

# Dialogic Poetry and The *Poetry Dialogues* Case Study: City Lore

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See, we try to have the conversation  
through the rhyme,  
that's what we do, yes all the time  
This is the aspect of Hip-Hop  
that you might not see on D-TV,  
or the radio,  
I said, sometimes, we flow  
That's the way we battle life  
without fists, you know,  
without the guns, without the knives,  
without the violence—  
that's the way we keep the hood  
in peaceful silence!

—Toni Blackman <sup>1</sup>

## PREFACE

The *Poetry Dialogues* is a series of intergenerational workshops, presentations, and community dialogues that utilize contemporary and traditional poetry forms—including Rap, Spoken Word, African *jali* (or griot) praise poetry, Muslim prayer-calling, and Filipino *balagtasan*—to engage audiences and communities in dialogue on self-defined issues. The initial experimental phase of this project, sponsored and administered by City Lore, was supported by the Animating Democracy Initiative of Americans for the Arts from 2001 to 2003.

The *Poetry Dialogues* project was based on an exploration of dialogic poetry and the concept of poetry as dialogue. It consciously employed poetry forms that are inherently dialogic in structure and explored the potential contributions of poetry to broader civic dialogue. City Lore's executive director, Steve Zeitlin, describes poetry "as an art form characterized by the intensification of language" that is therefore "an ideal form to galvanize dialogue in a wide variety of community settings."<sup>2</sup>

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There were multiple locations of art-based dialogue within this project: (1) intergenerational dialogue among youth poets, mentors, and elder poets; (2) dialogic exchange between genres of poetry or oral art forms through the encounter of the elder and youth poets; (3) debate or dialogue within the performance of the forms themselves, especially *Balagtasan* and hip-hop freestyling; and (4) facilitated audience dialogues following each presentation.

Proposed as an experimental project, the Animating Democracy phase of the *Poetry Dialogues* yielded lessons learned and led to further development of the model and future work. This case study offers a description of the initial phase and its impact on participating poets and audiences, as well as discussion of organizational issues and partnerships, working with youth, intra- and intercommunity dialogue, and the civic dimensions of the project. It also examines how the potential of poetry to create indelible images, to extend the reach of language, and to express complex ideas and feelings through metaphor makes it a powerful force for illuminating community issues and concerns.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

You gotta have a reader or a listener for a poem to do its work, so you're automatically in [an exchange] . . . If you can take that essence of the art form and translate it to how it works with a community, then you've got a great step along the way to dialogue.

—Bob Holman, The Bowery Poetry Club

### Poets, Players, and Structure

City Lore is a cultural organization “dedicated to the documentation and preservation of New York’s—and America’s—folk culture.” The organization’s staff includes folklorists, historians, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists who describe themselves as “cultural activists committed to the principles of cultural equity and democracy. [They] believe that cultural diversity is a positive social value to be protected and encouraged; that authentic democracy requires active participation in cultural life, not just passive consumption of cultural products; and that cultural heritage is a resource for improving quality of life.”<sup>3</sup>

For the *Poetry Dialogues*, in collaboration with Urban Word NYC (formerly Youth Speaks NY) and Poets House,<sup>4</sup> City Lore created three intergenerational poetry teams, defined by identity and comprised of young poets, elder master poets or “mentor poets,” and poet-facilitators. Steve Zeitlin introduced the poet-facilitators and their teams as follows:

Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad led a Muslim American team that brought four high school-age hip-hop poets with roots in the Middle East and the Muslim world together with elder poet Ishmaili Raishida, and musician and Rumi chanter Amir Vahab. Filipino American poet Regie Cabico brought together a group of four hip-hop poets, all with Filipino roots, with Frances Dominguez, an elder master of Filipino oral poetry traditions in New York. Poet and renowned freestyler Toni Blackman led a team of seven young African American rappers, working with jali (“griot”) poets led by Kewulay Kamara from Sierra Leone.

Each of the three teams rehearsed about ten times, mostly in City Lore’s offices and teachers’ center, exploring the interrelationship of poetry forms, themes, and music, through exercises and improvisations led by the poet-facilitators. As a participant on the Muslim American team, Tahani Salah explained, “In the ten-week workshops, we experimented with many different writing techniques from haikus to page-long masterpieces and different writing styles.”<sup>5</sup>

Within each team, there was an exchange of poetry genres and traditions. Assisted by the poet facilitator, youth and elder poets learned about the form and content of each other’s work, discussed issues in their own communities, and planned and implemented a community presentation generating broader community dialogue on issues identified through the teams’

process. The three teams also came together for joint performances. The project sought to help both generations discover links between their poetry forms, to reenergize the artistry of these forms, and to encourage both generations to employ the power of their art in expanded ways toward engaging others in public dialogue.

The goals that City Lore set for the project included: “(1) to transform communities by employing the community’s most powerful artistic resources to address issues of concern to the community; (2) to transform communities by building intergenerational bonds; (3) to inspire a younger generation of slam/spoken word/performance poets to employ their own art forms to address problems specific to their own communities and to their own backgrounds; (4) to discover, with both younger and older participants, links between the established folk poetry forms of an older generation and forms of popular and folk culture such as hip-hop and slam poetry, popular with the young;<sup>6</sup> and (5) to serve as a documented and disseminated model for the field of community cultural development.”

## **What Actually Happened**

### ***Framing***

One of the early challenges of the project was framing the teams. As City Lore and partners initially conceived the *Poetry Dialogues*, they envisioned African American, Asian American and Latino/a teams. There were early difficulties in organizing the Latino/a team, and when the tragedy of September 11, 2001 happened, everyone considered it vitally important to reach out and create space for Muslim American voices to be heard, especially in the context of an arts-based civic dialogue project. Suheir Hammad, as an up-and-coming and extremely gifted Palestinian American poet, was the perfect choice to lead a team. The difference in how the teams were framed, however, created some awkwardness: the other two teams were framed according to racial or cultural identity, while this one was framed by religious identity. Also, as it turned out, each of the three teams included Muslim participants. However, a team framed as Arab American, for example, would have excluded large and diverse portions of the New York Muslim community, all of whom were deeply affected by the aftermath of 9-11; and acknowledging the diversity of Muslim communities seemed part of the point.

On the other hand, Regie Cabico felt the frame of Asian American was too broad, and that a team focused on Filipino/a American identity and issues would be able to go deeper. Also, City Lore had a particular interest in working with Balagtasán, a Filipino genre, often practiced in Tagalog, in which poets debate issues and challenge one another’s positions in rhyme. However, the audition process used only identified one Filipino American high school student interested in participating. Regie selected additional college-age poets, and continued to find younger participants as the process unfolded.

### ***Dialogue training***

In March 2002, Fran Frazier, a dialogue trainer recommended to City Lore by Study Circles Resource Center,<sup>7</sup> held a special daylong dialogue training with the three poet facilitators, the project directors, and George Zavala, the community dialogue specialist chosen by City Lore to facilitate the dialogues with audiences and community groups. Steve Zeitlin commented, “The daylong retreat was a useful introduction to the field [of dialogue]. As part of her work with us, Fran Frazier drew up a 16-page document, a *Poetry Dialogues* Study Circle Facilitator Guide.”

