IN WORDS THERE IS LIFE:

KANAKA ‘ŌIWI PARTICIPATION IN SLAM POETRY

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the participation of Kānaka ‘Ōiwi in slam poetry. It explores why some Kānaka have chosen slam poetry as their poetic expression, but also looks at how slam poetry, an American poetic form, can be an articulation of contemporary Kanaka ‘Ōiwi culture. This project looks at the connections with oral traditions and examines the ways Kanaka slam poets use slam poetry to push against stereotypical/colonial notions of Hawai‘i and Kānaka.
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Preface: Origins

It begins with a stage.

The location is Worcester, Massachusetts in the evening at an arts space in an old creaking house. I was there for a reading series called Worcester Storytellers and in my mind this is the last night this series takes place.

It is 2006 and my friend and fellow poet Jon Wolf is debuting his piece about the bible, rewritten from a mathematical point of view. There air is alive with excitement and creativity. Jon performs his work with a passion I expect from poets who began their careers in slam poetry. After all, neither the audience nor I will ever see these poems performed in that exact way ever again.

As I hear my friend present his work I think to myself: “I want to write something similar, for the Kumulipo, the great Kanaka‘ōiwi creation chant.” Maybe not a new version, but what must have inspired the person or people who composed and committed this chant to memory? Working from the Beckwith translation, which was the only translation I had access to at that time, I proceeded to answer that question: What inspired the composer/composers? What resulted was the poem titled “Origins”:

The kahuna stands at the edge of the Hawaiian Islands where land breaks into ocean foam, wind carries the vested prayers of the first, the one who birthed every generation up to him, from coral polyp to mankind.

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1 Throughout this thesis I use the term Kanaka and Kanaka ‘ōiwi to refer to the Indigenous people of the Hawaiian Islands, also known as Native Hawaiians. Kānaka/Kānaka ‘ōiwi is the plural form. Kanaka means person and ‘ōiwi means native. ‘ōiwi also refers to bones, iwi, which in Kanaka thought is the source of one’s mana. While I use this term, other Kānaka used terms such as Hawaiian, Native Hawaiian, and Kanaka Maoli when they were interviewed. For a good discussion on what we call ourselves see the introduction to Noenoe Silva’s Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonization (2004).
Or, is the starting point a few years earlier in Fall 2003 at Westfield State College, when I went to my first poetry slam, which was organized by my friend David Lucander? This was the first time I hear poets really perform their work; imbue their words with the power to move the audience. I remember there were poets from across Massachusetts – Worcester, Northampton, Boston – and while specific poems may have faded from my mind, they passion these poets brought to their poetry has always remained.

These first slam poets I encountered tapped into a need within me to express myself through poetry and spoken word.

From that night on I would also attend the weekly poetry open mic in the town where I went to college. Named Community Voices, this weekly reading took on what is considered standard for many poetry readings by having an open mic followed by a featured poet. The open mic gave attendees a chance to practice reading or performing their own work and readers would range from first time poets to more poets more established in their writing and reading styles. It was at the weekly poetry open mics I first heard poets from different address political issues in their work. This might range from the personal to electoral politics, but it started to open up my mind to the possible range of topics for poetry. It was in this atmosphere that I began to hear poetry address their own racial, ethnic, or Indigenous identities. Not at first, but rather soon after I began writing poems for the open mic and for slams I saw how this competitive art form could be used to explore and express my own sense of who I was as a queer Kanaka ʻŌiwi male in diaspora.

Behind, the multitude of the Gods:  
Nā akua Hawaiʻi.  
mingled with the host of the ancestors:
Then again the start might be the first full week of August 2009 at the National Poetry Slam, my first time as a member of the Worcester Slam Team. However, even within this there are competing “starts.” One might be on Worcester’s second bout when I was chosen to perform my poem “Origins” after a high-energy poem from one of the poets on the team from Albuquerque, New Mexico. The poet I followed, Damien Florez, did a stunning piece related to his Chicano heritage which received the highest score one can get in a slam: thirty points.

I had been preparing to present this poem all day. I’d rehearsed it in team practice earlier that day, said it over and over to myself before the bout, but no amount of practice could have prepared me for taking the stage after another poet had given such a strong performance. My scores were significantly lower than Damien’s scores. I’d allowed myself to become scared by his success, and the enthusiastic crowd reaction. But I dug in and endeavored to give a good performance.

While the judges did not respond as I’d have liked, I remember looking into the crowd and noticed that not only were my teammates pushing me forward in my performance, but the poets from Alburquerque and Orlando, Florida did the same. That night was not my best performance of “Origins,” but I was aware of how members of the audience reacted. Despite low scores, what has remained was how excited poets in the audience looked during my time on the stage.
Another moment I consider a “start” was at the end of the National Poetry Slam when, after having been surrounded by diverse and amazing poets whose work touched on a wide range of issues and styles, I knew I need more in my life. To borrow from the cliché, my horizon was broadened. While my time in Worcester had been enriching on many levels, the National Poetry Slam reminded me of what it means to reach for more – as an artists, as a human, as someone who strives to push himself. For me this meant applying to graduate school and coming home to Hawai‘i.

And the night blinks it’s response.

The answer becomes clear, from coral polyp to humankind.

Perhaps the beginning is in fall 2013 at the opening of the new Pacific Hall at the Bishop Museum. Pacific Islanders (and I also include Kānaka as Pacific Islanders) performed dances, had craft and food booths, sat on woven mats to drink ‘awa, and saw for ourselves how our arts, cultures, and stories were displayed in the museums new hall. That night I was one of five Pacific poets who read and performed in a poetry show as part of the Pacific Hall opening festivities. Along with myself was Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, Tagi Qolouvaki, No‘u Revilla, and Donovan Kūhio Colleps. We began by doing a group reading of renowned Pacific writer Albert Wendt’s “Inside Us the Dead,” and moved on to individual poems. That night, I was the first poet to perform after the group poem. I did “Origins,” in what I consider one of my bester performances of that piece. My presentation was on point and as I dug into myself I could feel a tingle along my spine, the touch of my kūpuna. Or mana. Or both. That night I felt resonance with those who came before me, to the kānaka in the room, to the Pacific Islanders in the room, to my fellow poets. I was linked not only to Kanaka ‘Ōiwi literatures but also Pacific
literature. In that room and on that stage I had no fear about my poem being misunderstood or misinterpreted, maybe, for the first time.

Nowhere I stand in this space
made sacred by your voices
and call back through the ages
to the drum beat
the pulse of the pahu and ipu heke
   I call
to churned lava embraced by sea
   I call
to the pounding of poi and cloth
   I call
to the crack of lightning over Kahiki
   I call
through the refrain
   of generations …
   out …

Although the beginning could have been in 2009 when Kanaka poet Tui Scanlan was a
on a poetry slam tour of New England and the US east coast. Tui performed in Worcester, and so
did Jamaica Osorio. Both poets feature strong poems about Kanaka ‘Ōiwi culture and history in
their repertoire. To hear them live, to see other Kānaka draw on slam as a way to communicate
culture, to say the least I was excited. I also felt far less alone. It was quite satisfying to not be
the only Kanaka in New England, if even for just a few weeks, who addressed Hawai‘i through
slam poetry.

To:
Kāne, who provides the waters of life
   Kanaloa, the hot striking octopus
   Pele, of the sacred earth
Poliahu, in her mantle of snow
   Laka, who taught us dance
From coral polyp up to humankind
   I call to the thousands of Gods named and unnamed
I write above that the stage is a starting place. It is my belief that stages, performance spaces, are a place of multiple expressions, times, and connections. The stage is a place where motion, movement, orality, music, literatures, dances – a whole gamut of expression may take place. At the same moment they are not only the place where a current performance takes place, but contain the echo of past performances. For example, in the Halau o Haumea at Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies, I have had the privilege of performing my own poems, or presenting research in conferences. The halau has also been a place of activism, where political speeches or organizing have occurred; it has been a space for hula, not only classes from the University of Hawai‘i, but also for halau hula not part of official university courses; and of course it has been a space for education. All of these instances, and more, echo through and beyond any and all performances held there. The same is true of all other stages. So my performance becomes part of the genealogy of performances that occur on a particular stage.

Similarly, the stage is a place of multiple connections, of course there is the connections made between audience and performer, with each bringing their own experiences and interpretation to bear upon the instance of performance. There is also the connection between performer and text – poem, play, music, speech, etc … a dynamic which is played out before the audience. The connection made by audience members who witness and engage a performance and then respond through their own art, or by speaking of their experience with members of the community. This is another connection. Lastly, there is the connections between a current performance and past ones, much like the echo or resonance I mention above. These connections may not be obvious to performers or audiences, but genealogy is a connection and all stages have
their own genealogies of performances. These are connections I have made, but there are others, those I may not even be aware of, and they too bring different layers of meaning to the stage.

Each of the beginnings I have mentioned involved the stage in someway or shape. I use it as a start point because for me the stage lead to exploration of my Kanaka Ōiwi identity and culture. As someone born and raised in diaspora, far from Hawai‘i poetry and slam became my path to learning more. The poem “Origins” was could not have been written had I not already been participating in slams. It would not have been written had I not already began to read about my culture or looked for the connections between what I was doing as a poet and what Kānaka had, and still continue, to do: compose and perform. “Origins,” like the Kumulipo, was written in that spirit. Without slam I would not have written this piece. By the time I wrote the poem I had already begun to wonder what the connections were between myself and the oral arts and traditions of my people. I knew I wasn’t the only Kanaka who had taken to slam, but at that time I knew of only one other poet, Kealoha, founder of Hawai‘i slam. Surely other Kānaka used this medium to express culture, to make these connections. Of course, I wouldn’t find out until a few years later who these Kānaka Ōiwi were. As part of this journey I took advantage of the libraries in Massachusetts to read as much Kanaka literature as I could find. This led me also read Pacific literature and see the connections between the two. What became apparent was the power of the word, spoken and written, to voice our own stories and experiences.

