

Put Me in, Coach: The Political Promise of Competitive Composing

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In essence, the new alliance—what I have elsewhere called “conservative modernization”—has integrated education into a wider set of ideological commitments. The objectives in education are the same as those which guide its economic and social welfare goals. They include the dramatic expansion of that eloquent fiction, the free market; the drastic reduction of government responsibility for social needs; the reinforcement of intensely *competitive structures* of mobility both inside and outside the school . . .” (emphasis mine)

—Michael W. Apple, from “Competition, Knowledge, and the Loss of Educational Vision”

COMPETITION CONSIDERED

In a sense, the scope of this article begins in 1988, when I was eleven years old and the only “girl” on the little league team. I hit home runs, and I hit a lot of them. Sometimes more than one in an individual game. So naturally I thought, in the championship game with the bases loaded and my team down 3-1, I was going to hit a home run, or a double at worst. I was bigger and stronger than any other eleven-year-old I had ever met. But then, for the first time, I did something I can’t remember doing before this day. I struck out looking. Game over. I totally blew it.

On the car ride home, I did what any eleven-year-old might do. I blamed the umpire. “Dad, did you see that pitch?” I whined, outraged. “It was like soooo outside.” My father put his hand on my shoulder. “You’re a really good ball player,” he said, “but you struck out. The other kid threw a good pitch, and you struck out.”

This moment has always stayed with me, as have so many other moments I spent competing in sports as a kid. I’ve often thought about the connections between competitive sports and life itself to be, however cliché it can seem in the movies, quite meaningful. But, of course, I also understand how it all goes wrong in the name of competition. In an age of worshipping “the free market,” in a time of the neo-liberal university, in a culture where we have watched football programs value competition

over human decency, it's easy to feel that competition breeds devastation and exploitation—and that it mirrors all the power structures we, as academics and teachers, might resist the most. So I rarely spoke about my experiences as an athlete in the context of academia because those experiences seemed like they could only be read as the antithesis of the kind of progressive pedagogies I, and my colleagues in my field, truly value.

But recently I've been a part of something that has made me want to raise this subject in a more serious way and particularly in regard to how competition might have promise and potential, even as it can (like most approaches) do its share of harm. Educators talk a lot (and rightfully so) about that harm. And I wonder how competition could do less harm, how it could even transform writing communities, be a part of writing activism in the world.

For the past three years, I have had the honor of working with some of the bravest writers I've ever worked with as a poetry slam coach in a local high school in Lincoln, Nebraska, where I also teach at the university. I coach these young poets as part of *Louder than a Bomb Great Plains Youth Poetry Festival* (<http://ltabomaha.org/>), a large statewide competition (run by the Nebraska Writers Collective and poet Matt Mason) in which students from all over Nebraska compete in teams against other schools and other poets. In this context, I have seen competition go right, and I think it's worth discussing the educational, creative, and political implications for how and why it has "gone right." When a gathering of my experiences doesn't seem to line up exactly with my theoretical and political vision, I want to ask questions, to sift through the complicated layers of the questions at hand. My experience tells me there is value in competition. And if there is, what must be the conditions under which competition is generative, interesting, self- and community-building rather than exploitative and destructive?

I began to look for scholars talking about this subject. As I looked to read more about how scholars and researchers have been approaching the subject of competition, I found some interesting trends. First, these search terms often link themselves to articles on business, business models, and business classrooms at universities. Second, competition is often connected to systems of oppression (especially sexism) when it is discussed in articles about education and writing. Third, to say that discussions of competition in the field of Composition and Rhetoric are rare would be an understatement. When competition is mentioned in our field, it is usually referring literally to writing contests or student awards rather than referring conceptually to competition as it might impact writing pedagogy. Finally, those of us who write and work in education are rightfully and significantly critical of competitive models of education as linked to neo-liberalism, corrupt capitalism, and inequality. In fact, I couldn't agree more with Michael Apple in the epigraph to this piece. Yet there is the sense that I (and many other athletes) have had profoundly intellectual and community-building experiences with competition, and the young poets I coach also have had these experiences. I am uninterested in arguments as to whether competition is good or bad for education, or for writers as they learn to write. I find this kind of binary argument pretty boring. I am more interested in the contradictory nature of competition, in how we might see both its dangers *and* its promise at the same time.