Originally, City Lore had stated that they would work with Study Circles to identify a dialogue specialist. “Study Circles suggested Fran Frazier from Columbus, Ohio,” Steve explained: “they did not give us recommendations for dialogue leaders in [New York City]. She was excellent, but since we had to fly her in from Columbus, we could only do one day of training. We had no funds in the budget to fly her in for the programs as well.” Instead, City Lore chose George Zavala, a theater and visual artist with extensive experience in conflict-resolution workshops who has worked with City Lore on community programs for many years. George attended rehearsals with each of the three poetry teams and carefully reviewed the facilitator guide while preparing for the *Poetry Dialogues*.

### **Community events**

Some early shifts also occurred in roles and availability. One such unexpected change was that the Muslim Team leader, Suheir Hammad, was cast in Russell Simmons’ Def Poetry Jam on Broadway, creating severe limitations in her availability for the City Lore project.

Another shift came in the process of choosing community venues for the individual teams’ intra-community dialogues. The original proposal included two such events in each community before bringing the teams together for performances. The community dialogues were to be held in public libraries, as they represented “a positive neutral setting for community programs.” Steve Zeitlin explained, “As we planned the project on paper, we were working closely with Poets House which ran a program in branch libraries. When the Dialogues actually got underway, the decision making shifted to the facilitator poets—Regie, Suheir, and Toni. Regie suggested working with FAHSI, a Filipino American social service group, for the Queens presentation. Toni learned about the Slave Galleries at St. Augustine’s [Episcopal] Church at an Animating Democracy [Learning Exchange]. Suheir explored the possibility of a presentation at the Arab American Family Association in Brooklyn, but concluded that there were too many outside issues with them at that time. Once her schedule changed entirely because of her participation in Def Poetry Jam, scheduling a Muslim American community dialogue became impossible.”

Steve Zeitlin described how the project’s activities proceeded:

The first community dialogue of the Filipino team took place on Saturday, June 29, at a Filipino Youth Day sponsored by FAHSI (Filipino American Human Services) held at the Jamaica Arts Center in Jamaica, Queens. Frances Dominguez introduced the Balagtasian poetry debate. The subject she worked out with the youngsters for the debate concerned whether or not to attend college. A young Filipino student took each side of the argument, setting forth their points in Tagalog. English translations were provided through the use of an overhead projector. Following the debate in Tagalog, dialogue facilitator George Zavala led a dialogue with about 40 Filipino teenagers on the subject. The dialogue was complex and intense. The students related a wide variety of personal issues on both sides of the argument. This was followed by a series of presentations by F. Omar Talan, who presented riddles in the Filipino tradition, and the other young poets performed works relating to their Filipino identity. George Zavala then led a second dialogue on Filipino American identity. A key issue for the students was the aftermath of September 11, when a wave of patriotism made it difficult to sustain a multiplicity of identities. We thought the first Filipino dialogue program was a success. The Balagtasian debate was useful both in sparking dialogue about going to college as well as raising issues relating to Filipino identity.

The African American team led by Toni Blackman performed their piece at St. Augustine's Church on July 14. This performance grew out of the Animating Democracy retreat in Chicago when the Reverend Deacon Edgar Hopper, who was working with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum on the *Slave Galleries* project, met poet and freestyler Toni Blackman. On June 19 the Team, including Toni, Kewulay Kamara, and seven young poets, received a tour led by Deacon Hopper of the "slave gallery" rooms to which slaves and former slaves were relegated in the nineteenth century. The rooms had a powerful effect on the youngsters. Following the tour, Deacon Hopper, Kewulay Kamara, Toni Blackman, and a facilitator from the church conducted an intense dialogue with the students on the subject of racism. The dialogue explored contemporary issues of race in American society, juxtaposing it with racial issues in the nineteenth century when the segregated "slave gallery" was in use. Kewulay Kamara, for instance, initiated a discussion by pointing out that in his own experience as a Muslim in New York mosques, he has often been struck by the segregation of men and women that is part of Muslim religious life. The experience in the Slave Gallery reversed the dialogue process in an interesting way. Instead of using art to spark dialogue, it utilized a dialogue to stimulate art. Each of the participants, including Kamara and Toni, wrote powerful pieces about the experience. One of the students, Deana Evans, wrote her piece from the perspective of a slave.

Deacon Hopper was deeply moved listening to the writings. He invited the group to return to perform their work at the church on July 15. We set this up as one of the Dialogues. The performance that day, which included two African musicians, was extraordinary and left the congregation deeply moved. A few days prior to the event, Deacon Hopper told us that, in this church setting, he felt that it would be inappropriate to run an extended dialogue following the performance. We convinced Deacon Hopper to allow a brief discussion conducted by George Zavala following the event.



Poet Bob Holman in conversation with mentor poet for the Muslim American team, Ishmaili Raishidah, at the Dialogues presentation on September 14, 2002 at the Bowery Poetry Club.

The program at the slave gallery was audiotaped, and portions of it aired on July 21 and 22 on NPR's "The Next Big Thing," and were also picked up by WNYC's "Morning Edition."

On September 14, from 1:00 to 6:00, all three of the teams presented a full program at the Bowery Poetry Club. Regie Cabico and F. Omar Telan of the Filipino team performed a powerful poem written in the form of a duet in which a young man is reading a letter to his mother that avoids mentioning that he is gay. Regie Cabico speaks the letter to his mother, while F. Omar Telan relates the speaker's inward thoughts. The poem segued into a lively discussion about sexuality with elder Frances Dominguez, the young performers, and the audience.

The Muslim American group, led by Suheir Hammad, included performances by Suheir, Amir Vahab, and a group poem by the young Muslim American teenagers, each discussing Muslim holidays. The teenagers then read some of their own work, accompanied by Amir Vahab on either a lute or a drum. Tahani Salah, a Palestinian-American teenager who wears *hijab*,<sup>8</sup> read a powerful poem about the PLO. The performances led to a vital discussion about the effects of September 11 on the Muslim community, and about the diverse way that the religion of Islam is practiced and expressed in New York.

The African American team began with performances by the individual poets, but segued into a freestyle debate on whether “ghettos are beautiful/ghettos are not.” The result was a brilliant freestyle discussion in rap on the subject followed by a powerful discussion of African American identity, and a passionate debate on the use of the word “nigger” in the black community. The discussion grew heated, but never lost its positive focus and a number of whites in the audiences entered into the discussion.

In addition to our performance at the Bowery Poetry Club, all three teams brought the *Poetry Dialogues* to the Dodge Poetry Festival, on September 19, 2002. Since the performances were simultaneous, George Zavala led the dialogue portion of the program for the Filipino team, and Steve Zeitlin led the dialogue for the Muslim team.

