices we hear, it is a series of voices that is beginning to register the profound impact of generations of trauma. It is an activity that demonstrates how the voice, here and now, is echoing that complex and painful history. Empowerment at its most powerful, then, accounts for an awareness that goes beyond being able to name or categorize or put these traumas into a social context – it is, instead, about the felt complexities, the profundity of feeling that is in voice, in story, in narrative, that makes it more powerful and durable than, for instance, academic abstraction. Leyva’s “commitment to look at the ways in which we carry the traumas of history inside our spirits, our bodies, and our minds” is compelling in relation to the writing and embodied performance that occurs in a slam space (7).

The activity of declaration is part of that narrative that links one to stories unfolding over time and space. And in such spaces, where declarative assertions about identity and experience
are welcomed, critical inquiry that results in healing and activism is possible. A prevalent and criticized image of this kind of space is Mary Louise Pratt’s discussion of contact zones. This is a concept that has been used by youth studies scholars to promote such methods as youth participatory action research (yPAR). For instance, in “Researching and Resisting: Democratic Policy Research By and For Youth,” Maria Torre and Michelle Fine describe the most effective PAR collectives as contact zones, drawing from Pratt’s definition of “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (34). At its best, the contact zone contains “rage, incomprehension, and pain” as well as “exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom” (Pratt 39).

The concept of the contact zone can be contentious for borderlands scholars, and, in relation to the geographical and felt borderlands expressed through many TYPS poems, these objections are crucial to consider. Damián Baca, for instance, takes issue with Pratt’s conception of contact zones in *Mestiz@ Scripts, Digital Migrations, and the Territories of Writing*. Baca’s book focuses on how the study of ancient rhetorics of Mesoamerica holds strong implications for composition studies in terms of teaching beyond classical Greece and Europe. Baca argues for a “careful reconstruction” of Mesoamerican history that would “involve an investigation of material and historical plausibilities in order to develop ‘new’ ways of thinking about writing and rhetoric, both yesterday and today” (32).

Key to this investigation is mestiz@ consciousness as “a powerful conceptual and analytic tool that significantly revises how writing and rhetoric can be studied and taught” (Baca 32). The term “mestiz@” is drawn from Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the “new mestiza.” In
*Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa meditates on how a mestiza consciousness can tend to the influence and reality of being, as Anzaldúa states in relation to her own identifications, white, Mexican, and Indian. Mestiza comes from an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, and la mestiza is reflective of the transfer of cultural values across groups, which creates an intersectional identity that is flexible and indicative of the borderlands. This borderlands consciousness has possibilities beyond simply reacting to an oppressor, which is an idea that has been adopted and adapted across, within, and without Chican@ texts. Such a consciousness accompanies her feelings about being a writer and echoes Leyva’s discussions about narrative as a soul wound; Anzaldúa’s writing feels to her “like I’m carving bone” (95). For Anzaldúa, writing as an activity is inextricable from the mestiza; there is a lack of definition, a sense of being “boundless,” “a lot of squirming” (94). In performing and exploring how personal experiences and expressions can be part of a collective (but not a homogeneous collective), TYPS poets explore historical trauma and the idea of a mestiza consciousness, and this consciousness can be coalitional in its movements.

Baca might also insist that the concept of the mestiz@ not be considered simply a product of colonization, but as a way of being that generates other rhetorics, other narratives, other spaces not completely reliant on centralized, dominant narratives. Beyond the question of what it means to be colonized is the recognition of the generative discourses that emerge, and depart, from this particularly complex colonization. The mestiz@ context involves “the interaction of memory with the ongoing rush of history,” and this history is “a complex and dynamic legacy that today remains contested, fluid, and adaptive” (Baca 61).

Baca’s objection to Pratt and the idea of a contact zone has much to do with making visible the work of Fernando Ortiz, whose discussion of transculturación is crucial to
understanding contact zones. Pratt’s definition of transculturación is “to describe processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (36), and she discusses the concept as one part of the contact zone. Baca’s main concern is with perpetuating misunderstanding through ripping concepts away from their generative and experiential contexts, and so he is critical about the appropriation and subordination of transculturación to the contact zone.

Though Pratt lengthily discusses a text from 1613 as her main illustration of the contact zone, Baca focuses on critiquing her example of her son’s school experiences as a simplistic appropriation of Ortíz’s work. Pratt identifies as a problem the tendency to view interactions as “governed by a single set of rules or norms shared by all participants” and to analyze “how those rules produce an orderly, coherent exchange” (38). Describing this assumption leads her to the example of her son assessing why the new school he is attending has invisible rules that govern its ethos of openness and flexibility and to consider how classroom activities are designed in ways that do not encourage risk or student criticism (Pratt 38-9). Pratt asks: “Are teachers supposed to feel that their teaching has been most successful when they have […] unified the social world, probably in their own image?” (39). The relevance of Pratt’s son’s example is as simple as its link to the university system, where, at the time of Pratt’s writing, students were increasingly asking for not only acknowledgment of difference but belonging along with difference (39). Such demands are not limited to the formal educational system, but university teachers are working with these demands even as other university constituents and leaders might have a vested interest in perpetuating the opposite (Pratt 39).

Because of my research focus, I note that a large portion of Baca’s objection to Pratt rests in what he views as a shabby comparison between an elementary school student’s experiences
with the hierarchy of the educational system and the extensive theory rooted in particular mestiz@ experiences that Fernando Ortiz engages with in his theory of transculturación. Baca is arguing for a clearer understanding of transculturación as an activity that generates something new, alternative, and transformative, and Baca is engaged in recovering rhetorics that have been marginalized and appropriated. Baca writes: “rhetorical episodes such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, for example, will be persistently misunderstood, mistranslated, and misappropriated unless comprehended as ‘new’ rationalities and practices that emerge from the conditions created by colonial legacies” (124). This is a powerful argument, but Pratt’s example of her young son is also rooted in an everyday, material experience. While I agree that it is not the most compelling example or one complexly rooted in theory, I feel that Baca undercuts the potential validity of young people. The point is clear, but the tone is unnecessary. I don’t find it particularly compelling when scholars use their own children as evidence of the legitimacy of whatever theory or practice they are touting. I understand that, as a parent, I cannot be entirely conscious of how I misread my child’s actions, of how the read complexities of my child’s actions are a particular kind of imposed analysis, of how the particular context of inquiry in my household may influence what I perceive as my child’s apt or imitative or closed responses. However, in critiquing Pratt, Baca seems overly dismissive about the legitimacy of a young person’s point of view, and so it is worth a reminder that, in her article, Pratt does suggest that her parenting examples will not be acceptable to an academic audience (33).

Pratt’s most salient examples of the contact zone are from colonized spaces. Pratt describes a twelve hundred-page letter written in 1613 by an Andean named Guaman Poma to King Philip III of Spain. The letter, a mixture of Quechua and “ungrammatical, expressive Spanish,” contained eight hundred pages of writing and four hundred pages of drawings and was
discovered in the early twentieth century (Pratt 34). Pratt calls Poma’s *New Chronicle* an “autoethnographic text,” or “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (35). Autoethnographic texts “involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror” (Pratt 35). These texts disrupt the dominant narrative yet are intended for both the dominant audience and the author’s “own community. Their reception is thus highly indeterminate” (Pratt 35). Pratt discusses authoethnographic texts as they converse with and are able to enter and intervene in dominant frameworks. As an example of a nondominant group engaged with dominant print texts, she offers early published Chicana writing that “took the form of folkloric manners and customs sketches written in English” (35). While Baca is mainly interested in the evidence of Mesoamerican discourses before printed texts and beyond alphabetic literacy, Pratt describes the more recent composition of autoethnographic texts as part of a site of resistance that is “a contemporary creation of the contact zone, the *testimonio*” (35).

In “Pratt and Pratfalls: Revisioning Contact Zones,” R. Mark Hall and Mary Rosner use Latour’s elucidation of how a term such as “contact zone” becomes “black-boxed” – or certain – and is then limited in scope through its broad usage across fields of study. Pratt is handily criticized here for silencing certain voices in “Arts of the Contact Zone,” such as her students, “the teacher of her son,” and “the seventeenth-century Spanish who apparently brutalized the Incas” (97). Hall and Rosner follow the evolution of Pratt’s definition of the contact zone from her initial essay through two more of her texts. They note her word choice, which indicates early on that a contact zone is “an aggressive meeting” and later softens this space to “‘inventive interaction’” (99). They then do a compelling assessment of how the contact zone has been reviewed in different fields, showing how these differences support the idea that this term is not
“black-boxed.” Such pieces characterize how the term “contact zone” caught fire across fields of study, and was thus read for the specific purposes of a discipline and/or critique. And Hall and Rosner’s critique supports Baca’s. Ultimately, what Baca seems most perturbed by is what Hall and Rosner examine regarding the use of this concept – the plucking of theoretical histories/trajectories/contexts; as a result, the particular example from Pratt’s son is hardly analogous. So much theory suffers from this problem, such as the ways in which the theory of intersectionality has been whitewashed from its roots in the experiences of African-American women and transferred with abandon across varying scholarly contexts, where one cannot spit in a graduate classroom without hitting the term “intersectionality.” For Baca, transculturación is a significant concept that should not be subjugated to a list of the contact zone’s “literate arts” (Pratt 37).

The complexity of what happens in these in-between spaces – whether we call them contact zones or something else – is significant for TYPS because, in such spaces, the binaries of colonizer and colonized can potentially be disrupted and dispersed. Scholars offer images to understand the fluidities of these spaces, such as Krista Ratcliffe’s energy field image, where “gaps and contradictions in embodied discourses” (70) can help orient people toward “making visible the facts that multiple places of identification coexist and that we may stand in different cultural locations even as we share identifications” (71). The energy field image seems another apt way of embracing, rejecting, disrupting, combining, appropriating, despising, loving, and communicating the multiplicity of identifications both outside of and with an awareness of the historical, inevitable trajectories of power and subjugation. But when these spaces are described as embattled, like the contact zone with, for instance, its grappling, these spaces limit participation to those willing to risk it (or those who do not have a choice but to be present, even
if they remain passive). Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening is very useful but has some similar problems.

In a familiar genre such as slam poetry, it may be difficult to imagine how “new” discourses can emerge. In an analysis of zines by radical feminists of color, Adela C. Licona refers to “knowledge remixes,” or “new knowledges born out of traditional knowledges and recast in contemporary contexts” (112). In The Ethnographic Imagination, Paul Willis writes, “well-grounded and illuminating points flow only from bringing concepts into a relationship with the messiness of ordinary life, somehow recorded” (xi). He argues for art as social, living, and democratic (3). Willis writes: “The post-postmodern task, especially of the ethnographic imagination, is to analyse and depict the practices through which the structures of discourse, culture and communication find new articulations with, or dialectical uptake within (finally helping to constitute them) the structures of material and institutional life” (68). Like Baca, like Licona, like Bawarshi, Willis seeks the “new” in the fluid movements of the familiar and unfamiliar. Slam poetry is a “new” genre that is a space for experimentation for TYPS youth, where they come to understand and converse about their experiences, their knowledge(s), their continuing questions in a space that promotes supportiveness and learning.

Pratt writes, “Where there are legacies of subordination, groups need places for healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone” (40). This is quite relevant to TYPS and many youth organizations that are focused on marginalized youth and on facilitating opportunities for articulating resistance and sharing personal stories. The spaces created for and by marginalized youth can be seen as “safe houses” or stopping points. A “safe house” is a place that signals a longer and more treacherous journey; that place in the journey is meant to be a
reprieve. In Pratt’s safe house, the reprieve is also a place of interaction that serves as an entry point to the contact zone, which is much more fraught with painful encounters but with the possibility of understanding. Ratcliffe’s negotiation of the term “understanding” in relation to rhetorical listening is an interesting connection to the contact zone in that it acknowledges that understanding does not necessarily mean what we tend to think. If those who are interacting in a contact zone have some capacity to “stand under” the diverse discourses passing and merging around them, then they can perceive the discourses but may not be able to experience the gravity of these discourses. Gravity, here, meaning embodiment, pulling toward the limitations of the physical, of experiences, but also the weight of feeling, words, memories, or the soul-wound conveyed by Leyva. And so, again, it may be that it is not always clear how rhetorical listening is beneficial for or can be practiced by those who are not privileged to a certain degree. We cannot listen when not everyone is speaking.

In Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom, bell hooks’ description of border-crossing connects with ideas about spaces for youth: “If we really want to create a cultural climate where biases can be challenged and changed, all border crossings must be seen as valid and legitimate. This does not mean that they are not subjected to critique or critical interrogation […]” (131). An inclusive perspective on border-crossing brings with it the danger of sanitizing differences, of perpetuating a togetherness attitude that focuses more on similarities than differences. A complicated aspect of youth spaces is the desire for youth to feel free to express themselves, while promoting tolerance and the confidence to assert personal feelings. This is why border-crossing spaces are so important, why we should stay in them, linger, or make them our realities, for it is in these spaces where opposing ideas can interact, possibly transform. This is why a variety of images, such as the energy field, or the rhizome,
continue to stoke the conversation, and it is perhaps why a variety of images may be needed – if only for our differing and momentary entry points, if only to maintain differences and avoid some of the pitfalls of a ready common ground.

In a classroom, it is quite possible for safe houses and contact zones to be in flux, constructed and deconstructed. The critical latticework I will describe later is dependent on an understanding that structures and scaffoldings are temporary but can hold, and that these structures and scaffoldings are sites of flexibility, growth that can be linear and nonlinear (or both), and that can be slightly or completely altered. The capacity for critical latticework lies in a recognition of a safe, if temporary, space. For example, a poet who self-identified as queer and transgender described TYPS performances as a way to “funnel out” “emotions and thoughts […] and just throw them out into the world, and […] that I can’t do in normal circumstances.” This poet also noted that, while most of the slam performances at TYPS were about racial and immigration issues, he (PGP8) never felt uncomfortable performing about queerness.

In the space of TYPS, manifestos, declarations, and testimonials are common ways of perceiving slam poem delivery. Manifestos can serve a coalitional purpose, and one could imagine a collective manifesto emanating from the poetry and interviews of TYPS participants. In *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetorics and Coalitional Possibilities*, Karma R. Chávez examines the manifestos produced by organizations seeking to advance rights for queer and undocumented people and finds that the genre of the manifesto can be flexed for activist purposes.

The critical space offered through the genre is related to how interviewees describe the poetry performance. Several of the interviewees described moments when their performance

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8 Preferred gender pronoun.
visibly affected the audience, and they were often surprised at this effect. As one poet says: “[…] you look in the back and there’s someone like crying or like laughing or just like you know, or they stand up because that one line really hit them. And it’s just like, Wow. So, it affects a lot of people, more than I thought it would.” These interactions with the audience are crucial for the poets, as performance effects were often described as being dependent on the steadfast encouragement of the TYPS audience. Most of the interviewees expressed that they were initially nervous at the thought of performing and at the potential scrutiny of others. For many poets, the performance is about a bare offering that they might not otherwise share. Some poets discussed this in terms of breaking a boundary between what you’d only tell a close friend and what you might tell a roomful of people by slamming about something personal. This kind of performance involves bravery and faith in the human connections promised by the space. Some poets also talked about how, in telling their personal stories and feelings through slam, they gained perspective about how each person has a story that is important to the fabric of the space. According to another poet, a good slam poem isn’t simply beautiful language but emerges through the poet’s presence and passion. This performative presence is linked to the effect on the audience: “Being a slam poet, and like getting up on that mic...you’re inspiring people, you’re changing lives. No matter what the content of your poem is, you’re altering someone’s life because you’ve come into contact with them.” The presence of the poet “doesn’t have to be anything big, it just has to be there.” There are many statements such as this across the interviews. Once other specifics come into play, however, the interviewees begin to critically distinguish acceptable traits of slam performance.
Expressing, Reflecting, and Inhabiting Notions of Self: The Role of “Authenticity”

One area of critical inquiry for TYPS poets is an investment in the idea of authenticity. Most of the TYPS poets I interviewed want their performances to be reflections of themselves, and they often had strong ideas about the parameters for acceptable ownership over narrative. Slam poetry scholarship has touched on some of these concerns, such as the public conversation between Karma R. Chávez and Ragan Fox discussed in Chapter 2. Elizabeth Soep, in her examination of “Resistance” in *Keywords in Youth Studies: Tracing Affects, Movements, Knowledges*, calls into question a reliance on youth self-analysis when youth articulations are performative. Soep writes that researchers “run the risk of reifying the ‘authenticity’ of their voices while ignoring other forces and incentives that structure what they do and say out loud, to whom, when, and what it means” (128). This focus on “when, and not what” is important to an examination of youth resistance because it can keep researchers better attuned to the social contexts that influence performances (129). Soep also cautions researchers against “a participatory framework that is only designed to listen to those who can easily shape themselves into articulate ‘youth leaders’” (148). Resistance is also, Soep argues, understood best in relation to “youth as an assemblage” (286). Here, Soep draws from Jasbir K. Puar’s claim that assemblages “allow us to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities” (Puar 215). Assemblages are an additional way of imagining the ways that lived fluidities can be understood.

The problems raised by Soep in relation to reifying authenticity are particularly salient for the performance aspects of slam poetry. In *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, Susan B.A. Somers-Willett addresses how a relationship with authenticity is useful for slam: “Acknowledging that what
passes as authentic behavior is a symptom of larger systems of meaning and power does not mean that identities performed at slams are doomed to confirm the status quo. Rather, as places where identities are newly authenticated, poetry slams are places of possibility, insight, and connection” (9). Performing identity, according to Somers-Willett, is exploratory in slam. The fluidity of the space can allow slam poets to perceive authenticity as a dynamic and intervening force, not as stagnation. She goes on to write, “Instead of being windows on culture, poetry slams are culture; they are places where interracial exchanges are made and marginalized identities are invented, reflected, affirmed, and refigured” (Somers-Willett 9). Slam poetry is a firm companion of exigency and “entails not only an admission of authorial self but an outright proclamation of authorial self through performance” (Somers-Willett 34-5). While the issue of “self” is fraught, when we take a moment to understand that the youth poets represented here are by and large extremely interested in their names being attached to work they consider their own, as well as that their poems are often about a declaration of identity, and we consider the assigned value of making specific claims on one’s work in our own field, surely we can recognize the power of the notion of individuality in this performative space. In the case of slam poetry, the self and the public are uniquely intertwined.

TYPS poets are engaged with the idea of authenticity, and this is significant to the idea of a protected space for youth. The feeling of being oneself is often linked in the interviews to feeling safe in the space. To be safe is to be able to be honest about who you are, and to respect what others reveal about themselves. TYPS poets mostly support the idea that they should slam about the things they know, and many of them stated that they do not really have the right to slam about experiences they are not familiar with. Most seem to connect this narration of real experiences to authenticity – that, while they learn performative skills through TYPS, these skills
are attached to actual feelings and experiences. As one poet puts it: “I don’t think slam poetry is acting. Because people say, ‘Oh, they pretend to be sad,’ ‘They pretend to be happy when they’re reading this line,’ but it’s not really like that. I actually feel that way when I’m reading my own words.” Another poet who self-identified as trans-gender said: “I’d say it’s honestly easier to be genuine up on the mic than it is day to day, outside of slam poetry.”

This desire for authenticity is linked with many of the poets’ investment in the idea that they must get their stories out there, that their stories are underrepresented. On the other hand, one poet, who identified as white, female, heterosexual, and upper-middle class, discussed a poem she performed about a social issue⁹ that she felt quite passionately about. She had done research about the issue and desired to become active in addressing the issue, though it was not an issue she had personally experienced. She felt that this poem was the best one that she wrote and performed at TYPS, and that it received a very positive response there. The poet is not one of the more lauded among the local TYPS group but, on her own, shared her recorded performance with organizations that fight against this social issue and received a positive response from those organizations. In the poem, she tried to describe the experiences of others and inspire action regarding this social issue. It is difficult to try to place this type of narrative in context with the narratives of interviewees who feel quite strongly that they should only write about what they have personally experienced, as they feel this gives their stories credibility and helps them avoid offending others. These interviewees run into the inevitable conflict of imagination and creative freedom, a question that might often be resolved by the convincingness of the portrayal or the exceptional effect a piece of writing might have in spite of the writer’s

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⁹ I have chosen not to identify the social issue.
identifications “outside” of the piece. The identity/ies of a writer or performer in relation to the subject or identity inhabited in performance/text are often a cause for tension.

Some of the poets also consider what it means to be seen as a spokesperson for a particular population, such as the undocumented poet who speaks about her particular experience with the knowledge that others who are undocumented, including some youth in TYPS, may not wish to or be able to. In such a case, one might feel both obligated to speak about the experience as shared by others while, at the same time, not wanting to speak for others. Those interviewees who discussed what was acceptable in relation to having real experience with subject matter were often concerned with marginalized voices being heard, and/or they were concerned with how their specific privileges, including whatever had brought them to the mic, may limit their perspectives. One poet described how she felt about poets taking up issues in which they have little to no experience: “They either really gotta research it, or, you know, watch out with whatever words they use, because, you know, it’s not their words, per se, they’re putting words in other people’s mouths that aren’t their own.” Another longtime poet, on the other hand, said that one could make a poem that adopts a persona credible by making it relatable and by not exaggerating the character’s situation.

In the second set of interviews, TYPS poets began to talk about the concept of checking privilege and the declaration of oneself as an ally. TYPS poets had differing relationships with what it means to identify and “check” privilege, meaning to tell someone if what they had said, or slammed about, or enacted was a demonstration of their ignorance about a certain kind of group, issue, or identity. The ignorance is rooted in the privileges that the offending person may not realize they have. “Check your privilege” is a common phrase in social justice spaces, and the prevalence of this phrase across the interviews is an indicator of the social justice purposes
and effects of TYPS. Karma R. Chávez explains that checking privilege “invites members of a privileged community to reflect upon assumptions they have resulting from a position of privilege” (124). How and when to check someone’s privilege was a source of inquiry for TYPS youth. Related to this is an ambivalent relationship with the term “ally,” where TYPS youth appreciate the concept but not always its delivery.

Overall, TYPS poets described “checking” within the TYPS space to be necessary to maintaining a safe space; however, checking was associated with private conversations or with asking the adult facilitators to step in. Most of the poets said they would be very careful about checking someone’s privilege at TYPS; they would have to reflect about it first. Not all TYPS poets felt this way; notably, the poets who self-identified as male were more likely to be willing to “check” others and to be checked. One poet who self-identified as male said that whether someone was checked or not could depend on the amount of attention the poem was getting from others. It also depended on the way the person who may need “checking” is seen as part of the social fabric of the group. One poet saw the checking of privilege and responsible alliance as a form of social justice. In the case of a poet who wrote about a social issue she had not experienced, those poets who mentioned it felt ambivalent about her choice, and no one took it up with her.

In relation to learning to identify and discuss privileges, TYPS poets navigate what it means to be an ally in a space where support is supposed to be a given; however, some of the poets have difficult relationships with the term itself. One poet said that an ally is someone who supports a social movement or group, and she feels positive toward allies unless they try to overpower the conversation: “I guess when they speak over other people, so, it’s kind of like, yeah, you’re for it, and you know a lot about it, but, you know, you sometimes have to let other
people speak.” A few poets felt that being an ally is about supporting someone without expecting a reward. One poet described himself as a feminist ally but said he does not have much use for the term “ally”; he described part of being an ally as knowing one’s place within a group. Another poet who identifies as queer expressed anger at the idea of having to identify oneself as an ally: “I feel like everyone should be an ally, or everyone should think that way that’s not part of the LGBT community, and I feel like they are getting praise for doing the right thing.”

I started to ask about the term “ally” after it had come up in one interview, and I discovered the complicated relationship many of the youth have with the widespread use of this term. Youth were often ambivalent about those who stated, for example, “I am an LGBTQ ally”; they often had a response such as, Great, but show it. Don’t say it. Otherwise, it becomes about you, not me. At the same time, there were few criticisms about the frequent use of “privilege” or “white privilege”; these seemed to be accepted terms, and nearly all of the interviewees named their own perceived privileges. By contrast, two of the interviewees were adamant about speaking back to the community about assumptions made about them and the ways in which their experiences should not be undervalued due to perceived race (in one case, white) and socioeconomic class (in another case, a self-identified biracial, bisexual female whose family had moved from a low-income to middle-class part of Tucson and who felt that she was no longer seen as credible to youth from South Tucson). The majority of those interviewed, however, had a relationship with the discourse of privilege that is quite recognizable. In particular, those who identified as cisgendered and/or white expressed being troubled by their privilege and heavily influenced and changed by the poetry of poets they perceived as having less privilege in relation to race, gender orientation, and sexuality. Many of the poets were concerned about whether
checking privilege could be both useful and discouraging in a community that, above all else, promotes a safe space for personal expression with the exception of blatant hate speech.

What I gather from these articulations about performance is that a space such as TYPS creates many opportunities for youth to develop strategies for active listening and social transformation. The conflict about how to discuss privileges and who should discuss them is one that requires critical social awareness and a measure of comfort with such questioning, and it seems that TYPS is a space that encourages this. The space encourages the kind of moment-to-moment activism and growth that is a trait of the critical lattice I describe in the next chapter. TYPS poets have a dynamic relationship with concepts such as privilege and authenticity, and this relationship affects the parameters they set for themselves and each other, as well as ways in which they decide to resist those parameters.

The notion of authenticity is also connected with the extent to which poets inhabit and articulate the concept of poet and/or writer. Of course, learning about poetry and working to improve it as individual performers was also part of the discussion I had with several interviewees who were interested in exploring modes of expression, language, and emotion through poetry. Some poets were less interested in becoming poets and more interested in the power of slam poetry to build skills, make connections, and become, as mentioned before, that gateway toward community activism and other goals. Some TYPS poets have gone on to put together chapbooks and submit their poetry to literary journals, but the number of TYPS youth engaged in “literary” endeavors is far less than those who aim to make social change in their communities through poetry as just one of many other means.

Regardless of whether TYPS poets were more interested in pursuing the “literary” life, the social justice life, or some measure of both, all of the interviewees were invested in the
concept of authenticity. Many of them were also invested in understanding the many selves constructed by social experience. Their labor is common to spaces of critical inquiry: the yearning to feel like oneself, to feel an embodied experience that matters, while developing critical awareness of sociocultural influences. Many of the poets address this through performances about their similarities and differences with the group and other spaces. Trinh T. Minh-ha conceptualizes this as the “Inappropriate/d Other who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming “I am like you” while pointing insistently to the difference; and that of reminding “I am different” while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at” (9). This is an apt way of imagining critical latticework in a performance space.

**Authenticity in Classroom Spaces**

Bronwen E. Low addresses some of the complexities of this inquiry about authenticity as it might play out in the classroom. In *Slam School: Learning Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom*, Low describes a collaboration with a high school teacher in an urban setting in which a hip-hop and spoken word curriculum was used in a performance poetry course. In discussing approaches to this curriculum, Low confronts the current reality that classrooms are becoming more ethnically diverse even as the majority of teachers entering the workforce are white. For Low, in a high school classroom integrating hip-hop pedagogy, this circumstance creates an opportunity due to the cultural conflicts that emerge; students were able to bring their knowledges to bear on the shape of the curriculum. Seeing these moments as opportunities is a well-worn perspective in the annals of white female teachers; Low discusses it in terms of “the dynamics of cultural insider and outsider-ness in teaching” (3). This idea of what it means to be included and excluded is very much related to TYPS poets’ concerns with authenticity, which
Low addresses in a chapter about “keeping it real,” where she discusses how students in her research came to understand and learn about the concept of authenticity. Low suggests ways to facilitate student exploration about how they define and are defined by their relationships with the concept of authenticity. One of the challenges implied by Low’s work is how best to design curricula that integrate personal experiences with the development of a critical perspective recognizing social construction in the narration of experience and the medium or genre through which this experience is narrated. Low notes that the concept of authenticity is complicated by performativity and that the authentic self is an essentialist notion, but, in making use of performative genres such as slam poetry and hip-hop, it is difficult to ignore the profundity of self-revelations aiming for “truth.” It is a continuing challenge to sustain environments where the innovation and experiential aspects of artistic production are in healthy conversation with the complexities of representation. As I will discuss later, critical latticework is dependent on the ability to be comfortable with the temporary sense of stability afforded through feelings of authenticity; simply put, it’s very important for TYPS youth to have those moments of stability – wherein they feel they are performing their “truth” – while moving in a fluid space of identification with other TYPS youth and understanding the ways in which their experiences are socially constructed.