My ‘aumākua let down the gift of life.
Stir through these bones
live in these lungs

So I too may express
a world view stated through the poetry of
a single phrase that
begins with the syllable:
Hā:
the sound of the exhale of life
the exhale of death
Hā:
as in Haloa ancestor to the Hawaiian people
Hā:
a phrase that goes beyond the big bang,
beyond God speaking all into being
beyond God dreaming the universe into existence.
Hā:
A reflection the world around him
Hā:
a phrase carved
in the vibration of chant
from coral polyp human kind

The stage lead me to Kanaka ‘Ōiwi and Pacific literatures (of which Kanaka literature is a part). The stage also became the origin of this thesis. For over a decade certain questions have remained in my mind: What, if any, are the connections between our oral traditions and slam poetry beyond the use of memorization? What excites Kānaka about slam poetry? What topics are addressed? How did slam get started in Hawai‘i? And of course, why have some of us Kānaka chosen this form of expression in which to tell our stories?

These questions form the basis of my research, part of which are interviews I conducted with Kanaka ‘Ōiwi slam poets based in Hawai‘i. Answers to these questions often open up more questions and possibilities not only for research but also new performances. Insight into providing answers has me not only to Kanaka ‘Ōiwi literature and scholarship, but Pacific studies (of which Pacific literary studies is a part), testimonio, and of course, scholarship on slam poetry. The ways in which Indigenous Pacific Peoples, in which Kānaka express our stories
is important. Different times and situations call for different modes of telling. It is my belief that slam poetry is an important and exciting avenue for empowering our own voices. With that in mind, it is my hope that this thesis will lead to further discussions on the role of poetry, performance, and slam in a new light.

All stories have a start, a beginning, an origin. The nineteen year-old version of myself had no idea what slam would lead, or what it would connect me with. However, the first time I took the microphone and shared my own words was the moment I began to arrive at this writing.

The kahuna stands at the very edge of the islands above him regions of air below foundations of fire and earth
at his back and to his side nā akua, nā kūpuna crackle, mingle follow his gaze into the depths of night. When night blinks back

He speaks:

Hā: Hānau ka pō

and from coral polyp to humankind the origin is clear should never have been in doubt.

Hānau ka pō
Hānau ka pō: night, gave birth.
Introduction: Review of Literature

Indigenous Articulation Theory

I believe Kanaka ‘Ōiwi engagement with slam poetry to be an articulation of not only Kanaka ‘Ōiwi identity, but also culture, history, and Hawai‘i. My use of articulation draws upon James Clifford’s article “Indigenous Articulations” in which he discusses the ways in which Indigenous peoples bring together seemingly disparate parts so that a tradition changes, but ultimately continues. Clifford, drawing upon Stuart Hall, is positing the ways in which a tradition may change and endure, even when placed under pressures such as colonization:

“An articulated ensemble is more like a political coalition or, in its ability to conjoin disparate elements, a cyborg. While the possible elements and positions of a sociocultural ensemble are historically imposed constraints that can be quite persistent over time, there is no eternal or natural shape to their configuration. Articulation offers a nonreductive way to think about cultural transformation and the apparent coming and going of “traditional” forms.” (Clifford 2001, 478)

Clifford’s use of Articulation theory allows for developments in areas such as art, to take account introduced forms, ideas, and techniques. For example, a contemporary Kanaka ‘Ōiwi painter may draw upon themes, motifs, and designs that are considered “traditional,” but the technique and materials used to express this may be completely different. Indigenous Articulation reminds us that the artist of today is still in the same tradition as Kanaka ‘Ōiwi artists of the past – and while the means of expression has changed – what has occurred is a joining, an articulation, that allows for continuity of tradition.

As an articulation of culture, Kanaka ‘Ōiwi participation in slam, and their use of it as an expressive medium, is the “conjoining of different elements” that create a dynamic medium which engages culture, history, stories, lived experience, poetry, and performance. Articulation
theory allows for not only for the joining of different parts or elements, but allows me to examine slam as a continuation of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi poetic traditions. This theory also serves as a reminder that these traditions are not static and unchanging; that despite the often violent introduction of new elements, such as English upon Kanaka ‘Ōiwi, new poetic and oral forms, such as slam, may serve as articulated ensembles that enable traditions survive.

Kanaka ‘Ōiwi scholar ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui, in her article “He Lei Ho‘oheno no na Kau a Kau: Language Performance and Form in Hawaiian Poetry,” writes of contemporary Hawaiian poetry as a braided lei that “descends from at least two traditions, one native and the other foreign, which, like the different interwoven strands of the haku lei, are combined to hold fast, giving both shape and beauty to the lei (poem)” (ho‘omanawanui 2005, 33). This joining of disparate parts is hardly anything new in the Pacific. Whereas ho‘omanawanui is not speaking of articulation, her ability to see how introduced forms and traditions can combine with Native ones to produce something of beauty and worth, is an important grounding for the discussion of slam as an articulation of poetic culture for Kānaka ‘Ōiwi.

Similarly, Papua New Guinean scholar Regis Stella describes a similar process in the rise of written literature, in English, in Papua New Guinea (PNG):

“Papua New Guinea is by tradition an oral society; the intrusion of alien influences, however, inevitably meant that the germination and proliferation of its literature has had a hybridized provenance. Papua New Guinea Literature has risen from the interface of orature with Western cultural practices. Although these orientations are seemingly antithetical, in fact they inform each other from a literary seedbed from which writers produce their works and construct cultural and national identities.” (Stella 1999, 222)

Stella not only points out how different elements are joined, or hybridized, to create something new, he looks at how literature was supposed to help from a national and cultural
identity which could bring Papua New Guineans together in the post-independence era. With over eight hundred and thirty distinct languages, literature was seen as something that could help unite across different ethnic and language groups. I believe literature in various manifestations has done the same for Kānaka in terms of fostering a unifying nationalist discourse.\(^2\)

Articulation, I argue, offers a framework to examine Kanaka ‘Ōiwi participation in slam poetry that takes into account a variety of historical processes, means, and changing modes of expression.

Speaking about similar issues related to Native Americans, scholar Joanne Barker looks at the decisions that inform the ways in which Native Nations in the United States articulate identities and culture as an expression of nationalism. She writes: “The core, indeed sacred, concepts of Native culture and identity that inform these choices are not merely articulated by national narrations about Native peoples; they are articulated by Native people within their intellectual, political, and creative work” (Barker 2011, 6). What Barker expresses is particularly useful when thinking about how Kānaka ‘Ōiwi articulate culture, identity, and history. After all, the intellectual, political, and creative work is articulated within a matrix that includes the different traditions, histories, and experiences that inform Kanaka ‘Ōiwi slam poets. While Barker is specifically looking at how these articulations occur within Native controlled/produced work, it is important to note that Kanaka poets compete in national and international competitions that are not Native-run. Also, though Kealoha the founder and current host of the monthly Hawai‘i slam is Kanaka ‘Ōiwi, the slam is open to all. However, the venue has been supportive of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi, Pacific Islander, and other marginalized voices. The same is true for the youth slam, which has been an important venue for young Indigenous slam poets. The youth

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team participates in the non-Native controlled annual Brave New Voices (BNV) festival. BNV is held yearly and a team representing Hawai‘i has attended since 2006. What is interesting about slam is that these major competitions/festivals are open to the stories Kanaka ʻŌiwi poets tell.

**Testimony**

While slam is an articulation, what is literarily articulated, or in this case performed, are stories and experiences that also act as testimonies that not only run counter to the colonial discourse of Hawai‘i, but push against the expectation of where and how such stories should be told. In essence, when Kanaka ʻŌiwi use slam, their presence and performances serve as testimonies to their lived and collective histories.

As such I also draw from theories on testimonio, the orally told testimony of Indigenous peoples in Latin America which are then transcribed and published by a non-Indigenous collaborator. There are important differences between testimonio and slam, but also important concepts that are applicable. Analisa Taylor, a scholar of Latin American studies, writes about an important feature of testimonio which is applicable to slam: “Unlike traditional or canonical historical, literary or social scientific discourse, each of these indigenous testimonios considers subaltern or marginalized people as legitimate agents and communicators of historical processes” (Taylor 2009, 80). Here testimonio overlaps with slam poetry because slam places an emphasis on the poets performing their original work. In this regard, slam places emphasis on the poets and their voices and places the poet in a position of valid storyteller. Also, as Somers-Willet pointed out, slam has made room for marginalized poets and stories that, at least within the main stream of the United States, are not often heard or are extremely mediated in terms of how their stories may be told.
Lyz Soto, co-founder of the non-profit organization Pacific Tongues, writing about the participation of youth slam teams from Hawai‘i and Guahan at the Brave New Voices poetry slam and festival, points out how audiences unfamiliar with the history of either places or people are “given an opportunity to hear a story that is usually absent from and silenced in U.S. high school classrooms and in the role of witness they are, in that location and space, validating the importance of listening to these stories” (Soto 2012, 12). Soto further explains that the audience assumes the role of witness with the ability to offer validation through the act of listening.

The issue of publication and audience is a major point of departure between testimonio, and slam as a testimonial space. In testimonio, the audience is sought via publication, and mediated through a non-Indigenous collaborator. With slam the audience comes to the performer and in most slams the audience is receptive to hearing work that can sound different from their experience. Another point of difference is that there is no mediation between the performer and the audience. What might be considered as mediation, or even limitation, is slams three minute time limit, prohibition on costumes and music; and at least in terms of team competitions, the role and guidance of coaches. However the potential to voice ones own history and culture, to counter narratives that strip away the humanity of a people, this makes slam a powerful tool.

Orality – The Spoken Word

As this research deals with a slam poetry as an articulation of cultural expression, it is important to acknowledge the continuing importance of the spoken word in Kanaka ‘Ōiwi culture. As an Indigenous Pacific people, this is grounded in the very history and culture of Kānaka ‘Ōiwi. George Hu‘eu Sanford Kanahele, a Kanaka ‘Ōiwi author, activist, and scholar describes the power of the spoken word in *Kū Kanaka: Stand Tall: A Search for Hawaiian Values*: 
“The conventional explanation is that its [the spoken word’s] force comes from the sound that is “breathed” into the word, thereby giving it life. The idea is that when we speak words, we use our breath in making the sounds, and breath is life-giving. Through the hā, or breath, we infuse mana into the sound, hence, the meaning or intent of the word (Kanahele 1986, 45).