Tahani Salah offered her account of the event: “Our second performance was at The Geraldine R. Dodge poetry festival in Waterloo Village, New Jersey. Each of the three groups separated and then later did a show together. My group performed in a tent with about 80 to 100 people in the audience. It was a very diverse crowd. After my group read, we held a dialogue with the audience. We were asked many different questions. As I tried my best to answer, I couldn't help but tell life stories along the way. We came across some serious questions on how we felt and still feel about everything that has gone on since 9-11. I think it's safe to say that both myself and the audience felt the same way in wishing things to be better. Afterwards, a young Israeli girl named Isabella came up to me and thanked me for reading. We were both happy to have met doing something so great—she, writing a news article for her school paper, and me trying to spread the word of a Palestinian poet.”<sup>9</sup>

In April of 2003, the Muslim and African American teams also performed at the People's Poetry Gathering in New York City, followed by a discussion with the audience that addressed censorship of Muslims in the U.S. and the use of strong or controversial language in rap and poetry.

## OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

### Personal Transformation of Youth Participants

As the testimony of teen participants reveals, participation in the project resulted in personal and artistic growth, increased engagement in community, and strengthening of leadership capacity. Steve Zeitlin commented, “When the *Poetry Dialogues* began, the high school student participants were reticent to even speak in their own groups, let alone perform. The transformation that occurred through their poetry was remarkable.”

The *Poetry Dialogues* workshops created safe space for participants to explore their identities, cultures, personal life experiences, history, and contemporary political situations. The impact of this environment, and the opportunity to be among peers who were sharing similar experiences, was particularly strong and meaningful for the Muslim American group. At an Animating Democracy Learning Exchange, one participant, Sheila, commented, “It's rare for me to meet a lot of South Asian writers. To be in a group was really great for me. It helped me to understand my culture more.” Another young woman concurred, “Suheir's such an

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engaging individual, she made it possible for us to come together and be proud of who we are. [We wrote about] government policies, war, love, peace. Suheir would come in and say, 'Ok today, we're going to write about Eid.' We did another piece about language. For me, that was amazing; I didn't write about these things in my daily life before."

Tahani, as a Palestinian American woman who covers her head, discussed further the importance of a supportive environment in the political climate of the time: "After 9/11, I have had a hard time with just everyday life, but performing was different. I've gone from shows with open arms to having my mic cut. The *Poetry Dialogues* was a safe and unforgettable time for everyone. Youth bringing youth together, working with a well-known poet, just showed us that we can do it, that we can make it through rough times."

Elder poet Ishmaili Raishida added, "One of the things we talked about in our small groups was what it meant to be the other of the other. Most of us were immigrants, and Muslim, and [some] African. For me, poetry is a form of history telling. The young people were writing about serious things—confronting their identity, discovering themselves as people of color in a society (in the state of current events). They confronted serious issues, but they didn't make them 'problems.' The caution I suggested was that, with the same strength they showed in confronting themselves, to have the same strength in finding their own voice and in framing how they want to be heard—not to be locked in one form or style; to use hip-hop, but not be confined by it. I am so really grateful for the space these two organizations [City Lore & Urban Word] provide. They provide training, and they provide an environment for critical but non-judgmental expression."

The workshops, community events, and performances also provided guidance for the development of craft and artistry. Natasha, from the African American team, explained how the opportunity to work with Toni Blackman improved both her written poetry and her freestyle: "When I started, I was just a spitter, a rapper. I was just doing it the way I thought I was supposed to, because that's what everybody else was doing on the street. In the Poetry Dialogue workshops, I learned how to sound like me." Toni explained, "Poetry is to rap as the

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sun is to light—poetry is the river. In a freestyle, sometimes it doesn't matter what you say, it's how you say it. With poetry, the words are the flow, the voice is like an instrument. A few years ago, if someone called you a poet, it was a put-down—it was saying I was a girl poet, and that I couldn't spit. The popularity of poetry is bringing an authenticity to the spit." Natasha continued, "[I had the question] 'If I write one way, will the streets receive me as they do?' The truth comes out much better than the lies. Rapping what was real to me made my spitting much better."

Tahani had a similar experience: "Coming to the workshops opened my eyes to what I really wanted to write about. Working with

experienced poets that know how to work the stage was very helpful in sharpening my skills in performing . . . [Raishida and Suheir] helped me reach inside and find the better; they just reached in and found the best of the best. The *Poetry Dialogues* gave my poetry a big push forward."

In summary, Jen Weiss, director of Urban Word, commented, "The project was really exciting for all of them. . . . I know it was successful for the individual teenagers involved: they got paid; they got to be in dialogue with elders, which is so essential; they got to work with amazing poets (how can you not be changed by that?); and they got to perform at the Dodge Poetry Festival." Steve Zeitlin added, "We have published their articles and written college recommendations for

the youngsters . . . they were inspired by their participation in the program, and will go on to make a difference in their communities. Tahani Salah, for instance, went on to become a member of the Urban Word Youth Board. Tahani, along with Deanna Evans, Derin Adesida, Mohammad Haq, Alex Reyes, are far better equipped to play a leadership role in their communities.”

### Poet-Facilitators and Mentors

Animating Democracy has helped me understand my work in a context, and have a vision for my own art, and what art in community means.

—Regie Cabico

The *Poetry Dialogues* also had an effect on the work of some of the mentors and poet-facilitators, such as Regie Cabico. In an interview, Regie said, “I got into dialogue. I enjoyed the [Fran Frazier] training. It helped me establish what ground rules are and how to use them in my teaching.”<sup>10</sup> In addition to providing new skills, the community events and performances opened Regie tonew possibilities of the impact of combining poetry and dialogue approaches. “People really did talk. It’s the first time I’ve experienced that performatively.”

Poet-facilitator Toni Blackman participated in an exchange with another Animating Democracy project at the Center for Cultural Exchange (CCE). After learning about Toni’s work in the *Poetry Dialogues*, CCE invited her to lead a workshop with teenagers involved in their African in Maine project.

The mentor poets are also continuing this work in their own communities. Frances Dominguez, for example, plans to establish a Balagtasan class with Filipino Americans through FAHSI. According to Steve Zeitlin, “Prior to the Dialogues, Frances’s experience with the tradition was strictly with the adult Filipino community. . . . The *Poetry Dialogues* experience inspired Frances Dominguez to continue her work bringing Balagtasan to Filipino American youth.” At the New York Learning Exchange, she expressed her feeling on the importance of the project: “I want to thank you for uncovering a dying form in our culture, especially here in America. These young people were born here; they do not speak our language. I had to teach them how to pronounce words. I’m reviving the dead culture of my country.”

Also, Steve noted, “Kewulay Kamara of the African American team is now incorporating his own nonprofit called Badenya, to carry on many of the same goals as the Dialogues with the African immigrant community.”

#### **Regie Cabico: Animating Democracy Emcee at Large!**

Poet-facilitator Regie Cabico became involved in the larger project of Animating Democracy and attended the Learning Exchanges most frequently. He also became the expected and celebrated emcee for Animating Democracy convenings.

At the National Exchange on Art & Civic Dialogue, in Flint, MI (October 2003), Regie led a workshop for teen participants which included a local Spoken Word group called the Neo Griot Collective. He said, “The highlight for me was the Learning Exchanges and meeting the Neo Griots. Spoken word is a bastard art form. At Flint, those kids had the eyes of the nation, and they were given respect. And I was able to do what I do, which is the Open Mic. I believe in open mics . . . and they got better!”