In “Authenticating Practices: Producing Realness, Performing Youth,” Nicole R. Fleetwood warns against a “racialized version of authenticity called ‘realness’” (156) that can become especially problematic in relation to youth productions and performances. Realness is a concept with a painful history in relation to black history and culture, and the idea of being real must be guarded against because, too often, it is used as a “performativemaneuver in the face of white oppression” (Fleetwood 164). The performance of authenticity is about the dynamic of the
performer and the audience, and the danger is that “community arts organizations that strive to challenge non-normative representations of youth are often complicit in the construction of racialized youth as exuding authenticity through visual markings” (Fleetwood 157). The concept of realness is “a discursive strategy” that will “mask its relationship with the real, by standing in as the real” (Fleetwood 163). While many of the youth in TYPS are invested in the idea of keeping it real, the interview data indicates that they are also, often, quite critical about the ways in which their performances and personal expressions may be understood in relation to systemic inequities. This indicates to me that the organizational elements of TYPS have often allowed youth the opportunity to perform in ways that express fluidity rather than stagnant identity categories.

As I touched on in Chapter 2, teachers often find that they can engage with the diverse backgrounds of their students through a pedagogical approach to revealing their own positions. Some teachers become invested in being as open as possible about their positionality in an effort to facilitate discussion and intervention in traditional classroom dynamics. For instance, when Krista Ratcliffe began to work on *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, one of her aims was to question some of the choices she had made in previous work in relation to the purpose of rhetorical listening. Ratcliffe had been criticized in reviews of *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions* for not including women of color. As a result, she writes: “I determined to bring my embodied racism to consciousness […] and use it to complicate my feminism, my scholarship, and my daily life” (Ratcliffe 6). This extended to her teaching and to the development of a theory of rhetorical listening.

Elizabeth Ellsworth is another white female scholar who has worked through critical pedagogy to understand the extent to which classroom identities can be explored. In “Why
Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” Ellsworth argues that terms such as “empowerment,” “student voice,” “dialogue,” and “critical” “are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination” (298). Ellsworth points out that teachers often encourage empowering activities that perpetuate classroom hierarchy. One strategy of critical pedagogy is for the teacher to become a “learner of the student’s reality and knowledge,” but this is often practiced through a structure in which the teacher learns to see material they are already familiar with in a new way, from the student’s less complex perspective, and the purpose of this is to help the teacher generate activities that can enhance the student’s understanding in ways closer to the teacher’s (Ellsworth 306). Ellsworth writes of a course called “Media and Anti-Racist Pedagogies”: “I did not understand racism better than my students did,” and she offers up the formulation of engaging with the complexities of her own set of privileges (306).

When scholars such as Ellsworth and Ratcliffe take on the discourse of positionality, it is difficult to pinpoint how much of that is more about working through whiteness and being passive in the “right” ways and proactive in the “right” ways, rather than facilitating the learning activities of students. Critical pedagogy in literature was supposed to help generate a new kind of “public sphere characterized by citizens capable of confronting public issues critically through ongoing forms of public debate and social action,” and a large part of generating this state of affairs was an open discussion of “social identities” that “provided the basis for moral deliberation and social action” (Ellsworth 300). The problem is often with the construction of the classroom, where a white teacher (or, in various configurations, a teacher with many visible privileges) facilitates a class in which students are encouraged to narrate and express their experiences, and this is seen as a way to fold stories in and over and around each other so as to
take some steps toward greater understanding of each other. Yet “the speech of oppositional groups is a ‘talking back,’ a ‘defiant speech’ that is constructed within communities of resistance and is a condition of survival” (Ellsworth 310).

In light of mainstreamed discussions about privilege, how have students developed a relationship with the term, just as they may have developed a relationship with terms such as “empowerment” and critical?” If one has been “checked,” for instance, how does that affect that terministic relationship? How common is it for a group of students to have heard the phrase “check your privilege?” How might starting a conversation without those terms, and without terms such as empowerment, matter in relation to shifting their perceptions? Or would those terms simply be replaced, and hierarchies reinscribed?

The project of student voice and empowerment is about defining oneself, which “presumably gives students an identity and political position from which to act as agents of social change” (Ellsworth 309). Ellsworth argues that the teacher often inhabits “a social subjectivity that has been constructed in such a way that I have not and can never participate unproblematically in the collective process of self-definition, naming of oppression, and struggles for visibility” (309-10). Ellsworth also reminds teachers that including a range of voices and experiences in the classroom needs to be more than “correction through addition,” which “loses sight of the contradictory and partial nature of all voices” (312).

Expressing an experience from a marginalized point of view is not about making the experience clear for privileged groups. It is a form of survival and a way of articulating these experiences among those who may have shared them (Ellsworth 312). What has happened at TYPS is that the youth themselves have slowly developed a space that is about finding commonalities, developing a shared lexicon for what these expressions mean, yet acknowledging
that these experiences cannot be fully understood while, still, being heard. *We hear you*, the youth say to each other. *Perhaps we disagree. If we disagree in ways that cause this space to crack – that is, if you are hateful, or intolerant – we will tell you. And telling you is also a way of hearing you.* I would argue that this is not a transferable dynamic from TYPS to classroom, even though similar writing and teaching pedagogies operate in both spaces. TYPS is a space unlike the regimented and time-sealed space of a classroom.

In “Action Literacy: Position, Movement, Consciousness,” Stacey Waite talks about how teaching literacy should not simply be about the capacity to teach a certain set of measurable skills but is mainly about “developing with our students the ability to imagine identity as a movement and as a process” (108). Waite wants to “try to help them take action (social and literate) that will enable them to see themselves as moving, considering, and possibly even entirely uncertain” (108). Waite uses personal struggles with gender alienation as a point of positionality – “Gender is everywhere I look. You cannot, as it turns out, live without it” (111). Waite wants students to understand how their political and social ideologies get in the way of the project of critical literacy (111) and proposes “action literacy” as “a literacy of positionality that highlights the importance of movement and flux” (120). Waite’s own complicated work with gender restrictions allows classroom credibility that Waite continues to question. What all of these ruminations by teachers suggest to me is that, as Ellsworth might argue, classrooms dominated by heteronormative whiteness are hard-put to accomplish the kind of critical and collaborative inquiry that critical pedagogues seek. Classrooms are spaces for artifice, for the practice of the public sphere, even when the activities accomplished in the classroom are brought to bear in public through activism and/or performance.
Community Spaces and Social Transformation

In “Was That ‘Different,’ ‘Dissident,’ or ‘Dissonant’? Poetry (n) the Public Spear: Slams, Open Readings, and Dissident Traditions,” Maria Damon argues for attention to performance spaces such as slam that are not “directly politically interventionist” but can contribute to “a public sphere that is healthily contestatory” (327). In slam, the practice of identities has transformative potential because it is done in a performance space that is voluntary and that encourages a declarative genre that, at TYPS, is open to the flexibility afforded as poets learn and grow together. The space of this slam scene tells us how performance is a sustained expression of material realities. Slam performance is also part of the labor and stretching required of critical inquiry. In “Performance, Performativity, and Cultural Poiesis in Practices of Everyday Life,” Judith Hamera writes that performance “exposes aesthetics’ social work as embodied, processed, rhetorical, and political and, especially, as daily, as routine, a practice of everyday life” (47).

Drawing a distinction between space and place, where stability characterizes the latter, and using as an example a ballet studio, she prompts a consideration of the place and space of TYPS and how it can be or is transformed so that the “readability” of place can be “disrupted” or “feigned” (Hamera 52). There may be rules governing the place, but these rules could also be disrupted or feigned to shift place into a transformative space. TYPS is a localized event, and place is transformed to space in each enactment of slam, which involves different bodies (or is embodied differently each time) and different conceptions of location while maintaining some of the usual embodiments that empower or inscribe or govern the space, such as adult supporters and those poets who have moved into leadership roles. A place is staged as well and can be analyzed in terms of how it could be “shot through with contested notions of appropriate gender performances and gendered resistances, class-inflected expectations of the relationship between
art and life, and issues of discipline and authority” (Hamera 53). It is crucial to avoid limiting an examination of space and identity to the assumption that the poet’s speech and performance are the poet. Again, critical latticework is a useful image for understanding the ways in which one can embrace expression as authentic without the trappings of immobility usually assigned to this term, and Hamera’s discussions of space clarifies how the place of TYPS is not the same as the space.

In TYPS, this understanding of space fuels intercultural inquiry, which Linda Flower describes in her work with Pittsburgh’s Community Literacy Center. Flower’s work goes beyond discussing the limitations of positionality and offers practical ways to negotiate understandings among various stakeholders with vastly different experiences and encourage the production of collaborative texts that reflect these negotiations and maintain differences, thus reflecting “the rhetorical agency of everyday-people-acting-within-constraints” (151). Intercultural inquiry brings together “the inseparable individual and social nature of literate action” (Flower 95). She alters notions of community-university collaborations. She writes: “I would argue that there is an unavoidable poverty in an identity built around resistance. It enables us to relate to Others in an urban community as victims or at best as comrades at arms – united in a theorized battle plan (that academic intellectuals supposedly understand better than do the victims” (Flower 116). Flower warns readers not to “forget that those who perform in such spaces often have cultural capital” (203). Flower is referring here to the concept of cultural capital defined by Pierre Bourdieu, in which a person’s educational and knowledge experiences provide a certain amount of capital as related to access and opportunity. Flower situates this description in relation to community literacy settings as revising “the script in decidedly relational terms, as ‘an everyday person rising to reflective engagement over issues of shared concern’” where rhetorical agency is
“an interdependent, not an independent action – however, choosing and rising to take it is a
significant and a personal choice. In the same sense, our theories need to affirm both the
personal and the public and both the individual and collective aspects of a rhetorical action”
(207).

This work is important to composition studies because, as Flower and others have argued,
discourse taught in composition classes is often standardized and exclusionary. While there are
several creative ways to approach composition courses, writing programs must account for
transferrable skills and outcomes that can be proven to upper administration. Writing programs
need to account, in other words, for their continued existence. Beyond this, even though process,
drafting, and revision are usually part of a composition curriculum, the focus in terms of a grade
is often on the end point. Portfolio assessment eases this focus a bit, but students cannot escape
the message that at the “end” of a writing process is something that has been worked, crafted, run
through the mill. That end point is a polished draft that shows “individuals in control of their
lives, their medium, and their impact on others” (Flower 193). In contexts such as TYPS, the
focus is less on the end point – a polished slam performance – and more about an accumulation
of skills and community connections, as TYPS poets have revealed across these interviews.

This focus on control is related to rhetorics of agency and is significant to my study of
youth slam poets in relation to how these poets perceive and/or move through a performative
context. It also speaks to the concept of coalition, which is significant for understanding critical
latticework. Karma R. Chávez writes, “the centrality of difference to coalition work and politics
generally is directly opposed to a divide-and-conquer politics. Engaging in political work does
not mean that people cannot use other master’s tools to achieve goals, but it does mean that
differences should not be used to destroy community; people must discover ways to turn them into sites of strength and empowerment” (126).

Flower describes the rhetorical move of locating agency in actions, which is a way of noting the contexts that influence the performer. She then proposes, instead, a “performative model” that “acknowledges both the dancer and the dance, asserting the relationship between social, cultural, material, and individual forces by which an ‘embedded agency’ shapes rhetorical action” (202-3). Flower’s discussion here relates to many of the inquiries I ran into when thinking about the significance of youth slam poets as individuals (e.g., with desires to become that polished, great author, with strong connections to owning their poetry) in relation to the social constructs of community activism and social justice. For Flower, rhetorical agency “operates as a performative public practice of interpretation and dialogue” (205-6).

Chávez and Soep also narrate the zeitgeist of social justice movements as related to youth empowerment projects. They point out that the 1960s and 1970s social justice movements made use of “community-based media” empowerment; the 1980s focused more on media literacy in relation to economics and the market; and the 1990s saw more attention paid to youth violence and youth activism, resulting in an emphasis on alternative media possibilities (416). Attention toward the productions of marginalized youth has created space for youth to present alternative narratives about themselves and challenge dominant narratives. Yet when discourse about such projects focuses too much on voice and authenticity, there is a tendency to narrow the scope in which youth can participate – they might generate personal narratives but not otherwise involved or be encouraged to sustain their interest to move into leadership positions or take the project beyond expression (416).
In the context of slam competition and professional slam poetry as a model, it is also important to think about how this competition may benefit youth with more experience, attention, and/or educational privileges. Chávez and Soep do not directly state, but do suggest, that those youth who have had more training in writing and speaking may be the youth who receive the most attention in the organization for their abilities. Here, I cannot shake the memory of a young man who attended the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam in its first few years as an event. He struggled to write and perform, but he yearned so much to be performing on par with the top scorers in the group. Before the slam, he would be scribbling over paper, huddled at a table. Painstaking. Working hard. He never did well. He would read too quickly, stumbling over his words, bent over his page and never acknowledging the audience. He tried to rap smooth as butter, but the performance was always garbled and stitched. His words were abstractions; his concerns, very real to him, came across as untested. He never made it past the first cut. For a while, he stopped coming. Then, in a new season, I saw him again. The consistent TYPS attendees greeted him, tried to welcome him. Before the performance, he bent over his page at a table, mouthing the words. He was a little better that time; he had practiced. But he still wasn’t... good. That night there were a few newbie judges in the audience, too, who were a little harsher than the norm. He left as soon as his scores were read.

What is the difference between helping youth to feel “empowered” and training them to generate “good” artwork? And to what extent does this concern relate to privilege and inequity? Youth who succeed in these organizations are the ones who receive the most attention, who are researched, interviewed, and supported. Chávez and Soep write, “Community-based programs need to be intentional and ever vigilant in their internal efforts to unsettle the very inequalities many of them critique publicly through their media products” (416). The young man who did not
perform well is not necessarily an example of this problem, but something kept him from returning after giving it several tries. Youth events, like classrooms, are not one-size-fits-all, nor should/can they be. Yet Chávez and Soep point to the increasing numbers of youth organizations that view their space as an alternative environment for learning (417). Scholarship about such organizations has identified several traits, such as the active participation of young people in many roles as they move into and out of leadership positions, as well as a focus on the issues and subjects that youth care most deeply about (417). Such spaces are also significant because youth might not be able to learn about social justice and action in a formal educational environment of state testing and low funding, for instance. The key purpose of such spaces is to develop leadership and social skills, but a leader may not always be the person who stands out or does the “best.”

Chávez and Soep’s pedagogy of collegiality is quite similar to Flower’s description of intercultural inquiry. They discuss how the development of collegiality with youth can be complicated and difficult for an adult, as well as how a pedagogy of collegiality is not meant to conjure visions of complete equality. The difference in the case of collaborative work such as Youth Radio is that youth and adults are working on a project with implications for their audience (Chávez and Soep 420). It goes beyond personal expression to serving one’s audience, as well as deciphering the ethos of the audience and dealing with conflict in the service of a shared goal. Chávez and Soep also point out that, beyond an apprenticeship advantage, a pedagogy of collegiality also stresses “mutuality and joint production” (420). What is distinctive about their pedagogy of collegiality is that adults and youth are working together to generate something original and with implications, and that it is not a situation where youth slowly learn aspects alongside experts; all are involved and invested (Chávez and Soep 420). This type of
atmosphere might help avoid a situation where youth say what they think adults want them to say “rather than addressing their own and one another’s realities” (425). A pedagogy of collegiality relies on moving from reaction to intervention, providing the kind of support that allows for an initial response to grow and change and that asks youth to consider how their work has clear implications (429). In a space such as this, both youth and adults must be willing to participate in critical self-reflexivity, and Chávez and Soep argue that this productive space helps form “alliances between youth and adults” (431). In TYPS, one could discern a pedagogy of collegiality, but it takes the form of an abstract shared goal with some specific projects that not all of the youth are involved with. TYPS is a steppingstone, as youth stated across the interviews. TYPS also often deepens youth commitment to the local context, offering an alternative beyond the narrative of leaving or “getting out.”

Early in my research, I considered the extent to which the competition in slam poetry may affect youth participation and a sense of community, particularly in terms of who feels excluded or included. As a former athlete and a creative writer with a deep experience in the arts of rejection, I wondered to what extent the competitive elements of slam – in terms of ranking “good,” “better,” or “best” poems – were linked with the persistent participation of poets. The poet I had noticed, who was unable to get past the first round in spite of his persistence, weighed on my mind.

Overall, however, interviewees had a positive attitude about the competition. The interviewees – all of whom were consistent participants – described some downfalls to competition, such as comparing oneself to others and thinking that the way to be “good” is to write and perform like those who receive the highest scores. They acknowledged how envy could play a role. Most of the interviewees said that competition in slam is important but that it
isn’t the point or emphasis of a slam. Judging is an inherent part of slam, but it is also viewed as simply a person’s opinion and should not be taken too much to heart.

One of the interviewees who consistently scores high felt that the competition aspect may be discouraging or flawed, but it’s the impact one makes beyond the competition that matters. This poet had attended Brave New Voices, and a major takeaway for him was that the work outside of the slam is what is most important, which he translated to performing outside of Bentley’s teaching and facilitating workshops, and using poetry as a strategy to effect social change. Scoring, however, may be a factor in discouraging a poet early on, he felt. Yet another poet who attended Brave New Voices felt that competition is meant to maintain energy, keep a fast pace, and learn what others think of your poetry. At the same time, this poet felt that the tangible emotional effects on their audience were more important than the score. However, one poet held a meritocratic view on scoring: “I feel like those people who care more, those are the ones that score more.”

One poet expressed indifference to the competitive aspect of slams but described the scoring as a practical tool: “[Having scores] would force you to actually listen to the poetry and actually tell that person what you thought of it.” Upon reading this, TYPS alumni and Crossroads research assistant Sheila Dong remarked that it caused her to rethink slam scoring “as a way to connect the performer and the audience. It’s like a way of saying, ‘We want to involve you, the audience, in this too; we want to know what you think.’ This way, the poet isn’t just up there reading their piece, totally in their own world, nor is the audience feeling passively performed to/not really listening. That comment made me see judging not only as a judgment (with all its negative connotations) but an interaction. Not that I feel totally positive toward judging now, but I did find that comment very illuminating.”
Dong’s comment opened up the question of competition. Since the judges are randomly chosen and need have no stated expertise in the subject, we could also consider how slam is a space of critical inquiry for the audience. An “interaction,” as Dong puts it, happens, where both poets and audience members are learning about how they are perceived, where both poets and audience members are asked to think and rethink their preferences for what constitutes “good” poetry – meaning both the writing and performance, where they will inevitably consider what it means to distinguish between the poem and the performance (judges are advised to score 50% on the poem and 50% on the performance), and whether such distinctions are useful. One of the interviewees expresses this critical component in this way: “[In a competition], you’re figuring out like, what kind of footing you’re on and how people are like, receiving you in your poetry, um, so I think it’s an important process.” Overall, interviewees each saw value in scoring. Only one poet mentioned that a friend (not interviewed) had stopped coming because of the scoring. Sheila’s insight about interactions helps us understand how evaluation and, thus, competition, helps facilitate critical insight and community for those poets who stick around, as well as what might make them stick around.

I was also interested in the question of how TYPS youth might come to call themselves writers or poets. While some interviewees initially hedged at the question of whether or not they would call themselves poets, all said yes. Their reasons vary. One of the poets suggested that the performance itself is what validates creative efforts and, thus, the performance is what can solidify one’s identification as a poet. All of the poets seemed to agree that anyone can be a poet and call oneself a poet.

Interviewees also express how the processes of writing and feeling poetry make one a poet. One poet says: “When you are a poet, everything around you just becomes like, a verse or
like, a song...If you can write literally anything and make it a poem, you’re a poet.” Another said: “Sometimes I feel like I’m a madman. Sometimes I feel like I’m over-emotional, but if we were to confine it to one thing, I think it’d be a poet.” Still another: “Every poem is like, that’s your gift and you never apologize for your gift.” TYPS poets are often excited about the possibilities for poetry, how poems can be plucked from the everyday, and how the everyday is a magical space. As one poet puts it, “Poetry is not words on paper...poetry is living, poetry is everywhere, poetry is like these beautiful thoughts of beautiful images, uh, the beautiful things you see, these feelings, that’s poetry. Poetry is like some sort of active force.”

A few other poets see the poetry itself as a trajectory for creative growth and not simply a gateway. These poets tend to comment on poetry on the page versus the stage and may be looking into potential careers as writers. They are beginning to familiarize themselves with literary genres such as chapbooks and tend to discuss poetry in slightly different terms than the others. For instance, one poet mentions the ways in which he has been influenced by modes such as hip-hop and jazz, and he discussed the ways in which he initially imitated poet Saul Williams before working to develop his own “style.” This led to an exploration of how, for him, being a poet is about redefining what a poet is by learning and then breaking with established poetic rules or forms, or by creating hybrid forms. While nearly all of the interviewees describe their commitment to social change, most do not describe this relationship as critically connected to an aspiring professional career as an artist. Those who do have already begun to run into the questions of craft, appearance, and purpose that characterize discussions about “literary” poetry.

Most of the TYPS poets articulated ways in which their poetry had changed or grown. In some cases, they described a lull in their poetic activity. One poet who was still active in facilitating TYPS events said: “it’s kind of something I wish I could do more, but I just – I think
I just had like a block, where I just stopped writing, and I would try to bring myself to it, and like, I didn’t want to for some reason, or I just felt like I couldn’t, I don’t know if it had to do with feeling like I wasn’t like, good enough anymore, because I wasn’t competing, or I don’t know exactly what pertained to it […] it fazed me for a while […] but I think more recently, I’ve been wanting to more.” Another poet said that her perspective on her poetry that she had performed in the past has changed: “I don’t like some of the words that I use, I don’t, you know, my view has changed, so I don’t, even though I used to believe in those things, I don’t really anymore, or I don’t emphasize them as much.”

In slam poetry communities that are highly competitive and that receive more than local public attention, there may be more pressure to perform about specific issues. Youth slam poetry festivals, whether local, national, or international, are usually very supportive of youth; the mantra of “it’s not the points, it’s the poetry” still rings true, but the teams competing at a national or international competition can be very serious and there to win. As with any situation where teams compete, TYPS youth noticed that some teams were more competitive than others and were not as interested in collaborating or communing with other teams.

In my interviews with TYPS poets about their experience at Brave New Voices, an international youth poetry slam, I found that poets often felt there was a pressure at that event to perform about African-American histories and experiences, and TYPS poets, while expressing empathy with the need for these narratives to be heard, also sometimes expressed some annoyance that poetry about African-American identifications was rewarded more than poetry about, for instance, genderqueer or Latin@ histories and narratives. Those poets who attended Brave New Voices were exposed to a range of subjects uncommon in Tucson. Yet they also discussed how much they learned about the historical ties between slam and African-American
experiences. While most TYPS poets discussed how much they learned about experiences and events going on in different spaces, there was also a careful examination of how these experiences were used at Brave New Voices. One poet felt that, while poetry about African-American issues is important, the amount of poetry about the oppression and marginalization of African-Americans at Brave New Voices meant that poetry about other subjects, such as LGBTQ issues, was less welcome and/or rewarded at the national level. It seemed that indirect connections to prevalent subjects such as African-American slavery at Brave New Voices caused many of the TYPS poets in attendance to reflect upon style, subject, and delivery in relation to audience. Learning about these experiences also caused some TYPS youth to consider how they may have appropriated experiences of oppression in their own poetry. For instance, one poet became critical of her choices in a poem she had written long before BNV: “Like, the one about ethnic studies, I didn’t really like how I used Black slavery to kind of use that as a metaphor for, you know, censoring us. I thought that was a little too extreme...I mean, one, because I don’t really relate to Black slavery, so, I’m not Black, so, that to me isn’t something that I should address, or I don’t feel like I should address that, I don’t feel like I’m in that position to do that.”

While contemplating the prevalence of poetry about African-American experiences at Brave New Voices, TYPS poets were also proud that they were able to narrate to Brave New Voices attendees what it is like to be a young person in Arizona. TYPS youth began to consider how they were able to influence the perceptions of other youth, many of whom appreciated learning more about Tucson than what they had heard in the news.
These questions of justice and community cohesion offer a way into the next few chapters, where I will explore the notion of a critical lattice perspective that seems evident in TYPS performances. TYPS poets’ relationships with their poetry, each other, and the larger community can help us consider how critical inquiry fuels coalition, but, beyond these abstractions, it should be clear how visceral and defining the experience of TYPS has been for so many of these youth. As one poet said: “No matter how sad I was, no matter how totally broken apart I was, no matter how bad things were, how much they were falling apart, um, I could always come here. And I could always count on laughing, being happy...TYPS was my life raft for a while.”
In this chapter, I clarify the concept of a “critical lattice” and describe how it has emerged from research about the poetry and performances of youth at the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam. In imagining critical latticework, I draw from extant research to convey a practical image that could be used in several contexts, including writing classrooms that focus on critical inquiry into rhetorical and genre contexts. Critical latticework is a way to imagine the fluidity of identification and performance that addresses, in (at times) practical ways, the dissonance inherent to rhetorical and social contexts. By “practical,” I mean the practical imagination, where one might become aware of tools to understand complex concepts and, as a result, be able to generate rhetorically aware texts and become comfortable with fluidity in identification and narrative.

First, I will introduce and define two related yet distinct concepts: critical webbing and critical latticework. Drawing from new media and writing program administration scholarship (e.g., Bolter and Grusin, Peeples, and Bay), I define critical webbing as an activity or set of activities that reflect inquiry into the associative connections, disconnections, overlapping, and splitting experienced through perceiving exchanges as part of a fluid and ever-shifting series of identifications. In writing program assessment, a critical webbing activity might function well with the organic assessment practices connected with dynamic criteria mapping. Drawing from and conversing with scholarship focused on identification and coalition (e.g., Kenneth Burke, José Esteban Muñoz, Adela C. Licona, and Karma R. Chávez), I define critical latticework as part of a consciousness that activates in temporary yet sturdy locations to obscure, reveal, and perform identifications. Unlike a terministic screen, a critical lattice is an image that can offer a
way to perceive the labor of the screen itself, where growth and movement might occur, as a plant may unexpectedly wind through the criss-crosses of a lattice; in other words, the critical lattice is an image for third space and intersectional work. Critical webbing is an activity that takes place within and through the critical lattice.

Critical webbing and critical latticework invoke multiply situated strands and positionalities that are woven and spun in varying, and often surprising, directions. Critical webbing is used here to invoke an activity as well as a flexible structure because a web implies a malleable, strong, yet fairly easily destroyed structure. Webs can be moved and rebuilt, and they are original and patterned. A web requires an agent, the spider, which conjures many connotations that are gendered (e.g., the black widow) and have deep ramifications for various cultural and mythical narratives. Further, in the inevitable landscape of digital media, one cannot help but to think of the internet as web. On the other hand, because a lattice can serve multiple purposes, the agent, the spider, who builds and sustains a lattice, does not appear to be the major element for action or activity. Since it is built for multiple purposes and may be built and sustained by different agents, a critical lattice is distinctive from the image of the spiderweb, at least. Yet critical webbing – as it relates more to digital agency/ies – is one of the activities of critical latticework.