As I think about my own history in teacher training (the experiences I've had as both a teacher of writing at the college level and a certified high school English teacher), I can recall being "trained" to see competition as something that could likely divide and defeat my students rather than enrich their classroom experience. Perhaps this is because competition can often get equated with grades, standardized tests, and formal evaluation. Of course, these are institutional modes of competition, which don't necessarily mirror all uses or kinds of competition in all classrooms, even while we cannot separate institutions from our practices. After all, if we believe Audre Lorde, and I certainly do, that our task as political revolutionaries is not to make reforms to already existing systems but to transform or dismantle those systems (111-12), how can we transform our understanding of competition so that it might deconstruct rather than reify systems of domination? For me, the New Activism means rethinking old ideas, transforming systems in order to find new ways of imagining what it means to compete, to write, to have a voice in our current moment.

I happen to believe that the methodologies we use to teach writing are deeply political; craft is political. And because I believe this, I began to look to my poetry slam team in order to think more about why the competition (both between them for spots on the team, and between them and other schools) was not divisive, hierarchical, or damaging, why it was, instead, generative, community building, and deeply introspective. In the remainder of this piece, I want to bring to the surface what I found to be the four possible reasons the young poets thrived in their competitive environment, in the hopes that these aspects of competition could make their way into our classrooms and even change the way we think about competitive structures.

When I watch my slam poetry team compete, I think about the other systems of competition they participate in at school. I think about their ACTs and SATs. I think of the ways some other kinds of "competitive structures," as Apple calls them, make play impossible, render collaboration forbidden, and have little to do with students actually thinking through the questions of who they are, what they want, and how to get there. In 2014, our team wrote and performed a group piece that spoke to the very kinds of "competitive structures" that make competition seem like a bad idea.

GO TO VIDEO: "WHO AM I REALLY?" LINCOLN NORTH STAR GROUP PIECE
PERFORMED BY KATHAREN HEDGES, KYLAH JULCH, RACHEL VERMILLION,
AND ALYSSA GEYER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzHGRLn2EE>

Written primarily by Katharen Hedges, this poem illuminates the kinds of competition these writers find oppressive—that *our grades give us the merit to be wanted, that our ACT scores prove how worthy we are of having futures*. However, the poets use the competitive forum of the poetry slam to critique the discourse of competition, to try to take some power back from the competitive structures that seek to define them in ways they find problematic and troubling. The poem is also a performative metaphor for the power of community—the voices around Katharen¹ having the power both to tell her the insidious narratives that damage self-worth *and* to remind her that these competitive structures of cars, boyfriends, colleges, and test scores do not have the meaning "they" suggest. This poem embodies all the aspects of competitive youth poetry slam that these young

writers value: playfulness, community, collaboration, self-reflection, and the significance of an attentive listening audience.

COMPOSITION AND PLAY

In all of my writing classrooms, I value play, giving my students opportunities to play with and experiment with language and forms. I invite my students to push against convention and traditional notions of what essays or poems are or should be. In their article “Seasoning the Sonnet, Playing Poets: The ‘Sonnet Slam’ as Extrapedagogical Event,” Kirk Melnikoff and Jennifer Munroe talk about the significance of “combining play with pedagogy” as they discuss ways of inviting students to engage the sonnet form (253). The movement between convention and disruption is one that is very significant to me in the classroom. Even combining the poetry slam (which is often thought of as an irreverent or radical space) with the sonnet (often thought of as a stuffy, traditional form) seems to me an interesting approach with contradiction already built into it. But the contradiction is not enough without playfulness.