## Audiences and Community Impact

Steve Zeitlin remarked that, “The transformation that occurred through [the poetry of the youth] proved contagious with audiences who saw them perform. This work with young people seems particularly important because it takes place ‘where the rubber hits the road.’ Fear and stereotyping that drive communities apart often focus on ‘surly, threatening teenagers.’ Bringing out the articulateness of the students in both poetry and conversational dialogue was one of the achievements of the project. It gave audiences a way to relate to these young people and to engage them in meaningful discussion.”

Steve added, “The audiences at St. Augustine’s, the Jamaica Art Center, the Bowery Poetry Club, and the Dodge Poetry Festival were visibly moved by the programs and the ensuing dialogues. We showed the audiences a new kind of presentation that combined poetry and dialogue, and that addressed community issues with the community itself.”

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Jen Weiss of Urban Word, however, commented on the limited number of community events and organizing that actually took place within the timeline of the Animating Democracy project. “The Bowery Poetry Club event was really powerful,” she said, “but there weren’t enough people in that audience. There weren’t enough community events to have a real community impact.” Jen cited the absence of intracommunity events for the Muslim American team as a real shortcoming, “the most important one.”

In response to the question of whether the project achieved its stated goals of community transformation, Steve wrote:

To look at the meaningful transformation of whole communities, it is necessary to take a more long-term view of the work, because not enough can be accomplished in a single year with one set of experimental programs. Although Animating Democracy has only been able to fund us for this short time, our work does not end with this. We are also making the model we developed accessible through videotape, a national newsletter for teachers, and our web site.

New York is a complex city, with many different kinds of communities, many not rooted in place. Were we able to transform community? That would be an overstatement. But, in the *Poetry Dialogues*, we have set in motion processes that have the power to make a difference.

## ANALYSIS

### Partnerships and Collaboration

Many organizational challenges and issues arose in this project. It was, however, proposed as an experiment that would, and did indeed, yield many learnings on which to build continuing efforts. Steve Zeitlin stated in his final report that the Animating Democracy phase of the *Poetry Dialogues* “helped to define a useful model for further stages of development and implementation of the project/idea, and new initiatives.”

Partnership and collaboration constituted primary areas of tension in the beginning. There were miscommunications early on and a lack of clarity in defining roles. Problematic

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areas stemmed from not bringing partners and facilitator poets into the process of program design. For example, although decision-making regarding community venues shifted to the facilitator-artists, they did not have a full overview of intent. Some of the mentors and poet-facilitators were not well-informed of the larger Animating Democracy context and the goals of the project. Also, the partnership with Urban Word was not as developed and utilized as it



Tony Blackman, facilitator poet for the African American team asking for suggestions of topics for a freestyle debate at the People's Poetry Gathering in 2003.

might have been. Earlier involvement of these parties may have avoided some awkward logistical problems and enabled more informed choices along the way.

In City Lore's initial proposal for the Animating Democracy round of the project, Urban Word NYC (then Youth Speaks NY) was designated to help select teenage poets to participate on the teams, which it did. City Lore made a conscious decision to rely on Suheir Hammad, Toni Blackman, and Regie Cabico to provide pedagogy and community interface, drawing upon their considerable experience as workshop leaders. Jen Weiss, however, felt that Urban Word had more experience with pedagogy and community organizing than City Lore initially acknowledged or utilized, and that the limitations placed on her role and resources as a collaborating organization caused her to step out early.<sup>11</sup> This created additional work for City Lore, and lessened the potential impact of the project.

Steve stated, "With such an experimental program, it is not surprising to learn that, in the realization, the needs and partnerships differed from the way they were envisioned in the proposal. Urban Word turned out to be a crucial link to the teenage community, whereas some of Poets House skills with library and literary programs were less crucial. Poets House assisted with the original proposal and took a role in helping to organize the preparatory sessions and the presentations. Once the *Poetry Dialogues* were underway, we recognized that we might have established an even closer relationship with Urban Word."

City Lore came to realize that bringing Urban Word into a more central role and sharing power to create a more genuine collaboration between the two organizations could be crucial to the project's success. In 2003, City Lore was awarded a Rockefeller Foundation PACT (Partnerships Affirming Community Transformation) grant for a new round of *Poetry Dialogues*, with Urban Word NYC named as a collaborating partner. Jen Weiss reflected on the evolution of partnership between the two organizations:

Personal lessons learned: Define roles early on. Build administration time into the budget. With PACT, I wrote half the grant proposal, and got [two to three] of the letters of support. I had several meetings with Steve to talk about how it could be different. Within two weeks of getting the grant, we sat down together. We still have to negotiate the budget, but it's not them hiring us. We're applying for other money together. I'm much more involved now.

## **Working with Youth**

### ***Paying youth participants***

An interesting and complex choice that City Lore made from the initial planning of the project, and included in the budget, was to pay the young poets for attending workshops and for performing.<sup>12</sup> This is an approach often debated in designing youth programs. Some argue that it's important to pay participants, particularly those from underprivileged communities, in order

to make it possible for them to participate; otherwise, participation may compete with the possibility of finding other paying work during that time, and economic pressures may determine who is able to join the project and who is not. Some feel it is important to model the arts as a viable economic option for choosing a career path; others argue that it sets false expectations and may attract participants who are not genuinely motivated to develop their training and artistry.

Steve Zeitlin explained his reasoning for paying the young poets: “City Lore grows out of the fields of folk arts and public sector folklore. The emphasis is to ensure that participants are well paid. All the grants from the National Endowment for the Arts in Folk and Traditional Arts, for instance, insist that significant portions of the funding reach the folk artists. This is quite different from fields such as journalism and film where paying the subjects for the work is considered unethical and unnecessary. The *Poetry Dialogues* model utilizes young people as participants, poets, and artists, not as members of the audience. As we structured the project, it never occurred to us that the young people would not be paid. We also believed that paying the students—and offering them the respect that payment confers—was a key element in getting them to buy into the project and make it successful.”

Jen Weiss, however, noted that “Tahani and Sean are both Urban Word kids. I expected more of them to stay involved with Urban Word. But when the project was over, that was it.” Urban Word typically offers free after-school and weekend workshops for teenagers, with participants that return year after year. Their retention rate is generally high. It is difficult to know if the low rate of retention for the *Poetry Dialogues* project was related to the expectation of payment or other factors.

### **Poetry Dialogues as intergenerational**

Steve contended that, “Throughout the project, the intergenerational dialogue within each group was a powerful force, often affecting both the young and old poets. . . . We utilized the three facilitator poets to develop a new pedagogy [for City Lore] that linked youth culture to traditional poetry in the elders’ and youths’ countries of origins. In all the groups, the young people had to stretch their preconceptions of what was to be written about and discussed, as did the older poets. The potential of the Dialogues lay in the intergenerational nature of the presentations—a version of the community itself, with its own complexities, was presented to the wider community.” One of the Muslim American team youth participants spoke to the importance of having the elder poets and poet-facilitators involved: “As a Muslim American poet, who do you go to, before your own page? I didn’t have anyone to look up to. Through this, I met Suheir, Raishida, and made these relationships.”

