Words Are Serious, Words Are Divine

by Kewulay Kamara

Taking students to visit community sites can provide rich, authentic experiences that inspire powerful personal responses. Often young rappers are—as freestyler Toni Blackman put it—"stuck in the style" so writing about dramatic new experiences forces them to experiment. African-American high school students who participated in the Poetry Dialogues worked with poets Toni Blackman and Kewulay Kamara to write poems based on their experience of visiting St. Augustine’s Church, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, where slaves and former slaves were separated from White parishioners in a "slave gallery" above the main sanctuary.

As we all know, words, in any form are vibrations. Vibrations make things move, and bring them to life. The Lastiri ("griot") say:

What is said is done,
What is done is said.
Words are serious
Words are divine.

Working with young people who are already masters of their language in City Lore’s Poetry Dialogues affirmed for me the idea that great art lies like a seed within the heart. Words uttered reach beyond any finite self. We nourish and encourage the artists to bring them forth. Because poetry emerges from the inside and takes on an outward form, it is deeply spiritual, and by that I mean unifying and healing. In concrete social settings, such as the diverse metropolis that New York is, sharing of thoughts, forming words, expressing experiences, and reviewing history are as important as breaking bread, breathing, and praying together.

Poetry is personal communication that transcends all because it always remains intimate. It permits us to be personal. When Poetry Dialogues provided the youth opportunity and encouragement to express themselves on issues of personal concern to them, ink flowed from their pens more easily. 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.

Poetry can diagnose and heal. The Poetry Dialogues built bridges between "elders," "masters," and "students." In the end we were all one: we learned and grew. Through the little-known "slave gallery" and museum at St. Augustine’s Church on the Lower East Side, we traveled in memory to a time in America when the labor of our ancestors was harnessed by those who did not care to see their pain or the blood welling in their eyes. Perhaps as

Please turn to page 18

The Poetry Dialogues

The Poetry Dialogues, sponsored by City Lore and Poets House, created three poetry teams, each composed of young poets, elder masters, and poet-facilitators, to stimulate dialogue in their respective communities. The teams addressed community-specific issues that included cultural identity, the pressures of being an immigrant, legal or illegal; police violence; intergenerational relations, and factionalism in their communities.

Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad led a Middle Eastern team that brought five young poets with roots in the Middle East and the Muslim world together with poets Ammiel Alcalay and Ishmael Raishida, master oud players and a muazzin or khalil, who leads the call to prayer in mosques. Filipino American poet Reggie Cabico brought together a group of young poets with roots in the Philippines with Frances Dominique, master of the Balagtasan Filipino poetry tradition. Poet and renowned freestyler Toni Blackman led a team of young African-American poets, introducing them to and working with jali ("griot") poet Kewulay Kamara from Sierra Leone. Project partner Urban Word NYC helped to identify the young participants for all three teams, working in collaboration with the facilitator poets.

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Kewulay Kamara invokes a blessing
at the Opening Sampler of the People’s Poetry Gathering.

Photo by Matthew Cooper

C.A.R.T.S.—Cultural Arts Resources for Teachers and Students / 2003

17
Words Are Divine
continued from page 17

slave families sat cramped in the stifling bowel of a slave ship turned into the “slave
gallery” of a magnificent church, to hear
their master praise the Lord for their for-
tunes, they hid their pride in clouds saved
for their descendants. 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 ex-
pressions 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 ex-
pression:

Beauty is not humanity
Poverty is not humanity
Power is not humanity
Humanity is hope.

In the tradition of the praise singers, 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, poe-
try, or rap. Praises ground individuals,
bring families together, and uplift commu-
nities through affirmations of history, real-
ity, opportunity and destiny.

Lit by the electric moon, the Bowery
Poetry Club — where we met to work on
our dialogues — is the big tree in our vil-
lage under which we gather at night. As I
thought about what the experience of
Poetry Dialogues means to me, I received a
call from Malik, one of the participating
young poets and rap artists. He informed
me that he is working on a recording.
“Would you say something about the
power of words and music for the piece?”
he asks. My answer: “Of course, with great
pleasure!”

Let us offer praises for:

Words never die,
Words never rust.

Keeunley Kamara is director of the non-
profit center Badenya.

Me and My God

For no moment of my life, have
I been free
Free to work at my own pace
Free to go to school
Free to worship as I please
I wish to be free
I wish to pray unceasingly,
But I can’t because I’m cramped
So close to other sweating bodies
around me that
We seem to be taking our breaths
in unison
And as we breathe we sway to the
organ music
To distract ourselves from
discomfort
We sway while trying to pray to God
for strength
Trying to make it through one more
week, just one more day
But as I pray, I must comfort my
master’s child
Sit and rock my master’s child,
Forced to love those who despise
my very breathing,
And as I try to pray, I wonder
If God can see me hidden away
In a small upper dungeon in the
midst of the unsightly,
Black, swaying, sweating bodies,
Slowly dying sea of blackness,
Can that God they speak of see me?
I just want to praise Him one Sunday
without being a slave
Hold my own babies instead of my
master’s
They control my daily activities,
family structure, survival,
Control my words so much
That I wouldn’t even recognize the
phrase “I love you,”
In my own native tongue
And they think they have controlled
my worship
By hiding me away from my God
But while I’m swaying holding onto
my master’s baby instead of
my own
With my clothes sticking to me in
this intense heat,
With the stench of hot, baking,
black bodies encompassing me,
With the preacher talking about a
God who probably can’t see me
I’m gonna praise Him
No one will control my worship
No one shall deny me my God.

DeAnna Evans, a high school senior
when she wrote this poem as part of
the Poetry Dialogues, is a freshman
at Wellesley College in Massachu-
setts.

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