If you’ve been to a poetry slam, then you know there is a kind of irreverence toward the competition built into the competition, an acknowledgement that, for instance, the time limit is arbitrary. You can note this at many slams across the country, when it is announced that a poet has gone over time and the audience yells, “fuck time.” You can see it in the way that when the host tells the audience of the poetry slam that the competition was invented by Chicago construction worker Marc Smith, everyone in the house shouts, “So What?” as if to suggest that these traditional ways of thinking about histories (that there could be an “inventor” of slam poetry) are mostly bullshit. At the youth slams, this irreverence survives in other ways as well. The judges are booed every time they give *any* poet below a nine. The young poets, even as they are competing, are rejecting the terms of the competition, knowing that the scoring has no inherent meaning even as its temporary and arbitrary meaning can be fun, or rewarding, or entertaining. In “‘The Points Are Kind of the Point, But They’re Not the Point’: The Role of Poetry Slam in Youth Spoken Word,” Susan Weinstein writes, “slam competition is an enactment of the process-versus-product dynamic,” and its “tradition of undercutting its own competitive nature seems a valuing of process over product—of the work put in over the score received. Yet there is no question that youth slam teams take the competition seriously” (178). This seemingly contradictory relationship to the competition—taking it “seriously” *and* taking it playfully all at once—mirrors the relations I encourage my students to have with language more broadly in order to become deeper and more thoughtful writers. The valuing of process over product is something we talk about quite a bit in Composition and Rhetoric, so the connections for me in my college classrooms are rich. The young poets on my team spoke at length about competition, play, and process in their interviews with Sally Nellson Barrett in a film called *Why the Arts Matter*, directed by Barrett and produced by Nebraska Loves Public Schools. Here is what they had to say:

GO TO VIDEO: COMPETITION AND PLAY

<http://nelovesps.wistia.com/medias/s4rzgdvv55>

When Katharen Hedges tells us, “it’s not really a competition,” she goes on to describe what makes it different from traditional notions of competition—namely that “it is really about what the person is saying,” and Katharen herself describes this relationship to competition as really “weird.” She’s right to observe this kind of environment in relationship to competition as really unusual. The poetry slam’s playfulness and irreverence toward its own rules and structures, I think, is a big part of what makes the environment not only more “supportive,” as Katharen puts it, but also a more dynamic and generative literacy experience for the young writers involved.

At the time of this video, Katharen was a senior in high school, though she joined the slam team as a sophomore and had become the beating heart of our team. At practices, Katharen’s feedback to her teammates would always embody this sense of competition and play existing simultaneously. She might tell another poet, for example, what kinds of moves she has seen “score high” at the youth poetry slams, and then also tell the writer that it doesn’t matter what the scores are, or even that sometimes doing something surprising that no one has ever seen score high before is exactly the thing to do because it’s fun to “push the boundaries of the slam genre.” One teammate in particular, perhaps the most serious athlete on the team (a talented basketball player and jumper on the track team), Kylah Julch, took the competition aspect of *Louder than a Bomb* quite seriously. Kylah made it known (to her teammates, but not necessarily to the larger community) from the start of the year that she wanted to “win the whole thing.” Her teammates both respected this and teased her about it at the same time.

Kylah Julch gives us the sense of competition we are more used to—the idea that one would want to come out on top of the competition, but what’s fascinating about what she says is that word “secretly.” She says, “it is part of a competition so you do secretly want to win a little bit.” The fact that Kylah sees wanting to win as a “secret”—in other words, something she might not want the community itself to see during competition—interests me. In what other competitive arena would students feel that their desire to win might be best kept “a secret”? It’s no surprise to me that the students’ relationship to writing changes. For example, the third writer in the video, Savannah Brown, talks about crediting her participation in the slam poetry program with helping her to pass her mandatory state writing test. What would it mean for this version of “competition”—this playful and community-building version—to make its way into standards and testing? What if we accepted that a test, like a score from slam poetry judges, does and does not have meaning? What if we educated students more playfully?