Critical latticework is simply another image for the kind of work that theories of fluid identification seek to accomplish. By introducing this image, I mean to provide a practical way of perceiving some of the complexities of identification in relation to writing and the performance of writing. It seems to me that most identification work is hard put to provide a workable heuristic that can aid in transformative understandings of fluid identifications, so I want to contribute this option.
A critical lattice is a space where intersecting identifications might meet, pass, converge, and diverge. It is a space that can be a filter, but filtering is not its primary purpose; rather, the space is a rhetorical imaginary where possibilities for community, collaboration, and dissension might be discovered. In the case of the youth slam poets in this study, critical latticework might go beyond some of the limitations of “safe spaces” and other metaphorical structures often built by adults for youth. Critical latticework is not a new theory; it is, rather, an image and rhetorical strategy that can be concretely applicable in practice. The building of this theory is dependent upon LatCrit, feminist studies, queer studies, and identification studies (e.g., Chávez 2013; Licona 2012; Muñoz 2000; Sandoval 2000) that speak to interstices. As Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Adela C. Licona write, “the ‘interstitial’ assumes internal and external tensions, contradictions, and contestations, it resists fixity and pushes us to constantly interrogate ourselves, our locations, and the assumptions that inform our political strategies” (13). The pedagogical approach to action literacy taken up by Stacy Waite in the previous chapter is a narrative of this approach from a teacher’s point of view. It is crucial to find better, clearer yet messier, ways to help students, to help humans, develop comfort with how uncertainty, uneasiness, and dissonance aid learning and communication. I will argue in this chapter that critical latticework is not only a way of understanding the development of coalition and comfort with dissonance among TYPS youth but also widely applicable in other writing contexts.

**Critical Web, Critical Lattice**

Initially, after reviewing TYPS poetry, performances, and interviews, and after thinking about the events and modes that contribute to the ambience of TYPS, I imagined a web of multifaceted inquiry and performance that generated coalitional consciousness. I began to imagine this as
critical webbing, by which I mean the multimodal, textured activities that evidence engagement through composition, performances, and other events circulating before and after these processes.

The metaphor for the internet is the web, a space of intricate design that is flexible yet subject to manipulation and movement. Like a spider’s web, it is malleable and subject to breakage. Its paths seem infinite. The internet as a web is a powerful metaphor because it implies infinite possibilities and patterns, and it implies agency in terms of how we choose to navigate the web: where we go, what we do, and why. This is a slick version of agency, where choices are seen as under the control of the clicking thumb, and, if we take the metaphor a bit further, we see the agent as the spider, the storyteller of this structure, the narrative spinner. But these paths on the web should not assume agency, and clicking thumbs do not aptly describe the control of the spider.

Webbing, the verb, indicates activity. When applied to texts, we might think about how the reader or audience’s level of engagement helps determine textual effects. Webbing can also indicate the forging of specific threads or paths. Webbing as an adjective connotes strength, as in the way a fabric is tightly woven, or, in a baseball glove, the thick leather between thumb and forefinger. This texture is flexible enough for manipulation but holds together. Malleable, but able to withstand stretching, heaviness. Webbing is also a noun, such as the strong rubbery substance between a duck’s toes, that membrane of underwater swiftness that looks so awkward on land. Precise and swift in the right circumstances, clunky in others. A web can catch something and hold it fast for examination, for desiccation, but it cannot catch everything.

I begin with critical webbing because it seems the most obvious and perhaps well-worn way of thinking about not only the internet but the ways in which contemporary young people
are often assumed to navigate communications. Critical webbing indicates the kind of savvy multimodality that is sometimes attributed rather indiscriminately to youth, in the assumption that they are able to multitask, draw from a variety of sources, and simultaneously use various types of media effectively and efficiently. Pedagogical instruction that assumes students’ ease with multimodality and especially digital media is assuming a specific student status. Webbing is not always critical or savvy, in other words. *Critical* webbing, on the other hand, is rhetorical webbing and requires an understanding of moments of agency. Critical webbing demonstrates thoughtfulness about purpose, audience, subject, and, as a result, ethos. It requires at least an instinct about how various texts are structured and work together to produce an environment in which certain activities and perspectives seem inevitable. As Bazerman, Bawarshi, and others have pointed out, the (often policy-driven) texts of a college classroom create such inevitability: the syllabus, readings, assignment sheets, formal and informal student writing, informal instructional writing, and other activities. Webbing implies agency or lack of agency for particular kinds of transactions to occur. Agency is not steadfastly locatable; it is dislocated through the way it shifts depending on the unfolding of reader and writer interactions. Yet the dislocation of agency still creates a seeming inevitability in a classroom space. It is as if these texts converge to catch students and teachers in a web, for even resistance to texts and counternarrative often result in a typical set of narratives.

In classrooms, young people’s ways of thinking across several modes are often seen as evidence of their aptitude for critical thinking. Thus, some teachers adapt to this notion of aptitude and work to develop critical thinking by respecting this perceived aptitude (e.g., using current applications and digital media) and by earning credibility with students through demonstrating knowledge of media tools. Used effectively, digital and new media pedagogies are
attuned to the potentialities of what Henry Jenkins calls convergence culture. Jenkins discusses convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (2). This potential fickleness of audiences can be advantageous to the development of critical thinking in that the “migratory” behavior of media audiences can reflect choice, but of course this sense of choice may have already been molded by the media industries Jenkins refers to. Media content is only as effective as the participation of media consumers, and “convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (Jenkins 3). Such roles and responsibilities result in “participatory culture,” the agents of which shift and change (in other words, it is not simply corporations or a few select participants who ensure the success and flow of media content). And participatory culture in relation to consumption is part of a “collective process” or “collective intelligence,” a concept emerging from the work of Pierre Lévy (Jenkins 4). A collective intelligence can be facilitated for various stakeholders to participate in institutional and social transformations. Key to this collective intelligence, I think, is the capacity to inquire and collaborate with the agency/ies of various stakeholders.

The concept of agency is complicated by identificatory factors, and so Herndl and Licona’s discussion of constrained agency is helpful in thinking critically about our assumptions and approaches to new media. Specific circumstances, such as class status, lead to many assumptions that do not offer a sense of the complicated landscape of new media usage and accessibility. For instance, a Pew research report on mobile access of the internet in 2010 revealed that mobile web usage was highest among African-Americans and “English-speaking Latinos” (Smith). Minority mobile phone users made wider use of their phones than whites
Findings such as this emphasize two things. First, technologies that offer wide access to internet capabilities are not always and only accessible to those who have the most class privilege. I do not mean to ignore the perceived quality of these technologies, however. What the report also suggests is that mobile phones are being used in place of other technologies that may be more expensive and have broader capabilities. At the same time, the report suggests that mobile phones are being used for a variety of reasons. A second implication of the report, then, is that technology of all kinds can be used innovatively to not only call attention to but also transform encounters that are burdened with histories of oppression. For instance, troubled by police abuse and determined to document positive and negative encounters with law enforcement officers, three high school students developed Five-O, a mobile application that allows users to describe and rate interactions with specific police officers to spread awareness about whether certain police officers can be trusted as well as ensure that police officers know that people are also putting them under surveillance. People will also be able to engage in community activism through this application (Pinetart, Inc.).

A complicated conversation might be had about the concept of critical webbing. However, there are several connotations and implications that do not quite fit with what I have seen at work at TYPS. We often view the internet/web, for instance, as a space of rapid activity and performance. Bolter and Grusin, in “The Double Logic of Remediation,” discuss the “hypermediation” of texts in different mediums that has resulted from the influx of new media opportunities. As an example, they describe the website for CNN, “arranging text, graphics, and video in multiple panes and windows and joining them with numerous hyperlinks” while simultaneously engaging in a “sense of immediacy” through newscasts (Bolter and Grusin 9). For Bolter and Grusin, this hypermediation connects with an urge to view and experience events
unfolding in real time, to become part of that experience and feel present even though a screen exists between the viewer and the real event. The ability to click and swipe quickly and associatively, with purpose, might be viewed as effective multitasking but might also be critiqued in terms of opportunities for discovery that can occur when reflective activities are available to a person. If one is always clicking or swiping, where and when does one think? Of course, an assumption in that question is that thinking and reflection require a quiet space, and exploring that is not the purpose of my research. It is difficult to deny that the internet is a distraction, but to what extent it is more or less (or simply of a different kind) of a distraction than, say, the ocean view outside my window as I sit here in a community college writing center, stealing a few moments between student consultations to type these sentences with seventeen windows minimized on my laptop screen. Screens, and especially electronic screens, can create an awful lot of white noise.

Webbing is associated with the multiplicity of screens that characterize network culture and that demonstrate that screens are embodied parts of both nature and culture. My ocean view and my seventeen “windows,” as well as my sinking posture, my knuckle-cracking, and my ways of filling out this chair and space, are part of what Jennifer L. Bay calls “the body’s relationship to the computer screen and the body’s screening of online information” (26). Networks go beyond electronic screens; nodes and associations are experienced through our various senses.

Further, many practical applications that seek to clarify relationships and, specifically, power dynamics, adopt the notion of webbing to help identify spaces for understanding and change. For instance, in “‘Seeing’ the WPA With/Through Postmodern Mapping,” Tim Peeples describes postmodern mapping as a way to think about subjectivities so that identities can be imagined in relation to how writing program administrators locate themselves among and across
spaces. Postmodern mapping is an activity that facilitates the understanding of space so that subjects can be understood as organized by that space. It is a critical webbing activity that offers the opportunity to perceive kairotic moments and interstitial relationships.

While the idea of critical webbing seems useful for the ways in which TYPS poets demonstrate a savvy multimodality through their poetry subjects and performances, the concept does not do enough to acknowledge the sustained ways in which their multifaceted identifications performatively emerge or are obscured. The metaphor of a critical web is widely applicable but not specific enough. The internet is full of all sorts of invisible, inaccessible borders and avenues. But webs are translucent. I needed a metaphor, an image, that helped me understand how TYPS poets perform and engage in activism in relation to their understandings of what happens between self and other, between private and public, between individual and social – in the spaces of reality which we might call “third space.” In addition, I wanted an image that could serve as an organized method while being cognizant of the fluidities of third space. Despite the rapidity of slam poetry performances, however, I was not convinced that what I want to convey about TYPS has anything to do with quick-fire performances or quick-witted actions.

The image of a lattice returned from many years ago, when I circled it while writing my M.F.A. thesis, a nonfiction book about growing up on a farm in Illinois that I called *Through the Lattice*. I was intrigued by the concept of the lattice for both its lyrical potential and the ways the image conjured the silences and perceived mysteries of my rural upbringing. My grandparents lived in the farmhouse, while my parents built an underground house a half a mile away on a plot of land that my grandfather sold my father for one dollar. The house was not supposed to be in the ground, but my parents did not have the funds to go beyond a basement. Sometimes water would inch down the concrete wall beside my bed, which my mom had painted a light green.
Now that my grandparents are deceased, the farmhouse has become a crumbling storage place. My father still works the farm, tending to the cows, growing hay, and fixing balking pieces of machinery. He keeps the electricity on at the farmhouse so he can run the refrigerator and have a cool drink after doing the chores. A few years ago, a lightning strike imprinted a long black zigzag of electricity on the ceiling of the dining room, filled with boxes. A few of the windows have cracked. And the porch of the farmhouse sags. Beneath it is a lattice, which my grandfather painted a dark green.

A lattice is a partial screen, letting in triangles of light, such as those diagonal criss-crosses under Midwestern porches, lightly obscuring what lies or grows beneath. Weeds may be allowed to flourish behind the lattice, for instance. I do not want to suggest that on one side of the lattice is the inner, dark, weedy brain, while on the other is the sunny, social, light, outside world. Nor the opposite. The lattice is an organizational space that isn’t totally set but a fluid and facilitating space. It is not a fence. It can be easily taken down or moved. Think of it more like a moveable screen, but a screen that does not merely serve the purpose of filtering things out or in.

There are many kinds of lattices. If it helps to leave the farm, if you do not relate to rural spaces, then think of the intricate latticework of the mashrabiya that adorns many buildings in Cairo. In contemporary Cairo, dusty mashrabiya windows maintain a hold along with other diverse architectural choices of centuries of colonialism and invasion. If you have read Naguib Mahfouz’s *Palace Walk*, you know that the mashrabiya window is a beautifully designed screen that allows the person who is inside to see outside, but not the other way around. One of the central characters of *Palace Walk* is Amina, who married young and has been hidden behind a mashrabiya window ever since. The lattice, across cultures, can indicate what is hidden and what
can be seen by those who are hidden, and a specific gender portrayal can be read in Mahfouz’s narrative of confined women.

The concept of a critical lattice is an elaboration of Burke’s terministic screen. Burke’s delineation of dramatism provides a lens through which to understand that no expressive choice is neutral. Burke’s discussion of dramatism thus provides one clear thread for rhetoric and composition scholars’ emphases on the identificatory factors of sociocultural contexts and discourses of power and privilege. The terministic screen is a way for Burke to discuss how terminological choices are filters that include and exclude particular ways of perceiving a context and message. The symbolic resonance of language is an act, in that language moves and sways our perceptions and embodiments. These movements are part of the “texture” that creates filters; in one of Burke’s examples, photographs of the same thing but from a different filter change the texture of the viewer’s experience (45).

Critical latticework is mainly about what is happening and growing on the lattice, rather than what is passing through it or how. Growth that occurs in this space does not follow a singular path or subscribe to limited notions of development. The growth may be twisted, wanted or unwanted, clinging to the lattice or moving away from it. Sometimes it is trained upward or sideways, manipulated. Sometimes it trains itself. And an openness is always there in the criss-crosses of wood, an openness where activity takes place. A critical lattice is purposeful in that it provides a sense of stability but, to borrow again from Carrillo Rowe and Licona, “resists fixity” (13). A critical lattice can be a space for non-binary identifications to work actively with meta-discourse. This work, this labor, may not result in linear social transformation or progression, but it is work, nonetheless, and important work for youth.
Crucial to my project is examining the tension between thinking of young people as simultaneously savvy about their world and in the process of working through developmental stages. Such thinking is not always useful for understanding how youth practice and acknowledge their critical and creative capacities in the context of social complexities. More than critical webbing, then, the concept of a critical lattice helps me articulate the complexities of youth performances in and across rhetorical contexts and, most importantly, to respect the mysteries of rhetoric in writing and performance. I find it crucial to respect the mysterious and sometimes impenetrable screens of meaning and intention, the things you cannot quite place about what causes a piece of writing to have a particular ethos, particularly since so much of composition instruction is focused on modes of clarity and coherence. I feel it is crucial to be suspicious of our ways of teaching and packaging clarity and coherence. A critical lattice is a rhetorical perspective that never allows us to forget that there is much we cannot know or understand in observing and interacting with others.

Critical webbing as an activity is important to critical latticework. A critical web is an effective visual for understanding how a system of activities within a social context is characterized by an assortment of texts and discourses determining the organization and potential disruptions of a social context. In “Speech Acts, Genres, and Activity Systems: How Texts Organize Activity and People,” Charles Bazerman examines how the production and circulation of texts “in part constitutes the very activity and organization of social groups” but also how “people using text create new realities of meaning, relation, and knowledge” (309). We could view the critical lattice as a space where texts can be understood as helping to create “new realities of meaning, relation, and knowledge” (Bazerman 309). Bazerman’s assertions about “new realities” dialogues with the hopes expressed by Baca, Pratt, and others.
A slam poem can be an expression and/or a medium for critical latticework. For instance, in the following poem performed at TYPS by Araceli Montañó, the complexities of space and identity are revealed, and Montañó demonstrates some of the labor of growth:

Arizona, Arizona, Arizona!
I love you- with the burst of a thousand rays produced by the desert sun,
but boasting about this admiration does not come easy
for your sons and daughters.
You see, we were built from soil made into homes,
like Hopi natives patting down hope-filled mud bricks-
knowing that each square inch would count.
Risen up by callused Mexican hands, but-
your children cannot learn of the boiling blood that's seeped
into land first loved by us because our leaders, are freaking, nuts.
Arizona, I'm sorry.
That you've become more American than America can even handle.
That deportation of immigrants led to no visitation from tourists
-boycotting put us into a greater turmoil
but Arizona!
I still love you, with the burst of a thousand rays produced by the desert sun,
it is not your fault that some people can't handle the heat of your diverse kitchen;
boiling melting pots with the desire for less and less brown meat.

10 The transcription of this poem has been provided by Araceli Montañó, and I use it with her permission.
As if that wasn't bad enough; abortion is already a touchy subject-
but thanks to our not-so-thoughtful- “scientific”- legislature, the life of a child
begins before it is even conceived-
I don't get it, either.
And to think a doctor doesn't have to tell your daughters about pregnancy problems
is like a crystallized form of murder that rids a woman rights to her own
temple of a body.
Her water is pure, but they see her as tainted.
And as people from across borderlines watch in disgust, their eyes
cannot pierce through the love I have for you. As much as I'd like to leave with
the flow of leaves that dance with the breeze during fall to escape this fate- I can't.
Because Arizona, not only do I love you with the burst of a thousand rays produced by
the hot desert sun,
but the curvature of your mountain tops secure my faith in place, secure my heart
down to the fire-burning soil used to build me up, like the skies of brightest blue,
like the blue that lacks in your widespread rivers,
rivers that don't need water to run because you, run in my veins as
elegantly as in any other state.
Arizona,
Your cacti are the most beautiful plants that
stand in human form and as firm as statues.
A culture, that only 100-degree weather loving maniacs
will ever know,
will ever love,
will ever conquer, with pride.
I know, your leaders aren't the best influence
Politicians provide problem-solutions without thinking,
and we have to suffer.

But as your sons and daughters,
I promise we'll keep hope in you,
Arizona.

Critical latticework is evident in this poem through a complicated narrative in which the poet shows an awareness of policies and practices that negatively affect Arizonans but connects this disappointment with the complex feelings she has for her home, and the love one can have for a space that is beautiful and awful. The poem draws a border for those who dismiss Arizona without understanding its complexities, and it has a complicated perspective and ethos – narrated by a young person who shows breadth and specificity in a characterizing analysis of Arizona’s problems and beauty but also expresses concern with how the place is perceived. Many of the slam poems are speaking back to authority figures and stop there. Montaño’s poem speaks back, speaks up and out, but also imagines how the audience might perceive this space and strives to create a different conceptualization that isn’t just about demanding that an authority figure make it better but also implicates Montaño in the conceptualization of Arizona – its politics and its people. In the final few lines, Montaño rests her hope in a promise to the audience, that she will keep hope, but that she will also be part of the reason that hope exists. The poem is
representative of critical latticework because it demonstrates the sideways, entangled, organic work of identification, in this case in the feelings of love and disappointment that our home regions can inspire. The poem demonstrates critical insight into how rhetorical spaces create perceptions of Arizona, including the poets’ perceptions.

A lattice is a partial screen, letting in triangles of light. Diagonal criss-crosses under a porch. The upper crust of a pie. A lattice is screen-like, with openings and impenetrable spaces. A lattice, like a web, is structured. A lattice has a repeating pattern and organization. Perhaps this concept is too orderly. So much theory that deconstructs or dismisses the linear is fascinating but does not offer a space for action. So much of it reminds me of street sweepers in Cairo, where I lived and worked for four years. All day, these men, in green and orange jumpsuits, swept dust into piles. Though they often pulled a garbage can behind them, they did not sweep the piles into dustpans and toss the dust into the cans. They left the piles. The piles toppled, blew away. When I watched them, I felt that certain limitations in my perspective became clear. Cairo seemed to lack infrastructure. It often made no sense to me. A colonizing mindset. They were made up of so much, these piles, little wrappers and hair follicles and skin and ancient rocks and ancient debris, heavy with the chaos of Cairo. They were webs of narrative. And then they fell apart, again. Swept up into piles elsewhere or blown out past the exurbs into the undeveloped desert, that once green, lush space with its own mysteries, with even a bed of whale bones, Wadi Al-Hitan. Within the piles – those wrappers, follicles, skin, debris, particles – so many identities, right? And within dust, so many identifications ground into…dust. There is no sweeping that up.

So, I am left with a simple organizing image. Since it is, at least to some extent, purposeful, the concept of a critical lattice demands the question of what may be obscured and revealed in performance and how critical awareness and activity might shape that performance.
Latticework acknowledges a space that does not rely on metaphorical connections, and so latticework draws from borderlands consciousness as well as composition theory such as Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening. In critical latticework, rhetorical transactions are linked with activist intentions and hold radical possibilities. In this research space, TYPS poets who engage in a critical lattice delineate narratives that acknowledge multiple facets of identification that result in material, everyday effects; they verbalize the powerful structures fashioned by both themselves and others, and they demonstrate the significance of fluidity, which is integral to the structure of the lattice, a temporarily stable space that manifests in many ways and with different kinds of growth.

As with critical webbing, agency complicates the concept of a critical lattice. Barthes and Foucault offer models for perceiving the relations among writers and audiences that rhetoric and composition scholars have drawn from. Foucault’s notion of author-function, for instance, is a principle by which cultures exclude, include, and limit the privileges of certain texts in society. Two moves regarding agency in the field of rhetoric and composition can help build an understanding of youth coalitional consciousness in TYPS and characterize the notion of a critical lattice: the genre-function and the concept of constrained agency. In *Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition*, Anis Bawarshi subsumes the author-function into a “genre-function,” in which all genres and discourses are entities that are not only excluded, included, and limited in ways discussed by Foucault but also function to exclude, include, and limit in themselves. Genres, then, are not simply regulative but constitutive. As Bawarshi discusses, invention occurs at the intersection of the individual and the social. This is certainly relevant and practical when considering the process(es) of generating and
performing most writing, including poetry. The genre-function both inscribes and invents moments of agency.

The genre-function exists along with moments of constrained agency. In “Shifting Agency: Agency, Kairos, and the Possibilities of Social Action,” Herndl and Licona extend Foucault’s author-function to propose an agent-function, wherein, as Foucault’s author-function relies on authority preceding the author, the agent-function relies on agency preceding the agent. From this perspective, agency is enabled by a set of social and subjective relations that coordinate kairotically. An agent is created by agency itself. And agency is more complex than power in a given moment: it is a recognition of agentive opportunities even within the restraints of a power structure, what Herndl and Licona call constrained agency. In a TYPS performance, the kairotic agency of the performance space contributes to the poet as agent, in the moment, that delivery of the poem. The agent-function is malleable in relation to performative moments. And it is related to some of the assertions made here about the internet, where, for instance, the youth who created the Five-O app recognized the kairotic agency of the moment and were then able to widely distribute and deliver this text. The Five-O example is linear story, while TYPS poems, such as Montaño’s, are not linear in nature, as most TYPS poems cannot be connected from point A (performance) to point B (specific and concrete social change) but are part of “social and subjective relations” generating moments of critical resistance that characterize the stories of each youth slam poet. Critical latticework is not about mere choice but nuanced activities.

It seems that the “agentive opportunities” described by Herndl and Licona are particularly evident in slam performances at TYPS, as Herndl and Licona discuss how social and subjective relations might generate “the possibility of action.” A critical lattice can be viewed as a space of possibility. Through TYPS, actions might be taken that can be explained, as well as activities
that are inexplicable and depend on relations and kairos. One could argue that the poem is “the possibility,” but I think this argument limits the role of art as a means to an end. And indeed, as I discussed in Chapter 3, some of the interviewees view slam as “a gateway” that they pass through, a means to take on other roles in the community and advance their plans and goals. Such conceptions of what the community does and why it does it are rather linear. For instance, the logic here is progressive, where youth learn slam strategies and performance so as to improve their public speaking and poise, so as to learn about urgent social and political issues, so as to learn to express through poetry which leads to a commitment to social and political causes about which they feel passionate. This is a tried and true formula, wherein a significant number of poets continue not only supporting the TYPS community but become active in social justice issues.

But the “possibility for action,” as opposed to concrete action, is also evident at TYPS events, and this possibility may be high due to a remarkable acceptance at the slam for youth identifications that are in flux. The possibility is practiced on the lattice. Expanding their definition of constrained agency, Herndl and Licona write, “[…] the same social subject can occupy different, sometimes contradictory identities and social spaces. Thus the same person is sometimes an agent of change, sometimes a figure of established authority, and sometimes an ambiguous, even contradictory, combination of both social functions.” In the TYPS space, poets with varying and constantly changing dynamics within the community “occupy” different subjective and social positions. Most of the poems are about personal identifications and often take the form of declarations about such subjects as gender orientation, ethnicity, class, etc. These identifications are paired with issues such as cultural pride, abuse, depression, family, etc. These topics are chosen and performed in a space that offers a clear organization of events while,
for the most part, successfully promoting the idea of a “safe space.” I write “successfully” because safe space discourse can slide off the tongue and mean little when those who enter the space do not feel as if they can take risks or make mistakes, or when those who enter identify in multiple ways, so that some aspects of the event can feel safer than other aspects. While there is some ambivalence in the interviews about the safety of the space, the overwhelming response is that TYPS is a “safe space.”

Sustainable spaces, where youth can enter, remain, or depart as they like, can generate contexts of constrained agency as described by Herndl and Licona. For instance, a newcomer may feel nervous and out of place, while, at the same time, experience welcoming gestures from the regulars and the insistence that the poets and the audience carry expertise without having to show evidence of credibility. This can provide a newcomer with an air of pre-established authority. A TYPS “elder” (as they refer to themselves) who has “aged out,” on the other hand, carries established authority and may serve as a sacrifice or guest poet, or as a co-host. At the same time, an elder might be less visible to new poets in roles such as timekeeper or other roles within Spoken Futures. The audience has fluctuating relations in the space as well, where exclamatory responses are encouraged and viewed as empowering for all, and where many of the audience members are themselves slam poets also performing at the event. Further, the longer the event is in existence, the less the adult facilitators participate in organizing and running the event. Whereas in the beginning, the adults hosted and organized, now TYPS alumni and current poets who are regulars are trained to put on the event without the adult facilitators, who usually attend but are now freer to engage in activities to fund the newer umbrella organization, Spoken Futures, Inc. These activities also suggest movement in the ways that Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Adela C. Licona suggest in “Moving Locations: The Politics of Identities in Motion,” where
“moving” is meant to “evoke layers of meaning enfolded in the term” and is “spatial and affective – suggesting motion, expansiveness, and the sensation of being compelled forward” (11). This perspective disrupts language that focuses on the individual and, thus, generates “static notions of identity” (Carrillo Rowe and Licona 11). This type of disruption is meant to clarify how community interactions are characterized by “exclusionary or inclusive relational practices that tell us who we are” as well as consider concepts usually related to the individual, such as “agency/experience/consciousness” as part of “collective processes, as movements that arise out of collective struggles and oppositional forms of belonging” and, thus, to “reconfigure the face of feminist resistance” (Carrillo Rowe and Licona 11). To rethink collectivity and feminism in such a way is to move differently through the spaces and practices where resistance is a key character trait.

TYPS is a space of motion in the ways that Carrillo Rowe and Licona describe. It is not a utopia, and I do not want to paint it as such. It is a damned fine space for young people who are moved by the power of expression and community. Certainly, critiques can be made about the space. And it is not as if every poem is accepted by the community. As my interviews reveal, poets might talk about each other’s work during the slam event. They might express disapproval of a poem, as in the case of a white poet who wanted to speak back to other work about white privilege by pointing out that she has problems too. The performance was applauded, and she was supported in the space, but not outside of it. According to interviewees, critiques, then, tend to be more of a subtext in this space, via texts or through discussions taking place after the slam event, or in organizational meetings. Critiques are often subtextual in spaces of artistic production and performance; this space is no different.
Chapter 5 will explore these dynamics in more detail by departing, briefly, from TYPS and considering the state of creative writing in the formalized institution of MFA programs and how certain pedagogies are pinned to silences about race, ethnicity, and other sociopolitical tensions. In “MFA VS. POC,” Junot Díaz lambasts workshops for avoiding issues of race: “anyone that tried to introduce racial consciousness to the Great (White) Universal of Literature would be seen as politicizing the Pure Art and betraying the (White) Universal (no race) ideal of True Literature” (n.p.). Recognizing these silences has created a useful but limiting debate about creative writing workshops that I will explore, and it offers some insight into identification and pedagogy across writing classrooms. It also speaks to what safe space looks and feels like. As Díaz writes about his disappointing experiences in an MFA workshop, “I wonder what work might have been produced had we writers of color been able to talk across our connections and divides, if we’d all felt safe and accounted for in the workshop, if we’d all been each other’s witnesses” (n.p.). Of course, in reading this, I remember the way whiteness trickled through my commentary in my own MFA workshops, my feelings about what constituted quality writing, my interactions with the few writers of color in my program. And I think about how TYPS is a space that offers young people a way to tell of their experiences without being questioned, without being told that there is one right way.