For many slam poets, Kānaka included, an essential function of slam is to use words, images – the power of language to connect with the audience. While one aim is to please the judges who score the poem, the real intent is to build a connection that resonates not only at the intellectual level, but also at the emotional level. Mana, which can be translated as power, spiritual energy; gives words power. Kanahele writes of the hā, the breath that infuses mana, and this is important, because it gives extra weight and value to those expressions, which are spoken, into the world. A slam poet who does not successfully make a connection to their audience might be considered as giving a performance that lacked mana, or did not honor the mana of the words spoken.

The power of the spoken word is discussed in other Indigenous Pacific scholarship, for example Raylene Ramsay in writing her literary-cultural history of Kanaky New Caledonia states that:

“A central feature of all Kanak societies is the great importance attributed to the spoken word, translated by Kanak into French as La Parole (the Word). To speak is to carry out a sacred act on behalf of both oneself and one’s entire clan, and because words are actions, not merely sounds or expressions of thoughts, they can have grave consequences” (Ramsay 2011, 13).

For peoples whose primary means of communication was oral, the spoken word is the essence of thought and power. Ramsay grounds La Parole in the sacred, which is similar to how Kanahele wrote of Kānaka infusing words with mana. Both Ramsay and Kanahele echo what former professor of English Water Ong wrote in regards to the spoken word: “… oral peoples
commonly, and probably universally, consider words to have great power. Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power.” (Ong 1982, 32)

Ramsay reinforces the social aspect of words. Oral expression is not just a solitary act done by the speaker, but required the reception and interaction of the listener or community, to have power. I believe this adds to the power that both Kanahele and Ong wrote of. The Tongan scholar and philosopher Epeli Hau'ofa in reflecting on his experiences as a child in an oral world writes:

“The spoken word, especially in the form of stories, was central to social and cultural life. Indeed a people could not be known and understood sufficiently without their stories. Pacific islands societies were held together by series of stories: and divisions in a community were delineated by stories. One’s links to social groups were by virtue of one’s connections of the stories of one’s ancestors” Hau'ofa 1988, 3).

Hau'ofa and Ramsay speak of the importance of audience, in this case, the community that not only receives the words, but are connected to the speaker, through shared experiences and the collective cultural knowledge contained in those stories.

As a continuation of living speech, the participation of Kānaka in slam poetry competitions, is just the most recent growth and articulation of Indigenous Pacific traditions. Though recent in their current form, similar poetic competitions have been common throughout Oceania. Subramani, a professor of literature at the University of the South Pacific, writes in his study of Pacific literature points that in the Pacific “literary contests, in which rival poets vie to win the approval of their patrons and audiences, have enhanced the quality of oral poetry.” (Subramani 1985, 46) Such contests were a celebrated aspect in the Indigenous Pacific and form one part of the genealogy of slam in Hawai‘i and Kānaka in slam.
In Hawai‘i one such verbal contest was ho‘opāpā. Meyer describes ho‘opāpā as “a wrangling contest of words,” and “a ritual of debate,” that “interwove imagery with the many characteristics words themselves held (not just meaning), i.e., historical, sound, ability to group, etc. Ho‘opāpā shows how valuable and powerful understanding context, place and history was to this display of intellect” (Meyer 2003, 117-18). Meyer continues by recalling the story of Kaipalaoa, a youth whose skill at ho‘opāpā was so great he was able to utilize his knowledge of imagery and puns to outwit his adult challengers. Kaipalaoa won because he was able to draw on a large repertoire, which were grounded in his knowledge of land and culture. His skill put to shame, and to death, his competitors. In the story it is the ali‘i who has the right to judge who was victorious. As a judge, he would have been familiar with the skills needed to become an expert in ho‘opāpā. This story is but one example of Kānaka engaging in verbal contests, literally to the death.

In The Wind Gourd of La‘amaomao a main component of the story is the knowledge of chants, and various wind names which one of the main characters, Kūapāka‘a, not only recalls, but also performs/chants. His knowledge and skill are not only essential to the story, but are displays of literary skill and craft that in Hawai‘i, took much time and training to gain the appropriate expertise.

Traditions such as ho‘opāpā and stories such as The Wind Gourd of La‘amaomao are important to remember in that they serve as reminders that Kānaka ‘Ōiwi engaged, and continue to engage, in literary arts and competitive contests. This stands in contrast to prevailing colonial attitudes that there were no literary traditions in Hawai‘i prior to the introduction of writing. Oral literature, and by this I mean all aspects of performance, oratory, chanting, verbal
competitions, and songs, are an essential aspect of understanding the endurance of literary and performance traditions into the contemporary period.

**Slam Poetry – Poetic Competition**

Kanaka ‘Ōiwi participation in slam poetry is a more recent form of Kanaka poetic culture (Kānaka have been participating in slam since at least the very late 1990s), but one that emerges out of and is made possible by older forms. The poetry slam has been described by Gregory as an oral poetry competition “in which poets are expected to perform their own work before a live audience. They are then scored on the quality of their writing and performance, by judges who are typically randomly selected from this audience.” (Gregory 2008, 63) At a poetry slam a poet, or slammer, is given 3 minutes in which to perform original work with out the use of costumes, musical accompaniment, or animal acts. They are then scored, Olympic style, on a scale from 1 to 10 with one point after the decimal. This format is important to highlight. While slam may be similar to Indigenous Pacific literary contests, its format is quite different. Unlike most verbal competitions in the Pacific, in theory anyone may participate in a poetry slam. It should however be noted that those who tend to do well are those who have spent time practicing and memorizing their poem. Whereas in the example I gave earlier of ho‘opāpā, in a slam the judges are randomly selected from the audience and are not required to have any poetic expertise, skill, or knowledge.

In his introduction to *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*, editor Gary Glazer writes that the poetry slam was started in 1986 by Marc Smith who “… started the Poetry Slam in Chicago with the idea of giving the audience a voice, letting audiences say if they liked a poem. By cultivating their participation, poetry slams build an audience for poetry, bringing everyday workers, bus drivers, waitresses, and cops to a poetry reading and letting them
cut loose.” (Glazner 2000, 11). The history of slam is worth exploring. Glazner places Smith into a populist poetic tradition that seeks to involve as many “everyday” people as possible. While this is important, and opens up slam and poetry to class analysis, it does not address the issues of race within slam.

While Glazner links poetry slams to a populist form of poetry, in the introduction to Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorian Poets Café, Miguel Algarin, co-founder of the café brings slam into a longer tradition, or articulation of poetry contests and oral traditions:

“The modern Slam is the creation of Marc Smith, who continues his bare-knuckles events at the Green Mill in Chicago. The idea for the slam grows out of ancient traditions of competitive and/or linked rhymes between orators – from the Greek mythological tale of Apollo and Marsyas to the African griots, from the Sanjūrokunin sen, or imaginary poetry team competitions, of tenth-century Japanese court poet Fujiwara no Kinto to the African-American “dozens.” It is a tradition that still exists very actively on the island of Puerto Rico, where El Truvador improvises in the plaza, spontaneously pulling into verse the life of the folks in the small town … this tradition of El Truvador coming to perform to the audience for their approval or being punished by their disapproval is totally alive at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe” (Algarin 1994, 16).

While Algarin makes the obligatory nod towards Greek traditions of poetry performance and competition, what is more important is his centering of slam within the traditions of various people of color, especially that of his Puerto Rican heritage. This re-centering within diverse traditions of poetic competitions away from European and white American traditions makes space for the reinterpretation of poetry slams and slam poetry within Indigenous, and in this case Pacific and Kanaka ‘Ōiwi, contexts and traditions.

It should be noted that even though slams have American, and in particular white, Midwestern roots, slam has become a site where queer, Indigenous, and other poets of color (to name but a few) have found an avenue for expression. Susan B. A. Somers-Willett writes in her book The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular
Verse in America, how slam’s “emphasis on diversity, inclusion, and democracy have resulted in a “pluralism” among its poets; on the national level, slammers hold a bevy of readings outside of the national competition celebrating marginalized racial, sexual, and gender identities.” (Somers-Willett 2009, 6) This is not to say that slam is a panacea of acceptance and tolerance, and certainly there are critiques of the limitations of slam as a community (see Somers-Willett 2009, Johnson 2010a and 2010b) and the social inclusiveness of the community.

However, this does not detract from the importance of slam and the spaces it creates. Lyz Soto has written about the ways in which slam can help Indigenous poets reclaim identity: “spoken word and slam performances have not just created a space for poets excluded from the more traditional academic avenues of acceptance, they have also created safe and supportive locations of expression for people, who have been disenfranchised by mainstream society.” (Soto 2012, 6). Soto, like Somers-Willet, believes slam has created venues for marginalized voices to be heard, but goes further than Somers-Willet who believes that one of the reasons slam poets feel free to express their identity through slam is because of its “commitment to diversity and plurality” (Somers-Willett 2009, 6). While this is certainly true, the participation of Indigenous poets from Hawai‘i and the Pacific reflects US hegemony in the region. Beginning in the nineteenth century the United States colonized the islands of Hawai‘i, Guam, and American Sāmoa. Following World War II, the US administered the Trust Territory of the Pacific which included the Marshall Islands, Palau, the Northern Marianna Islands and what is now the Federated States of Micronesia. So while slam has spread to other parts of the Pacific because of this, slam has also provided a space for Pacific poets to share their stories, experiences, and histories with a wider audience.
While slam poetry has taken root in other parts of the Pacific\(^3\) the fact that Hawai‘i has a particularly strong slam poetry communities is indicative of colonial control of these islands. It is not to say that slam doesn’t also serve as a counter to colonization and occupation; rather the spread of this form and competition is because of colonial control of Hawai‘i and its forced orientation toward the United States. While slam has colonial origins it has still created a familiar, if different expressive space for Kānaka Ōiwi.