I am not sure we are doing our students any justice when we pretend we are living in a world where everyone wins; neither do we do them any justice when we pretend winning matters in some grand way. What interests me is that I have experienced competitive communities, in both athletics and poetry, in which everyone wins *and* not everyone wins. It is this seemingly contradictory quality that makes competition, to me, full of promise, “creating an alternative culture,” as Rebecca Brown calls it in “Promoting Cooperation and Respect: ‘Bad’ Poetry Slam in the Nontraditional Classroom”—and in this case, I want to consider it an “alternative culture” of competition whereby community is the primary value (576). As Serenity Stokes, a junior at the time of her interview, says: “it makes everything like shiny. Like it makes everything a new opportunity, a new friend, a new

way to help; like it helps everything. It lets you connect and people who I normally wouldn't talk to or wouldn't talk to me cause they're shy or they're mean or whatever . . . If I show them a part of me they show a part back and you get that thing going." That thing is a writing community—something I have tried to form again and again in my own classrooms through writing groups, class readings, and class workshops.

My experience with these young writers has had a profound impact on my college composition courses. I find myself more often looking for the playful place to begin. For example, I might, in a first-year composition course, be expected to teach my students some version of the "research paper." And in the spirit of playfulness, I like to start by asking students to bring in some piece of writing they think is *not* a research paper. Students bring in poems, stories, songs, comedy, comic strips, personal narratives, self-help books, or advertising. And instead of telling my students, "great job, these aren't research papers," I ask them to think about the ways this writing *is* research. There are *very few* times that students bring in a piece of writing that does not have some research involved, some sources that are informing its construction—whether explicit or implicit. This day of class is often a playful day. We are messing with forms, with each other's sense of reality; we are troubling categories—something I think much more significant to the teaching of writing and to our current political moment than if I had shown my students examples of "research papers" and told them to "produce something like this." As a queer person and an activist, I find very few concepts more important to the future survival of queer youth than whether or not the writers I educate can trouble categories and assumptions. Making this "trouble" is, I believe, a transferable and essential aspect of writing and, it so happens, of living.

COMMUNITY AND COLLABORATION

One common understanding of competition is that it breeds divisiveness rather than community. So I became curious about the *Louder than a Bomb* writing community, wanting to think critically about what made this competitive environment so community oriented. Weinstein puts it this way: "The sense of community and of a communal (that is, a shared, discursively oriented) identity is something that comes up regularly in the interviews I have conducted with young people about their participation in youth spoken word" (174). I see the same patterns of community in Barrett's interviews with my team as well:

GO TO VIDEO: COMMUNITY AND COLLABORATION

<http://nelovesps.wistia.com/medias/uozhox3c0e>.

Serenity Stokes, often called "the mom of the team" by her teammates at Lincoln North Star, responded to this question of community this way:

It's become a family cause I've been here a year and so that's kinda cliché but we really are, like we go to each other's houses, we practice, we hear each other's hearts being set in front of people and we get to watch how they react and stuff and so, its . . . you get really close and you look forward to every time that you see them, you get really excited and it's just an

amazing experience and it made high school worth it.

I wonder, when I hear these young writers talk about their community, how I might bring this kind of community and audience-consciousness (“we hear each other’s hearts being set in front of people”) to my other pedagogical contexts for teaching writing. This year I began bringing competition into my writing classroom—something that, before working with these slam poets, I would not have dreamed of doing. *Competition*, I would have told myself, *is bad for writers, bad for class dynamics*. But when I started incorporating play and collaboration into competition, something changed about its tenor. In my college writing classrooms now, we construct numerous competitions: best opening sentence, best use of a quote, best image, best concluding paragraph, etc. I have noticed my college students really responding to these activities, even when the “winner” in each competition receives only a homemade cupcake as a “prize.” The students argue playfully about what makes a sentence good. Quite honestly, I have never had such dynamic conversations about writing as I have with students when they are trying to decide who “won.” Though I want to keep this piece focused on the high school poets I work with, I also want to keep their impact on my broader teaching practices in view.