In TYPS, which is a less formal and more welcoming space than many academic creative writing spaces, criticism seems more organically generated as well. For instance, as pointed out in Chapter 3, critiques often focus on whether the poet handled their subject well or needed to have their privilege “checked.” Some poets also feel that offering a critique of someone’s poem and/or performance is acceptable at the slam, while others do not appreciate this. These questions of when, why, and how to critique a poem and/or poet emerged in my interviews with TYPS
poets and reflected critical latticework attuned to how moments of constrained agency are perceived and engaged within and outside of the space.

While Bawarshi, Herndl, and Licona draw from Foucault’s author-function to describe alternative functions (the genre-function and the agent-function), these arguments about agency and authorship can also be connected with Roland Barthes’ conception of the death of the author, where the subject is lost in the writing, and the performance of language is of more significance than the performance of the writer, whose ideas are always anterior. Barthes uses his claims as a way to place more significance on studying the audience or readers since, if a text is “a tissue of quotations” from “the innumerable centers of culture,” multiple responses and interpretations of the reader are of more significance than any anterior intentions of the writer (146).

These discussions of authors and authorship inform composition studies work about ethos, and this scholarship also contributes to imagining the critical lattice as an image and heuristic in writing classrooms. For instance, in “Audience Addressed/ Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy,” Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford propose an intertwined model of reader, writer, and rhetorical situation to discuss avenues of identification involving both the writer and audience. They discuss two camps in work about audience: audience addressed (“those actual or real-life people who read a discourse”) and audience invoked (“the audience called up or imagined by the writer”) (78). In this article, Ede and Lunsford wish to critique lines of thinking that limit discussions about audience to that which will only help students consider how to situate their work to suit an audience (as in Mitchell and Taylor’s work), as well as audience only as understood through how it is created by the writer (as in Ong’s work) (82-3). These discussions of audience oversimplify the relationships between audience and writer. Ede and Lunsford claim: “Every writer must indeed
create a role for the reader, but the constraints on the writer and the potential sources of and possibilities for the reader’s role are both more complex and diverse than Ong suggests” (85). Ede and Lunsford’s proffered model of concentric circles emphasizes the agency/ies of readers and writers. Audience becomes both the actual or embodied audience as well as the implied audience targeted by the writer.

In “‘An Eternal Golden Braid’: Audience as Rhetor,” Theresa Enos complicates Ede and Lunsford’s model of concentric circles. Operating from the idea that rhetoric has shifted from “persuasion to identification,” which means ethos is elevated over pathos and logos, Enos argues that Ede and Lunsford’s binary discussion of audience must be expanded so that scholars can more thoroughly consider the “levels of identification made possible through ethos that enable the writer to create audience and, inversely, for the reader to re-create this audience” (99). The generative ethos described by Enos involves an alteration of the rhetorical triangle. Enos makes use of the notion of concentric circles but constructs them in relation to a braid or helix that still provides a visual for audience and writer but further complicates the potential dynamics of ethos. Each interaction between writer and audience, whether implied or “real,” generates circles upon circles of understanding, where each is aware of the other. This reliance on presence and identification are drawn from Burke’s notion of consubstantiation (Enos 100-5).

Enos’ braid or helix in relation to generative ethos inspires critical latticework. The main distinction between generative ethos and critical latticework is that it seems Enos is focused on the ethos between writer and reader, and therefore the helix is another screen. That screen holds several changing complexities, and the work done there is critical latticework. Critical latticework seeks to more specifically describe what is occurring in temporary spaces, and how
these occurrences might generate the dynamics of ethos drawn by the helix. Critical lattice is strongly connected, then, with the movements described by Carrillo Rowe and Licona.

TYPS poets might develop critical awareness in relation to critical latticework, and this work need not follow restrictive developmental stages. A critical lattice perspective supports the desire to move beyond the constraints of a developmental narrative. Nancy Lesko writes, “in order to rethink youth, we will need to reconsider our modern conception of linear, cumulative time” (14) and asks “Can we consider youth as more than becoming?” (13). And Dolores Delgado Bernal’s discussion about youth of color as “holders and producers of knowledge” is useful in moving away from a developmental perspective, though Delgado Bernal does not really offer a way to engage with critical perspectives and inquiries among youth. Youth are more than “becoming.” They are doing more than waiting for time to pass in sensible fashion, waiting for their hot heels to cool into some maturated state. Youth swim in imaginations, spaces of precious nostalgia and austere impatience. Even calling youth “holders and producers of knowledge” might seem a posturing inversion, where adults learn from youth but are still present, still in some way sanctioning youth activities and knowledge expression. It is important to understand how adult discourse that is intended to be empowering can stultify that hierarchical relationship. Some TYPS interviews, for instance, revealed the belief that youth slam poetry can be instrumental in social change if it is handed to the right authority figure in a position to make that change. The impressive concrete instances of TYPS poetry making change that I have cited elsewhere involve an appeal to authority through poetry performance: the youth poets who appealed to school board candidates to bring back their busses, for example. And, in a poem I will cite in this chapter, Alexia Vazquez performs about being undocumented ahead of Pima Community College’s decision to provide in-state tuition for DREAMers. These are examples
that can easily demonstrate a linear process and support the concept of slam as a gateway to other methods for social transformation. The youth who slam, for instance, could be the leaders of tomorrow. This type of gateway discourse can uphold a relationship where adults are crucial to results. Across the interviews, the relationship TYPS poets have to the adult facilitators is frequently discussed, and in a mostly positive way. It is clear that youth in this space view TYPS facilitators as authorities whose support and approval they seek, and they view them as people who can and do make change. The difference with TYPS is that youth are now taking over some of these facilitating roles. Even those youth who have not stuck around in TYPS and who might be more critical about the space are thinking about how the rhetorical context does or doesn’t work for them, and often in terms of how they are perceived as youth by other youth and by adults. So, for instance, the poet who began to attend the adult poetry slams in the community had expressed a desire to be treated more like an “adult.” The idea of progression, then, still upholds divisions between adults and youth. What I mean is that the way in which youth are talked about and talk about themselves can confine them to these linear narratives. Linearity can be dissuaded through a critical lattice, where the image is meant to convey what is mysterious about knowledge(s) while offering gaps and openings in perspective, as well as attuning those who practice a critical lattice to that which is not known. This supports the idea of possibility and radical opportunities for change in terms of both social movement and discourse, particularly when considered in relation to Sara Ahmed’s strange encounters, where one is open to surprise but also open to the inevitability of failure in what can be “revealed” (181). I think of the strange encounters Ahmed theorizes, too, in terms of an image of a somewhat sheer curtain fluttering at an open window in my grandparents’ farmhouse in the summertime, revealing and not revealing the business of the farm outside of the cool, dark house where my grandmother sat losing what it
meant to be herself. Ahmed asserts, “Thinking of encounters as ‘face-to-face’ also suggests that identity does not simply happen in the privatized realm of the subject’s relation to itself. Rather, in daily meetings with others, subjects are perpetually reconstituted: the work of identity formation is never over, but can be understood as the sliding across of subjects in their meetings with others” (7). Since the TYPS population keeps growing and changing, from this perspective it seems possible for Ahmed’s notion of close and strange encounters to be a possibility for transformation. For instance, a large part of the population is from two high schools in South Tucson – Pueblo and Sunnyside. The establishment of TYPS has to do with a targeted outreach within these two schools. As TYPS has grown, youth have been recruited from several other parts of Tucson and surrounding cities – youth from magnet schools, schools with more financial support, schools in the foothills where the rich reside. Several interviewees noted how they have built lasting friendships with people from different high schools whom they would not otherwise have met, while others expressed class and racial conflicts. This demographic diversity is significant for understanding how critical latticework can be seen as both a practice and a (moveable) location in a space such as TYPS.

Beyond demographics, interviewees revealed the significance of learning about and not quite understanding the perspectives of others through poetry performances and subsequent discussions. Many of the interviewees discussed how their perceptions of others have developed and also reveal to them what they cannot understand about certain perspectives and identifications. For example, one poet of color revealed how much he has learned about the limitations of his identification as a heterosexual male, expressing some surprise at the ways in which he had forgotten these privileges as he wrote and performed poetry about being marginalized due to his ethnic identifications. As an example, he expressed what he has learned
from other poets in the group who identify as genderqueer, lesbian, and/or gay. While poetry about sexuality and gender identifications is not prominent at TYPS, a small group has taken on these subjects in ways that have influenced the beliefs and understandings of privilege of other poets. Interviewees often expressed surprise at a lack of knowledge about certain kinds of identifications but also the broadening of perspective, wherein sometimes the interviewees clarify a sense of coalition that engages with the notion of differences being viewed as a stable part of the success of a coalitional consciousness.

At the same time, conflicts about privilege are a subtext reflecting another kind of critical latticework. For instance, the poet whose family moved away from South Tucson has written several pieces in which she attempts to establish legitimacy over the experience of growing up there while defending her family’s choice to move elsewhere in Tucson. She expresses that those poets still residing in South Tucson claim a sense of ownership that marginalizes her experience, and she articulates, in her interview, the fluctuations of identity that she has experienced through understanding the complexities of privilege and access (and different kinds of restrictions) in the part of Tucson where her family moved. This poet expressed irritation at what she perceived at TYPS as the discourse of ownership over experience, of the right to speak about certain subjects over others, and she perceives that she was pushed out of the group. A conflict such as this serves as a reminder that a sense of community is reliant on strangers, at least the common narrative of community. Ahmed notes this and proposes other ways of perceiving and encountering what might seem strange.

I would not argue that there is a collective agency in TYPS, but critical latticework practiced through exposure to diverse narratives helps characterize a community sensibility that can be traced to agentic moments. According to Herndl and Licona, “agency” is often misused or
misunderstood in that it does not clarify “social reality” in its use by scholars. They remind us to look to Foucault – it is not the what and where of power that matters, but the how. People don’t “hold” agency, or any of the transitive verbs often used with agency – it is more fluid, “scattered,” than that. Herndl and Licona write, “If we understand power as a set of relations […] it no longer requires that we connect it to an autonomous individual.” Power is dependent upon the transactions that occur within and across spaces.

Of special interest regarding the TYPS community is the idea that agency is “diffuse and shifting,” and the shifting nature of agency is what offers opportunities for radical changes. The shifting nature of power is how it is perpetuated, but Herndl and Licona go beyond a Foucauldian perspective to suggest how change is fluid, shifting, and queer. Agency is about the moment, about kairos. The social reality of agency comes to the agent in a temporary shift; it is something that the agent will not totally grasp. Returning to the image of the curtain fluttering in the farmhouse, movements from moment to moment alter possibilities for seeing, listening, feeling, and acting. In the interviews, I aimed to understand more about how TYPS youth perceive how poetry can make material and practical changes as well as how discourse structures in the TYPS community contribute to the articulation of an ethos concerned with poetry and activism. Many of the interviewees’ responses to such questions demonstrated an understanding of the writer, reader, and rhetorical situation as intertwined, clarified a generative ethos, and described the significance of constrained agency and kairos. There are many types of critical latticework, contingent on rhetorical situations and particularly in regard to agency, ethos, and kairos.

Alexia Vazquez, an undocumented student, demonstrates critical latticework in a poem about what it means to be a DREAMer, performed in November 2012 at a TYPS slam (and
performed elsewhere since then). The DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act offers a way for undocumented youth to gain a six-year temporary citizenship status through a college degree or military service, and to eventually gain permanent status. In her poem, Vazquez juxtaposes her experiences pursuing a college education (at one of two Arizona colleges honoring the DREAM Act) with living as an undocumented person in the United States. The college education described here will help Vazquez acquire temporary citizenship status. Vazquez offers a more intricate look at the limiting nature of the discourse of and surrounding the DREAM Act through an expression of the personal. In other poetry, she has also expressed ambivalence and anger at the experience of being undocumented and the ways that opportunities for becoming documented as well as attaining certain privileges are fraught.

Transcript\textsuperscript{11}:

For me, being a DREAMer means never sleeping in

Having side jobs and staying double shifts

All these cereal crumbs and we’re always out of milk

All while having an exam on the same week

It means all those countless times that we needed help but my father didn’t want it

Insisting that we’re not victims or criminals like those marijuana addicts

It means humiliation and risk of separation

It means not being good enough to be worthy of a title as simple as being human

Parasites and leeches

\textsuperscript{11} Some transcripts are linked to a particular performance, meaning that lines, etc., might change across performances. Some are linked to a performance but then checked with the poet. This transcript has not been corrected by the poet but is used with her permission. \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PhbO0VApk}
They scream to television screens and internet debates
But it’s OK because it’s not racist, right?
I’m still trying to convince myself that it’s OK
because we’re not at the jungle gym fighting over swings
we are in the real world where bullying had outgrown with time and age
But I still don’t feel as if anything has really changed…since high school
I’ve been assaulted, sexually, at a public place,
and if I screamed I would lose this race,
the clocks keep moving and days go by
but I find myself frozen for just a simple line,
I still remember, I came out to an old friend,
I had told him what I had been through, and what I was fighting for,
how I got here, and why I wanted to stay
His reply was: “I’ve heard worse stories than yours.”
Like if that was the only one of my own, like if I should feel different because someone else had
it worse, and like if he could comfort me with that shitty compassion of his when I had the
courage to reveal a secret I had been told to keep since I was small.
I’m all grown up, and all I can say that nothing has really changed
And if there is a hope worth hoping for then I’m placing all my bets.
This one is for my family, and for my friends, and for everyone here who cheers us on, this one
is for the English teachers that helped us use our voices, this one is for the ones who’ve had it
worse or better than me because they all matter to me in the same way I matter to myself, and
this one is for the fucktards I overhear at restaurants who think we have it so easy and all the
teachers I had that talked about our status like it was a punchline to a joke, this one’s for the last laugh I’ll be having because we are better at math than you citizens will ever be, and this one is to the piece of paper that might get me farther than I had thought, this one is to the fighters, to the DREAMers like me, and just as a Mexican woman cannot speak for Mexico, I cannot speak for all DREAMers. We’re all humans. And we’re all individuals. We’re all stories, and struggles. We fight every day, and we barely make a sound.

This poem demonstrates critical latticework: the DREAM Act, supported by many, is critiqued. Governance here, and in the context of so much failed governance for undocumented people, is a palliative. It does not remove the trauma of the past and the continued misunderstandings and misrecognitions that take place for DREAMers. It does not take away from the competition of suffering, where the revelation of a secret is met with a shrug, for someone always has it worse. Vazquez declares that she is a DREAMer and thus encountering an opportunity for education and citizenship in the linear pattern prescribed by the U.S. government. She complicates this encounter with the way she must still juggle experiences of alienation. Consider that, while “DREAM” is a backronym, the term “alien” is particularly noticeable and problematic. Including “alien” in the name of the Act sustains the limiting binary of alien and citizen, strange and familiar. It undermines the story of a young woman who has grown up in the U.S., who is “better at math than you citizens will ever be.” In this line, Vazquez implies the insult in being “offered” this education in a setting in which identified citizens may or may not have acquired the same skills that “aliens” also may or may not have acquired; the implication is also a common statement since math skills learned in school in Mexico tend to be superior to those skills taught in the United States.
Vazquez’s lines reveal the complexity and contradictions in the narrative of being a DREAMer. Overall, the poem calls out the insistence on dividing humans along the lines of “alien” and “citizen.” Sara Ahmed’s work on strange encounters is helpful here in considering the advantages to a nation-state of perpetuating a binary between what is familiar and strange. But Ahmed calls us to consider how notions of the stranger emerge from what we already recognize: “the figure of the ‘stranger’ is produced, not as that which we fail to recognize, but as that which we have already recognized as ‘a stranger’ . . . .The alien stranger is hence, not beyond human, but a mechanism for allowing us to face that which we have already designated as the beyond. So we imagine, here, now, that we are facing an alien stranger: it allows us to share a fantasy that, in the co-presence of strange and alien bodies, we will prevail” (3). From this perspective, it is necessary to have an alien, an outsider, who is recognized as such; this also perpetuates a narrative of exceptionalism. Through offering temporary citizenship status to youth “aliens,” the nation-state “will prevail” in perpetuating the binary of alien and stranger. DREAMers are accepted and assimilated; they must jump through certain hoops for temporary privileges and the hope of something more permanent. Meanwhile, what happens to the families that may have brought them here is not discussed in the legislative discourse.

Vazquez also narrates constrained agency and indicates a coalitional consciousness. For instance, she reveals to a friend that she is undocumented, in a moment that can be read as kairotic as she declares who she is to someone she trusts, but this moment is constrained by other forces of power when the friend says, “‘I’ve heard worse stories than yours.’” She calls out his relativity by asserting the courage it took for her to reveal her status, and she practices constrained agency by describing the coalitional consciousness evident through her experiences with the people she loves – family, friends, and TYPS.
Vazquez’s poem expresses radical possibilities through its complex and ambivalent narration, which also reflects the activity of critical latticework, built by the poet and exercised in, around, and through the poem. She has decided to perform the poem in this space, in this moment. It is a risk to perform. It is the tension between telling the story, publicly, and fearing repercussion. As more than one interviewee revealed, while they might slam about being undocumented, they have family members who have barely left their homes since the passage of SB 1070. The poem represents something larger to Vazquez; it is a piece of a transaction that requires a decision to convey these ideas, in this way, to this audience. The lattice is part of an organized yet organic rhetorical performance.

At times, critical latticework can be tied to a traceable action or set of actions intended for transformation or progress; for TYPS poets, this activity might be in line with the ways in which the performer understands a specific issue of social justice. For instance, Vazquez has performed this poem at various events, such as at the Women’s Foundation of Southern Arizona, which provided a grant to TYPS. Perhaps the most directly influential performance of this poem was at the February 27, 2013 meeting of the Pima County Community College District Board of Governors meeting, where the first item on the agenda was a vote for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals). Vazquez was one of fourteen people speaking in favor of DACA, and she was also the first, performing her DREAMer poem. All board members who were present voted in favor of DACA. Many TYPS poets with activist intentions are prepared to perform poetry that speaks deeply to their local context(s), and many of the poets state across the interviews that they have become more committed to staying in Tucson and making social change.
Perceiving these performances, interviews, and poems as part of a critical lattice can help us understand the complex ways in which young people navigate spaces often facilitated (and, too often, muddled) by adults and develop methods for communicating with and against those contexts assumed and perpetuated by (often, well-meaning) adults. I don’t wish to perpetuate a binary between youth and adults, but attending to these divisions also adds texture to the ways in which young people are subjected to gatekeeping but also find certain ways through and within the cracks and crevices of those boundaries. This texture is undoubtedly connected with the recognition of constrained agency as a vehicle for change.

While there is no exact science to a critical lattice, I’ve identified a few strategies that have helped me recognize it as a potential practice across TYPS performances and a useful practice and image for other writing contexts. In the next section, I will draw from the work of José Esteban Muñoz to focus on disidentification as a performative strategy that negotiates the power structures inherent in language through reclaiming and redefining certain speech acts. Muñoz argues that, in his research context of queer performers of color, this reclaiming and redefining is a way of working within and against dominant paradigms. TYPS poets can be seen as making use of this strategy as part of a critical lattice.

Disidentification As a Rhetorical Strategy in the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz describes disidentification as “a critical negotiation in which a subject who has been hailed by injurious speech, a name, or a label, reterritorializes that speech act and the marking that such speech produces to a self” (185). Disidentification is a key performative strategy that takes identification beyond working within or outside of a dominant paradigm. Disidentification is one
rhetorical strategy enacted in the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam that demonstrates evidence of critical latticework and the potential for youth coalitional consciousness.

Injurious hailing resonates as a way to reflect upon identity performances and possibilities. In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Judith Butler writes that the application of an “injurious name” is harmful but also “holds out another possibility”: “by being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate the call” (2). The act of hailing opens the possibility of “inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call” (Butler 2). In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Sara Ahmed examines injurious hailing in terms of the strange/familiar binary and offers, rather than a counter-narrative, the notion of a performative space called the “strange encounter” that focuses on not only disrupting the binary of strange and familiar but also working as a space to acknowledge what “fails to be revealed” in any encounter (181). The lens of the strange encounter offers a perspective through which to perceive opportunities for identifying and “remaking what it is that we may yet have in common” (Ahmed 181). This possibility for “remaking” hints at coalitional possibilities that are taken up by Adela C. Licona and Karma R. Chávez, to be discussed later in this chapter.

Ahmed’s discussion can also be put in conversation with Krista Ratcliffe’s work on rhetorical listening, where non-identification is proposed as a generative space. Ratcliffe articulates a space where “metaphor and metonymy coexist” in an articulation of non-identification, where people “choose to recognize their interdependency as well as their movements among different insider and outsider cultural positions” (73). Ratcliffe calls readers to consider how “dominant and nondominant positions” are felt and understood by “all people,”
each day, and that “listening to multiple discourses produces not only harmony but disharmony; hence, a person must choose to stick with the work that needs to be done in such a place” (76).

The theory of rhetorical listening is grounded in classical rhetoric and modern and postmodern theories of identification, and I am in no position to argue with it, but I cannot get around the feeling when I am reading it that rhetorical listening as described by Ratcliffe is more for an audience inhabiting whiteness and doing their privilege work than an audience marginalized by whiteness. Non-identification as a space, however, is another way to imagine the labor that can be done through critical latticework, as experience(s) of non-identification can be understood, through rhetorical listening, in such a way that identificatory harmony and disharmony are acknowledged in the same spaces.

Butler’s and Ahmed’s discussions of injurious hailing provide an avenue through which to understand the complexities of disidentification, which is a performative strategy distinctive from Ratcliffe’s proposal of non-identification. Muñoz’s definition of disidentification indicates that it is initiated by hailing that is “injurious” in intent, and that a disidentificatory act responds to hailing by reclaiming those acts and terms intended to be injurious. Muñoz’s examples of disidentificatory performances by queer performers of color often generate a complex mixture of agency and toxicity. This complexity is partially a result of the circumstances through which a disidentificatory performance moves, where a performance enacts the agentic opportunity to speak up, out, or back while often enabling more than one perspective, including injurious perspectives, to seep through.

The disidentificatory performance indicates the effects of injurious speech acts while, at the same time, lays a different kind of claim and understanding upon those harmful terms. Muñoz doesn’t describe it in this way, but I think of the performance of disidentification as a re-
dispersal, almost liquid in nature, shot from an aerosol can. I initially questioned Muñoz’s aggressive word choice, such as “reterritorializes,” because his description does not seem to represent the rhetorical transactions that occur at the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam.

Reterritorialization, however, addresses the impact of historical trauma. The combination of the empowering and the toxic – this capacity to perform what is healing and what is disempowering in a particular context – seems crucial for understanding how youth can and do engage in social activism through poetry. The performance of disidentification often leaves one with the question of for whom it may be empowering, for whom it may be toxic, which seems to be part of the purpose. When you reterritorialize, you redraw boundaries, but you also, likely, rattle, discombobulate, or offend while defining or maintaining a (perhaps new) community and set of identities. This could be an empowering experience, an activist performance, but it also reopens the trauma of historical and material disenfranchisement and erasure.

Muñoz illustrates disidentification through following the multiple identifications of queer performer of color Vaginal Crème Davis. Davis started her career through the punk scene in Los Angeles, creating a gossip zine called *Fertile La Toyah Jackson* and performing in an a cappella group, Vaginal Davis and the Afro Sisters (who Davis notes are “two white girls with Afro wigs” (Muñoz 95-8). Davis mainly explores “issues of blackness” and queer identities and performs through several musical groups, such as PME (Pedro, Muriel, and Esther) and Most High Rev’rend Saint Salicia Tate (Muñoz 97, 103).

Davis’ performances are consciously intersectional, and she often inhabits more than one persona. Muñoz illustrates this perspective through a description of how Davis chose “Davis” as a surname. In interviews, Davis has talked about going through a time when she attempted to respond to a nondominant upbringing by associating with white culture. The failure of this
association then led to the failure of “simple counteridentification” because she was not able to pass as a “heterosexual black militant” (Muñoz 99). So Davis “disidentified with Black Power by selecting Angela [Davis] and not the Panthers as a site of self-fashioning and political formation” (Muñoz 99). This choice allowed Davis to bypass the homophobic and sexist discourse of Black Power and reterritorialize it so that Black Power could be understood and performed by “a self that is simultaneously black and queer” (Muñoz 99).

One of the purposes, then, of disidentification is to perform, inhabit, and generate spaces that are flexible, fluid, and un-fixed in relation to dominant power structures. Davis practices disidentification through performances that are “fantastic and farcical,” “restructured (yet not cleansed) so that they present newly imagined notions of the self and the social” (Muñoz 97). For instance, one of Davis’ characters is Clarence, a white militiaman who is “a picture of paranoid and embattled white male identity in the multiethnic city” (Muñoz 105). In a performance of Clarence that was observed by Muñoz, Davis enters the stage in male drag, with a fake beard, military fatigues, and sunglasses. At first, Davis – known to the audience as a black queen – speaks in a feminine voice about her attraction toward “white supremacist militiamen,” then lowers her voice to inhabit the character of Clarence and perform racist, homophobic songs (Muñoz 103-7). When a song titled “Homosexual is Criminal” is performed, Davis begins to strip off the garb of Clarence, continuing to “perform homophobia” while “becoming queer” (Muñoz 107). By the end of the performance, Vaginal Crème Davis is back, wearing “a military fatigue baby-doll nightie,” and “the Clarence persona has disintegrated” (Muñoz 107).

This performance could be understood as related to critical latticework because of the inquiry that it provokes, where numerous ways of thinking and identifying are folded together as both as a way of critiquing oppression while maintaining awareness of its toxicity. The
performance, in its way of inhabiting all of these things at once, is what indicates critical latticework, where multiplicity is possible on the lattice. This is significant to TYPS youth poets because the image of Clarence is unstable, which is what makes the performance so effective. As Clarence, Davis performs images of hate by “inhabiting them with a difference” (Muñoz 107). While the performance is parodic in nature, the inhabitance of multiple characters is also a way for Davis to show how a dominant narrative can be “co-opted, worked on and against” (Muñoz 108). TYPS poets are often engaged in inhabiting multiple identities in single poems, as they attempt to narrate the complexities of their many intersections concerning race, sexuality, gender, and class.

In the case of Davis’ performance, the personae reveal cracks and are not meant to be aesthetically fine-tuned: Clarence is not supposed to be entirely convincing. As Muñoz puts it, “Clarence has as much of a chance to pass as white as Vaginal has to pass as female” (106). In this performance, “the ambivalent circuits of cross-racial desire are thematized and contained in one body” (Muñoz 103). Thus, disidentification is called up as “a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification” (Muñoz 97). Rather than reproducing hegemonic discourse through counternarrative, Davis creates a situation where positions and roles must share the same space for the purpose of critical inquiry. Davis “interrogates white hysteria, miscegenation anxiety, and supremacy” through the performance of Clarence in the body of a self-identified “black queen,” and “the white supremacist is forced to cohabit in one body with a black queen in such a way that the image loses its symbolic force,” transforming from a threat to a “joke” (Muñoz 109). Further, Davis’ performances contrast the commercialized drag accepted through film and television (e.g., RuPaul), a “sanitized” performance that “helps one understand that a liberal-pluralist mode of political strategizing only
eventuates a certain absorption and nothing like a productive engagement with difference” (Muñoz 99).