\(^3\) For slam in Fiji see Vaka‘uta’s 2012 article “The Personal as Political: 1 a Self-Reflective Essay on the Act of Poetry Making and Creating the “Jangrynative” Persona.” For slam in Aotearoa New Zealand see the web site and South Auckland Poets Collective: http://www.sapenz.com/
Chapter 1: Connections to Where We Come From

“To see this orature/literature becoming reinstated by a genuine interest in storytelling and other verbal art events should give us a good heart that we are going the most satisfying way… we have arrived at orality again, admittedly by a somewhat rough and tortuous passage, but the idea has arrived nonetheless” – Pio Manoa

In this chapter I explore some of the intersecting resonances between Kanaka ‘Ōiwi oral traditions with Indigenous Pacific poetry and slam poetry. Using Indigenous articulation theory as a framework, the purpose of my interrogation is not to point out a direct correlation between specific Kanaka poetic techniques and Kanaka ‘Ōiwi slam poetry, but to posit how these similarities enable slam to act as an articulation of culture. I take into consideration both broad similarities between slam poetry and different oral traditions, then examine the roll of audience as an element essential to the continuation and evolution of poetic tradition.

Contests, competitions, rivalry, riddling – from the Pacific:

Slam’s power is in words enlivened through performance. It is often stated by slam poets that slam is a continuation of global oral traditions, usually without anything more than a vague reference to ancient Greek poetic competitions. One exception is slam poet and editor Gary Mex Glazner, who writes, “Holding poetry competitions is not a new idea. The Greeks gave laurel crowns to the winning poets in the ancient Olympics. Basho made his living travelling the Japanese countryside judging haiku contests. From Africa we get “signifying,” word battles” (Glazner 2000, 11). In making this comment Glazner argues for a global heritage for slam poetry

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5 For specifics on the connections between Kanaka ‘Ōiwi oral arts and traditions to contemporary poetry see ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui’s 2014 book, Voices of Fire: Reveeving the Literary Lei of Pele and Hi‘iaka. For a discussion of the “redevelopment” of Kanaka oratory see Hiapokeikikane Kichie Perreira’s 2011 dissertation: “He Ha‘i‘ōlelo Ku‘una: Nā Hi‘ohi’ona me nā Ki’ina Ho‘ōla Hou i ke Kākā‘ōlelo”
a link to other oral competitions and traditions. While I agree these are important to acknowledge, I contend that for Kānaka ‘Ōiwi, whose lands have been occupied and culture colonized; it is important to place participation in slam poetry in the broad context of Indigenous Pacific orality, and in the specifics of our own traditions.

Competitions are not new to Kānaka. A more recent example of their continuation is the Merrie Monarch festival. Held annually in Hilo, Hawai‘i this festival is not only a celebration of ongoing hula traditions, but it is also an invitational competition where hula halau (hula schools) compete for accolades. Judged by expert kumu hula, which can be translated as hula teacher or source, the competition is fierce, and is widely seen as a continuation of vibrant Kanaka ‘Ōiwi hula traditions.

In regards to competition among poets in a broader Pacific context, Subramani asserts that “…literary contests, in which rival poets vie to win the approval of their patrons and audiences, have enhanced the quality of oral poetry. In the matter of poetic rivalry the names of the Tongan poets Falepapalangi and Mameaepoto, who lived during the first half of the 19th century, have become legendary” (Subramani 1985, 46-47). The essence of Subramani’s argument is that competition increased not only the quality of compositions, but that in winning the acclaim of their audiences and patrons, poets such as Falepapalangi and Mameaepoto became renowned well over a century after they lived. While renown may seem like it is important, in considering Subramani’s remarks, it is important to note he places this acclaim with in the context of contests “enhancing the quality of oral poetry.”

In a speech presented at the 1988 Pacific Writers Conference scholar and author Epeli Hau‘ofa recalled growing up in a predominantly oral society. Speaking about being on the threshold of adulthood, Hau‘ofa describes being about sixteen and listening to older men tell
stories at kava circles and that it was “most enjoyable listening to clever and versatile men vying with each other in telling the tallest tales, one bouncing off from another” (Hau'ofa 1988, 11). Hau'ofa affirms what Subramani emphasizes about “literary contests” enhancing the “quality of oral poetry.” While not referring to formal competitions, Hau'ofa references men “vying with each other” with tales “bouncing off one another.” I argue that here, he is using ‘vying’ to denote a competitive aspect to storytelling among friends, which encourages storytellers to do their best to entertain their audience, and in this case, Hau'ofa remembered enough from these sessions, demonstrating their success.

In relation to slam poetry, it can be argued that performance for the slam competition also enhances the “quality” of the poetry. While not a competition per se, Judy Flores in a chapter on changing and growing pacific musical forms, describes what are known as kantan chamorrita, a form of folk poetry and song. She describes hearing them performed as a pastime when growing up on Guam in the 1950s and 1960s:

“... During quiet evenings, people relaxed on their porches or at their open windows and doors to catch the cool breezes. Others worked in their open back kitchens, washing clothes, cooking, or mending fishing nets. Invariably, some man or woman would begin a song verse consisting of four lines in which the second and fourth lines rhymed. Out of the darkness, from another house, would come an answering verse. They were clever, impromptu verses, sometimes teasing, sometimes romantic, and they would continue into the evening as more neighbours joined in the challenge to top the previous singer” (Flores 2001, 19)

In much the same way that Hau'ofa touched upon storytellers in Tonga “vying” and “bouncing off one another,” or how Subramani mentions the importance of rivalry between performers, Flores tells how performers of kantan chamorrita try to “top the previous singer.” With this example of Chamorro tradition, we see how the audience not only listens to the singer,
but is also expected to participate. That these verses were done spontaneously, and in rhyming form, is indicative of the skill each singer needed to contribute.

Flores further contextualizes kantan chamorrita within a continuous lineage of what might be termed Chamorro oral arts, which have adapted, and endured because of and despite, hundreds of years of colonization. She specifically positions kantan chamorrita as similar to fifteenth century Chamorro debate verses and quotes from Fray Juan Pobre who described them as such:

“The also come together to debate … One gets up and begins to debate and to throw verses and tell witticisms in their style against whomever is in front of him or against the other towns and after he has finished another from the opposite side begins to debate the former one” (Quoted in Flores 2001, 20)

Further more, Flores follows this quotation by stating that according to other written accounts it is most likely that Chamorros put on large feasts “organised around the central activity of poetic debate” (Flores 2001, 21).

The skill to retain a large amount of poetic knowledge in ones mind was highly valued in the Pacific. This, combined with wit and creativity, was an important characteristic of orality in many island cultures. While I have addressed ho’opāpā, the Hawaiian riddling competition, in my review of the literature, it is worth noting that this particular verbal sparring is mentioned six times in the ‘ōlelo no‘eau compiled by renown Kanaka ‘Ōiwi scholar, translator, and cultural practitioner Mary Kawena Pukui. ‘Ōlelo no‘eau, which may be translated as proverb or poetic saying, are themselves passed down orally and often reference historical events, Kanaka ‘Ōiwi religious traditions, and mo‘olelo, to name but a few topics. Hence, the presence of ‘ōlelo no‘eau concerning ho’opāpā speaks to the enduring legacy of this competition, which was important enough for Kānaka to incorporate into their poetic sayings and pass down for a variety of usage.
I believe that of the six ‘ōlelo no‘eau relating to riddling and ho‘opāpā the following would find near universal relevance with orators in other parts of the Pacific:

“A hua a pane; a pane ka waha, he ho‘olono ko ne‘i.  
_A word in reply; open the mouth and speak, for a listener is here._

A command to speak up and tell what one has come for. Used in ho‘opāpā riddling.”

The injunction in this ‘ōlelo no‘eau to speak, especially because there is a listener, has a certain resonance for poets who come from slam. At competitive festivals such as the National Poetry Slam and Brave New Voices it is quite common for groups of poets to assemble and share their work in a round robin format. Known as a cipher, it is expected that all those present will participate and offer a poem. Likewise, slam champion poet Mike McGee always reiterated to me that as a poet, especially one who comes from slam and performance, if anyone asked me to perform I was obliged to provide a poetic offering.

What I have sought to do in this section is place Kanaka ‘Ōiwi participation in slam poetry within a broader tradition of Indigenous Pacific oral arts, and Kanaka ‘Ōiwi traditions in particular. While slam as both a competition and an art form is exceedingly American, its growth in Hawai‘i has context and precedence. In other words, slam in Hawai‘i, and involvement by Kānaka, was not the case of something being poured into an empty bucket. Rather, I argue Kānaka have taken to slam as a mode of expression because of past, continuing, and adapting oral arts. As Haunani-Kay Trask said, “Hawaiians are a profoundly oral people whose major transmission of feeling and thought occurs not through the isolated practice of writing but through the instant act of living speech, chant, and song” (Trask 1999, 167). In this light, it makes perfect sense for Kānaka to take to slam poetry as a mode of expression.
However, while competitions and rivalry inform an exciting component of not only Kanaka, but also Indigenous Pacific orality, these are meaningless if the words performed are not received. Audience, is the key aspect to performance, and is dealt with in the following section.

**Audience:**

One of the more entertaining aspects of slam competitions is the expectation that an audience will react to a poem. At a minimum reaction is built into a slam due to the presence of the five judges who respond to a poet’s performance and score it, Olympic style, from one to ten. However, it is also expected that the poet not only connect with the members of the audience that judge them, but the broader audience as well. Danny Solis, a long time slam poet in an essay concerning the aesthetics of slam, writes how the common goal of all slam poets is “to connect with the audience in the deepest possible way. So too, the slam poet is looking for that deep soul connection” (Solis 2000, 88). Trask states a similar sentiment when she describes the relationship Kanaka ‘Ōiwi composers and their audience: “... immediacy of interaction between listeners and composer is integral to the creative process” (Trask 1999, 171). While Solis states it is desirable for a poet to connect with their audience, Trask reminds us that the connection, the rapport between poet and audience is an essential component to the process creativity.