Jen Weiss felt strongly, however, that “[*Poetry Dialogues*] was about the kids. The elder poets were great, but it’s a youth project. It should be used to reach other youth.” She wanted to organize more community events that would reach other teenagers or be performed in places where teenagers are (in public schools, community centers, etc.). “Dodge was really great,” she said, “where they did get to perform for other teenagers. I think, the more teenagers the better. But that’s my orientation.” She also emphasized the importance of pedagogy and program design. A major pitfall of intergenerational work is that older people tend to think they’re more knowledgeable. In some things they are, but you have to define what your goals

*“Intergenerational work can underestimate what kids can do. Teenagers are knowledge producers. They produce knowledge that I can incorporate into programming. That requires a real vision for the role of the elders.”*

are. The elders were played out as ‘experts’ in the Animating Democracy project; it was not set up as a dialogue between generations. Intergenerational work can underestimate what kids can do. Teenagers are *knowledge producers*. They produce knowledge that I can incorporate into programming. That requires a real vision for the role of the elders.”

In the next phase of the Dialogues, elders will be required to attend a training retreat and workshops. Urban Word will set up a pedagogical philosophy teaching in student-centered ways and work with elders differently.

### ***Pedagogy and youth development***

Steve Zeitlin stated: “One of the key issues we faced with all three of our teams is that we were working with young, high school poets in addition to accomplished professionals. All three groups were successful, but it took considerable time and resources to get the students to open up, to identify the issues to be written about and presented, and to develop the performance skills necessary for the Dialogues presentations. This additional work pushed back our timetable for the project by about a month.”

Both Jen and Steve agreed that the process of identifying youth participants was limited. There was a nomination by a teacher, and an application. Steve explained, “The auditions were conducted through written applications rather than live auditions. That meant that the poets selected were good writers but had no experience performing their work or standing in front of audiences.” In the beginning of the project, Steve had the hope that they would be able to find young poets who were already writing and performing at an accomplished level. But, as it turned out, considerable time was spent working with the young people to bring them to the point where they could perform their work effectively.

Jen Weiss reflected, “City Lore could have hired us to do pedagogy and youth development. That’s the point, to *develop* youth, community, dialogue. Teenagers have something to say, and we want to hear their voices.”<sup>13</sup> She felt that pedagogical process with the young poets should have been a stronger focus and should have been built into the initial planning of the project. She also believes that the poet-facilitators were not coordinated enough. “It’s not about stars coming in for a few hours a month; it’s about sustained, organized work with the teenagers. Regie’s strengths [for example] are in his pedagogy. It’s important to assess strengths and create a program that is porous enough to accommodate them.”

From City Lore’s perspective, Steve said, “Our strategy was to bring this model as far as we could, and then to use the results of the project to help raise funds for a second round of the project.” He acknowledges Urban Word’s pedagogy around spoken word poetry and its capacity to bridge the gap between adult poet-mentors and youth participants. The next phase of the *Poetry Dialogues* will use youth to recruit youth. “We always turn youth into youth mentors,” Jen explained. “[This time,] Tahani will be a mentor, and Natasha. Otherwise, you use teenagers; you exploit them if you don’t give them any leadership position. We’ll also be working with the mentor facilitators differently.”

Steve detailed plans for the next round of the project based on lessons learned in the Animating Democracy experiment:

The *Poetry Dialogues* will improve on the model developed for Animating Democracy in a number of key ways. Because we seek to build a long-term, sustainable project, we will invest in the training and the implementing of youth mentors for each team, helping to create a new generation of arts activists. Drawing on Urban Word NYC’s expertise,

each team will include a youth mentor-facilitator. Once selected, all members of *The Poetry Dialogues*, youth and adults, will participate in a new weekend-long community-building writing/performance “retreat” led by writing/performance artists and teachers from Urban Word NYC.

The retreat will offer intensive sessions on writing and performing for the new young poets. [It] will give all the teams a chance to interact with one another. It will bring youth together, before they separate into their “teams,” as a community across cultural differences. It will also help energize and stimulate discussions and urgent writings around issues that are important to youth participants.

The retreat will offer workshops for the facilitator-poets and the teen mentors. . . . [Urban Word] facilitators will work with respective elder, poet-facilitator, and youth mentor teams to develop teaching strategies aimed at creating student-centered spaces in which to write and talk. Similarly, by bringing both the young poets and the facilitators together at the outset, they will have the opportunity both to share, discuss, explore, and trade their own teaching methods, and to see each other as resources.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Intracommunity Dialogue: Multiplicity Within**

#### ***Challenges: the Filipino American team***

From the beginning, there were multiple challenges in intragroup communication for this team. As poet-facilitator Regie Cabico explained, “I had to hold a lot of groups in this—kids from different regions [of the Philippines], immigrants, Americanized teens, different languages . . . [different sexual orientations, and different relationships to religion and politics].”

Choosing the primary topic for the team to address was an initial point of difficulty. Steve Zeitlin wrote:

Working with Regie and Frances Dominguez on an intracommunity dialogue brought up many interesting issues. As a mentor-poet, representing the “older generation,” the subjects that Frances selected for the Balagtas poetry debates were not always what one would expect—or what we would have chosen. For our program, she wanted to debate whether or not young Filipino Americans should attend college.

The subject for the Balagtas and the discussion was quite different from the issue of Filipino identity and sexuality that characterizes some of Regie and participant Omar Telan’s work, and the rage against American commercialism and stereotyping that marked some of the young rappers such as Charles McHale and Alex Reyes. These differences made for a certain amount of tension in the group itself.

When asked about the process for choosing the topic, and how the college debate arose, Regie responded, “I don’t know, I can’t remember. That’s been a burning issue for me. It may have come from workshops, or may have been brought in, but the kids latched on to it. We could have talked about sex and sexual identity, but I think people were afraid. Frances is like a grandmother. Even I didn’t come out to Francis until Filipino youth day.”

Though Frances Dominguez was very kind and open, some participants may have been intimidated by her status as elder. Regie noted that Frances did not attend the dialogue training conducted by Fran Frazier. In some instances, that created some obstacles. “You have to confront people’s choices,” Regie said. “For example, with the topic of college, Frances is always going to say ‘go to school.’ The question probed a lot of cultural pain. [Because I was a

facilitator,] my own agendas were never rallied. I had to remain neutral, stifle my own opinions. As a teacher, I also had to be neutral.”

Notably, however, Frances ultimately did become more open-minded about issues of sexual identity and youth perspectives as a direct result of participating in the Dialogues. As Steve pointed out, “The results of each group’s dialogue within the group became part of the presentation itself.”

Some of the challenges of framing that this group encountered may have resulted from early gaps in communication during the design phase of the project. Since decision making and organization of community events eventually shifted to the poet-facilitators, the process might have been smoother if they had been engaged from the beginning. In an interview, Regie remarked:

For projects like this, you need time. I found bilingual teens who really had the skills to do this late in the project. As a result, we reached out to a new community. I felt a lot of things were forced in this project, because they had to be. I was fed variables and locked in. Rather than saying—“Regie, what are your ideas for this?”—I was given this project. I could handle that, I could do it. But it was not my vision. They should have talked to me—what would you like to do? Because they’re not Filipino, they don’t know what the burning issues are.