While TYPS is mostly not about parody, disidentification is a useful strategy to consider when understanding how youth slam poets attempt to inhabit and perform identifications in relation to the limitations of a liberal-pluralist mode. For instance, Alexia Vazquez disrupts the liberal-pluralist mode in her DREAMer poem, where she narrates the inhabiting of an assimilating practice (the DREAM Act as a “path” toward “citizenship”) by never letting any of her listeners forget how complicated it is for her to embrace her experience as a DREAMer while remaining critical of its very rationale. Her embodied experiences and lived history are crucial to her perspective and serve as an interrogation of the threat of liberal discourse about tolerance, progress, and equal opportunity creating a vanilla lens that refuses to understand the significance of differences. Vazquez will always be revealing her “secret”; she will be responded to in ways that do not fully acknowledge her lived history but reenact tropes of the familiar and strange, that ask her to get over it, that distract her with the tit-for-tat of who is suffering more and the most. The DREAMer poem articulates a context in which disidentification offers a viable third space, where Vazquez is a beneficiary of the DREAM Act but does not allow this designation to distract from the structural conditions that perpetuate the need for a DREAMer designation. It is a space where Vazquez can inhabit multiple roles and lived complexities through performance.

Vaginal Crème Davis’ multiple types of performances reflect “a radical impulse toward cultural critique” that Muñoz claims is not always understood by other drag queens or scholars (100). Davis’ audience must deal with the “jolt” of multiple identifications surfacing in a single performance. Such performances include queer of color spectators who are also uncomfortable with dominant paradigms and frameworks and are seeing in these performances a representation
of themselves, sometimes for the first time. Spectators can then imagine and relate to the possibility of change and/or transformation, as Davis’ cultural critique is not simply a parody or riff but an opportunity for decoding and recoding identity formations. Disidentification does not work for all of its possible subjects but is “a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant sphere simultaneously” for some (Muñoz 5). Collisions and jolts offer the potential for the decoding and recoding of identity formations “at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit” (Muñoz 6).

In a disidentificatory performance, the performer embodies both the strange and familiar, to bring us back to Ahmed’s work. In Davis’ performances, it is often difficult to distinguish strange from familiar, which confuses and startles perhaps even those who are in on the joke. Viewed from this perspective, Davis inhabits the strange or close encounter Sara Ahmed calls for, a temporary performance where, still, “something fails to be revealed” (181). Ahmed builds upon Althusser’s discussion of hailing as “a form of recognition which constitutes the subject it recognizes (= misrecognition)” (23). Such a misrecognition, Ahmed argues, is a failure because “the singularity of the figure conceals the different histories of lived embodiment which mark some bodies as stranger than others” (24). We recognize the stranger, and therefore the stranger is familiar. However, the stranger is familiar only because we have a limited understanding of the stranger; we do not recognize the limited, familiarized perception of the stranger’s body, the makings and markings of what it means to belong or not in a community. The homeless person, for instance, belongs in the sense that one who has not experienced homelessness can recognize a generic version of what it is to be homeless (which is to say, one clear and discernible (thus, familiar) version of what it is to not belong while very much indeed belonging). The homeless person is an affront that one might choose to hail as strange. I think of the Stone Arch Bridge/St.
Anthony Main area of Minneapolis, which, in the course of my four years living in the neighborhood in the early 2000s, began to undergo serious gentrification marked by the disappearance of the homeless and the scrubbing out of graffiti tags. I think of how I began to notice that I was no longer encountering homeless men (always men) on my walks over and around the Mississippi River. They did not suddenly become homeowners, these men. Their disappearance, in hindsight, was more startling than my normative perspective of them as strange/familiar. I encountered their disappearance as another kind of strange. My understanding of the embodiment of homelessness was jolted through disappearance, an enforced performance.

Disidentification is a way of encountering the inextricable connections between the markers of the strange and the familiar. The performer inhabits these markers simultaneously – in a way, the disidentificatory performance can be seen as an enactment of Ahmed’s concept of close encounters because the aim is not only to bring together the dominant and nondominant but also to startle the audience (and perhaps even the performer). Startling leads to an understanding of how this action might rethink injurious hailing and take (momentary) ownership of the acts, transforming the initial intentions of the hailing into a social critique. Such a performance creates a third space where our limitations in perspective and identification can be (but are not always) revealed. It is also a space where constrained agency can be enacted. Herndl and Licona’s definition of constrained agency is particularly salient here as a recognition of agentive opportunities even within the restraints of a power structure, where agency is kairotic and enabled by “a set of social and subjective relations.”

In regard to TYPS, I want to focus on a few performances that demonstrate the potentialities of disidentification for strengthening a critical lattice and generating youth coalitional consciousness. In my understanding of disidentification in TYPS, dominant and
nondominant narratives are challenged through the poetry performances in moments of constrained agency that emerge in lines and passages. Let’s go back to the idea of hailing, which up to this point has been used in relation to “injurious” speech acts. One could also argue that youth poets hail each other; they have been taught to hail as a form of acknowledgment and encouragement. Hailing can simply be a curled hand lifted confidently in the air, or snapping in appreciation at a moving, apt, penetrating line and delivery. Understood in this way, hailing is a key transaction in this space, where poets appreciatively hail and where they address injurious hailing in the everyday. There is even the hailing of the judges, who have their own stories of strangeness and familiarity. While Muñoz does not focus much on the response of the audience in his study of queer performers of color, in TYPS, the audience is a crucial part of the effectiveness of disidentificatory and other rhetorical practices.

Disidentification is one of many rhetorical strategies used in this local slam context. Such strategies, and glimpses of these strategies – are a significant part of the synergy at the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam. The following poem, written and performed by TYPS poet Sammy Dominguez, reflects a practice of disidentification:

Mijito

I confess.

When the lunchlady called me ‘mijito,’

my heart sang.

You see, I don’t feel like a woman,

---

12 The performance is publicly available on YouTube. The poet has given me permission to use this poem as well as the poet’s name. The poet has also checked the transcription.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DG8VW3rV020&list=LLtPQBHS6B_VoVDXMeVz0Nw&feature=mh_lolz
and I don’t really feel like a man,
so you can just call me Sam.

It’s all I was ever meant to be,
just good old me.

Yet most days I can’t see.

Who’s that in my mirror?

Once, I bound my chest and called myself Jack.

Yesterday I put on lipstick and a dress.

It feels like there’s too much of me to fit in my mirror.

I think it’s why I dream in first person and can’t ever see myself clear.

My mind’s eye doesn’t know how to see me, how to perceive me
and sometimes that makes me a little scared

I threw out the rules, blurred the lines, and broke the barriers.

I am breaking my mirror now.

Who I am defines itself.

But I will always remember that year I spent looking in the mirror screaming,
‘You are not a faggot.’

The year my lover’s lips were laced with fear

every kiss felt like a sin

pieces of me died every time their parental eyes burned ‘sinner’ into my flesh.

I didn’t match their heterosexual Christian values

I am not what they would have chosen,

and I am sorry.
Some days I’m sorry.
I never liked to shop and wear pretty things
and I was always mixing my stripes and my spots.
I always despised my long hair,
pulled back into braids,
and today I am still pulling on my chains
my heart desperately trying to beat its way out of this cage.
But if I can’t be free
I will plaster my prison with poetry
sing syllables like skylines and breathe words like freedom
to take me away from here, to somewhere where I can be me.
No matter what he she is.
Mijito.
Her voice snaps my spine back in line
where I am standing on a broken reflection
burnt flesh free from chains
What do you want, mijito?
What do you want?

In “Mijito,” Dominguez is engaged in disidentification through reterritorializing and critically negotiating a potentially injurious term – “mijito,” which means “my little son.” This is a complicated expression of affection that is also masculine sexed and masculine gendered. The poem captures the imposition of efforts to perform expressions and expectations of normative
gender and sex roles, and the poet reclaims “mijito” by expressing joy and viewing the encounter with the lunchlady as an occasion to affirm the experience of gender identity as fluid and not fixed. The ways the poet has tried to negotiate normative expectations are expressed in such lines as: “I was always mixing my stripes and my spots.” Throughout, the poet acknowledges the power of words to resist, negotiate, and reconfigure imposed identities. At the end of the poem, the lunchlady asks: “What do you want, mijito? What do you want?” The repetition of this question, coupled with “mijito,” indicates urgency and the blurring of boundaries expressed earlier in the poem. And the presence of an adult figure, the lunchlady, that the poet does not find threatening, provides the hope of a model of meaningful listening to youth regarding their rights to self-identification.

Muñoz discusses a space for identity negotiation where the subject who disidentifies uses a “strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within” (11-12). This involves the performance of colliding perspectives, a “collision” that “is precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation. In doing so, a representational contract is broken; the queer and the colored come into perception and the social order receives a jolt” (Muñoz 6). Dominguez transforms the encounter with the lunchlady into a moment for nonnormative understanding and identification and does so from the beginning of the poem. If an audience member were to assume that Dominguez identifies as a woman, for instance, the first few lines – “I confess/when the lunchlady called me mijito” – might momentarily bring pause. These lines are arranged so that audience members with normative assumptions experience “a jolt” (Muñoz 6). In this case, I would argue that the jolt feels more personal and joyful than the kind of performance that Muñoz describes, and so the verb “reterritorializes” may not be apt. The poem reveals a joyful reclamation that also invites
the audience into the ongoing struggle experienced by Dominguez, summed up with the question at the end: “what do you want?”. Vaginal Crème Davis’ performances, on the other hand, are more often dependent on the kind of jolt that causes both an understanding and a sense of confusion for the audience at the ways that identities are not-quite folded. In one body, Davis inhabits the kind of strange encounter that Ahmed describes, and this encounter is then extended and expanded in the presence of the audience. The male and female drag she inhabits is not about disappearing in a specific role. Davis’ performances lead to satire and farce, which lends itself to critical reflexivity.

Similarly, Dominguez’s poem makes it clear that there is not one role, one way to be, one way to identify – that Dominguez is not interested in that kind of normative narrative. While Dominguez’s poem would make that message clear without viewing the performance, if one reviews the YouTube video, one can see that Dominguez’s manner of performing is invitational and communal. Dominguez is confident but not aggressive; there is a sense, as there is with many poems across TYPS, that this experience is one that the poet hopes resonates with youth in the audience, especially those who may be experiencing something similar.

Confessional poetry is a common mode, but the sharing of confessional poetry in a public space, where anyone could wander in, is a rich opportunity for the expression and development of a critical lattice. Across the interviews, as discussed in Chapter 3, TYPS youth articulate the significance of experiencing the performances of their peers and relating to those performances or, in the case of viewing the experience as different, gaining an appreciation for the distinctive experiences of those they know. Interviewees also discuss how important it is to not only hear
about similar experiences from other poets but also to experience the post-performance moments when someone in the crowd approaches the poet and says, “That’s how I feel. Thank you.”

Again, disidentification is “a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant sphere simultaneously” for some (Muñoz 5). Poetry is often about declaration and discovery, glimpses and fragments, the fluid processes of living. The best poetry persuades in ways that are never complete. In poems such as Dominguez’s, a survival strategy is clear. Even as Dominguez reterritorializes or reclaims a normative expression of gendered identity, the conversation shifts for the audience. The question at the end of the poem – “What do you want, mijito? What do you want?” – shifts the conversation and leaves us without an easy answer. The poem reads as a survival strategy in that Dominguez works within a perceived sphere, a dominant paradigm where it is deemed appropriate to perform a bordered, limited gender expression, while, at the same time, the poet operates outside of that sphere, renegotiating the term “mijito” so that it is not injurious but, rather, affectionate and part of Dominguez’s ongoing consciousness.

In addition, this is a coalitional gesture, in that Dominguez indicates tenderness toward the “lunchlady” and, one might interpret, toward the lunchlady’s misinterpretation of how the poet identifies. Dominguez implicates the lunchlady in the reterritorialization of space, even as the lunchlady may not be aware of this interpretation. Since this is a poem, and a glimpse, we cannot know the entire context, but we can understand that the poet emerged from the situation with an insight about the possibilities of identification, even as Dominguez continues to negotiate the hardships enforced by normative gender narratives and performances. The use of disidentification as a rhetorical strategy, then, can be seen as a coalitional gesture that supports a theory of youth coalitional consciousness in performance spaces.
But this interpretation is perhaps too revealing of a “liberal-pluralist mode.” I want to return here, then, to the idea that Vaginal Créme Davis’ whiteface performance of Clarence seeks to transform white supremacy into a joke for an audience that would, in most other spaces, see it as a threat. Muñoz refers to Davis’ performances as “terrorist drag” because she is “performing the nation’s internal terrors around race, gender, and sexuality” (108). TYPS is not a space where this sort of biting social commentary is regularly practiced, nor is irony a dominant social strategy at TYPS. It is a space of fairly direct and invitational negotiation of identification through performance, and “safe space” discourse prevails here. One of the main modes of TYPS poems is through declarations of identity/ies, and this is a different type of confrontation than a performance one might see from Davis. At the same time, this is not to say that TYPS poets are not performing the kind of terror and social ills mark many of their experiences. They often very explicitly confront these ills. An early poem\(^\text{13}\) from TYPS alumni Enrique García illustrates this point:

*Ring, ring, ring.*

Did you hear that?

I think it’s freedom calling.

But of course, only a kid born, raised in the slums of humanity could actually Kodak the feeling or capture this reality.

Sitting in the air currents of probables and if so’s,

living in a culture of *Man, get that pussy,*

and I got enough money to get those

---

\(^{13}\) Poets whose work appears in full were asked for permission to use their real names out of respect for their artistic productions, and each of them preferred this. García has checked this transcription. For Enrique García’s performance, see: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HA2XAzzVSOQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HA2XAzzVSOQ).
Chucks, Jordans, Vans,

Chucks, Jordans, Vans,

chucking all this shit from the NY to the problematical cities of Jordan

enough to fill 20,000…Vans.

Exaggeration?

Nah, look at the African cities deprived,

they’re still alive.

Not because of arising exported goods,

rather swelling gun importing bads.

Now take a look down at the border,

our border, Juarez,

a place baptized in the name of peace, and respect,

now baptized in the blood of murder, drugs, and criminal intent.

We have governors who say they represent the people’s struggle.

I wonder, what struggle,

the struggle of staying up late reading out of a law book,

or the struggle of the evicted notice paper on your door

because you can’t pay the rent for those three children, your loving wife,

the rent of a room that holds a bed that creaks false hope,

and a television that televises the deadly smoke,

your children watching in the lights saying,

“We want liquor, liquor as a fashion,

sex, blunts, drugs, and parties.”
No more food,
food as in faith, religion, cures, education and families.
I have food, but the food of American culture
cheeseburgers fat with politics,
fries greasy with ignorance,
and a large soda filled with lies.
With lies of freedom, freedom
Engulfing my throat.
making me belch ideas of horrible massacres,
racial slurs of African American kids
loving chicken because they were born to eat it,
as if their ancestors were given chicken
right after a hard day of whippings and slappings.
Racial slurs of Latin American kids
loving beans because they were born to eat it,
as if their ancestors were given beans
right after their land and culture were stripped
along with their dreams and streams of young blood.
Liquor cures the left wound by God
who abandoned Brandon when his sister was deported,
by the state, sending her back to
Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, y México.
Liquor makes the wound feel better,
especially when your girlfriend Libby, Liberty,
dumped you for a guy, Uncle Sam’s nephew, Matthew, materialism.
The guy who has rims and Crocs
instead of tims and free curls enslaved in dreadlocks.
And in the prison, the Southside,
I see young youth losing truth
as the crackheads being cracked down
like Egyptian hieroglyphics being translated,
and knocked down.
All this race,
as in race,
by the third ring of Freedom’s call,
it begins, I slowly pick up.
“Where you at?” She says.
“Where you last left me,” I reply.
When I can rest with the slaves and minimum wage workers,
believers, and doubters,
deemed no longer freedom writers but freedom scouters,
I am the United States of America.

In this poem, García narrates a “nation’s internal terrors” (Muñoz 108) around race, ethnicity, and citizenship, addresses the limited narratives for marginalized male youth in the U.S., and links these national issues to global concerns. The poem can be read as a call to action
regarding discrimination based on race/ethnicity as well as the right to be educated with relevant knowledges. García also refers to the organized framework of formal education – the scholars, schools, and teachers, and implies what they can learn from the lived experiences of non-dominant others, insisting that this is what they need for a sense of humanity to prevail. He explicitly calls out racist actions while using the clichéd and normative symbols of American freedom, such as Uncle Sam, to point out the ways in which the notion of freedom is restricted and oversimplified by those who can take it for granted. He defines a political climate, and he demands liberty and justice for all. He also describes the borderlands, labor rights, and class-consciousness, referring to the violence in Juárez and the lies of politicians. He juxtaposes abstract issues with material realities through a concrete narrative of someone affected by these issues who is studying law late at night, unable to pay rent or care for a family.

Dominguez’s “Mijito” performs the “nation’s internal terrors” (Muñoz 108) in a personalized way. Disidentification in TYPS often consists of identifying what has been interpreted as “injurious” and rethinking and/or reclaiming injurious hailing when one cannot identify with the dominant narrative. In “Mijito,” Sammy Dominguez narrates the painful experience of recognizing oneself as genderqueer through being constituted as a stranger by others, but Dominguez co-opts such reactions through the lunchlady’s hailing. The lunchlady does not intend to cause harm to Dominguez, and Dominguez finds a way to comfortably inhabit a genderqueer space through reinscribing the context. Dominguez’s poem still acknowledges this as a moment of constrained agency and a constant struggle. There is also a tenderness to the performance; Dominguez starts out with a strong declaration – the poet’s heart singing at the hailing of “mijito.” The confession declared in the first line allows the poet to place the
lunchlady’s (potentially injurious) hailing in a genderqueer framework that makes this hailing acceptable and positive for Dominguez and the audience.

“Mijito” is a poem I return to again and again when I reflect upon what it is that makes TYPS powerful. It is a poem that urges me to continue to describe that power in ways that don’t simply reinscribe youth empowerment discourse. As a parent, I am provoked to facilitate a space for my toddler that queers her alternatives yet leaves her to imagine narratives I cannot. Alternatives to gendered consumerism, for instance. I think about how I already try to control my infant daughter’s clothing and toys, and how it seems almost futile when the persistence of consumerism will win out, at least for a while, for she will notice the pink and blue aisles, and other children will notice them for her. And then I must relinquish whatever control I imagined myself having while continuing to facilitate an environment that offers opportunities for gender fluidity. I console myself with my childhood memories – my insistence upon never wearing anything uncomfortable, thus bypassing many of the most restrictive of girl-assigned clothing, never wanting to “do” my hair, expressing rage at “girl-chasing” on the playground and thus being seen as not worth the energy of capture, and then busting my girlfriends loose, but then realizing that they actually had wanted to be captured. That persona was maintained in the midst of many girlish girls. This third space, the one described in “Mijito,” seems hopeful, preferable. I hope these imaginative possibilities are part of my daughter’s narrative. I am not the intended audience, but this poem has a powerful reach and offers imaginative possibilities that are rehearsed by Dominguez, already lived by Dominguez and others, listened to, created. In the context of a youth slam space, such imaginative possibilities are crucial, and the disidentificatory strategy of reclaiming a speech act while performing multiple identifications is one way of building an effective youth coalitional consciousness within and outside of TYPS events.
In another poem from 2011, Alexia Vazquez slams about her experiences entering the U.S. school system as an undocumented child, being bullied, and coming to understand how to reclaim spaces that have been built to keep her out:

I didn’t have to run across the border to know that
as much as I love her,
America does not love me back,
and as much as I want to succeed,
*she* won’t let me.
I was planted like many sunflower seeds
in the soils of Obregon, Sonora,
and I began to sprout for eight short years.
My father was a migrant farmworker,
Picking onions and grapes like Cesar Chavez.
My mother left her job to take care of three girls
inquietas eramos todas
fighting for toys, food,
anything our distraction caught.
After five months without my father around,
he came back to tell us he was jobless

---

14 The transcription has been checked with the poet and is used with her permission. It is publicly available at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--
PoEdfeyF6c&feature=plcp&context=C3bea1d5UDOEgsToPDskLbgNLQtAC4fxyvSr1ySJRa
and wasn’t paid for the work he did.
Not even blooming yet,
I was pulled from my roots
and carried up north of the border.
Held in a dirty old pot,
my mother figured an American diploma
would fit her well with her toilet cleaning job
and a sense of loneliness.
I remember I cried the first day of third grade.
Eyes of all colors followed me
as the teacher’s hand signals grew impatient,
all this for telling me where to sit.
I remember being bullied in middle school by two girls –
one was Macy, the other Francine.
They would laugh when they threw their fists towards me
and watch me flinch.
They would call me names
like ‘pancha.’
They were both Native American,
of tribes who dance like the fariseos
on the empty sand roads of Sonora.
I remember I was the most difficult to bully
since I didn’t know English.
I would simply study and keep my grades up.

This was your typical everyday American lifestyle,

and I thank my mom for it,

but now that I’m older,

I dream of becoming one of those people,

you know,

the ones you see talking on their Bluetooth,

meeting at Starbucks,

and brag about success.

Do you know what it feels to be labeled ‘alien?’

Well, do you?

It feels as heavy as the chains hanging from my wrist,

it feels like the weight the slipknot carries every day,

the moment when you’re forced by law to sit next to a sign that says ‘colored,’

and the only way you can be signified separate is by skin,

and there you are,

watching people evolve before you,

as you sit there like a dog begging for a treat.

Because when 65,000 dreams are denied a year,

there is something wrong,

because sitting in that dirty old pot feels like you’re young forever,

and there is no list for me to sign at the bottom

so that I can grow up and stand
as high as palm trees and petals that reach for Apollo’s hands.

I want to know what more than ten bucks an hour feels like,

I want to know what it feels to get paid without labor

and live a life that isn’t frozen.

I want to be superior,

standing high above you with nothing in my way!

You think this will hurt you

so you pay for smaller cages

and try to scare us with your threats.

Majority rules, honey, but minority counts, too.

Your thoughts are gathered of

fear of pests swarming your home.

The world falls apart as your eyes gleam for only profit

and your doubts relieved solely by blaming the same people

of blood still stained in Vietnam, and Korea, and Iraq, and Afghanistan.

What more will it take to stop history replaying again and again?

When will you realize that these pests eat the mold in your forgotten attics?

I speak English just as well as you do, honey,

and I know you’re afraid of change,

but I am not leaving!

Vazquez focuses on themes of immigration and identity in relation to growth and progress, the

notion of the individual, bullying, pejorative phrases, the idea of work without labor, dreams of
capitalist middle class success, and how multiplicity in identification can be seen as an asset. She chronicles moments from her childhood that reflect movement, marginalization, and connect with a plant metaphor that meditates on roots and rootlessness. In this way, her poem connects with the metaphorical concept of the critical lattice, where plants and growth occur in rooted and rootless fashion. In this way, she articulates the critical lattice almost directly. Her tone and delivery are important in that she demonstrates the complicated mixture of emotions that accompanies details associated with both oppression and opportunity. In the latter portion of the poem, she speaks quite clearly to an audience that is the majority. The poem reflects a desire to invert hierarchy– to look for a place in the conversation, recant injustices. She uses asset-driven descriptors to defiantly announce that she is staying.

Vazquez also makes use of disidentification. For instance, she combines experiences with class and privilege with lines such as:

now that I’m older,

I dream of becoming one of those people,

you know,

the ones you see talking on their Bluetooth,

meeting at Starbucks,

and brag[ging] about success.15

The poet makes use of disidentification when the same poem that exhibits a desire to talk on a Bluetooth in Starbucks ends with the declaration: “I speak English just as well as you do, honey, and I know you’re afraid of change, but I am not leaving!” Like Dominguez, like Garcia,

15 The entire poem can be viewed here and is used with the permission of the poet: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PoEdfeyF6c
Vazquez implicates the “nation’s internal terrors” (Muñoz 108) in her final few lines. The poet implies here the capacity to be and become that person in Starbucks but with a critical lens, a reterritorialization of that space of class and privilege that she implies would be renegotiated with her presence. Across many poems at the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam, I see such glimpses of disidentification as strategies to create new and/or more complex narratives. The theory of disidentification can be applied to the textured ways in which youth poets negotiate dominant paradigms by both being/becoming part of these paradigms and inscribing alternatives with/in these dominant paradigms through poetry, performance, and community action.

**Reverso, Refraction, Coalition, and Love**

Critical latticework can also be viewed in relation to another rhetorical strategy, reverso, which Adela C. Licona describes in *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric*. Reverso complicates Muñoz’s discussion of disidentification. Reverso is a strategy that involves a refracting gaze at normative contexts and through which radical activism becomes, not the only desirable end but, rather, a possibility. Refraction, understood in relation to third space, is the activity that is part of an approach to “identities-in-difference” that José Esteban Muñoz, borrowing from Third World, radical, and Chicana feminists describes as “a reconstructed narrative of identity formation that locates the enacting of self at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit “ (6). Licona situates reverso in relation to Chela Sandoval’s notion of differential consciousness in *Methodology of the Oppressed*. The work of differential consciousness is significantly reliant upon the notion of the not-quite-or-yet. Social movement is constant movement, never quite there, always working and folding and circling and failing and succeeding. Muñoz’s theory of disidentification is
influenced by differential consciousness as well, as it “is meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social” (8). Licona’s and Sandoval’s discussions about third space consciousness can help us reflect upon how practices of “love,” as described in Sandoval’s work, help characterize a youth coalitional consciousness emerging in TYPS. To elaborate on the concept of coalition, I will draw from Licona’s work, as well as Karma R. Chávez’s meditations on coalition in *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities*.

Licona describes reverso as a way “to begin explaining how third-space subjects are returning the normative and normalizing gaze on society not in an oppositional way but rather through a refracted gaze and related new ways of looking and seeing” (24). It is especially important to note that Licona links the concept of “reverso” to “the body-in-relation,” where “reverso” consists of “critical reversals of the normative (and normalizing as well as often pathologizing) gaze” (70). Licona applies the concept of reverso to radical zinesters who identify as feminists and queers of color, and whom Licona refers to as “everyday theorists” (70). From its literal translation in English to “reverse,” Licona extends the concept beyond the oppositional; instead, “practices of reverso emerge to return and, importantly, refract the normative gaze, produce critical inquiries into questions of (mental) health, madness, pathologies, morality, and pleasure, and to re-present embodied practices of healing, resistance, and activism” (70). Through refraction, critical inquiry and the facilitation of a third space perspective become possible because refraction not only suggests passage from one entity to another, but it also suggests a border space where identities-in-difference meet, and, in Licona’s work, it is applied to the queering of discourse around social justice issues primarily concerning queer people of
color. One purpose of this refraction is to facilitate “nondocile, noninnocent, re-membered bodies […] emerging as corporeal and coalitional third-space subjects” (Licona 70). A critical lattice is a way to imagine this border space identified by Licona and others.

Licona explains her initial engagement with the term in connection with her research into Wonder Woman comics, which are “entrenched in a lesbian utopian history” (72). In one issue, the villain known as Dr. Poison seeks to put a drug called REVERSO in the water supply, in order to sabotage the U.S. Army by causing commands to be given in reverse. Licona focuses on the intended effects of the drug: to alter and confuse the messages of an authority. This scene from the Wonder Woman comics inspired the development of reverso as a strategy for refraction and coalition.

I find the character of Dr. Poison to be of interest as well because Dr. Poison is a woman known as Princess Maru who, in the role of Dr. Poison, is disguised as a man (“Dr. Poison”). This, also, seems a significant connection to Licona’s concept of reverso, in that not only does Wonder Woman actively work against many gender binaries, but Dr. Poison also emerges as a character whose “messy” identifications are intriguing to consider in relationship to the gender and sexual orientations disrupted and altered in third space by so many of the zinesters Licona describes. Dr. Poison might also be seen in relation to the TYPS performances, such as Dominguez’s “Mijito,” that seek to not only disrupt but spin a more complicated narrative from a genderqueer perspective.