In considering Kanaka ‘Ōiwi participation in slam an articulation of culture, this relationship between audience and poet is essential to the articulation of culture. An audience must receive, process, and respond to an articulation. This can be juxtaposed with what Subramani writes broadly about literature when making a comparison between the written and the oral as they relate to Pacific literature:

“The literary process begins with the creation of a work and is completed with its
reception by an audience. To be a living force literature requires the collaboration and critical response of the society for which it is created. It affects the reality only through its reception in society” (Subramani 1985, 72)

In other words, Subramani is claiming that a work (literature, performance, etc …) is only completed once a society has received it. I agree with his assertion, and add that slam shares one important facet with traditional Kanaka ‘Ōiwi performances and that is the immediacy of reception when a work is performed in front of a live audience. Fijian scholar Pio Manoa elaborates on the dynamic between performer and audience in such a way that speaks to not only Indigenous Pacific and Kanaka oral performances, but also to what slam poets are hoping for when they perform:

“We know that orality truly speaks. It speaks with its own rhythms, inflections, cadences, silences, “the rise, the roll, the carol, the creation” (to use one of Hopkins lines), its social and verbal complement (which sometimes takes the form of compliments, additions, echoing, reinforcing sounds of approval, disgust, wonder) from an interacting audience, a participatory audience” (Manoa 1995, 17-18)

Manoa, like Trask, Subramani, and Solis; is insisting on the significance of audience to performance. Reception of a poem, or a piece, in a performance can be immediate. As Manoa points out, an audience can have a variety of responses to what they are seeing and hearing. In this way, there is the initial reception of a work – and if the work is received well – the success of a work will spread throughout the community by word of mouth.

Today that “word of mouth” may also include video and audio recording. In the case of the poem “Kaona,” performed by the 2008 Youth Speaks Hawai‘i team at the Brave New Voices festival, the reception of this poem by the audience and judges helped them take first place in the slam competition. Since that time the video recording of the performance has remained on the internet and has gained in enough popularity that members of Youth Speaks Hawai‘i were
invited to conduct workshops and perform in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this particular case, even though the poem has spread through video its success was still contingent on the poem being well received by the judges and audiences at Brave New Voices.

Diana Looser, a New Zealand based Pacific Theater scholar has commented on the similar ways in which the intersection between audience and performance is a crucial aspect of theater. She writes that theater is

“… particularly well suited to connect communities and link localities because of emphasis on interaction and collaboration: the reciprocal dynamism that emerges from the audience-performer interface, the way that its shared process encourages outreach within and between social groups for resources and expertise, and its particular modes of circulation as a cultural product (touring, participation in arts festivals and other regional cultural events, and community-based education initiatives)” (Looser 2014, 10)

In the above quotation Looser points out a crucial aspect of live theater, that as a live performance with a receptive audience, the overall experience is a “shared process.” What I interpret this as are the multiple ways in which the processes of performing/receiving a play overlap with one another. At one level the audience members, as individuals, experience the performance. On another level the audience experiences the performance as a viewing community with other members of the audience. While still at another level the audience, as both individuals and as members of other communities apart from the viewing audience process and share their experience with the rest of the broader community. At the same time the performers, in this case the actors, feed off the energy of their audience, which can help them in their performance of a play. Furthermore the actors, crew, director, etc … are also members of the broader community and bring their own experiences to the presentation of the play.
This is directly relatable to slam poetry where the poet is the one who composes, practices, and performs the poem. The poet’s performance is interpreted and given a score by the slam judges while at the same time the audience is expected to not only receive the performance, but respond verbally and physically (clapping, stomping, and so on) to the performance. The same layers of experience for both audience and performer I pointed out for theater is applicable to slam: interpenetrating layers of community, experience, and feedback from what Looser termed the “audience-performer interface.”

A good example of this interface is shown in an article by Aotearoa New Zealand based poet and scholar Selina Tusitala Marsh. The article is a history of Marsh’s poem “Fast Talking PI,” a rhythmic poem that, as Marsh states, “pulses with the politics of Pacific Island identity in all its forms” (Marsh 2011, 34). Inspired by American poet Anne Waldman’s “Fast Talking Woman” which was inspired by lines from Mazatec shaman María Sabina – Marsh’s poem addresses not only Pacific Islander Identity in Aotearoa New Zealand, but also the discriminatory misconceptions about Pacific Islanders held by the broader society. Marsh recalls that when she performed the poem at Southern Cross, a school with mostly Māori and Pacific Islander students, their response was anything but subdued:

“Each line was met with laughter, calls, shout-outs, and an echo formed as people began repeating ‘PI’ at the end of each line. The volume increased so that I could no longer be heard. I had to stop after each stanza to let the response die down, and the poem took twice as long to get through” (Marsh 2011, 35-36)

According to Marsh, this kind of reaction was not uncommon when she performed the poem for other students, at community events in Aotearoa New Zealand, and in other parts of the Pacific. Marsh then situates her poem, its performance and reception, within the framework of orature. Marsh quotes renowned African scholar Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o for her definition of orature.
as “the way in which language transmits culture through ‘the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression’ (Ngugi 2007)” (Marsh 2011, 39). I concur that Marsh addresses orature in her article. In slam poetry interactions between poet and audience are very much in the same as Marsh’s depiction of student reactions to her work. A prime example comes from the introduction to *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, by poet and café founder Miguel Algarin who describes a typical weekly slam event in the early 1990s. Algarin pays special attention to the feedback of the audience to the poet:

“Regie Cabico, the third slammer, enters the room like a bullet … Cabico is a dynamo of metaphors spun out of an extraordinarily sensitive blend of gay audacity and Filipino sensibility. By the time Regie explains “orgasms are onomatopoeia,” the crowd is wild, screaming, shouting, talking back to him, involved in the poetic process. Poet and listeners have become one” (Algarin 1994, 17)

Much like Marsh, Algarin writes of an active and engaged audience willing to fully participate in the experience of the performance. According to Algarin interjection and enthusiasm by the audience have made them part of “the poetic process.” This is similar to how Trask illustrated the interactions between Kanaka Ōiwi listeners and composer as “integral to the creative process.” These parallels and intersections between slam poetry and Kanaka verbal arts, both ancestral and continuing, are important to what makes slam a vibrant avenue for expression and articulations of culture.

Again, I believe it is important to reiterate that slam poetry did not arrive in Hawai‘i to fill a void, nor is it the fulfillment of a “return” to a long lost orality. It’s growth in the islands is just one creative avenue utilized by some Kanaka Ōiwi poets as a means of expression. On the other hand, I do find that slam in Hawai‘i is given a richer meaning, as well as broader creative and expressive possibilities, when placed within a Kanaka Ōiwi and Indigenous Pacific context.
Likewise, understanding audience/poet as part of that context provides further understanding to the growth of slam in Hawaiʻi.
Chapter 2 – The Fire in Our Speech: Kānaka ʻŌiwi Slam Performances Engaged

“Utterance always carries the powerful conditions of its speakers and writers.” Steven Winduo

As I suggest earlier in my thesis, the emergence of slam poetry in Hawaiʻi in the 1990s did not happen in a political vacuum. Connected to and informed by ancestral orality, slam has provided a means for Kānaka Maoli to express their stories and stories of Hawaiʻi through poetry by touching upon a wide range of topics including identity, politics, culture, and how all these are connected to over a century of occupation and colonization of Hawaiʻi by the United States.

The resulting colonial trauma of Hawaiians is explicitly related to the enduring legacy of Christian missionization of the islands and the United States backed overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893. The results of these processes include, but are not limited to land alienation, rising homelessness in Hawaiʻi, militarization of the islands, and the suppression of Kanaka Maoli language, history and culture. Like many Kanaka ʻŌiwi poets before them, Hawaiian slam poets speak to these intergenerational traumas, both blatant and subtle, embedded in Hawaiian experiences. This puts them into dialogue not only with current and previous Kanaka scholars, but also with the larger Pacific community which has experienced similar legacies of trauma due to colonialism.

Discussing the history of Papua New Guinean literature prior to independence, Steven Winduo writes that the first wave of writers and intellectuals “used writing to assault the epistemic violence against them.” (Winduo 2012, 67) What Winduo means by epistemic violence is the erasure and overwriting of Indigenous Pacific peoples lives, cultures, and

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experiences by and with European concepts and notions of the Indigenous Pacific. This occurs through the systematic devaluation of Indigenous voices in relation to their own histories and the overvaluing of European and American accounts and visions of the Pacific. Rotuman scholar, playwright, filmmaker and critic Vilisoni Hereniko eloquently points this out when he writes that “representations of Pacific Islanders from the eighteenth century to the 1980’s became the domain of Europeans whose views of the Pacific and its inhabitants were ethnocentric at best and racist at worst” (Hereniko 1999, 144). Scholar, activist, and poet Haunani-Kay Trask speaks similarly about the power of non-Hawaiian scholars to define the story of Kānaka, even to themselves. She tells of the different versions of Hawaiian history she was told from her family, and what she read in books by white historians:

There was the world we lived in—my ancestors, my family, and my people—and there was the world historians described, this world, they had written, was the truth. A primitive group, Hawaiians, had been ruled by bloodthirsty priests and despotic kings who owned all the land and kept our people in feudal subjugation. The chiefs were cruel, the people poor. But this was not the story my mother told me. No one had owned the land before the haole came; everyone could fish and plant, except during sacred periods. And the chiefs were good and loved their people. (Trask 1999, 114)

Trask exposed the contradiction, and the power imbalance, inherent in outsiders writing about Kanaka ʻŌiwi. While she and other Indigenous Pacific Islanders countered this through writing, Kanaka slam poets continue to actively counter not only the centuries of epistemic violence, but also the continuing condition of Hawaiʻi and Kānaka under US occupation and colonization. This is done not just through writing, but also through the acts of speaking and through performance.