Steve concurred in the final report, “[The topic of college] did elicit considerable heated discussion at the FAHSI youth day. Although I was skeptical about the subject that Frances chose for the Balagtasán, I was struck by how lively the debate turned out to be with the Filipino teenagers. Often, the issues that an ethnic community is interested in exploring may not be the same as those that we envision for them.”

### ***New connections: the African American team***

The African American team focused on praise poetry: “In the tradition of praise singers,” Kewulay Kamara explained, “We offered praises, at a church on the Lower East Side, at the Dodge Poetry Festival, and at the Bowery Poetry Club. Praises in words take different forms: oratory, poetry, or rap. Praises ground individuals, bring families together, and uplift communities through affirmations of history, reality, opportunity and destiny.”<sup>15</sup>

This team encountered intragroup differences in another way and was able to achieve meaningful levels of dialogue in the workshop process. The group included participants who were both African American of many generations—some descendents of slaves, in the U.S. for many generations, or from other areas of the African diaspora—and those who were born and/or raised on the African continent. Because of the different histories and backgrounds that youth and mentors brought to the experience, the workshop that was held at St. Augustine’s Church was particularly rich and layered.<sup>16</sup>

After visiting the Slave Gallery, with an introduction and tour by Deacon Hopper, everyone was asked to write a poem, silently, including emotional responses, thoughts, and reflections, on what they’d just experienced. Afterwards, poet-facilitator Toni Blackman invited everyone, including Deacon Hopper and two other members of the congregation who were being trained in dialogue, to share what they’d written. The poems were extremely poignant, filled with imagination,

*While the poetry written by the youth captured a tremendous sense of empowerment, resistance, and hope..., the dialogue revealed an equally powerful disillusionment and sense of futility in the urban “ghetto.”*

empathy for the people (the slaves) who used to sit in the Gallery, and questioning or reaffirmations of faith in the face of oppression. After the sharing of writings, the group engaged in dialogue.

Mentor poet Kewulay Kamara wrote later: “From the ‘slave gallery,’ we traveled back to those who were left behind in Africa—the mothers who came home from the fields to find their children gone. While poignant expressions of pain were to be expected, it was the triumph and hope in the writings of the young participants that brought me to tears. They made me recall the Jali expression:

### TONI BLACKMAN

(Concluding a Poetry Dialogues free-style at the Bowery Poetry Club, September 14, 2002)

Ghettos are Beautiful vs. Ghettos are not  
That is the topic that we drop  
You, Natasha, kick in the beat box—  
Don’t you understand, this is the way we rock!  
See, we try to have the conversation  
through the rhyme  
that’s what we do, yes all the time  
This is the aspect of Hip Hop  
that you might not see on D-TV,  
or the radio,  
I said, sometimes, we flow  
That’s the way we battle life,  
without fists, you know,  
without the guns, without the knives,  
without the violence—  
that’s the way we keep the hood in peaceful  
silence!

Ghettos are beautiful vs. ghettos are not  
I said, at the end of the day,  
who cares, as long as you rock the spot  
As long as you live, your life will be true,  
understand about the God that is within you!  
You got to be clear, you got to stay real,  
you got to open your ears so that you can hear  
you got to understand, as we break it down  
turn up the volume as we end this sound,  
You see . . .

This was the debate we did for you this afternoon.  
This was the debate we free-styled, not a moment  
too soon.  
This was the debate, the dialogue that we did start.  
I’m sure that it won’t end today, but this is the end  
of this part!

*Beauty is not humanity  
Poverty is not humanity  
Power is not humanity  
Humanity is hope.”<sup>17</sup>*

What was striking about the dialogue was that it opened complex, intricate, and generous conversation on different experiences of Blackness and identity in contexts such as New York, the U.S. South, West Africa, and in different economic classes or educational situations. Discussions around continental and diasporic experience, as well as generational differences within African American experience, were candid and passionate. While the poetry written by the youth captured a tremendous sense of empowerment, resistance, and hope (within the imagery of slave experience), the dialogue revealed an equally powerful disillusionment and sense of futility in the urban “ghetto.” The young poets offered very raw questions about where to go from here. Participants listened carefully, spoke from personal experience, and in equitable ways, revealed assumptions, and left with a deeper of understanding of each other and the issues, achieving the primary markers of what is generally considered genuine dialogue.

As Kewulay Kamara attested, “The *Poetry Dialogues* built bridges between “elders,” “masters,” and “students.” In the end we were all one: we learned and grew.”

### Civic Dimensions of Poetry Dialogues

I don’t want to change your mind, I want to explore your mind. I’m here to make everybody think of everything. . . . Talk it out with me, but don’t leave with misconceptions about me and my people.

—Tahani Salah<sup>18</sup>



Tahani Salah and Sheila Mirza from the Muslim American team embracing after a Poetry Dialogues session, 2003.

The ways in which the *Poetry Dialogues* were civic in nature are as complex and layered as poetry is itself.

The Muslim American team, given the historical and political context at the time of the project, most obviously addressed civic issues in performances and dialogues with audiences. At both the Bowery Poetry Club and the Dodge Poetry Festival, audiences were very engaged in discussions of September 11 and its aftermath, and the role of Muslim Americans in U.S. society at this time. The team also demonstrated the diversity of the Muslim American communities in New York, and to humanize their experiences, which stood in counterpoint to the monolithic extremist view of Muslims that was being promoted by mainstream national media at that time. As Steve Zeitlin remarked, “The richness of perspectives being presented by Muslim Americans, as different, for instance, as poet Rashidah Ismaili and the young

rapper Mohammad Haq are, is what makes the [*Poetry Dialogues*] model innovative and effective.” This inevitably provoked discussion, direct and indirect, of national policy in relation to the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq during the Bush Administration, new immigration policies, and civil rights under Homeland Security and the Patriot Act. Although there was no particular structure in the design of the dialogues to bring these issues forward or achieve deeper intergroup understanding, the honesty and immediacy of the topics in the poetry itself elicited civic response.

In the African American group, the topic of “ghettos are beautiful/ghettos are not” may not seem civic at first, but within the free-style debates performed by the poetry team, many issues of civic dimension were touched upon: poverty in African American neighborhoods, drug abuse, gun violence, lack of jobs and opportunity, for example. Following the Bowery Poetry Club performance, the discussion of race, identity, and language that ensued—particularly around the use of the word “nigger” historically, in music and media, and in black communities now—was deeply sociopolitical. Certainly the workshop and performance-dialogue for the congregation at St. Augustine’s engaged the history of slavery and its contemporary implications. Other free-styles led by Toni Blackman took topics from audience suggestions, which were sometimes civic and sometimes not, and were not necessarily facilitated toward deeper civic meaning in the audience dialogues following.