Additionally, the young writers on our poetry slam team illuminate for me something service learning advocates and place studies scholars have know for years—something that, admittedly, did not fully hit home for me until now. That something is this: if you want to form communities, or stress the value of community to students, bring them outside of classrooms *to the communities* in which they live and go to school. Both Katharen Hedges and Savannah Brown talked about their connection to their communities through their writing. Brown says, in her interview, “[We] perform for classes and sometimes going to like, the state capitol performing or it’s, like, a café or any place that is people who have not heard my poetry before.” What is notable about this remark is that my poetry team has been all over Nebraska—making a case for after-school programs at the state capitol, performing in coffee shops, at fundraisers, colleges, for middle schools and high schools who do not yet have poetry slam teams. The writers are advocates for the power of writing, and they go out into the community and make connections. When Katharen Hedges says, “I wanna help out in the community,” so much of that desire comes from actually *being* in the community and, I would argue, from being a competitor in the second largest young poetry festival in the country. Having been named the third best team in the competition in 2013 and the second best team in the 2014 competition, the writers on the team felt the recognition gave them confidence, helped them see they had something to contribute to the *Louder than a Bomb* community, to their schools, and to their local communities.

SELF-REFLECTION

When I think about the cultivation of writing communities in my college writing classrooms, I try to imagine ways to teach students to be conscious members of intellectual and political communities; however, a widely circulated idea about competition is that it can breed *unconsciousness*, that competitors might do anything to win or get ahead and therefore don’t participate in the kind of

self-reflection or self-implication many writing teachers would agree is at the heart of learning to write *and* learning to be thoughtful, critical, and responsible citizens of the world. I am aware, as I'm writing this, of the unfortunate stereotypes or assumptions about slam poetry—assumptions that go something like this: *slam poetry is expressivism at its worst*. Or that slam poetry is self-indulgent. And maybe it is, but at a great gain for writing, and for political promise:

GO TO VIDEO: SELF-REFLECTION

<http://nelovesps.wistia.com/medias/w8w2d5jcj0>

Katharen Hedges tells us: “It’s like seeing yourself, it’s like you can see yourself there and if you can see yourself then you can do something about who you are. So I think expression is very important . . . very important.” I know it’s a moment to learn from these young writers when they tell me things about their process. I think of the many times I try to push my college students to “see themselves” on the page, the many times I ask them: *who are you when you write this way or when you tell this story?* Good writers, after all, see themselves clearly. And, of course, seeing one’s self clearly is profoundly political. What a different world we might live in if all of us practiced seeing ourselves clearly, seeing our motivations, our identities, our audiences, our actions. But to see ourselves clearly, we need to look in new ways, to try out new methods, new approaches. As Kylah Julch explains about her writing: “I have learned so much about myself I can’t explain. I have done things that I’ve never have . . . that I would not have gotten the opportunity to do before. I’ve performed on so many different stages, I’ve met so many different people. I’ve learned who I am by writing pieces that I would never normally write.” Learning about ourselves through writing is part of self-reflection, and this kind of self-reflection also leads writers to understand the ways they might be implicated in the systems of domination they might want to resist or understand.

In her 2005 article, “Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity” (the article that later developed into her 2009 book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*), Susan Somers-Willett takes Judith Butler’s lens of performativity to examine some of the issues of self, identity, and embodiment that are at the center of slam. She writes:

I take as my premise that the self is the result of performance, that subjectivities as they are expressed both in the world and on stage (i.e., as performed identities) come into being through social practice. With this view in mind, we must treat the authentic also as a social practice, as something which has no original beyond its own repetition and acceptance over time. (56)

The writers on my team talk a lot with each other about performance and authenticity, particularly about how those ideas are connected to the competition itself. The poets become aware, through repetition of performances and through their discussions of “what gets points” from the judges, that the line between performance and authenticity is barely a line at all. Because of this awareness, they are able to see their poems as both them *and* not them. This makes the scoring bearable. If you thought your poem were actually you, there might be some serious devastation at it getting a 7.9. But if you are aware that your poem/performance is both who you are *and* not who you are, the 7.9 matters a lot less. The poetry slam illuminates these paradoxical truths, ones that

are crucial to producing powerful writing and ones that are integral to being a politically conscious human being in the world. We are bombarded every day with politicians and talking heads who are not able to hold two opposing truths in their minds at the same time. We are in desperate need of writers and thinkers who can do this, so that our vision can become more nuanced, more layered, and more complex. And I have watched these young writers enrich and complicate their visions of themselves and others over and over again over the last three years I have coached them in *Louder than a Bomb*.