Included in these forms of violence is an ongoing tourism apparatus that plasticizes and homogenizes Kanaka ʻŌiwi culture into something palatable for tourists from the American
continent and Asia. By performing poetry based on personal, family, or societal experience, these poets speak to the reality of their lives and counter hegemonic depictions. In her master’s thesis, Marshallese poet, performer, activist, and teacher, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner states: “I have always seen writing as a form of healing – why not continue that form of healing by writing about the wounds which have been ignored, the voices which have been silenced?” (Jetnil-Kijiner 2014, 20) With this in mind, poetry and performance then become an avenue for exposing the colonial traumas of occupation, while at the same time offering the poet and the audience a collective chance to explore these issues immediately within a safe and attentive environment. This is one of slam poetry’s important contributions: space in which to offer truth, space in which to testify. Writing about the power of testimonio in Central American literature, Nancia Buiza states that:

… testimonio contains at its very core a poetics of affect, which I understand to be a text’s expressive quality or force that at once bears the presence of the testimonial subject’s traumatic experience and penetrates deeply into the receptor, triggering an empathetic identification with the trauma victim by breaking through the receptor’s ideological frameworks that inhibit his understanding of an experience that lies outside the bounds of normative cultural categories … (Buiza 2013, 152)

The chance to offer similar modes of testimony in slam occurs within the context of a competition, but the opportunity for the poet to literally see the audience move “deeply into the receptor, triggering an empathetic identification with the trauma victim by breaking through the receptor’s ideological frameworks,” as Buiza writes above, is a powerful indicator of success. This may be marked by verbal affirmations from the audience, snaps, clapping, other audible signs of support, laughter, or even crying. Slam allows the poet to not only bear witness to individual or societal traumas, but also witness how the audience responds to their poem.
Travis Thompson, a long time slam poet and Youth Speaks Hawai‘i and Pacific Tongues mentor shared how slam gave him an opportunity to speak about political issues that were on his mind. Thompson began writing and performing his own poetry between 1998 and 2001 at the small one-off poetry slam events which would occur throughout Honolulu. In Hawai‘i this was a particularly interesting time politically as it followed the 1993 march commemorating the centennial of the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, the 1998 centennial commemoration of the so-called annexation of Hawai‘i, and America’s aggressive foreign and domestic policy in the wake of the 9-11 attacks.

Thompson portrays this early stage of his career as being driven to write poems which articulated his own knowledge of events such as the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, and his own critique of American foreign policy. In particular, his poem “The Americans are Coming” makes the connection between the overthrow and America’s invasion of Iraq. Thompson draws on Kanaka ‘Ōiwi experiences in dealing with the intrusion of American empire to express solidarity with the Iraqi people who have dealt with their own violent American occupation. This piece demonstrated empathy with other victims of American military actions, because just as Kānaka ‘Ōiwi did not ask for the US military, neither did the people of Iraq. At the same time, Kealoha, founder of Hawaii Slam, had written a piece titled “Dichotomy,” that explored his internal struggle with being a Kanaka who was educated at MIT. Kealoha expresses the seeming contradiction of being Hawaiian and having his world expand because of the opportunities afford to him by receiving an elite American education. However, he uses this poem to examine the cost of this cultural dichotomy imposed by America upon himself and other Kānaka ‘Ōiwi by critiquing the presence of the United States in the Hawaiian islands.

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7 Travis K. Thompson, interview with author. Honolulu, HI, January 2015.
Such poems fit within the larger genealogy of Hawaiian and Pacific literature. In his 1976 essay, “Towards a New Oceania,” Samoan critic, novelist, and poet Albert Wendt wrote that Pacific peoples needed to not only understand who they are but also “understand colonialism and what it did and is still doing to us” (Wendt, 1983 74.) This need to understand the effects of colonialism is a recurring theme among Hawai‘i-based poets broadly, and Kanaka Maoli poets in particular. Poets like Haunani-Kay Trask, Joe Balaz, Mahealani Perez-Wendt, Wayne Westlake, Imaikalani Kalahele, and Leialoha Apo Perkins, to name but a few, were already active and had been publishing powerfully critical poems for at least two decades before poetry slams appeared in Honolulu. What slam afforded this next generation of poets that publication didn’t, however, was the opportunity to share their works through live performance with an attentive audience.

Thompson mentioned that at the early slams he attended there were members of the local literary scene in attendance, such as Richard Hamasaki, a poet, English teacher, publisher, and supporter of local and Kanaka Maoli literatures. Thompson also spoke of how after he started attending some of these early slams, and sharing his work with whomever would listen, he was invited to perform at rallies and venues such as Nā Mea, a local Hawaiian bookstore. It is possible that these particular early audiences were ready for what slam poets brought due to their familiarity with past literary works and through support for Hawaiian issues.

The following section examines three poems by Kanaka ‘Ōiwi slam poets. Taken from YouTube, these are video recordings of poetic performances at different venues. The first poem, “Dichotomy” was performed by Kealoha at the 2009 Hawai‘i Writers Conference. The second poem, “Waypoints,” was performed by Tui Scanlan at his 2009 feature at the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City. The final poem, “Law of the Splintered Paddle,” was performed by

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8 Reprinted in a 1983 issue of the Hawai‘i based literary magazine Seaweeds and Constructions.
9 Thompson, interview.
Keala Morrell and Noa Helela at the Brave New Voices competition. Each of these video recordings offers the opportunity to examine these poetic performances at a particular moment in time and take account of not only the content and performance of the poem, but also if, when, and how the audience reacts to each performance.

**Dichotomy**

The poem “Dichotomy” was written and performed by Kealoha, the founder of the ongoing Hawai‘i Slam. With between four hundred and five hundred attendees, Hawai‘i Slam is the largest poetry slam registered and certified with Poetry Slam Inc. (PSI). PSI is the non-profit organization, which supports and runs the National Poetry Slam. A certified slam is a venue which meets certain criteria set up by PSI to be eligible for competition at NPS or other PSI run slams. Kealoha has run Hawai‘i Slam since 2003 and has continued to perform and conduct poetry workshops throughout Hawai‘i and on the United States continent.

Kealoha composed, and began performing, “Dichotomy” around 2007 to be performed at a national event, in this case NPS, for a diverse audience which would most likely not be aware of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi history and culture. In the piece Kealoha describes the dichotomy he feels between being Kanaka and growing up in a Western educational system, a fractured experience due to ongoing US colonization and occupation. Kealoha addresses this conflict at the interpersonal level, hence his use of the first person singular throughout the majority of his poem.

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To look at this piece I have made use of a text version published in the Hawai‘i journal Bamboo Ridge\textsuperscript{11} and a YouTube clip of Kealoha performing the poem in 2009 at the Hawaii Writers Conference where he was accompanied by musician Makana on guitar.\textsuperscript{12} It is worth pointing out that performing a poem with musical accompaniment is not allowed at NPS or in any qualifiers to make a team to go to NPS, however, many poets take advantage of a lack of competitive rules when outside of slam so as to experiment and expand their art form.

There are some interesting differences and correlations between the printed version of the poem and the performance. In the printed text, Kealoha signifies the conflicting thoughts between Kanaka Maoli traditions and Western thought by using different fonts and page justifications for each stanza. This marking on the page has a correlation to how the poem is performed by Kealoha. When he speaks about Hawai‘i and Kānaka he faces stage left and when he talks about American and Western concepts, he turns stage right, going back and forth to visually symbolize the dichotomy he feels. However, Kealoha starts and ends his poem looking straight at the audience symbolizing a possible wholeness, or acceptance of what it means to be a Hawaiian who deals with the pain inherent in this dichotomy.

Kealoha begins the poem with the line “I am a Hawaiian …” and then turns stage left and recites these lines:

\begin{quote}
Born of Kekuku and Kaʻopua blood
direct descendant of Kākuhihewa
ancestral link to Papa and Wākea …
\end{quote}


By following Kanaka Maoli protocol and providing some of his moʻokūʻauhau, his
genealogy, he connects his family back to Papa and Wākea the progenitors of the Hawaiian
people. Here Kealoha engages a practice that would be familiar to Native Hawaiians and those
who have some understanding of Native Hawaiian protocol. While this particular performance
was done in Hawaiʻi where there would be some audience members who might understand this,
it is less likely that audience members at an event like NPS would have such knowledge. Similar
to Morrell and Helela, Kealoha is placing trust in his audience to not only pay attention, but also
be at ease with Kanaka ʻŌiwi concepts and words in ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi.

There is also precedent within contemporary Hawaiian poetry for framing one’s
connections to Hawaiʻi through genealogy. Kanaka ʻŌiwi scholar and poet Brandy Nālani
McDougall and Euro-American scholar Georganne Nordstrom discuss how Haunani-Kay Trask
opened her first collection of poetry, Light in the Crevice Never Seen, with her moʻokūʻauhau.
They write that not only is this an exercise of rhetorical sovereignty that establishes Trask’s right
to speaks, but it also

creates a space for herself as a strong Hawaiian leader who is expected to read
and write in ways that promote cultural and national sovereignty, which she does
through her poetics of resistance. However, even Trask’s readers who may not be
aware of the accomplishments of her ancestors would still understand how the
performance of moʻokūʻauhau is an observation of a distinctly indigenous
protocol of introducing oneself and confirms Trask’s deep roots within Hawaiʻi.
Therefore, both Native and settler audiences receive Trask’s poetics within the
context of this moʻokūʻauhau and the ethos that both its content and telling
demonstrate. (McDougall and Nordstrom 2011, 113)

Likewise, Kealoha reaffirms his connections to Hawaiʻi via his moʻokūʻauhau, but he
also engages different audiences – those who know such practices as moʻokūʻauhau and those
who would, as is the case with Trask, recognize it as part of an Indigenous practice.

Also, throughout the poem Kealoha makes reference to a variety of words and concepts
that would be unfamiliar to those from outside Hawai‘i, including ‘ōlelo no‘eau, Hawaiian proverbs and poetical sayings; The Kumulipo, the sacred genealogical creation chant belonging to the last ruling monarchs of Hawai‘i; the Ko‘olau mountain range; the Hawaiian gods Kāne, Kū, Lono, and Kanaloa; heiau, ancient Hawaiian temples; ‘aumakua, ancestral deities; the Great Mahele, and Hā‘ole, without breath. All of these will have meaning to those audience members who have access to such cultural knowledge.

Kealoha’s use of Hawaiian history, phrases, and cultural references is an important stylistic feature of many slam poems composed by Kanaka ‘Ōiwi poets. Given the structure of slam and the three minute time rule (three minutes and thirty seconds for youth), poets have to consider whether or not there is time to explain certain cultural concepts. As such, many poets either do not translate words and phrases in Hawaiian trusting audiences to infer meaning, or work translation into the fabric of a poem in a way that does not detract from the performance, or overload a piece with definitions.