The main topic of the Filipino American team—whether or not it’s important for youth to attend college—is perhaps the most subtle, but reveals deeply political roots and civic implications. On one level, it touched upon contemporary financial realities and pressures of Filipino Americans in the U.S., and conflicts between first generation immigrant parents and second or third generation youth. But the intensity of cultural pressures on Filipino American youth to be educated and financially successful can also be linked to historical events—what is referred to in the Philippines as the “brain drain,” the policy under dictator Ferdinand Marcos that trained large numbers of Filipinos in health care professions (as doctors, nurses, aides, etc.) and then exported them as migrant workers to the United States and other countries.<sup>19</sup> The extent to which these civic dimensions came to the surface within the Filipino American team and in the community dialogues and performances is difficult to discern.

To some degree, this may be due to the approach to dialogue facilitation that the project used. Steve Zeitlin commented that George Zavala’s strengths, however, were not in constructing a methodology that elicited elements that might be considered *civic dialogue* (as distinct from other



forms of postperformance discussion or conversation). Steve wrote, “He has immense rapport with young poets, and I believe that his warmth and presence helped to elicit emotional and candid responses from audiences. [But] George had some shortcomings in guiding the dialogues in a step by step manner.”

In all three groups, the exploration of culturally specific themes and forms, and intragroup dialogue that occurred in the process, can also be considered civic in and of itself. However, in planning future phases of the Dialogues, beyond the Animating Democracy project, City Lore is interested in more explicit connections to the civic realm and influencing policies. According to Steve:

In the next round of Dialogues, we plan to use our four teams to address policy issues relating to the communities they represent. With each of the four new intergenerational teams—Muslim American, Queer, Deaf, and Incarcerated—the policy issues are different but crucial to address. With the Muslim American team, our efforts will be geared to bringing the group to perform before legislators who are working with issues relating to immigration and The Patriot Act. With the Incarcerated Team, we will work to have the group perform for the Prison Authorities, and to bring groups of legislators and those concerned with youth delinquency to Rikers to see the performance and participate in the dialogue. With the Queer group, we would seek to bring the team to education conferences where teachers and principals discuss school policies across states and districts. Part of our goal with the Deaf team is to bring the group to mainstream poetry slams and spoken word events, creating a new recognition for the Deaf community. We will also bring them to Gaulladet College, a center for Deaf learning and policy-making nationwide, to help encourage policies that encourage the use of ASL (American Sign Language) instead of (or along with) signed English and the new implants to improve Deaf hearing.

### **Dialogic Poetry and Poetry as Dialogue**

As we all know, words, in any form, are vibrations. Vibrations make things move, and bring them to life. Words uttered reach beyond any finite self.

—Kewulay Kamara

There were at least four primary levels or locations of dialogue within this project. First, intergenerational dialogue occurred among youth poets, mentors, and elder poets in the workshop process. Second, a dialogic exchange between genres of poetry or oral art forms—between traditional and contemporary forms, from different cultural practices and contexts—took place within the generational exchange. Third, debate or dialogue happened in the performances of the forms themselves, especially with Balagtasian and Freestyling (in hip-hop tradition) which City Lore specifically chose because of their dialogic or debatelike structures. And finally, audience dialogues were facilitated following each performance; in some instances, the program also closed with poetry.

One particularly intriguing aspect of the *Poetry Dialogues* proposal was the idea of a dialogue between poetic forms, how one might influence the other through the encounter of the elder and youth poets.

Kewulay Kamara worked with the African American team and transmitted the tradition of praise

*When West African musicians performed with the team, it challenged the youth to work with the polyrhythms of African music, different from rhythms typical in free-style or rap...*

poetry, encouraging the young poets to express praises in their Spoken Word and “spitting.” When West African musicians performed with the team, it challenged the youth to work with the polyrhythms of African music, different from rhythms typical in free-style or rap, and pushed them to explore and utilize new rhythms in their poetry.

Kewulay Kamara wrote in his essay, “Words are Serious, Words are Divine”:

Poetry is personal communication that transcends all because it always remains intimate. It permits us to be personal. During group discussions, we were able to demonstrate that our realities are all part of one reality. When the connection between the personal and the communal was made, all apparent timidity receded.

At an Animating Democracy Learning Exchange in New York, George Zavala stated an obvious but significant fact: Poetry is an emotional form. It is an essence of language. Toni Blackman described the process of the workshops, for the youth poets, as “an exercise in exploring your authentic feelings, your true emotions on paper, so that we could then inspire a community to want to say something meaningful, and say something real—say something with depth.” This acknowledges an implicit understanding or belief in the importance of emotional content and expression in the dialogue process (unlike approaches to debate or public conversation that emphasize only the rational). Tahani Salah confirmed this with her experience of the *Poetry Dialogues*: “I realized for the first time that poetry can help get people talking. In poetry, people can express their true feelings, and that sincerity can help other people to open up.”

Also, Steve Zeitlin contends that poetry is an intensification of language that inspires heightened response. He believes that moving from poetry to dialogue—influenced by both the talents of the youth and facilitator poets and the wise commentaries of the elder poets—“elevated” the ensuing conversations. Not only were audiences more open, offering personal experiences and emotional as well as intellectual responses, but they also communicated in heightened language, using repetitions, rhythm, and metaphors that may not have been elicited otherwise.

As is typical in postperformance dialogues, however, Steve Zeitlin noted that “art always draws attention to and references itself. Audiences always try to begin any dialogue following a performance by commenting on the performance itself.” He continues: “One of the challenges for the facilitator is to make the transition from the natural audience response—which is to comment not on the issues raised but on the artistic elements of the performance—to a facilitated discussion of the concerns raised in the poetry.” A structural discovery that City Lore made in the course of programming the Balagtasan events was that ending the presentation portion of the program with a poetry debate (rather than ending with individual performances of prewritten work) segued much more naturally into audience discussion of the issues. Animating Democracy liaison Caron Atlas noted that witnessing the *Poetry Dialogues* among the performers made it easy for the audience to jump in, with no stiff transition. Taking a cue from the Filipino team’s experience, City Lore decided to use this structure for each team.

“Of all the poetry forms with which we experimented, freestyle rap clearly showed the greatest potential for generating dialogue,” reported Steve: “Toni’s ability to ask community audiences for subjects that they would like to discuss, and then work them into a discussion in freestyle form is simply astonishing dialogic presentation. Although the dialogues are ‘in your face,’ they are able to raise intelligent arguments and at the same time vent emotions in a way that leads to a reasoned conversation.

*“Of all the poetry forms with which we experimented, freestyle rap clearly showed the greatest potential for generating dialogue...”*

Toni Blackman and the young poets she works with are a vastly underutilized resource for generating meaningful dialogues in communities.”

At the New York Learning Exchange, Toni explained that as poets, rappers, and freestylers, she and her colleagues are practicing forms true to the origins of hip-hop. “These people freestyle and actually say something, because they have a knowledge base,” she said. “One of the challenges for rappers today is that we’re inundated by rappers [without consciousness] influencing the young people. In other countries, the political and spiritual nature of hip-hop is so clear. We’re up against a whole corporate machine.” Toni’s comments suggest that the *Poetry Dialogues* model is an important contribution to the perpetuation of hip-hop, as well as to civic dialogue, because it emphasizes content and connection to community.