Zines are a fitting genre through which to explore reverso because of their temporary nature, for print zines are created and copied through underground means and with limited distribution, traded among like-minded readers, and seen as tangible acts of protest. The concept of reverso can apply to slam poetry performances as well through the temporary nature of the
performance, the general agreements (in TYPS) among the audience members, and the direct declarations of protest that often characterize slam poetry. Reverso is dependent upon the agreement that our identifications are fluid as we pass through various contexts. This passage “effects a space and time when and where the shape of bodies can be re-imag/in-ed and re/per/formed, and relationships can be re/con/figured” (71-2). The gaze of a dominant paradigm is subverted through reverso, and narratives that do not reflect authority within that paradigm are given credence through reverso (Licona 72).

With all of this in mind, reverso is a useful rhetorical strategy that can be read across many TYPS poems. As an example, I want to focus on excerpts from the following TYPS poem:

I look at my best friends
and wonder why I can’t say I love ‘em.

I wonder why all my emotions gotta stay in my mind,

wonder why I’m ashamed to admit I’ve never had sex or shot a gun.

If the letter “M” on my ID is the first thing to define me,

then why don’t I feel like a man?

I see women talk and write about how they need a man,

and I wonder, what is a man?

My sex, my gender.

Be yourself […]! Be a man!

Don’t be a pussy, pump your fists, it’s nature!

[...]

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16 This poem is excerpted and presented without a public YouTube link since the poet could not be reached for permission or transcription correction.
If man is who I am,
tell me why am I responsible for
85 percent of murder,
90 percent of all assault,
95 percent of domestic violence,
95 percent of child sexual abuse,
99.8 percent of rape.
Perhaps I’m sensational.
Maybe I’m over-representing
the one in six women
who will be raped in their lifetime,
the 1 in 4 men who will beat their partner,
the 1 in 3 women who will experience physical abuse by their spouse,
and the 1 in 3 men who admitted that they would rape if they wouldn’t get caught.
Perhaps I’m unfair.
Being a man ain’t supposed to be about rape.
Being a man is supposed to be about being strong,
pumping your fist, closing your chest,
protecting your woman, your woman,
like a human being but she belongs to you.
Delicate flower, she’s your responsibility,
she’s happy being property,
she needs a man, she needs protection,
as if muscles exist only on the biceps of a male,
and biceps on a male are too much power,
\textit{too much} power.

The defender and the helpless,
the dominant and the submissive.

The basis of our culture?

Rape.

Dominant hypersexuality.

Where do we go from being man to rapist?

Is it nature?

[...]

\textit{why}, in our minds does virginity only pertain to a girl,
\textit{why}, do we find the man to be infinitely clean and un-corruptable,
\textit{why}, has the queer population been completely left out of this equation,
\textit{why}, does a girl wait for a boy to ask her out,
\textit{why}, do we refuse to see that men not wanting to share emotion
and the male being raping a partner are all one and the same \textit{game}!

[...]

If it’s such inescapable nature,
how did the Iroquois create equal rights for men and women a thousand years ago?!

If it’s so mundane in perspective,
why do we use our dominant feelings to justify such ignorance and intolerance,
\textit{why}, do we disparage one to live without,
the wuss and the tomboy,
the faggot and the feminazi.

[…]  
Be a man!  
Why!  
Would I settle!  
To be a man!  
When I can struggle  
to become  
a human being.

The poet makes an interesting rhetorical move near the beginning, delivering a series of lines that might be interpreted as hyperbolic (e.g., men are responsible for “99.8 percent of rape”) to what then might seem a more reasonable representation of the situation of assaults and invasions against women. They refer to the initial lines as possibly “sensational,” which then calls greater attention to the statistics that follow, such as how one in three women will be physically abused by a male spouse. These numbers, followed by lines that depict their frustration with the limited roles available to those who identify as male, lead the poet to this question: how could the poet possibly be a “man” if this is what the poet, and so many others, understand a man to be? The poet paints a dismal view of the options afforded to those who identify as male, where love and affection between males is unacceptable, where machismo is rewarded, and where those who identify as women are also implicated in this narrative through being asked to navigate the

17 I am not in touch with the poet and cannot assume the preferred gender pronoun.
strictures caused by such an imposed, narrow view of masculinity. The poet narrates this as both a societal problem and a personal issue; they narrate the difficulty they have in being called to perform a normative expression of what it means to be a man. The poet also narrates what it is like to grow up with limited choices regarding gender expression, what it means to be viewed and to perceive oneself as property with a limited available range of actions and choices, and what it feels like to be defined by sexual in/capacities. The poet draws a comparison between not being able to express emotions as a man and the act of rape, calling these out as part of “the same game.” And the poet poignantly demonstrates the frustrating existence of gender binaries in the line “why, has the queer population been completely left out of this equation.” The poet confronts the fallacy of assuming that there are “natural” ways of being male or female by integrating other kinds of knowledges, such as the way that the Iroquois viewed gender and sex “a thousand years ago.” The poem’s argument rests in its litanies – its statistics and its repeated words, such as “why.” The poet also clarifies how the embodied person is lost in narrow educational contexts. The poet knows the audience and makes use of enthymematic suggestions, implying the context of sex and sex education in Arizona, which mainly offers abstinence-only programs. Allusions and numbers support the argument that normative masculinity is sanctioned violence.

The characteristics of this poem demonstrate the potential of reverso in slam performance. The ending of the poem does more than invert gender identity or speak back to normativity. The poem refracts the dominant paradigm of what it means to be a man through, for instance, the question: “Why would I settle to be a man?” The term “settle,” especially, calls up reverso; by suggesting fluid gender identifications, we can see how “the reversed gaze from third space is refracting and thus imprecise and even messy, affecting new and unpredictable
assemblages” (Licona 71). To “settle,” in other words, is to practice a heteronormative way of thinking and to give in to the codes of masculinity and manhood that have been so deeply inscribed. To “settle” is to have a clear path. To “struggle to become a human being” involves much more. Here, the poet is offering a space for a new assemblage of human being, something they yearn for and are already practicing through the performance of the poem. Reverso, then, is a useful rhetorical strategy for youth slam poets as they engage with the limitations of normativity and point out the weaknesses of binary formations that have significant impacts on how they have and will choose to identify and act.

In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval argues for a differential consciousness that results in a messy love, a love that is not wholly positive, a love that is difficult, a love that is not-quite-not-yet-nor-will-be. Licona takes up this idea of messiness in her delineation of reverso, where love involves refraction, which indicates scattering and passage. Refraction is a way of imagining the interplay of identities-in-difference for the development of coalitional consciousness in moments of constrained agency.

Chela Sandoval’s decolonizing methodology focuses on “the social imagination” (182.4). This methodology was developed through the tenets of queer theory, U.S. third world feminisms of color, and deconstruction. The methodology of the oppressed is a “resignification process” that is a tactic meant to shift dominant paradigms (182.4). Sandoval draws a careful distinction between tactics and strategies that relates to her depiction of social movements as constantly shifting. Strategies, unlike tactics, have a broader function that Sandoval argues is tied to ideology. Once social movement becomes ideology, it is no longer moving but static. Thus, the breadth of a strategy means that it does not account for smaller movements. Tactics, on the other hand, connote more concrete actions and activities; these smaller activities are like a pebble
thrown in a pond, radiating and fluid in a substance that cannot readily be contained or cupped. Sandoval’s discussion of tactics relates to the everyday, material, micro-practices discussed by feminist, queer, and third space theorists. Tactics are the not-quite, the not-yet. Tactics matter a great deal. Tactics can be represented, for instance, in the decoding and deconstruction of symbols and significations, which is one of the technologies of the methodology of the oppressed. However, the ability to fully define either a tactic or strategy is an indication that it is already becoming ineffective and static.

The collection of TYPS poems in this book is representative of tactics and the potential for differential consciousness, and the critical lattice is a space where tactics as defined by Sandoval might be practiced. Differential consciousness emerges from the methodology of the oppressed and allows for a “poetic movement of consciousness” that “represents a cruising, migrant, improvisational mode of subjectivity” (Sandoval 179). This fluidity in relation to definition and declaration is part of what makes the critical lattice a viable image.

The methodology of the oppressed cannot be pinned down to one definition or one type of context; it is a momentary poetics that is in constant motion and that requires a consciousness that always already deconstructs. This consciousness is deliberate yet inexplicable, meaning that firm strategies for revolution and social transformation are failing strategies – clearly defined strategies become part of the dominant paradigm and, thus, they become embedded ideology that disrupts the effectiveness of the social movement or coalition, and the imagination required with a methodology of the oppressed. As Sandoval insists, “the differential is not easily self-consciously wielded” (181.2). In relation to a critical lattice and to Ahmed’s notion of strange encounters, something always fails to be revealed, and this failure is significant to understanding effectiveness. This logic reminds me of a logic regarding the analysis of artistic creations: we can
see some of the scaffolding that makes a piece effective for its audience, but, if the work of art is somehow “true,” we will never be able to pull apart every strand that makes it so. Of course, I am biased as I am convinced by this logic, not only from my identifications as a creative writer but also from my observations of the moment-to-moment powers of poetry at TYPS, where poetry is often generated and spun in the presence of others. This idea of mystification and magic can also be applied to rhetoric, of course, as rhetoric at its best is imaginative and artistic – we can study Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech over and over, for instance, and still never completely capture the complete picture of what made that speech so powerful that it rests in the pulse of a national consciousness and is embedded in a nation’s educational curriculum. At the same time, we can come to understand how and why it is embedded in this curriculum and how the ways in which it is taught and understood might perpetuate some of the very circumstances the speech was speaking against.

Sandoval’s theory can extend here to this population of youth poets who are often chafing against contexts that restrict their ways of being and doing in the everyday, restrictions that occur because of age, socioeconomic class, and identifications with race, ethnicity, culture, and sexual or gender orientation. Youth (many of color) are drawn to poetic performance as a way of communing about subjects that affect their material lives. Many young people in this community experience a coalitional consciousness that emerges through the space, around which gravitates the performance of slam poetry. The methodology of the oppressed is applicable because this concept relies on the fleeting nature of performance and action, a reliance on movement and intersections, a focus on tactics rather than strategies. One could argue that the poems are tactics and that the event itself is a tactic. The slam is connected to a strategy that aims to create a coalitional consciousness among young people who are interested in the expression of art and
social justice. But the poems themselves do not have specific subject requirements related to that strategy. It is complicated because slam poetry itself is connected with a social justice purpose that is not actually a requirement for slam performance. This is seen through my observations, through a compilation of themes that wax and wane based on what’s going on locally but that also demonstrate a range of acceptable subjects, and the results of the interviews, which show a range wherein most of the interviewees view the poetry as a gateway toward a larger purpose having to do with social justice but some view the poetry as not having the same ties to explicit action or transformation.

In regard to coalition, I rely on Licona’s argument that writing zines is an “act of subversion and revision” that offers the possibility of “transformative recoding, which can produce, promote, and/or reveal diverse community and grassroots literacies” (19). In articulating a theory of coalitional consciousness that emerges from her research into zines, Licona builds upon Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness, Chela Sandoval’s differential consciousness, and Emma Pérez’s decolonial imaginary. Sandoval and Licona paint coalition in difference and love as inextricable complexities. Licona provides a more concrete application of Sandoval’s methodology of the oppressed to the medium of zines and thus offers an example of the way in which radical art is a tangible reflection of the methodology of the oppressed. Licona is interested in the concept of the borderlands as it relates to the creation of third space sites that not only resist static binaries but that are also dynamic spaces of transformation. For Licona, “Third space zines materialize the Sandovalian abyss” (16). This is applicable to the youth slam community in this study as borders can be (re)imagined in regard to legislation, the relationships and interactions among adults and youth in slam and other contexts, and the intersections of identity in relationship to political and social values.
While Licona focuses on zines as “nondominant expressions,” I consider slam to be another kind of space in that it is simultaneously a popular and “nondominant expression” (13). Youth are stereotyped as imitators or as always in a becoming stage rather than as knowledge makers, but TYPS youth express what they know through performances that expose alternative and nondominant experiences and perspectives. While TYPS youth are engaged in nondominant expressions, I want to note that there is a fair amount of the predictable at any given TYPS event, where youth express their concerns in reference to beauty, popularity, anxiety, and depression. These expressions are crucial to the space but do not always seek out the third space perspective I analyze in relation to the TYPS community. It is important to reconfirm, then, that the acknowledgment of third space through interviews and performances is a key part of my analysis, and that this acknowledgment is a key characteristic of TYPS but doesn't seem to be a requirement for becoming part of the community and being an active participant. At the same time, as Licona writes, “Third space consciousness is inherent in the deliberate deployment of a borderlands rhetoric. Third space offers a possibility for many concurrent, interacting, ambiguous, and even contradictory discourses” (14). TYPS poets are often experiencing slippages of identification and positionality that they track in their poetry performances.

There are some parallels between slam and print zines – for instance, zines are (deliberately) not reliant on the idea of a gatekeeping literary world where someone else determines the worth of the writing through access to publication and a readership. Zines are usually created and put out in the world without a medium beyond the zine writer. Slam is engaged in something similar in that it is viewed as open to all. However, the judging component of slam differentiates it from zines. At the moment of the performance, it is judged, and it is over. The zine is also temporary in nature, in that it is not mass-produced, has limited range, and
may not be produced in a medium that is long-lasting or reliably recorded. (Digital zines are another matter.) The importance of these traits to this study is in the movement of these artistic productions. Production and distribution of both slam and zines are part of a rhetorical tactic. In other words, if we understand a tactic as Sandoval does, then the effectiveness of performativity is dependent on the idea of gestures and everyday practices, or change that happens from moment to moment, in the present. What causes some youth to identify with these rhetorical tactics and others not to seems beyond the purview of this study except to state the obvious: we each come to different ways of being and doing at different times in our lives.

Key to the messy, complicated notion of love drawn by Sandoval is the recognition of emotion in relation to coalition. Licona focuses on anger and love and writes “emotion” as “e-motion” “to emphasize the motor that drives an integrated, discursive, and emotional third-space understanding toward coalitional action” (66). Licona situates the role(s) of e-motion in relation to desire and movement. A space such as TYPS seems fitting for a consideration of e-motion and coalitional consciousness because youth poets enter a space that is the same yet different each month. They encounter themselves and others as performers, as poets, as young people with thoughts that have changed, grown, or even become unrecognizable from one month to the next. They establish strong relationships with each other, as evidenced across the interviews and then TYPS is a space where youth can appreciate the opportunities and challenges of being “more than our skin and always circulating in the potential of (intimate) realignments and of becoming an/other in the crossing of our daily borders” (Licona 66). Licona is focused on what happens within the third-space context and writes that “E-motion in zines is often represented as motivated in anger but continued in love” (67). If we follow this continuation and linkage of e-motions in relation to TYPS youth, we can see how so many of the poems are performed and
written in such a way that there is a triggering event or catalyst that sparks anger, and often in the poem this anger is transformed – the youth poet is trying to figure out how to not only channel the anger but do something with it. So, for instance, Alexia Vazquez’s DREAMer poem focuses on anger and follows through with a litany of thanks for those people who are listening and supporting DREAMers and youth. Vazquez’s activities in and around TYPS provide evidence of the ways in which she works through a third-space lens, through meaningful activities to make change, whether that is through supporting and recruiting poets or performing the DREAMer poem ahead of a significant vote to determine the future of Arizona DREAMers. I hesitate to draw a direct line from one activity to the next; instead, these activities could be viewed through the image of the lattice. As Licona writes: “The practices of identifying oneself are often painful and/or exhilarating, and efforts to re-identify oneself are often urgently motivated by e-motion” (68). And it is important to note that the result of third space work “[…] need not necessarily be liberating or transformational. Instead, it is through third-space consciousness that the lived experience of ambiguity can serve its coalitional potential” (Licona 68). The main connections between youth slam and the articulations of consciousness, coalition, and love that I’ve discussed here are in the opportunities for developing, understanding, and sustaining a youth coalitional consciousness. I have found that TYPS is an especially effective space for such a project. And it is a space, as I’ve mentioned elsewhere, where narratives of the oppressed are valued and believed. In “Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology,” Alison M. Jaggar notes that those who have been oppressed are “more likely to incorporate reliable appraisals of situations” and have an “epistemological privilege” that makes their responses more “appropriate than the emotional responses of the dominant class” (162). Jaggar’s work is taken up by Licona in the development of the concept of “e-motion.” As Jaggar writes, “Emotions are neither more
basic than observation, reason, or action in building theory, nor are they secondary to them” (165). TYPS is a space for the practice and value of emotions as significant to youth development.

The concepts of reverso, differential consciousness, and love are crucial in explorations of coalitional consciousness. A key characteristic of coalition and coalitional consciousness is the capacity for people who differ from each other to come together to make change. Adela C. Licona characterizes coalition as a focus on how “boundaries of difference […] can be imagined and consciously pursued” (28). The emphasis on coalition as something that happens among people who have very different experiences and identifications is important to an understanding of how a youth coalitional consciousness happens in TYPS.

The sheer trust and openness emanating from this slam each month is a tangible symptom of the kinds of circumstances that offer the opportunity for coalition. This type of context can result in moments of transformation that are significant for the imagined consciousness exercised by individual poets as they then contribute to the community ethos. This is a unique slam space - not devoid of conflict or intolerance but shaped so that a positive sense of value is placed on each performance whether it is “good” or not.

Coalitions are often understood as having beginnings and endings: a specific goal brings people together, people who may not have otherwise been interested in working together. While valuable, this is a limited view of the sustained work that coalitions can do. Additionally, viewing coalitional work as temporary and related to just one specific goal can lead to the limitations of a feel-good liberal perspective. When differences are erased in the discourse of accomplishing activist work, coalition is something with a beginning and an end, rather than part of a sustainable coalitional consciousness.
In my interviews with TYPS youth who attended the Brave New Voices international poetry festival, I noted the ways in which the experience of interacting with and observing teams with different agendas and emphases greatly influenced the lens with which TYPS youth then turned back on themselves and on the TYPS community. Overall, this experience created a stronger sense of community concerning TYPS and the similarities and differences among its community members. In addition, the perception of certain Brave New Voices performances offered a space for critical inquiry that reinforced the commitment TYPS members have to their community, such as the critique by one TYPS member of the poem performed at the finals that created a tidy analogy between black civil rights and the Stonewall riots. The poem was heavily lauded during its performance at the finals, with its packed audience, but the poet who critiqued it in an interview stated that the analogy flattened out difference in a way that made her uncomfortable. If we view the youth who attended Brave New Voices as leaders identified by the adult facilitators, and remember their (most of them) subsequent continuation as facilitators and supporters in TYPS once they had “aged out,” then we might conclude that there are possibilities for a more complicated sense of coalition in TYPS as it grows and changes.

Coalitions are often understood to be temporary because of the variations among those in the community and because a coalition is often formed with a specific end in mind, thus not requiring sustainment of the group (Chávez 7). My interest here, however, is in the ways in which a coalitional consciousness, as understood by Adela C. Licona, is sustained through the spaces generated through a youth organization devoted to artistic performances and social justice awareness. Karma R. Chávez understands coalition to have “a more flexible theoretical utility” than conventional understandings “in that it can describe an enduring alliance at the same time that it can help explicate a juncture that happens to be brief” (8). A space of performance and
potential activism such as that offered through TYPS is fitting for thinking about how sustained alliances can occur through moments of performance.

Karma R. Chávez’s discussion of queer temporality can help us understand why coalition and a coalitional consciousness are most effectively viewed from a third space perspective. In *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities*, Chávez argues that practicing coalitional consciousness from a third-space perspective can offer ways to avoid seeing only an “inclusionary agenda” as acceptable (2). While inclusionary discourse is effective for some, its foundation as “inclusionary” indicates exclusion and is inherently contradictory. This seems to be part of the issue I’ve been trying to get at concerning protective discourse and youth. Protective discourse has to do with the kind of encounter Sara Ahmed discusses, in which a stranger is already viewed as such and, thus, is familiar. This familiarity encourages the strangeness of exclusion. So, while I would never argue that safety is not of utmost concern in the performance and expression of marginalization (since it is reliant on the sensation of common ground, and the most basic and understandable of arguments against banning ethnic studies, for example, is that ethnic studies provides one of the most basic requirements for understanding and expressing self, that is, seeing self in others), safe space discourse can still mute that expression, as it has certain limitations. Strangeness must always be familiar, and when strangeness is not recognized, it is unacceptable. There seems to be some sort of threshold that takes a performance outside of the easy/ier divisions of strange and familiar, to a space where the response is bafflement, confusion, a jolt (as Muñoz might say) – a place where the unsaid, the unthought, the unrecognized is almost but not quite the un-articulable. Vaginal Créme Davis’ performances use disidentification to inhabit spaces that are meant to take the audience (and, I would surmise, the performer) beyond mere discomfort. She melds dichotomies
in what at first seem ridiculous contradictory roles and inscribes a space where such a melding seems possible but still not wholly describable, where, again, as Ahmed might say, something always fails to be revealed.

One thing that can be dangerous about safe space discourse is its potential connection to what Mia McKenzie in “Things To Stop Being Distracted By When a Black Person is Murdered by Police,” calls “respectability politics,” in which rules of morality and respectability that do not take context into account tend to dictate behavior. For instance, when people protest unfair treatment and are met with disproportionate police violence as a response, as McKenzie discusses in relation to the 2014 Ferguson protests, the protestors, who may engage in property destruction or looting, are dismissed on a moral high ground that doesn’t acknowledge the conditions that got the protestors to a place of anger and rage in the first place. The safe space created by TYPS encourages discussions about the very conditions that connect with youth poets’ expressions; however, it seems important to acknowledge that ideas about safety can easily limit the kind of discourse considered correct and right in a particular space. We have to ask what useful dialogue and interaction consists of, who determines those rules, and how those rules come to seem a natural logic for a particular community. In TYPS, an inclusionary space is a coalitional space that is most effective, it seems, when youth practice third-space tactics such as refraction and disidentification which serve to bring a community with identities-in-difference into conversation and movement.

TYPS is a safe space in the most basic sense of the term, but differences are acknowledged. Unless perspectives are viewed as coming from places of hatred and harm, differences are expected to stay intact. This basic rule of TYPS creates an environment for third-space coalition. Most of the TYPS youth I interviewed describe how they can and cannot know
one another, and how the differences among them make them stronger as a community. As I also have indicated, however, there are a few TYPS members who have felt marginalized by expectations for certain kinds of subjects and performances, while other TYPS members critique poets who do not seem to understand the range of privileges they bring to their performance and language choices.

The frequency with which TYPS poets write from the first person point of view and declare certain facets of identity as a way of persuading others in the community that they are legitimate is important here. TYPS poets negotiate certain understandings of key terms that sustain a safe space. I have mentioned that the term “privilege” reverberates in the community and is under consistent examination and use. As a result of this space, many poets explore how certain privileges should persuade one to take greater care in subject matter and perspective. The personal narrative or declaration is a significant part of inclusionary discourse because narratives are by and large, or typically perceived to be, about relatability. Such relatability is part of a strategy in inclusionary discourse that is meant to cause an audience to think: Yes, I understand how painful this might be and would not want it to happen to me. So, this goes beyond the idea of showing marginalized youth depictions of themselves through such programs as ethnic studies and extends to making the aims and discourse of a group relatable to those who hold the kinds of power and privilege that can result in tangible change that perhaps only they can make. For instance, in the Safe Schools Policy Project\textsuperscript{18} I worked on as a research assistant, we found that one of the strategies used to convince stakeholders to support comprehensive and enumerated anti-bullying legislation was to ask youth who identified in several different ways to tell personal stories about bullying. The breadth of these stories and the appeals to parents’ desire to keep

\textsuperscript{18} This project was designed by principal investigators Stephen T. Russell and Stacey Horn.
children safe flattened out differences and sent the message that it was in the best interest of everyone to promote anti-bullying legislation, thus furthering what Chávez calls an inclusionary agenda. It was an effective strategy in terms of passing legislation to help make, specifically, LGBTQ students safer, but one that furthers a perspective that avoids tangible confrontation with lived differences. An inclusionary strategy that appeals to authority figures, while effective, does not change the status quo or offer alternatives for power structures.

Chávez is focused on the significance of everyday practices that both provide options for nonnormative practices but also provide avenues for enacting and imagining those options. Chávez’s discussion of queer temporality helps us understand why coalition is most effectively instantiated through a third space perspective. Chávez argues for a queer migration politics defined as “activism that seeks to challenge normative, inclusionary perspectives at the intersection of queer rights and justice and immigration rights and justice” (6). Queerness is crucial to this activism and “not only refers to a kind of critique and to non- or anti-normative genders and sexualities, but […] also implies what is possible for making lives livable” (6). Licona’s concept of reverso connects with this perspective since the activity of refraction involves more than reflecting or reacting. Refraction is a more complicated perspective, one that requires the capacity to learn (and keep learning) how our identifications and processing of narratives are contingent upon moments and temporary spaces. Reverso is a lens through which to motivate critical inquiry and activism because it is meant to initiate refraction, which offers alternative, fluid lenses through which to re/imagine ways of being and doing.

The acknowledgment of differences and reflections about how to navigate them for the good of a community is a prevalent theme in the TYPS interviews. TYPS poets express much about the kinds of negotiating that happen when one is faced with contradictory ways of being
and doing. The term “negotiation” can sound empty in academic discourse, but it also can be problematic in that it presumes movement toward some particular end and, in doing so, does not seem to value uncertainty and fluidity. In the case of TYPS, however, the interviews and activities of several members indicate a forward-looking perspective – poets are thinking about how what they do matters to themselves and to their communities, and many of them are thinking about how they can serve newer TYPS poets in doing the same kind of thinking and activism.

In the interviews, TYPS youth consistently point to the relationships they see between their own struggles and others, but they also call attention to how important identificatory differences are to their perspectives on the community and, in turn, on what can be accomplished through a coalition that operates with differences intact. Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s concept of differential belonging is relevant to this idea, as it “compels us to be longing, to desire relations across lines of difference,” which leads to revelatory moments in which divisions between groups of people being oppressed in similar ways can be recognized (Chávez 27). Such an understanding can lead to “coalitional subjectivities whereby people cannot see seemingly disparate struggles as anything other than related” (Chávez 27).

Chávez concludes that queerness “is a coalitional term, a term that always implies an intermeshed understanding of identity, subjectivity, power, and politics located on the dirt and concrete where people live, work, and play. By understanding ‘queer’ as orienting us not toward the ‘not yet’ but rather toward coalition, we find a vital alternative to both inclusionary and utopian politics” (7). Chávez’s point about how queerness can be oriented toward coalition maneuvers readers toward a perspective of coalitional consciousness independent of notions of time and linearity in regard to development. When we think of the “not-yet,” we are still
orienting toward progression in relation to time, and time and progression are often linked with limited perspectives on empowerment. Empowerment is often related to “personal change” rather than social change, as Jessica K. Taft points out in Rebel Girls: Youth Activism and Social Change Across the Americas, and, when the focus is on personal empowerment, discourse is limited to concepts of individual choice and identity rather than an orientation toward working to change systemic inequities (28-9). In her study of female youth activists, Taft offers “an active, engaged, culturally embedded process of the construction of identity narratives, which then guides choices for strategic action, not a simple linear relationship between identity as a fixed essence and strategy as a direct outcome” (8). Such alternatives can be applied to the coalitional consciousness suggested in TYPS, where rhetorical tactics or gestures such as disidentification and reverso help facilitate an emphasis on differences as crucial to the coalitional movement of a group. Coalition extends beyond a specific group or goal, which links with Taft’s assertion that “The relationship between identity and strategy is not determinate” (8). The image of a critical lattice emanates here because a lattice can be temporary and is easily moved, but it can also feel located and locatable.