As stated earlier, the major focus of Kealoha’s poem is his own experience. Within his poem he describes how America has “given me opportunities to expand my consciousness/they took a brown kid from an island and trained him in universal sciences …” Here Kealoha has recounted what it meant for him to attend M.I.T. and graduate with a degree in nuclear physics. While he speaks of this in a positive light, the next part of his performance opens with the line “You don’t understand what America has done to us.” This section of his performance confronts the colonialism of the United States:

To them we are nothing but a strategic military and economic center disguised by a tourist trap veil forced to inhale their policies and drink of their imperialism they do not belong here
and we are not of their world

The langue used in this part of the poem does not hide the harsh reality of an unending occupation. His words point out how the notion Hawai‘i as an idyllic tourist destination only masks the United States militaristic and colonial occupation of Hawai‘i for over one-hundred years. By ending with the phrase “they do not belong here/and we are not of their world” Kealoha rejects not only Americanization of Hawai‘i, but also the presence of America in Hawai‘i. Just as Kanaka poets of the past and present have done, Kealoha does not hold back in his poetic critique of the United States. His poem has poetic resonance and commonality with peer slam poets and with Kanaka ʻŌiwi poets who publish their work. Whereas his use of Hawaiian language spoke directly to Kanaka ʻŌiwi in the audience, and may not have been accessible to non-Kanaka, here the language is plain and stark, reflecting the message he wishes to convey to all audience members.

Kealoha’s performance ends with him once again facing the audience, seemingly to have come to some sort of balance around the dichotomy he feels but ends with the phrase: “Hā‘ole … my people are running out of breath.” Here, he plays on the idea that the Haole, the word for foreigner or whiter person, can be literally translated as “with out breath.” Implied in this ending is that more work needs to be done to not only overcome the personal dichotomy, but the continued wrongs done to Hawaiians and the painful contradictions that are a part of the post-overthrow Hawai‘i.

Waypoints

The poem “Waypoints” was written and performed by Tui Scanlan (also known as Tui-Z), a poet of Kanaka ʻŌiwi, Sāmoan, and European ancestry. A 2000 graduate of Kamehameha schools, he became involved with slam poetry in 2007. As with the other poems considered in
the chapter, this poem was written and performed for a national competition, in this case the National Poetry Slam (NPS). As with the other two poems, I am drawing my analysis from a YouTube video of his December 2009 performance. In 2009 Tui was on a poetry tour of the Northeastern United States, performing at various poetry slam venues.

This particular video\textsuperscript{13} is interesting because he is performing at the famed Nuyorican Poet’s Cafe in New York City. Ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse, the Nuyorican is situated in the Lower Eastside of Manhattan and is home to one of the oldest continuous poetry slam venues in the United States. The cafe has existed in one form or another since 1973, and has been a hot spot of artistic activity for many communities of color and the Puerto Rican community in particular. Considered a Mecca for many slam poets, it is no surprise that Scanlan chose to perform at this venue.

Scanlan’s poem is more nuanced than the previous poem considered, but like Kealoha’s poem, it deals with the traumas of history. He begins and ends his poem with the question: “Where are you from?” Scanlan uses this question as an opportunity to articulate his connections to the Pacific and to Hawai‘i. Using the metaphors of Oceanic voyaging traditions, he opens with ancestral stories of Polynesians moving from island group to island group, then sustaining the metaphor of voyaging, touches upon recent Hawaiian history to reaffirm himself as both Kanaka ‘Ōiwi and from Hawai‘i.

However, the origins of the poem do not lie solely in writing for slam competitions, but also in personal experience. In another video of Scanlan performing the same poem for an audience in Vancouver, British Columbia, he gives this humorous preface:

This is the result of going to school in Southern California for college, and whenever I would walk around there it was: “You’re the biggest Mexican I’ve ever seen! What did your parents feed you?” So I wrote this …”

While this is certainly funny, this story speaks to the different ways Kānaka are read on the United States continent by people who are unfamiliar with Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. It also demonstrates the creative opportunities that may arise from such interrogations of identity. In the opening of the poem Scanlan frames his piece and address different issues related to identity and history:

I am often asked: “Where are you from?”
The question is much simpler than the answer
I come from a land in the faraway sky: Raiatea
a place so sacred its location had many names
so its location may never be revealed

When Scanlan performs the line “I come from a land in the faraway sky …” his right hand sketches a triangle in the air. For audience members in the know, this gesture refers to the geographic-cultural area of the Pacific known as the Polynesian Triangle. Instead of a verbal kaona, Scanlan uses the freedom of performance to invoke this image through signed kaona. He also does not give Hawai‘i as his answer, at least not until the end. This is a strategic move as it allows the poet to devote the majority of the poem to providing more historical detail. It is important to point out that in competition, and in features such as this one at the Nuyorican, the audience is aware of where he is from. When called up at the National Poetry Slam, the host of the bout will have said the name of the team and where it is from. Likewise, as a feature an introduction is usually given that the city, state, or country a featured poet is from, will be mentioned.

Scanlan invoked Raiatea in the opening of his poem. Located in present day French-occupied Polynesia, variations of the name of that island are found in other Polynesian languages, and according to different traditions, is one of the places that different voyaging canoes launched from to explore the Pacific Ocean. This reference serves as a poetic waypoint within his poem in that it grounds his response to his own question within wayfinding upon the ocean. For most audiences this will not mean much, but for those who are familiar with Pacific navigation or are Pacific Islanders, this segment of his poem is part of the long history of navigation and the migration made by Indigenous Pacific Peoples. He goes on to mention not only Aotearoa, but also mentions “naming the new islands we found, after home.” This refers to the commonality of certain place names between different Polynesian islands. For example: Sava'i, Havai'i, Hawaiki, and Hawai‘i; Kahiki and Tahiti; or Bora Bora, Pola Pola, and Pora Pora; to name but a few similar place names.

Scanlan concludes his section on ancestral navigation with this powerful stanza:

And while we zig-zagged across
the largest bucket of water
this puny planet has ever seen,
the Europeans burned books in the Dark Ages
But our darkness has a name
Te Ao Uriuri
from the darkness to the light
emerging with perfect sight
surging as if in flight
a seamless sky that does not exist
in amber waves of grain

For audiences that may not have quite gotten the past references to navigation and island names, here his claim to ancestral navigation is clear due to his use of ‘we’ in the start of this section. In the recording of his performance, the line referring to the European Dark Ages received many loud of snaps of support, but the last two lines, got the most exclamations and
“wows” from the audience. What Scanlan has done is taken Kanaka and Polynesian concepts of night and contrasted them with the American ideal of amber waves of grain. This serves to remind the audience the Kānaka have origins and concepts that are older than the United States itself. It helps that Scanlan reinforces this by speaking the lines with not only his trademark clear distinction and force, but holds up his left hand with his index finger pointing to the ceiling as if to emphasize this exception.

From here he recalls the racist theories of Thor Heyerdahl, who did not take into account Indigenous stories of navigation, but rather believed the ancestors of Polynesian peoples drifted from South America. Scanlan addresses Heyerdahl to begin a section talking about Hōkūle‘a, the lead double-hulled voyaging canoe for the Polynesian Voyaging Society (PVS). He recalls that one of the reasons the canoe was constructed was to “disprove his (Heyerdahl’s) claims/to display our ways/upon the waves.” Scanlan then moves from a discussion of the meaning of the name Hōkūle‘a to a very brief story of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi big wave rider, lifeguard, and Polynesian Voyaging Society crew member Eddie Aikau; who lost his life trying to save the lives of members of the Hōkūle‘a crew when the vessel flipped over.

It is safe to assume that the audience at the Nuyorican was largely unfamiliar with the story of Eddie Aikau. What Scanlan has done is bring that particular piece of recent history into the present, and into conversation with the cultural stories and knowledge he had been drawing upon before. In a poetic context such as this, and before an attentive listening audience, these stories take on the power of testimony. Especially, when Scanlan links Aikau swimming to save his crewmates to a century of oppression of Kānaka. In the following lines Scanlan personifies Aikau’s thoughts as he was swimming, before breaking back into his first person narrative.

I’ll swim that twelve miles for a century of regression that twelve miles of oppression
twelve miles of political cartoons
that depicted our Queen, as a monkey

He swam,
and was never seen again
and what ensued was the largest
air-sea search in Hawai‘i’s history.

In these lines Scanlan continues to bring in the political aspects of Hawai‘i’s history to the poetic forefront. In particular, his mentioning of the racist political cartoons of Lili‘uokalani that were published throughout America in the 1890s, stand as a strong reminder of how Native Hawaiians have been depicted. Just as he did with discussions of darkness, these lines also further emphasize the differences between Kanaka culture, history, and government, from that of America.

The final section of Scanlan’s poem is as follows:

So to answer your question,
I come from a place where
we know why Eddie Would Go
I come from a place you wish
you could go, I come from paradise

From a geological-evolutionary-phenomenon
from nearly one-hundred and fifty distinct ecosystems
from a ring of fire hot-spot
from a land that loves me from the soles
to the soul

And you can never take away the feeling
of my feet upon my land
or my hands within my walk

Scanlan concludes his poem by combining the popular idea of Hawai‘i as paradise with scientific facts about the archipelago. However, what is especially powerful is the way he claims his connection to the ‘āina, the land, not by talking about how much he loves it, which is evident
from the performance, but how the land loves him, “from the soles, to the soul.” This is a beautiful way to stake claim to not only the land, but indigeneity. This line, followed by the image of Scanlan’s feet on the land in the next three lines, are one way he asserts his connection to Hawai‘i as Kanaka, and answer the question he opens poem with. As if anticipating further questions, Scanlan concludes by asking saying to his audience “Now I don’t claim to be omniscient/so if my answer is insufficient, then tell me, where are you from?”

Scanlan’s piece is a powerful testimony that begins and ends with the personal, but is firmly grounded in the larger Kanaka Maoli historical and cultural story. As with the two other poems, it is something that can and has been performed for non-Hawaiian audiences, but contains elements that would resonate not only with a Hawai‘i audience but specifically with Kānaka Maoli. Like the other poets I examine, Scanlan does not shy away from what he presents. He may define Hawaiian language terms, but he does so in a way that still places trust in his audience to pay attention to what is being performed, he does not over explain any meanings, and even introduces ancestral voyaging without a set up. Scanlan’s poem and performance pick up on both the pain and pride of being Kanaka ‘Ōiwi.