The kind of self-reflection and self-implication I am talking about is something that has long concerned me in teaching college courses in writing. I spend many hours trying to help students see the ways self-implication can enrich rather than damage their writing. They often get the message that admitting their biases, their positionality, or their connections to their subjects is not something writers should do because it shows some kind of weakness or tendency to lean in one direction or another. I would argue that this notion that self-implication as weakness is one of the primary ways systems of privilege continue to function as they do. Moreover, the idea that self-implication as weakness is connected to those damaging ways of thinking about competition—especially as it relates to “winning” an argument. To me, the idea of winning an argument is particularly boring and simplistic. After all, if the “argument” is complex, who could win or lose it? It should just keep going.

In teaching composition, in particular first-year composition, we might focus quite a bit of attention on argument. Yet I wonder how self-reflection, community, listening, and play might very well disrupt so many of the conventions that frustrate writing teachers about how students approach and think about the subject of argument. For example, like many composition teachers, I often encourage students to write about subjects they are passionate about or wonder about. This sometimes mean students write essays about issues that are too often represented to us in binary fashion—linear polarized arguments about reproductive rights, the death penalty, or any number of social issues about which people “argue.” If I cannot teach my students self-reflection and self-implication, they will too often reconstruct arguments they have heard elsewhere without considering the positions, identities, privileges, oppressions, or histories that inform those arguments and shape their understandings. The writers on my slam team have modeled for me ways of inviting my students to reconsider the possibilities for “argument.” Katharen Hedges, in 2014, performed a piece about bullying—and her team shared feedback with her that encouraged her to write more about how she is implicated in that subject rather than writing what the team called “an issue poem” that just writes about an issue and sums up its argument: *don't bully*. Here is Katharen’s response to that feedback, the final version of her poem “My Apology,” perhaps (at least in my opinion) one of the best poems in the statewide competition this year:

GO TO VIDEO: “MY APOLOGY” BY KATHAREN HEDGES

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khVLM6mBsXI>

Working with Katharen on this poem made me think more about college essays, about the ways her piece might instruct a college writer in how to write an “argument essay” about bullying—one that might be more circular and complex than a public service announcement. The power of Katharen’s

piece lies in her willingness to consider herself, to implicate herself, and to reflect on that implication. What might an essay on bullying that took this approach look like? What arguments would that essay make and how? Is Katharen's concern winning an argument? How did the competitive community she is part of create the conditions under which this poem could emerge? And can I create that kind of community in the college writing classroom?

LISTENING AND BEING HEARD

In "From the Coffee House to the School House: The Promise and Potential of Spoken Word Poetry in School Contexts," Maisha Fisher describes communities like *Louder than a Bomb* as "Participatory Literacy Communities (PLC's)," and she positions her work in this piece as thinking through PLC's "not as a strategy but as a movement and a way of life for students" (117). In forming these communities, my students transfer their "way of life" as poets on their own team from context to context. Kylah Julch is right that it is a competition and that many young writers "secretly want to win," but at the same time that desire doesn't stop them from listening intently to the poems of the writers they are competing against; it doesn't stop them from rising in a standing ovation to a powerful and vulnerable poem by an opposing team. Both on their team and in this community, writers have developed a practice of listening, becoming more critical and supportive readers and writers.

Krista Ratcliffe, in her book *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, argues for listening as a primary way to employ a politically conscious rhetorical pedagogy. She writes, "As the performance of a person's conscious choice to assume an open stance in relation to any person, text or culture, rhetorical listening challenges the divided logos of Western civilization—the logos that speaks but does not listen" (26). What if competition or competitiveness as we know it was nuanced with this "open stance," this listening? Might this kind of stance, combined with the community and play I describe earlier transform competition, make it something that might challenge the status quo rather than reinscribe it? Is this possible in more "traditional" classrooms? Certainly, the young writers find this listening stance transformative.