Creative writing, and, in particular, poetry, connects well with the discussion of coalition as an intersectional space where differences are not broken or muted for the sake of compromise or movement. In an interview with The Paris Review, Matthea Harvey says, “Poems are impractical telephones, prone to mishearing, distortion, but perhaps indirectly a means to the truth” (Burt). The notion of the “impractical telephone” that mishears yet also enlightens is akin to the slam performance of a young person at TYPS, ready to lay down some truth on the mic, ready to spit. Rhetorical analysis is a tool that mishears and distorts like any other, like the ears at TYPS. Poetry is impractical and powerful, its messages misheard or flexed. We mishear youth.
We mishear all texts. It is fashionable and accurate in creative nonfiction circles to talk about how an essay is not looking for one answer but is a contribution to a conversation. Creative nonfiction is crafted thinking that appears on the page. We encourage conversations in composition classes, in scholarship. Words are an impractical telephone. Impractical, perhaps in part, because of craft and rhetorical understanding. The poet spits and then listens to other poets, sees and understands what is rewarded, what is valued, what is not to be questioned. The genre, the subject, the agent constitute and reconstitute. The poetry slam is potentially a queer space, a space of coalition, a space that intervenes in notions of time and progress and, instead, moves, scatters, reconstitutes in other spaces, some of which are linked with specific social justice activities.

In the critical lattice, there are interstices, those gaps through which light and, more abstractly, perspectives and identifications are let through or seen in specific encounters. The critical lattice shaped for and by each individual is not something entirely controlled by this individual; it is not, in other words, always a space of agency, nor is it a space of only imposed subjectivity. Constrained agency, as described by Herndl and Licona, becomes key to understanding a critical lattice since the lattice depends on a knowledge of the momentary opportunities afforded through interactions and encounters, and through the types of agency that may or may not be recognized in those moments of opportunity. Further, a critical lattice – the interplay and movement within the lattice – connects with Licona’s reverso in that refraction indicates the intangible nature of passage and the movement of ideas. In relation to interstices, Chávez describes a “gray politics,” in which “a queer orientation centers on the ‘gray’ areas of politics and identity. Gray politics refuse divide-and-conquer strategies and insist on building
critique and change from the complex interstices among nation-states, groups of people, and issues” (37).

I have discussed some of the limitations of a developmental narrative about youth, limitations that scholars such as Nancy Lesko and Susan Talburt have critiqued and offered alternatives for. A queer perspective can alter the ways in which youth are seen as “becoming”; “becoming” could still be a viable term if refracted, if altered from the traditional, and linear, perspective on youth development and more as a way to think about how queer potentialities are seen in present moments. Youth, and anyone who engages with a queer perspective, are becoming, in that they are always becoming, and not in a linear way that can narrow our perceptions of what it means to be a “normal” and socially acceptable human being at a specific stage. Chávez, Licona, and Sandoval offer compelling ways to subvert that developmental narrative for youth.

A major trait of the youth coalitional consciousness I have observed in TYPS is that it is formed and performed in various rhetorical contexts and at several meeting points and crossings that are not dependent upon one way of viewing and understanding encounters. This understanding of coalitional consciousness is dependent upon the notion of constrained agency especially in relation to the ways that moments of constrained agency offer a practical lens through which to view social transformations. The here-and-now-ness of coalition is dependent on what Chávez calls “daily micro-practices” (6). This emphasis on everyday, material encounters means that coalition goes beyond being “hoped for or imagined. Instead, coalition is a present vision and practice that is oriented toward others and a shared commitment to social and political change” (7). So, saying “hoped for” is not evidence of coalition in youth; coalition is
evidenced in the “daily micropractices” of their lives as articulated through stories, poems, performances, and other activities.

Coalition, for Chávez, is often “a space of convening that points toward coalitional possibility” (8). TYPS performances are part of a public open, commitment and are often about a declaration – a description of a state of things surrounding a specific issue or set of issues, in connection with a declaration about the poet’s feelings on the subject and what should be done, even if the thing to be done is to simply name the issue and publicly disavow it, meaning openly disapprove of and clarify that there is no support for that particular issue or actions related to that issue that support it. A “convening” is a meeting and is meant to imply a short-term situation. Chávez, like Licona, tends toward viewing the moments of short-term connection as, often, sustainable practices of coalition, and Chávez frames this in terms of a “coalitional moment,” which “occurs when political issues coincide or merge in the public sphere in ways that create space to reenvision and potentially reconstruct rhetorical imaginaries” (8). Understood in this way, coalitional moments can be seen in TYPS because of not only what the poet expresses, claims, or declares as an identification of self but also because of what the TYPS space sets out to achieve through the dynamics among poets and audience, through the poet becoming the audience and vice versa, through the ever-changing ways in which the population in the TYPS space shifts. Placing “coalition” and “moment” together involves qualifying the type of moment while pointing back to the “possibility it prompts” (Chávez 9). If viewed in this way, TYPS youth are in a space that facilitates a queer perspective and coalitional moments.

TYPS can be viewed as a public rhetoric through not only the public nature of the monthly slam but also the online, public posting of performances on YouTube. This status as a public entity and rhetoric means that TYPS is subjected to the concept of openness and potential
scrutiny. Although it is a “safe space,” anyone can attend a slam event; anyone could enter the space with harmful intentions or with a critical reaction. Chávez argues, “It is crucial to understand coalitional moments and possibility through public rhetoric because publicity creates not only visibility and accessibility but also accountability” (15). At the same time, public rhetoric is often about the disingenuous act, the surfacing of a neat way of stating what is deemed most palatable in a given moment; publicity is too often about savvy rhetoric in the ugly way that rhetoric can be referred to. Chávez is talking here about activists in particular contexts, but Chávez’s work calls me to take care about the ways I might idealize what it is that the youth poets are up to and to remember that the performance is partial, and poets are ever aware of their audience.

Critical engagement is deepened when political and social identifications are seen as fluid rather than immobile. Chávez draws upon differential consciousness and forwards the notion of a differential vision, which “reflects an impure political orientation, whereby activists seek relationships to others who may take different approaches but who resist hegemonic power systems” (18). There is still an overarching purpose here – the resistance of particular power structures – but different approaches imply different kinds of goals and tactics. This concept of a differential vision is developed from Chela Sandoval’s differential consciousness and Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s notion of differential belonging (Chávez 23).

Carrillo Rowe’s concept of differential belonging extends Sandoval’s differential consciousness to discuss “how social relations can be altered and coalitions can be built in the specific contexts of our various belongings – those we are born or hailed into, those we choose, and those we long for” (Chávez 27). Carrillo Rowe’s work seems to specifically call us to acknowledge and understand the textured nature of multiple contexts of belonging in the
imaginary of differential consciousness. In the imaginary of differential belonging, being tethered to a specific identity is not a prerequisite for political activism; the requirement for engagement rests in the activity of resistance to power. Chávez’s concept of differential vision emerges from differential consciousness and differential belonging. A differential vision is “an impure orientation, committed to a politics of relation with others that may differ in their approach […] but that share a commitment to resisting hegemonic systems of power, even as they might understand that system differently” (47). Key to TYPS is the idea that youth orient themselves differently and with distinctive understandings of their relationships to power and privilege. The practice of differential vision is one that I believe many TYPS youth are engaged in, and within this practice, many of these youth employ a critical lattice in which they adapt to the conditions of the space and reveal and/or queer specific ways of being and doing.

The environment generated and sustained through this particular youth slam context is crucial to a youth coalitional context generating significant political, grassroots change in Arizona. The purpose of coalitional subjectivities is to “provide the agency to resist in ways that are not bound by fixed identities or subjectivities as people learn to politicize their belongings and adopt impure stances that allow for further connection between individuals and groups who are very different” (Chávez 27). Youth in TYPS are, by and large, open to the “impure stances” that can create and sustain coalitional moments, gestures, and possibilities.

Chávez’s use of the term “stance” is useful in connection with youth slam performances, particularly since the declaration of one’s standpoint or beliefs regarding the subject of the poem are often an explicit and expected part of the performance. In Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities, Chávez examines how two groups in Arizona use manifestos to subvert inclusionary discourse(s) and reflect a differential vision. (One of the
groups is Wingspan, which hosts the EON Youth Lounge, another organization the Crossroads Collaborative partnered with.) While manifestos, Chávez asserts, often reinscribe the logic and discourse that they aim to critique as a way to clarify the message to the dominant audience, the group manifestos Chávez analyzed (and had a hand in producing) flex the genre (24-5). Chávez describes a common manifesto structure that is beneficial for the groups she analyzes: a manifesto delineates a brief, particularly focused history of the issue, lists the problems that need to be addressed, and confronts a perceived agent of oppression while encouraging collective action from the audience (26). Chávez concludes, “even as manifestos may seem to be utopian, their very existence is a present political action, a performative gesture that engages and alters the conditions of the public sphere” (26).

If we return to the poem from earlier in this chapter about what it means to be a man, we might see an example of the kind of queering manifesto discussed by Chávez. If seen as a gesture within a larger conversation at TYPS, this poem represents a rhetorical tactic for potential differential vision and, thus, coalition. My interviews with TYPS poets revealed the influence that such poems could have in locating other individuals with similar stories but also in providing texture to ways of being and doing that may not seem, at first, to connect with other youth poets. A manifesto has the potential to create this textured response: it speaks up, out, and against a dominant paradigm while, at the same time, it serves as a coalitional gesture, a concept Chávez introduces in *Queer Migrations*. Slam is a space for declaration and coalitional gesture, and it can, thus, reflect what Chávez refers to as “the rhetoric of radical interactionality, a form of rhetorical confrontation that starts critique from the roots of a problem and then shows how power and oppression interact to produce subjects, institutions, and ideologies to enable and
constrain political response” (18). Youth have unique opportunities to uncover and narrate these problems, I think, particularly when these opportunities are viewed as coalitional moments.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I began to describe a theory of a critical lattice and latticework that characterizes the poetry, performances, and interviews of TYPS youth. I drew from José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentification and Adela C. Licona’s theory of reverso to describe rhetorical strategies that express critical latticework. I then discussed how these rhetorical strategies can be understood in relation to a perspective on coalition that resists fixity and respects the capacity for differences to remain as a significant part of the coalition. I drew primarily from the work of Adela C. Licona, Karma R. Chávez, and Chela Sandoval to explore how coalition might be expressed through TYPS poems and how a coalitional consciousness might be built. These rhetorical strategies and theoretical orientations converse with the activities of critical latticework. I have been focusing on how the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam is indicative of critical latticework. In the next chapter, I will focus on how critical latticework is a transferrable concept and image that can be applied in formal writing classrooms in regard to more effectively addressing elements of identification as a key part of understanding rhetorical situations.
In this chapter, I consider how the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam space can speak to the desire in writing classrooms to engage in meaningful public discourse. The capacity to generate and think critically about public discourse might be greatly enhanced by an understanding about how the fluidity of identification can be practiced in relation to purpose, audience, genre, and ethos. I start with Krista Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening, which offers a lens through which to engage with conflicts that can result from discussions about identification. I then argue that the refractive elements of Adela C. Licona’s theory of reverso speak to some of the theoretically weaker aspects of rhetorical listening. Reverso is one way of imagining the usefulness of critical latticework, which can be a tool for practical and imaginative identification work in classrooms. Identification work can be viewed as part of the skills acquisition that writing programs use to explain how the work in these classes is transferrable to other university classes as well as work beyond the university. The hope is that critical latticework might be useful in many, if not most, writing classrooms. This hope emerges from the research described in this manuscript: the analysis of a space of high-intensity public discourse offers a theoretical and practical model for more productive expressions and analyses of identity/ies in writing classrooms.

I am not suggesting that slam poetry should be imported into the classroom, though it is a mode I have used with students and that other writing teachers have successfully used. It is not realistic, at least for me, to imagine recreating the atmosphere of the slam. TYPS poets want to be there, even if there is an initial incentive of extra credit. These youth are part of a sustained community that stretches beyond the limitations of a quarter or semester system and involves
monetary and psychological payment. Our writing classrooms are usually much more questionable spaces than poetry slams in terms of why students find themselves there and what they expect in relation to what the system they have entered expects. In writing classrooms, we are often struggling with questions about how to generate innovation while being clear about transferrable and practical writing, researching, and critical thinking skills. Students, if they have chosen to attend college, might not have the choice about whether they take a writing class. In shifting from slam poetry to college writing classrooms, I am considering what TYPS can teach writing teachers about creating spaces of critical inquiry, performance, and listening in the classroom. TYPS and similar spaces can also inform the development of coalitional consciousness in those classroom spaces committed to socially conscious writing and activity. In other words, critical latticework is a useful heuristic outside of one particular genre or space.

My research into TYPS, as well as identificatory pedagogies such as rhetorical listening, calls me to consider how meaningful discussions and activities can occur in relation to cultural conflicts in classrooms. The kinds of suggestions I will make are meant to help facilitate writing environments where a coalitional consciousness could emerge in and beyond the classroom. Yet we have to imagine a classroom to write about a classroom. We have to imagine it because no one classroom is the same as the next but what we experience as instructors can become applicable from classroom to classroom. Too often, we either see a specific case study or an every-class, so I want to tell you how I am generalizing about the classroom, how I might be imagining it, and thus help clarify where and how specific suggestions and inquiries may come from my personal experiences. And I want to explain more about why I think that the meditations about youth slam poetry in this manuscript are relevant to the kinds of questions we should be asking in different, more, and better ways across writing classrooms.
I have taught writing – composition, creative writing, and literature – at three public research institutions and one overseas liberal arts college, and I have been teaching writing since 2000. In addition, I have worked at writing centers at a public research institution, at a private overseas liberal arts college, for an online for-profit company, and at a community college. I have been considered a graduate student teacher, a lecturer, a temporary instructor, an hourly-wage worker, a visiting writing consultant, and fulltime faculty. I have developed curriculum, helped usher in rhetoric and composition as a minor at a liberal arts college, and participated in various departmental committees. I have also been a student-writer with a range of experiences concerning feedback. I have absorbed harsh critiques, as well as positive feedback, from well-known writers through my tenure as an MFA student and through my years trying on the mantle of budding scholar, and I have transferred my understanding of these experiences to the ways in which I teach and respond to writing.

I write all this down here because my experiences have been fairly diverse in terms of location and type of teaching, so that, when I say I am imagining a classroom, I hope you know that I am, to the best of my abilities, imagining a classroom that takes into account all of these experiences and types of students. I also want to emphasize that I am not only imagining this space as a teacher and student but also as, first and foremost, a writer. In this space, I imagine white students. I imagine students of color. I imagine queer students. Poor students. Older students. Disabled students. Critical students, ambitious students, suspicious students. I imagine a space where many of the students have varying degrees of mistrust and overextension with the term “privilege,” and a space where few do. And, hearkening to my international experiences, I imagine a space of mostly upper-class Egyptians, with a few students from Palestine, Lebanon, Saudia Arabia, and Doha, with a few scholarship students who are already marginalized. I
imagine frat kids, international students, students with varying relationships to the writing, reading, and speaking of English, students who love to write and hate to write, students who are already bored with this class and will never not be so, students slipping past the controlling grips of writing program placement and assessment into the exact right or wrong class, students who have only ever wanted to be creative writers and artists and do or do not have an interest in how this class might contribute to that aspiration. This is my imagined community, and it is a space where I, ever-practical, can say to myself: Just do your best. You’re not going to oh captain, my captain this thing. Just do what you can do. And for some students, it is the best class they have ever taken. And for some, in the same class, whatever class this may be, it is the absolute worst. I try to think of these things whenever I read composition pedagogy. The slippages that we cannot see, the diversities that mean we cannot overlay one philosophy or practice into the everyday chaos of a class. This is how I have settled on the image and feeling of the critical lattice.

**Critical Latticework in Writing Classrooms**

My purpose is to situate the concepts of critical lattice and coalitional consciousness in the artifice of university curricula and classrooms. I want to examine possibilities for engaging students in writing classrooms in acquiring the kinds of literacy that facilitate an understanding of fluidity, which, as Stacey Waite has pointed out, can enhance their capacities for critical analysis, what Waite refers to as “action literacy.”

I will refer to workshopping in this chapter as just one example of many areas in which writing students can explore identification and imagine critical latticework. Workshopping is a ubiquitous teaching strategy across different types of writing classrooms, though it may be called other things, such as a peer review or a peer critique, and it takes many forms. The blandest form
is probably the peer review that consists of filling out a sheet of questions predetermined by the instructor. The expectations and surveillance of the instructor are crucial in determining the effectiveness of this type of review. Another form of workshop takes place in many creative writing classrooms, where participants share their work with a group that discusses the strengths of the work and offers suggestions. This discussion is verbal and can be accompanied by written critiques. This all sounds quite practical and useful. When I was given the opportunity at a liberal arts college to design a nonfiction class at a liberal arts college, one of the ways I justified its usefulness was through connecting the course outcomes with departmental outcomes regarding critical analysis. I argued that students were producing at least 30 pages of critical work through the submission of workshop critiques, in addition to the creative pieces they were submitting to be workshopped. The written critique, complemented by the verbal discussion of work in workshop, is used as an argument for stretching students’ critical skills and enhancing an understanding of the craft of writing.

One lesson from TYPS is that critical and creative inquiry enfold in the generation and performance of poetry. There is an ongoing debate in creative writing circles about the structure and effectiveness of a conventional workshop. In “Catching One’s Breath: Longevity, Endurance, Interval Training, and the Hypoxic Workshop,” Michael Martone describes the workshop focus on critique as distorted and imbalanced, thus negating individual creativity. Martone and others’ critiques have a lot to do with a metaphorical view of the workshop as a battlefield or combat zone, where the writer is silenced while others criticize for the purposes of taking them down a notch. In contrast, I believe that the conventional workshop is a rich environment for the practice and development of a critical lattice, which requires both creative inquiry and the confrontation of intersections of privilege and oppression. A critical lattice
perspective is an organized way in which to think about generating and sustaining coalitional consciousness as well among writers, beyond camaraderie to critical and urgent questions of justice, invisibility, and marginalization.

Martone feels that the critical focus of workshop emphasizes prescribed writing and reading behaviors that trump individual creativity. While Martone’s argument is important, his focus elevates modernist views that ascribe a mystifying power to the artistic process and to the individual as agent. Martone attributes the ambience of a combat zone to workshop history. The workshop sprang from a postwar era, aligning with the implementation of the GI Bill. Martone claims that veterans returning to school were skilled at “improvisational problem solving” but had larger battle-oriented goals that were more rigidly determined. Thus: “The thinking in combat was mainly tactical and not strategic. A hill to be captured. A story to be written.” Therefore, “the drama of combat was written into the DNA of the form” of creative writing workshop. The problem with this characterization of combat is that it suggests that conflict itself should be avoided in favor of upholding individual agency, or, rather, it suggests that the conflict that permeates workshops is controlled by an impenetrable hegemonic structure. It suggests that this structure cannot be even temporarily disrupted. It cannot be a site of intervention or intersectional discovery.

The combative workshop described by Martone is populated by readers who expect a workshop submission to be completed and who become skilled at discovering rigid solutions to problems of craft. According to Martone, these solutions are prescribed and uninspired, and they emerge from “the imagined hostile environment of the larger world.” Workshop participants imitate this “imagined hostile environment,” persuaded by the logic that they had better toughen up through the critical remarks of their peers so they can deal with what is to come. An emphasis
on product over process connects with Martone’s argument that the university itself is not conducive to making art – it is an institution that still relies on conventional notions of knowledge and empty vessels. It is a place where those moves that do not fit with a shared notion of what is strong work are deemed weak rather than simply different. According to Martone, all of this results in a combative atmosphere. Therefore, the institutionalized logics of the university, such as those described by Martone, shape our ideas of the transactions that occur in workshop. Even the term “transaction” as I use it here rather sucks the joy of creation out of writing.

I believe Martone. I get it. I’ve come out of that culture, where I convinced myself that I had to be tough, unmoved by the harshest of comments, and ready to work on becoming a better writer, and, if I couldn’t hack it, well, I must not be a real and true artist anyway. So, I get that Martone is inviting readers to imagine a new kind of space for creation and critique, but this invitation relies too much on separating the critical and the creative. The sustainment of this binary in creative writing debate is one way to perpetuate attempts to keep political and social discussions about identification out of writing classrooms, to claim that such discussions remove the workshop from its main task, which is to focus on the piece itself, as if the writer and the piece could be separated from the everyday that led to the workshop moment. Martone is not directly making this argument, but his argument is in danger of perpetuating this absence of conflict regarding the material realities writers bring to the space, something Junot Díaz is taking up in “MFA VS. POC.”

More in tune with issues of agency and social construction in writing classrooms is Rosalie Morales Kearns’ argument in College Composition and Communication. Though Kearns’ argument is ultimately problematic, in “Voice of Authority: Theorizing Creative Writing Pedagogy,” Kearns confronts issues of power and privilege in the “normative workshop,” which
is characterized by the following: the silence of the writer (what Kearns and Martone both call the “gag rule,” conjuring a powerless figure whose lips are forcibly shut), an emphasis on perceived weaknesses in the text, and a lack of evidence in workshop discussion for what constitutes these weaknesses. Kearns claims that three elements will help repair the current state of the normative workshop: studying published pieces, assigning writing exercises, and providing a forum for a conversation about “more polished student work” (802).

While Kearns’ description of the problem is worthwhile, the proposed solution does not contribute much to extant workshop curricula. Kearns’ three proposed elements are presented as if they do not exist in workshops, yet there is little examination of contemporary workshop practices, recent scholarship about workshop practices, or workshop artifacts, which Stephanie Vanderslice points out in a response in CCC (759-60). Further, though Kearns’ work is a recent publication, her suggestions are not informed by evidence beyond her personal experience in workshop and external anecdotes. This is not to say that personal experience does not constitute evidence. Kearns uses the negative experiences she has had in workshop to express the embodied experience of suffering, which bell hooks writes is “a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience. This complexity of voice can rarely be voiced and named from a distance” (91). This expression of embodiment is crucial to some of the critical thinking implied in the refractive labor of reverso theorized by Adela C. Licona. Kearns’ embodied experience could be a crucial part of this argument, but the way it is expressed does seem to invalidate some of her criticisms.

Perhaps the dynamics of workshop could be more adequately understood if personal experiences are put into conversation with specific workshop artifacts and activities, which are, again, noticeably lacking from the overall debate as well as the critiques of Kearns and Martone.
If workshop practices are to be critiqued and transformed, the numerous activities that take place in a given workshop should be examined as well as, where possible, the influence these activities may have on the development and attitudes of a diverse population of writers. These activities often expose the contradictory dynamics out of which writing emerges.

Further, investigating dissonance and conflict in the workshop may reveal the potential for effective writing development and serve to emphasize that dissonance and cultural conflict cannot be scrubbed out of a conversation about writing. My research questions about TYPS youth have helped me think about the ways in which understanding the writers who come into our classrooms is not simply a matter of a diagnostic essay or a literacy narrative assignment or a hearty debate about a social issue. The concept of the critical lattice offers some depth to the moments of writing and critical inquiry that seem antithetical to pre-assessment testing and the like. The application of critical latticework may offer an expansion in how dissonance and conflict can be meaningfully folded into writing classroom pedagogy.

As I’ve noted throughout this manuscript, the idea of protection concerning one’s identity and identifications is an effective rhetorical device, though it is easy to say and not as easy to sustain. My research into TYPS has shown how effective an artistic and performative space can be which is perceived by most participants as (mostly) protected from harmful behavior, inspiring, and straightforward about the connections between social problems, the everyday, and the power of creative language and expressions. This space is dependent on context, of course, and is not wholly translatable to a writing classroom. However, scholarship that focuses on cultural conflicts, power and privilege, and coalition, and that seems applicable to TYPS, is also applicable to writing classrooms. I think that the youth slam space I have examined in this manuscript delves without hesitation into the question of writing, public arguments, and social
transformation. It is a space that draws from pedagogical scholarship while avoiding many of the arbitrary squabbles of academia.

In order to move toward the practice of a critical lattice perspective in writing classrooms, I return here to exploring a theory of cultural conflict and inquiry that has emerged from rhetoric and composition studies: Krista Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening. Ratcliffe offers a framework for listening and critically engaging conflict and conflicting experiences resulting from the intersections of power and privilege.

When placed in conversation with the work of Adela C. Licona and others, rhetorical listening is a good starting point for practicing the potential for informed and critical discussions of power and privilege. Licona’s work on reverso, as well as my discussion of critical latticework, complicates rhetorical listening from a queer perspective which would view the critical and creative as inevitably and complexly intertwined, and which would inevitably engage narratives and creative work more frequently in relation to the identifications of audience and writer.

Creating an environment in which writers in any writing classroom are asked to contend with the nuances of the rhetorical situation through lenses of power and privilege makes the writing classroom a more difficult (and interesting) space to navigate while serving as a reminder to participants of the political, personal, and social functions of writing. Scrubbing out (seemingly) the political and/or the personal is also a deeply personal and political act, even when it doesn’t seem so to the writer or the reader. An ideal writing space would encourage participants to talk about and practice these issues in a way that enhances the creative process rather than potentially burdening it, as some writers might assume. I have never seen a space like that.
Rhetorical Listening in the Writing Classroom

Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening offers ways of engaging with dissonance that connect with many of the critical activities in writing classrooms. Rhetorical listening is dependent on what Ratcliffe terms “non-identification,” which she arrives at through an examination of theories of identification represented by Burke (a modern theory), Fuss (a postmodern theory), and Trinh (a postcolonial theory). Burke’s modern theory of identification relies on finding common ground, which only allows for differences to emerge that can be bridged (Ratcliffe 60). Fuss’ postmodern theory of identification focuses on differences rather than common ground, which Ratcliffe sees as problematic in relation to “their figuration as metaphor” (67), since metaphor focuses on commonalities. While supporting Fuss’ theory of identification, Ratcliffe develops it by emphasizing metonymy, which reflects commonalities and differences. Ratcliffe then draws from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s discussion of interdependency in “Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference,” where the notion of being “other” creates a space that cannot be claimed by anyone, where all are then empowered and neither included or excluded (73). Ratcliffe’s use of interdependency leads to non-identification, which is described as a place where rhetorical listening can be practiced to “help people consciously navigate troubled identifications and disidentifications” (74). It is important to note here that Ratcliffe is conversing with Fuss’ notion of disidentification, which is distinctive from José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentification as detailed in the previous chapter. For Fuss, disidentification has to do with “an identification that has already been made and denied in the unconscious” (7).

When identification theories focus on metaphor, a vision of conjoined circles that demonstrate commonalities is often used. This calls to mind the concentric circles of Ede and
Lunsford, and the ways in which Theresa Enos intervenes in an understanding of those circles through the braid or helix. In discussing a generative ethos that emerges from the helix, Enos is drawing from Jim Corder. In “Jim Corder’s Reflective Ethos as Alternative to Traditional Argument, or Style’s Revivification of the Writer-Reader Relationship,” Rosanne Carlo describes Corder’s concept of generative ethos in relation to how it can “build time and understanding into discourse as a way to reach out and embrace audiences” (98). In the space of a poetry slam, “time” – in terms of slowing down time – in terms of a modernist conception wherein reflection, solitude, and solace are material possibilities and are embarked upon in specific, often culturally sanctioned, “quiet” ways – does not seem applicable. If anything, time is about the timing of the poem, the time limits of the poem within the competition. And the genesis of slam poetry was as a response to the rather quiet, ivory tower notions of poetry. Yet we could also think about time in TYPS in terms of the generative ethos across slams and slam-related events, an ethos that is articulated by TYPS members and that may be one more strand in theorizing a youth coalitional consciousness in this space. This way of thinking calls up the ways in which Nancy Lesko has discussed time and youth development.