Hip-Hop and Spoken Word poetry are not only cultural forms but, arguably, constitute or contain movements and subcultures themselves, creating links and facilitating connections among an entire generation globally. The phrase “Youth Culture” is often used to refer to the vast influence and impact of hip-hop aesthetics and Spoken Word, nationally and internationally. Regie Cabico describes Spoken Word as “a bastard art form not yet recognized” for its unique characteristics, both aesthetic and civic. Jen Weiss often notes that the spoken word is the best, and perhaps only, way to mobilize and harness the intelligence and energy of young people and direct them towards community issues and social change.

Spoken Word and Rap do not always move beyond single-voice expression to a mode of genuine exchange, engaging a broader community in issues of mutual concern. The emphasis is usually on the uncensored individual voices of people typically considered voiceless, or under-represented, in dominant social or political discourse—youth, people of color, queer folks, or those with alternative political views—which in itself is a contribution to civic life.

These and other forms of poetry in performance utilized by the *Poetry Dialogues* project carry immense potential to catalyze audiences and to generate complex and meaningful dialogue. As provocative art, poetry can elicit passionate and immediate responses from audiences; as intimate but structured expression, it can open a space for honest exchange of experience and point of view; as heightened language, poetry can bring public conversation to a meta-level of communication, engaging imagination, metaphor, and spontaneous creative expression; and as intergenerational communication, the impact of hearing young people articulate their thoughts and feelings through poetry can expand participation in community-wide dialogue.

The potential that the *Poetry Dialogues* model offers is to create and open new civic spaces through poetry, new modes of engagement and community participation, and to understand the aesthetics themselves as dialogue, as civic space.

*You got to be clear, you got to stay real,  
you got to open your ears so that you can hear  
you got to understand, as we break it down  
turn up the volume as we end this sound,  
You see . . .*

*This was the debate we did for you this afternoon.  
This was the debate we free-styled, not a moment too soon.  
This was the debate, the dialogue that we did start.  
I’m sure that it won’t end today, but this is the end of this part!*

—Toni Blackman

**Andrea Assaf** is Program Associate for Animating Democracy, and was Animating Democracy's liaison to the *Poetry Dialogues* project. She is a performer, poet, educator, and activist. She has a master's in Performance Studies and a bachelor's in Acting, both from NYU. With a training background in theater, she is currently a solo artist creating original multi-disciplinary work. She has taught Meisner Technique, creative writing, ESL, and facilitates text and movement workshops for people of all ages. Her community arts experience ranges from intergenerational work with Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, to creating original collaborative performances within the Filipino/a/American community in NYC, to street theater with youth in East Harlem, to performance-based conservation education with young adults in Tanzania, East Africa. Her theory interests include post-colonial studies, critical pedagogy, and cross-cultural performance. She is a member of The Writers Roundtable and Alternate ROOTS, where she is an active part of the Resources for Social Change workgroup. She speaks Kiswahili and Spanish.

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<sup>1</sup> Transcription from video of the live Poetry Dialogues performance at the Bowery Poetry Club, September 14, 2002

<sup>2</sup> Information attributed to Steve Zeitlin or City Lore is drawn primarily from City Lore reports to Animating Democracy, written and submitted by him as executive director (unless otherwise noted).

<sup>3</sup> City Lore website: [www.citylore.org](http://www.citylore.org).

<sup>4</sup> "Urban Word NYC (formerly known as Youth Speaks NY) ignited the youth spoken word and poetry scene in New York City when it was established in partnership with Teachers & Writers Collaborative in 1999. Since then, Urban Word NYC has provided thousands of New York City teenagers with free, safe, ongoing, and uncensored writing and performance opportunities." Urban Word website: [www.urbanwordnyc.org](http://www.urbanwordnyc.org). "Poets House is a literary center and poetry archive, a collection and meeting place that invites poets and the public to step into the living tradition of poetry." Poets House website: [www.poetshouse.org](http://www.poetshouse.org).

<sup>5</sup> From the "Poetry Dialogues" article by Tahani Salah, published in City Lore's newsletter, C.A.R.T.S. (Culture Arts Resources for Teachers and Students), Spring 203 (Volume 7).

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion on the historical and cultural connections between poetry forms, Bob Holman of the Bowery Poetry Club recommends the book *Orality and Literacy*, on how the Jali tradition came through the Middle Passage and influenced the development of hip-hop.

<sup>7</sup> Study Circles Resource Center is dedicated to finding ways for all kinds of people to engage in dialogue and problem solving on critical social and political issues. Website: [www.studyircles.org](http://www.studyircles.org).

<sup>8</sup> Hair covering, in Muslim religious tradition.

<sup>9</sup> Tahani Salah, C.A.R.T.S. newsletter, op.cit.

<sup>10</sup> Regie, with his usual sense of humor, offered additional comments on setting ground rules: "I don't know if ground rules work in all contexts. For example, teaching kids who want to be able to eat in class. One woman said she was coming directly from work. We accepted that, tried it, and she was coming in with buckets of Kentucky Fried Chicken. It's complicated with teens. It probably works better for controversial subjects."

<sup>11</sup> All quotes from Jen Weiss of Urban Word are taken from my notes of interviews with her, at the midpoint and end of the timeline for the Animating Democracy supported phase of the Poetry Dialogues.

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<sup>12</sup> Youth participants received \$50 for each workshop and \$100 for each performance/public event. Poet-facilitators and elder/mentor poets were paid higher rates.

<sup>13</sup> Urban Word pedagogy draws from Freire, and from Lisa Delpit (author of *Other People's Children*), with her focus is on explicit vs. implicit teaching; and *Fires in the Bathroom*, by the organization What Kids Can Do ([www.whatkidscando.org](http://www.whatkidscando.org)), dealing more with policy issues. Urban Word published a book (*Brave New Voices: Guide to Teaching Spoken Word Poetry*, Heinemann, 2001) that sets out its philosophy (Jen Weiss, interview).

<sup>14</sup> Steve Zeitlin feels that the retreat model will improve upon the “long and costly string of writing workshops” utilized for Animating Democracy; however, it is questionable how much development can be accomplished in a single retreat, especially if it has multiple and layered goals. The process of developing artistry and performance ability is something that requires time (a process of maturing into form), especially for youth.

<sup>15</sup> From “Words are Serious, Words are Divine” by Kewulay Kamara, published in C.A.R.T.S. (op.cit.).

<sup>16</sup> I was able to attend this workshop with the African American team at St. Augustine’s Church. Comments here are from my own reflections on this event.

<sup>17</sup> From “Words are Serious, Words are Divine” by Kewulay Kamara, published in C.A.R.T.S. (op.cit.).

<sup>18</sup> From City Lore’s case study presentation at the Animating Democracy Learning Exchange, NYC.

<sup>19</sup> The controversy around this policy— promoted as a financial way out of extreme poverty on the one hand, and considered a draining of the Philippines’ most educated and trained professionals on the other—still influences the generation of Filipino immigrants who are now parents and grandparents of high school or college-age youth. It is also complexly related to U.S. political history and military presence in the Philippines.