GO TO VIDEO: LISTENING AND BEING HEARD

<http://nelovesps.wistia.com/medias/kubxwkub42>

Savannah Brown mentions "the way the crowd interacted with the poet, like when they heard a line they all snapped for it or if they really like something they'll just scream and cheer for it and after that I was like: 'That's amazing, like you can actually do that during . . . while people are still saying their poetry.' I loved it. I feel like [. . .] the crowd is actually listening to their poetry." I have observed the power of the shared value of the snap, however cheesy one might accuse it of being. It's a powerful sound in a room of 100 people snapping to say they are listening and they are connecting with the poem. Serenity Stokes puts it this way: "it didn't matter if I was scared or if they . . . or if I was scared they wouldn't like me because no matter what you say you're gonna be heard and it's gonna resonate with someone." Additionally, Katharen Hedges remarks:

I think people really do listen to slam poetry, like when you see somebody your age or someone, like, you can really relate to doing something that they're passionate about it's like you have to respect that and it makes you wanna listen because it's almost like as if you were up there doing that it's like you really do feel like they're a lot like you.

Many of the young writers I coach might have thought of "Poetry" initially as something belonging to academia, something out of reach or inaccessible. But the poetry slam has brought them to see the complex intellectual and innovative writing practices in one another and to bridge the gap not just between individual poets but also between "the arts" as they imagined them and *their* art as they perform it. Somers-Willet, in her book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, writes, "Even as poets continue to characterize a classic tension between the academy and popular culture, slam poetry might be, in the end, about building bridges, not walls, between these two audiences for poetry" (15). I believe there is a bridge to be built in thinking about competition as something with promise and potential, something that generates rhetorical listening and literacy communities, even as it could, at times, or in the wrong spirit, become the enemy of literacy in certain contexts. Quoting partially from Allan Luke, Michael Apple later concludes, in "Competition, Knowledge, and the Loss of Educational Vision," that "in the long term, we need to 'develop a political project that is both local yet generalizable, systematic without making Eurocentric, masculinist claims to essential and universal truths about human subjects'" (18). This community of young writers might be this kind of "local but generalizable" project—its attention and commitment to play, to community, to self-reflection, and to listening perhaps becomes "systematic" in a way that resists or challenges conventional notions of competition—notions that are, indeed "masculinist" and "Eurocentric." From what I've observed and through the aspects of this competitive community I've outlined here, I believe it is possible to build systems that incorporate competition without erasing or exploiting difference, without reproducing the systems of privilege that make the competition rigged, too meaningful, or too monolithic.

Of course, no community is perfect. No competition is perfect in the same way no particular pedagogy can work for *all* students or in *all* contexts. The young writers on my team sometimes experience disappointment if they don't get to compete on a particular competition night (there are only four spots on any given night). And when I explain to them why, I think back to my own conversation with my father. I think about what it teaches us to see ourselves clearly, to know and honor when someone has done a better job than we have, or perhaps was just a better fit for some specific moment in a competition. I sometimes hear my more conservative family members talking emphatically about how sad it is "these days" that "everyone has to get a trophy." My niece is 10, and they still don't keep score in her soccer games. I'll admit I want to disagree with them—both because it's my gut reaction to do so and because I know it's hard for the young person who doesn't get the trophy (or even that the system doesn't always reward those it should). At the same time, I've seen the ways that competition can enrich lives and writing experiences: my own and those of my students. It is my contention that through play, collaboration, self-reflection, and the cultivation of a listening/speaking community, writers can engage in competitive literacy practices without reifying the very structures that are said to create competition in the first place. After all, here are a few more outcomes

of what our team wrote and performed as part of this competition. It's hard to hear these poems and think their motivation for writing them (partly the hope that coach might put them in the game, and I did) is only a problematic capitalist construction that harms them.

Poem by Katharen Hedges: <http://nelovesps.wistia.com/medias/jqjpyw9g3a>

Poem by Kylah Julch: <http://nelovesps.wistia.com/medias/jj16iqwwxg>

Poem by Serenity Stokes: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb_s_-dq7Eg

NOTES

¹ While it is, I believe, an important citation practice to refer to student authors by last name when quoting from their work, the young writers on the poetry slam team and I decided that this formality (in the context of both the irreverence of the poetry slam itself and the closeness of my relationship with them as their coach) does not reflect the arguments, writing, or relationships in this article.

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