Carlo argues for scholars “to value the presence of persons in making arguments” (98). She uses Corder’s concept of enfolding, calling it a “performative act” (98). Carlo and Corder’s discussions of “enfolding” are important here in relation to a community ethos, but in this case it is not entirely dependent on the writing but the performative transactions that take place before, in, around, and after the writing. This is important because it takes Corder’s emphasis on reader and adds to it – an ethos of coalitional consciousness among youth. The development of this ethos – and the various ways in which it might be performed – can help us understand how argument is a key component of youth coalitional consciousness that depends on a keen
interaction with the various transactions taking place in and around the written and performed
texts. I suppose we could call this a multimodal ethos or some other fancy term, but perhaps it is,
simply, ethos, if we queer ethos to acknowledge that it is in constant motion. Carlo’s argument is
about how stylistic analysis is a pertinent method of understanding the enfolding nature of
generative ethos, which is not my emphasis. But Corder, Carlo, and Aristotle believe deeply in
the power of ethos over subject and “content” (101). In the case of slam poetry, we should be
called to understand how lyric, public and civic debate, and performance are threaded together in
an opportunity to enact public debate in an inventive, curious, inquisitive, creative way that
reminds us of the refreshing notion of joy in and through our words even as creative writing, with
that (nearly-dead-now) concept of craft, that beaten-into-the-ground word, has its own problems
sustaining joy. But there is such joy in this community of young people. Joy in being able to
express and perform even pain. In one of the TYPS interviews, a poet said that the slam was the
only place where he could just say what he wanted to say, this very public space that also feels
private. That is the thing about being a writer, perhaps the thing that drew me to it as well – in
nonfiction you might reveal the most private of things about yourself, things you wouldn’t say to
your friends or family, but things you would write and sometimes perform in a reading. And
when you do that, when you do that in nonfiction, or poetry, or sometimes even fiction, it is as if
you are both you and not you. And so maybe a discussion of authenticity is moot except if we’re
talking about who has a “right” to say and perform what. But ultimately that discussion about a
“right” has to do with the quality and credibility of the writing, which then boils down to ethos,
which Aristotle says is the ultimate persuasion, and who could disbelieve that? If you live in the
world, you could understand this. After all, we can label all of these slam poems as about
“identity,” or we can enhance that description by thinking about how ethos is declared and
performed in these poems, how they are spaces to experiment (but I don’t want to assume it’s experimentation, as in, Oh, little Johnny, he’s just trying stuff out before he grows up, which is not the kind of discourse I want to perpetuate) and to declare and, ultimately, to argue in a space that promotes a comfort in expression. While I tend toward being critical of too much discourse encouraging protectiveness, I also know of no other way of identifying a space in which comfort is so closely tied to the feeling that what you say and do is acceptable and respected in this context where you have chosen to say or do it. That pedagogy is an undercurrent for TYPS and Spoken Futures programs. It is something Linda Flower works through concerning intercultural inquiry, and something more abstract in Krista Ratcliffe’s work.

Performance in the case of youth slam is about a representation for the audience, and you can see how this awareness of audience is immediately there for some poets and unfolds slowly for others. That first time you venture up to the mic, not having memorized your piece, paper visibly shaking in your hands, you cannot quite see how it all works. How awareness of audience is everything. Carlo talks about how “unfolding,” or revealing a part of oneself through “the imperfect medium of language,” leads to enfolding (102). For Carlo, “Enfolding a reader requires that the writer take a risk by unfolding his values and narrative to others and a willingness to begin a dialogue, even if the writer experiences resistance from her audience. It is part of a recognition that we are standing in a narrative, in a rhetoric, and that we are trying to speak out across an ideological divide to another” (103). This resonates in relation to work such as Ratcliffe’s, where we are asked to cultivate an openness and willingness to differences. Sometimes when I read this kind of thing I think about representations of Jesus, standing with upturned palms, forgiving and understanding and being all open. But is this a radical openness? A problem in Ratcliffe’s work is in the concept of “standing under,” which makes a lot of sense
but has an unfortunate name. “Standing under” conjures a *theoretical inversion rather than a theoretical refraction*.

In the work of Chávez and Licona, such openness is not enough. Can this idealism be recognized and/or transformed in a youth context, in a context that is meant to inscribe coalition, voice, and action? Is it worthwhile to chafe against these notions, to get all meta- about the problems of empowerment discourse, when such discourse, as evidenced through my interviews, seems to be suiting the youth here just fine, seems to be taking them to new and useful and interesting places? There is a magic, yes, to the TYPS space. There is a love. Carlo argues that one of Corder’s main questions is: “What if we can't find love for one another? What if all we have is really a self-love, a love that we think we feel for another but is merely a projection of ourselves onto the other?” (105).

I love this question because it is bare, because it can be helpful in dealing with all the burdens and talents we bring to writing classrooms. In all of these identification theories is a desire to perceive and perform as much of our fluid identifications as we can. To embody and perform fluidity, Ratcliffe suggests, instead of concentric circles, an “energy field image,” which “posits identifications as places where discourses, acting as energy fields, pass by and through a person’s body as well as by and through the bodies of others” (69). The image acknowledges the significance of embodied experiences and connects with Herndl and Licona’s discussion about constrained agency, in which agency is not something that can be held or contained by one entity and, thus, it is constrained from moment to moment and through the dynamics of interactions within specific contexts and bodies, with specific historical traumas that are felt and present. Ratcliffe links Trinh’s postcolonial theory of interdependency with the kind of identification she sees resulting from the energy field image. Again, Trinh’s theory focuses on discovering spaces
where no one is empowered more than anyone else. Rather than the term “interdependency” used by Trinh, Ratcliffe uses “non-identification,” where discourses are “associated but not overlapping” and where “metaphor and metonymy coexist” (72-3). Ratcliffe’s imagining of the ways that dissonant discourses interact and emerge could fold into the activity system of workshop pedagogy.

For Ratcliffe, dissonant discourse is in motion. Dissonant discourse need not be approached in terms of finding similarities (a metaphorical approach often looked for in instances of consensus and collaboration). Rather, while one can imagine discourses or logics in the same space, in Ratcliffe’s imagining, “standing under” these discourses allows one to hear that they exist simultaneously; however, this does not mean that one draws connections. In that sense, one can listen to different discourses with a metonymic approach, meaning that connections need not be drawn for one to try to simultaneously listen to these discourses and attempt to discern the cultural logics that underpin each form of discourse (Ratcliffe 98-9). When one shifts from a metaphorical desire that seeks identification and allows for a metonymical desire that values dissonance, one can shift the possibilities for conversation in the writing classroom. Such a shift requires the capacity to value identification and the lack thereof with a similar type of thoroughness. The shift from metaphor to metonymy in analysis then aids with the defining (as much as possible) and acknowledging of cultural logics. Rhetorical listening strategies offer the possibility of holding contradictory ideas in mind simultaneously, a focus that disrupts the critical/creative binary.

Therefore, rhetorical listening can be applied to the kinds of identifications experienced by writers. First, writers can learn to listen with intent rather than for intent, as Ratcliffe suggests (28). When writers listen for intent, they look for the traits of writing and genre that confirm their
assumptions as writers, readers, and critics. When listening with intent, writers might learn to hear others’ understandings of the purposes and effects of a piece of writing. We understand “self and other” when we consider how multiple perspectives have been arrived at.

Ratcliffe’s energy field image is also somewhat related to Licona’s discussion of reverso as a refractive activity, where meaning and activity are in movement. One major difference, however, seems to be that Licona’s work focuses on activism and labor within the medium of transferral; in other words, it is not about meaning or communication passing from one entity to the next but, rather, the work that is done in the border or third space, and this work is not necessarily about accomplishing a major goal or transformation, though it might be. The notion of a critical lattice could be overlaid here as one way of understanding borders and how certain ways of being and doing pass through in specific rhetorical moments while others remain in partial or full hiding, along the cracks and crevices of the lattice design. It is here, in these cracks and crevices, in this border, where the work of third space activism (and exploration) can thrive.

Ratcliffe’s theory seems more aligned with a practice of inversion, however, while Licona’s theory of refraction works beyond binaries and counternarratives. Refraction does not consist of “simple inversion,” as the idea of standing under indicates; instead, reverso is a “reversed and refracting critical gaze” (71). This use of refraction seems very much linked to an energy field image, but Licona’s focus on the work done within a third space, instead of simply through this space, might be more fitting for the work that can be done in the criticism facilitated through writing classroom activities.

In *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* Paul Dawson articulates the possibility of a workshop space where reader, writer, and text merge and diverge, which also calls to mind Ratcliffe’s energy field image:
Within the workshop the literary work can be conceptualised [Brit. sp] as a zone of social contestation not by dismantling the desire to craft an individual work of art, or by policing the literary representation of identity in the service of social justice, but by exploring how the compositional process is a mode of social intervention at the level of discourse. (214)

Practicing Dawson’s theory would involve an engagement in a thorough and ongoing investigation of the multiple textual activities that occur in writing classrooms and a consideration of the motion of these textual transactions in a way that embraces the fluidity of logics in a given space. Dawson’s articulation emphasizes the significance of trying to understand how and why compositions emerge while still encouraging the desire to make art. Investigating, questioning, explaining, and becoming mystified by writing and writing processes can be “social intervention” (Dawson 214), and a context in which these boundaries merge and separate and cause conflict is a space where the creative/composition process is as significant as the critical process, where creativity is critical and vice versa. Conceptualizing this movement seems crucial for the understanding of rhetorical contexts and compositions, and I offer critical latticework as one way to do that.

In “Dialectic/Rhetoric/Writing,” Kathleen E. Welch proposes a workshop model for the composition classroom that revises the notion of dialectic as movement rather than stasis and points to its dialogic qualities (133-43). If dialectic is movement, she argues, the search for “truth” is in constant motion, much like the multiple activities of writing classrooms: the verbal discussion, the side discussions, debriefing from feedback, reflection, written critiques, and, of course, the discussed texts. This is a kind of “truth” that potentially acknowledges the multiple
narratives and knowledges writers bring. This movement is a way of hearing or listening beyond the evaluated text.

Those who are asked to provide feedback often simultaneously identify with being a reader, a critic, and a writer, and this is a form of fluidity that can be tapped in relation to critical latticework. Peer reviewers have the opportunity to question their own cultural logics regarding what creates a “good” or “effective” piece of writing, which provides an opportunity for dialogue about shared and dissonant knowledges. The term “cultural logics” is used here to reflect not only a literary logic but also a personal logic influenced by factors and identifications beyond the narrow perspective in which literary publications can be viewed. Ratcliffe uses the term “cultural logic” in this way: “If a claim is an assertion of a person’s thinking, then a cultural logic is a belief system or shared way of reasoning within which a claim may function” (33). Muñoz also uses the term “cultural logic” in relation to the way that disidentificatory performances might re-imagine these logics. Discerning a cultural logic, then, is a way of interpreting how and why certain claims are believed to be valid.

Normativity is implied in any discourse setting in which shared knowledge is a given. In addition, shared knowledge implies agency for those who do not question this knowledge or how it has been gathered – in other words, those whose acceptance of and integration into the setting are laden with power and privilege. The predominant narrative(s) about what makes a piece of writing successful can be viewed as an imposition whose roots in power and privilege can become masked to writers if they insist on certain overarching principles of craft as somehow inherent to process and composition. Considering these implications and unmasking structural inequities for the purpose of transformation is one of the possibilities offered by rhetorical listening but more aptly imagined in the work of Chávez, Licona, and Sandoval.
Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as a “stance of openness,” “a trope for interpretive invention and more particularly as a code of cross-cultural conduct” (17). Rhetorical listening attempts to respond to some of the more futile aspects of agonistic debate that shut down conversations, understanding, and hearing. While not applicable in every context, Ratcliffe’s theory of laying stories, moments, and responses alongside each other as a way of engaging dissonant discourses is a method of thinking about the inevitable conflicts of dialogue. Therefore, listening becomes rhetorical when we can acknowledge how communication is implicated in sociocultural contexts. In a workshop, for instance, multiple opinions about whether a piece of writing is effective come into contact with learned notions of craft and taste, as well as with assumptions about the purpose and place of certain subjects and genres.

Ratcliffe describes the following “moves” as characteristic of rhetorical listening:

1. promoting an understanding of self and other (“understanding means listening to discourses not for intent but with intent - with the intent to understand not just the claims but the rhetorical negotiations of understanding as well” 28)
2. proceeding within an accountability logic (Here, Ratcliffe is confronting the kneejerk response of those with privilege – to express sorrow or guilt rather than to accept responsibility 31).
3. locating identification across commonalities and differences (wherein participants “consciously locate our identifications in places of commonalities and differences” 32). The capacity to do so reflects what Ratcliffe calls “non-identification.”
4. analyzing claims as well as the cultural logics within which these claims function (while disagreement may still arise, listeners can acknowledge that others may not be “simply wrong but rather functioning from within a different logic” 33 ). (26)
Rhetorical listening is an attempt to understand cultural logics from an accounting of one’s own subject position(s). Rhetorical listening provides an opportunity for a critical understanding of dialogue that is not devoted entirely to critique and production but that helps characterize the space as one in which the participants are simultaneously writers-readers-critics who can develop an awareness of cultural logics, thus engaging them in analyzing the claims that permeate this space. Applying this theory can emphasize that such identifications as writer, reader, and critic are not really separable, and that the dissonance of these identities is one that is transferable to critical discussion about the purposes and practices of writing, as well as the normative behaviors that often accompany literacy practices. Practicing rhetorical listening, reverso, and critical latticework can help make structural inequities visible while maintaining a focus on the perceived needs and development of the writer.

This approach might also encourage discussions about why readers might feel as if they are not the audience for a particular text. Kearns wants to address the cultural distinctions that may accompany texts and complicate critical evaluations. Kearns does not provide much insight into how to address these issues beyond stating that the writer should be able to defend their writing. Yet these are valid concerns that might be addressed through theories meant to encourage listening and dialogue, as well as applications of critical latticework. Rhetorical listening is meant to address and involve distinctive logics, but its entry points seem more open to those who are privileged and questioning that privilege than those who need to be heard.

However, rhetorical listening can serve writing classrooms in multiple ways. It is expected that perspectives and voices and attitudes will be in tension with one another, but how we attend to that expectation is crucial. Certain tensions may be acknowledged while others are rendered invisible. Flower’s perspective on intercultural inquiry is one lens through which to
understand how a shared goal or collaborative discourse can be the result of conflicting, sometimes painful, articulations from various stakeholders who are each asked to undergo the process of rivaling, or rival hypothesis thinking, which “asks writers not only to construct strong rival hypotheses about hard questions but also to rival their own ideas” (49). Ratcliffe articulates the opportunity for such questions as follows: “[…] if we associate discursive agency with tropes, authorial and readerly agencies with the body, and sociopolitical agency with culture, what emerges is not a battle for which site possesses agency but rather a question of how the agencies of different sites converge to effect moments of rhetorical usage” (121).

Ratcliffe’s articulation of energy-field imagery is helpful: “Energy field imagery posits identifications as places where discourses, acting as energy fields, pass by and through a person’s body as well as by and through the bodies of others” (69). In this way, while identifications are constantly being made, a person is also “particularized as a subject” (69). Legitimate takes on writing can come into conflict without being resolved for the writer: resolution or consensus is not the point of critique. Therefore, rhetorical listening is a helpful frame for when the writer is taking in critiques.

All of this is very liberal and fine, but it only slightly punctures the understandings needed in writing classrooms in order to address how to listen, speak, and value experiences and writing that have been historically, perpetually marginalized. Writers must be challenged to ask what is missing, absent, covered up – in stories, critiques, and discussion. Teachers of writing must better facilitate spaces that bring together the underlying power and privileges of written compositions with the assumptions underlying what it means to imagine, innovate, and capture the imagination of an audience.
Writing classrooms can be fruitful spaces for exploring the messiness of fluidity. A fluid space may be one where writers are left with more questions than answers. This is why the finished, polished piece should be treated with care in relation to evaluating students. While Rosalie Morales Kearns’ article about identity in workshop is not well supported, Kearns’ point is still significant in that it challenges us about how to integrate identification practices into the classroom as a key part of understanding ethos, audience, genre, and other aspects of discourse. Maybe writing classrooms need to become more like battlefields, rather than less so. What I mean is that the notion of a battle can be reconfigured so that there is a place for anger and love in contexts of writing and critique. I’m thinking of Licona’s discussion of “e-motion,” which is situated in relation to desire and movement as a way of imagining “an integrated, discursive, and emotional third-space understanding” (66).

In the performative space of TYPS, there is an urgency that is not only inspired by engagement with the material effects of political decisions but also the unparalleled urge to assert: I am. Often, composition courses seek to stimulate public engagement through learning about and performing public arguments. This move toward civic engagement seems eminently more useful than teaching writing through modes such as literary analysis or as individualistic expression, but to what extent a public argument curriculum stimulates sustainable public engagement remains unclear.

What matters for rhetoric and composition scholars, and, more broadly, writing instructors, is how this message of moral or civic responsibility and engagement can be imagined to be more meaningful in terms of the goals of critical inquiry and producing more and better writers. If we look into the issues of cultural conflict, critical race, intersections, and privilege, but with a mind to analyze these things with a viable image such as a critical lattice rather than
with the goal of vague liberal enlightenment, we might do a better job in writing classrooms. I’m coming from a practical perspective here, from a teacher who has gotten both glowing and tragic reviews from her students, from a teacher who has sometimes hated and other times loved the job of teaching writing. Something has to change. Critical approaches that have been forwarded in composition studies through such concepts as rhetorical listening and intercultural inquiry are great, but I want to add to this discussion by providing more of a viable or visible image in relation to the significance of facilitating discussions of difference across many forms and senses. Reverso, the idea of refraction, is indescribably helpful in shifting the ways that we can perceive fluid identifications and in clarifying “a space where differences can stay intact” (Licona 28). And perhaps a scaffolding such as a critical lattice could be a viable companion to this work of third space activism and activity.

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It has been a few years since my final set of interviews with TYPS poets. The political and social landscape is as fraught as ever, and these youth continue to be, by and large, invested in the power of voice and action in their communities. TYPS youth attend events resisting injustices, such as a recent rally for supporting in-state tuition for DREAMers at the University of Arizona. Others have published chapbooks, performed at slam events in the community and throughout the state of Arizona, and been part of the volunteer corps at Brave New Voices festivals. As for the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam, it’s bigger than ever, and it’s almost entirely run by youth participants and alumni. Many TYPS poets are poised to be “agent[s] of collectively imagined radical social change” (Taft 179), and so much of what I observed in my research demonstrates
the ways in which TYPS has become a space for youth to perform identity/ies and invent methods for social transformation. In encouraging and thinking critically about the multifaceted possibilities for identification, TYPS youth have developed a coalitional consciousness that has led to not only concrete action but also the capacity to imagine and live and move among non-binary spaces. And this capacity can be understood through the image of critical latticework.

Throughout this manuscript, I have drawn from research about the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam and attempted to situate it in regard to a resonating focus in rhetoric and composition on public, engaged discourse. TYPS is an event that encourages a multiply-situated coalitional consciousness. I describe critical latticework as emerging from this study of TYPS and as applicable to the work of identification in writing classrooms. Critical latticework is an iteration and elaboration of the terministic screen, intersectionality, and the rhizome. It is also dependent on rhetorical strategies that queer our notions of performance, identity, and activism. In particular, Adela C. Licona’s discussion of reverso and José Esteban Muñoz’s discussion of disidentification offer ways to perceive the kinds of activities that are crucial to an understanding of the social justice aims of intersectionality. I came to these theories through observing and interviewing TYPS poets, as well as through my own ways of grappling with writing curricula. In this final chapter, I wanted to draw from Krista Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening to provide a basis from which to develop everyday practices in writing classrooms that support an understanding of a critical lattice and could facilitate more meaningful discussions about cultural differences, power, and privilege. The work here is about the question of how we engage with complexity and how we might better facilitate generative, viable spaces for conflict and contradiction. And this question is crucial for writing classrooms. Identification work is very much about social justice, but it is also about developing a critical perspective and awareness
about ethos, audience, genre, and any number of the rhetorical elements of writing. This is why critical latticework could be an engaging image and heuristic across many writing classes.

I began this book lamenting my poor attitude, a honed and distant behavior learned from too many creative writing workshops, something I wore as a mantle the first time I attended the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam. If you recall, I came to feel I was lacking in love and generosity that first time I listened to youth spit about the things that make them pine, bleed, lash out, desire more. What I wanted to capture here was some part of that inexplicable love I discovered emanating from TYPS. And what I want to say is we should want more of that, please, in our classrooms, our interactions, our writing, our public discourse. More of that, all around.
APPENDIX: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview Protocol #1 (with TYPS Brave New Voices participants)

Name:  
Interviewer:  
Date:  

Note: these questions are meant to serve as a guide for the interview, but the interviewee will play a large part in determining the scope and movement of the interview. At the end of the interview, follow up with unanswered questions.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak with you. I’m interested in learning more about what you experienced at Brave New Voices and in what ways you identify as a slam poet. Depending on your responses, I estimate this interview to take 1-2 hours of your time.

1. Tell me about how you got involved in TYPS. What motivates you to do slam?
   a) How would you describe your involvement in TYPS? How did you get involved in TYPS?
   b) Do you call yourself a poet? Why/why not?
   c) What do you think slam poetry can “do?”
   d) Do you think slam poetry has a role in social change and social justice? If so, how, and what changes do you seek through your poetry? If not, why not?

2. Overall, what’s your response to BNV? What did you like most and least?
   a) What were some of your favorite teams and poems at BNV?
   b) Are there any poetry subjects you would have liked to see more of at BNV?
   c) What was it like to hear poems about Tucson or Arizona by teams not from this state?
   d) What did you think when poets slammed about places it seemed they hadn’t been to, such as the poems that mentioned Arizona?

3. What was it like for you to slam at BNV?
   a) What was it like to be a first-time slammer at BNV?
   b) What are some of the similarities and differences between spitting a poem at TYPS in Tucson and getting up on the mic at BNV?
   c) What did you learn about the places other teams were coming from?

4. What did you think of the competition at BNV? How was it similar to or different from slams in Tucson?
   a) What are your views about competition in a poetry slam?
   b) Is there a dissonance between producing the poetry and being evaluated for it?

5. What kinds of things have you learned about slam poetry from Sarah and Logan?
   a) What are some of the most memorable lessons you’ve taken from working with them?

6. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experience at BNV? And, if there is one thing from this interview you want me to be sure to take away and understand, what would it be?
Interview Protocol #2 (Retrospective with Brave New Voices participants)

Name: Interviewer: Date:

Note: these questions are meant to serve as a guide for the interview, but the interviewee will play a large part in determining the scope and direction of the interview. At the end of the interview, there will be an opportunity to follow up with any unanswered questions or comments.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak with you. I’m interested in returning to some of the things we discussed in last year’s interview and learning more about how you may have changed as a slam poet since we last talked. Depending on your responses, I estimate this interview to take around an hour of your time.

1. How has your participation with TYPS evolved or changed since last year?
   a) If you are with Spoken Futures or Liberation Lyrics, talk about those experiences.
   b) Can you describe what the TYPS community is like? Has TYPS changed since last year?

2. Tell me about your poetry right now.
   a) What are you slamming about now? What are you thinking about, and how has it made its way into your poetry? What are your current foci re: topics, forms, etc.?
   b) Do you connect what’s going on in your personal life and in your community to your poetry? Why/why not?
   c) What’s your writing process like?
   d) How would you describe your performance style?
   e) Does it feel like “you” when you are performing, or someone else, or a mixture? Describe.

3. How do other poets influence your poetry and performances?
   a) If you are still involved in TYPS, who are some of the newer poets you would like to mention? Tell me about their poetry. If you are involved in other poetry scenes, tell me about some of the poets you’ve encountered.
   b) What about poets on the national scene or outside of TYPS?
   c) If you are no longer involved in TYPS or other poetry scenes, tell me about how writing and/or performing poetry does or doesn’t fit into your life.

4. Can you tell me some background information about yourself that you feel is important for me to know?
   a) Your age, education, and work experiences.
   b) How do you self-identify?
   c) What is your preferred gender pronoun?
   d) How do you identify specifically in terms of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class?
   e) Are any of the ways in which you self-identify relevant or important to your poetry? If so, how so? And why?

5. What has your educational experience been like up to this point?
   a) Describe your school(s).
   b) What do you think of formal education (purposes, attitudes about it)?
   c) What about informal education? What is it? Where and how have you experienced it?

6. What is your understanding of the political climate in Arizona at this time?
   a) Re: your feelings about education?
b) Re: your feelings about your rights as a young person?

c) Re: your poetry?

4. If you are involved in facilitating workshops for Spoken Futures, tell me about your approach to teaching poetry and performance.
   a) What is your teaching style?
   b) What is a successful workshop exercise you’ve used?
   c) Tell me about a workshop exercise that didn’t go as planned.

5. I asked you last year if you think that slam poetry has a role in social change and social justice. Has your opinion about this changed or developed?
   a) How do you define social change?
   b) How do you define social justice?
   c) How do you define social activism?
   d) Are you involved in the above three? If so, how? Does your poetry contribute to this involvement? If so, how?
   e) How does or doesn’t TYPS fit in with these definitions?

6. Is there anything you want to say about your experiences that I haven’t asked about?
   a) If there is one thing you would want me to take away and understand from this interview, what would it be?
Interview Protocol #3 (with other TYPS participants)

Name: Interviewer: Date:

Note: these questions are meant to serve as a guide for the interview, but the interviewee will play a large part in determining the scope and direction of the interview. At the end of the interview, there will be an opportunity to follow up with any unanswered questions or comments.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak with you. I’m interested in learning more about your involvement with TYPS and in what ways you identify as a slam poet. Depending on your responses, I estimate this interview to take around an hour of your time.

1. Tell me about how you got involved in TYPS. What motivates you to do slam?
   a) How would you describe your involvement in TYPS?
   b) What is the TYPS community like? How has it grown or changed since you became involved?
   c) Do you call yourself a poet? Why/why not?
2. What is it like to spit a poem at TYPS?
   a) Tell me about your first time at the mic.
   b) How would you describe your performance style?
   c) When you perform, to what extent does it feel like “you?”
3. Tell me about your poetry.
   a) What are you slamming about now? What are you thinking about, and how has it made its way into your poetry? What kinds of topics and forms do you currently gravitate towards, and why?
   b) What’s your writing process like?
   c) Has your poetry changed since joining TYPS? If so, how?
4. Because so much of slam poetry is about identity, I would like to know how you identify as a person and poet.
   a) Age, education, and work experiences.
   b) How do you self-identify?
   c) What is your preferred gender pronoun?
   d) How do you identify specifically in terms of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class?
   e) How do these identifications influence your poetry?
   f) In what ways does your background – family, school, etc. – contribute to these identifications?
   g) Are any of the ways in which you self-identify relevant or important to your poetry? If so, how so? And why?
5. Can you tell me more background information about yourself that you feel is important for me to know?
   a) What has your educational experience been like up to this point?
   b) Describe your school(s).
   c) What do you think of formal education (purposes, attitudes about it)?
   d) What about informal education? What is it? Where and how have you experienced it?
6. What is your understanding of the political climate in Arizona at this time?
   a) Re: your feelings about education?
   b) Re: your feelings about your rights as a young person?
   c) Re: your poetry?
4. What are your views about competition in a poetry slam?
   b) How do you feel about having your poetry evaluated or judged?
5. What kinds of things have you learned about slam poetry that you haven’t yet mentioned?
   a) Who have you learned these things from?
   b) What are some of the most memorable lessons you’ve taken from working with other poets?
6. What do you think slam poetry can “do?”
   a) Do you think slam poetry has a role in social change and social justice? If so, how, and what changes do you seek through your poetry? If not, why not?
   b) Are you involved in social activism? If so, how? Does your poetry contribute to this involvement? If so, how?
   c) How do you define social change?
   d) How do you define social justice?
   e) How do you define social activism?
   f) How does or doesn’t TYPS fit in with these definitions?
7. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your experiences with TYPS? And, if there is one thing from this interview you want me to be sure to take away and understand, what would it be?


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