The Law of the Splintered Paddle

The poem “Law of the Splintered Paddle” was written by poets Keala Morrell and Noa Helela when they were members of the 2011 Youth Speaks Hawaii that competed at the international Brave New Voices (BNV) competition held in San Francisco. At the time of writing this poem Helela, whose family has been active for decades within the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement, was still attending Hakipu‘u Learning Center, a Hawaiian culture-based public charter school in Kāne‘ohe, O‘ahu; and Morrell had finished her senior year at Punahou, a prestigious private school in Honolulu. While both poets are Kanaka Maoli with a background in
'Ōlelo Hawai‘i and Hawaiian history, they had very different educational experiences. Nevertheless, both poets knew Ke Kanawai Mamalahoe, the Law of the Splintered Paddle.¹⁵ Performed by both poets, within slam poetry this type of piece is known as a multi-voice or group piece and is one of the unique contributions to performance poetry that come out of slam. Lesley Wheeler, a scholar of performance poetry, writes “pieces delivered by two, three, or especially four people are more patently theatrical than solo performances. The lines must not only be composed but they must be designated, and performers must collaborate on timing and blocking.” (Wheeler 2008, 153) “Law of the Splintered Paddle” adheres to what Wheeler describes, in that the piece makes use of a combination of choreographed movements, lines spoken together, and lines performed one after the other in a manner similar to theater.

Written a few months before attending BNV, the poets decided to write about a timely and a persistent problem in Honolulu, homelessness. The island of Oahu has been struggling with issues of homelessness for many decades. However, 2011, when the poem was written, also coincided with the arrival of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Honolulu. As the poem points out, the city wished to impress foreign leaders and business people visiting the city, and to clean up started massive sweeps of the homeless population across Honolulu and Oahu. The title comes from the name of a law, Ke Kanawai Mamalahoe, given by Kamehameha I to prevent the harm done to innocent people along the road.

Considered a foundational law for Hawai‘i, the law became part a part of the constitution of the state of Hawai‘i due to the work of Kanaka legislators and activists at the 1978 state constitutional convention. The image of the splintered paddle is also the symbol on the crest of the Honolulu police department (HPD). This makes apparent the cruel irony that the HPD have

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¹⁵ Noa’s mother, Laulani Teale, was also using Ke Kanawai Mamalahoe as part of her own activism around the arrival of APEC in 2011.
the splintered paddle as their crest while sweeping away the most vulnerable in Honolulu, a 
contradiction and irony the poets point out within their performance.

To discuss this poem I made use of both a printed copy of the text, and a YouTube video 
of Morrell and Helela performing this piece in one of their preliminary bouts at BNV in 2011. The setting for the performance is important to explore because the video does more than just record the poets performing their work, it also captures the sounds of the audience who received it. In particular, the viewer of the video hears when the audience reacts to specific lines and images in highly affirmative ways with: snaps, clapping, verbal exclamations (whooo, yes, uhhhh, wow, yes!, etc …). Again, this performance shows the importance of not only audience interaction and reaction, but shows how it was received by people, in this case other youth poets and adults from across the United States. It is a powerful demonstration of what slam competitions offer: a willing and receptive audience.

The poem opens with Keala Morrell on the viewer’s left and Noa Helela on the viewer’s right. They start their poem by telling the story of Kamehameha and why he promulgated the Law of the Splintered Paddle. At 30 seconds into the poem they recite the text of the law. Helela speaks a line in English and Morrell provides a translation alternating back and forth.

The text of the law is as follows:

E nā kānaka
E mālama ‘oukou i ke akua
A e mālama hoʻi
Ke kānaka nui a me kānaka iki
E hele ka ʻelemakule
Ka luahine, a me ke kama
A moe i ke ala
Aʻohe mea nana e hoʻopilikia

Their translation, provided in the performance, and transcribed from the video is as follows:

My people
honor the Gods
care for the men great and small
that the men, women, and children
sleep in the streets
without fear of harm
disobey, and you will fall

The use of ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i in a poem which will be performed for a continental audience unfamiliar with Hawaiian history, language, and culture is not only deliberate, but is a hallmark of youth teams from Hawai‘i that compete at BNV. The first use of ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i in a youth poem at Brave New Voices was in 2006 when team member Alaka‘i Kotrys performed a poem titled “Chants.” In 2008 the team performed the poem “Kaona,” which also made use of alternating between ‘Ōlelo and English, and the recent 2014 team opened a group piece titled “Hawai‘i Poem” with an introduction in ‘Ōlelo. The use of Hawaiian language is an example of teams engaging with stories about and from Hawai‘i as not only poetic education, but as a testimony to audiences who are unfamiliar with the struggles of Native people, and Kānaka Maoli in particular.

An interesting point about their translation of Ke Kanawai is that they translate the final line, “Hewa no, make” as “Disobey, and you will fall.” Usually the Hawaiian word make is translated as die, and in the law seems to refer to individuals who may be traveling the roads, especially other chiefs or ali‘i such as Kamehameha. The law serves as an edict to individuals

not to harm those who are vulnerable when traveling - elderly men and women and children. However, by translating the word “make” as “fall” the poets allude not just to what will happen to an individual who disobeys, but the fall of a society that disobeys Ke Kanawai.

Immediately following their translation, the poets jump to the current day (of 2011) and articulate what is happening to the homeless in Honolulu in preparation for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting the coming November. APEC is a transnational organization whose annual meeting involves talks between many of the governments of the “Asia Pacific region” and business interests. At this meeting policy is discussed which often leads to further enactment of legislation and treaties latter on. The policies articulated at APEC are widely criticized for setting back labor laws, stripping away environmental protections, and providing business the ability to run rampant throughout the region. A wide range of activists and organizations in Honolulu contested the meeting of APEC in Honolulu in 2011.

After introducing the concept of Ke Kanawai early on in their performance, the poets describe how the city is sweeping the homeless in preparation of APEC because “human rights are bad for business.” They continue:

*KM = Keala Morrell
NH = Noa Helela
Both = instances when both poets deliver the same line.

KM: In Honolulu, the city ranked fifth meanest to its indigents, our homeless communities are seen as crime sites
Both: Their survival is second degree trespassing
NH: And the city’s priority is to hide these public eyes sores to keep tourists and business leaders interested
KM: Twenty one fiscal powers are uniting to discuss fair policies and cooperation
NH: In their shadow twenty one-hundred powerless are subjected to unfair policies and arrested for not cooperating
Both: This game of blackjack has dealt them an eviction notice
so they will forever be wild cards

This section of their poem, which in addition to the recitation of Ke Kanawai Mamalahoe, would perhaps be the most unfamiliar to a non-Hawaiian audience, pushes directly against colonial expectations of Hawai‘i as a paradise and a place where people primarily enjoy an easy and carefree life. The lines marked both indicate when Morrell and Helela say lines together as a way of emphasizing certain points, and building an emotional momentum within the poem.

Following this section, Morrell and Helela point out the hypocrisy and cruelty of the HPD removing the homeless from the streets of Honolulu for the benefit of the global elite attending APEC while having the crest of the splintered paddle as their symbol, a direct contradiction of Ke Kanawai Mamalahoe. Whereas the Law of the Splintered Paddle was established to protect the vulnerable in a time when Hawai‘i was not only independent, but also under Kanaka rule, due to occupation and colonization the priorities of the state government are more in line with what is good for business rather than what is good for the people.

In discussing the HPD’s use of the splintered paddle as its crest, the poets delivers these lines which get many claps, sounds of approval, and supportive snaps from the audience:

NH: But now it’s nothing more than a logo
for the tourist industry’s largest private security company
Both: The Honolulu Police Department
NH: The road to hell is paved with good publicity

In particular the Helela’s line about HPD’s logo being for the tourist industry, and then dual voice line received the most reaction from the crowd. It is worth pointing out that the teams and poets who attend BNV are largely people of color who come from marginalized
communities and mistreatment by the police and the broader society are relatable themes. Hence, it the positive audience reactions that demonstrate that the poem is reaching the audience. Their lines also serve as a scathing indictment about the true purpose of the HPD as serving the interests of the tourist industry and APEC, while not truly protecting the innocent of Honolulu.

Here the poets assert that the state of Hawai‘i and the city and county of Honolulu, as failing to uphold the ideals of Ke Kanawai Mamalahoe. According to the poets the failure of these state agents to fulfill their obligation to society to care for those with little means or resources and therefore have set themselves up to fall vis a vis Ke Kanawai.

KM: E mālama ‘oukou i ke akua
NH: We can’t continue to sell our culture
at the expense of those who can’t afford it
Both: Nothing is sacred when we are buying
miracles at reduced prices
KM: A e mālama ho‘i
Ke kānaka nui a me kānaka iki
NH: E hele ka ‘elemakule
Ka luahine, a me ke kama
Both: Families are not an embarrassment
to be made invisible
KM: A moe i ke ala
NH: Their only crime is a lack of shelter
the streets are the only home they have
Both: We are speaking for those
who aren’t deemed lucrative
NH: Those whose voices are lower
than their income
KM: A‘ohe mea nana e ho‘opilikia
NH: Paradise is not just a photo-op
KM: And these people deserve more
than shackles for sustenance
Both: Hewa no, make
NH: If human rights are lost
our society will fall
Both: We must remember Kanawai Mamalahoe,
the Law of the Splintered Paddle
This section, the emotional peak, the poem brings the audience full circle. The intersection of quotations of the Law, in ‘Ōlelo, with their English poetic text, performed with urgency and speed, make for a powerful closing. That neither poet has lines that provide another translation of Ke Kanawai is an interesting choice, one which takes into consideration not only the time restraints of a slam competition, but places enough trust in the audience to remember the importance of the Hawaiian text as it was translated earlier. Additional trust is placed on the audience to have followed along with the emotional ebb and flow of the poem.

The pairing of certain poetic lines with quotations from Ke Kanawai Mamalahoe have an emotional resonance beyond the way in which they are performed. For example Keala Morrell says the line: “E mālama ‘oukou i ke akua” which can be translated as a command for people to honor the Gods. Immediately following this the poets say:

Both: “Nothing is sacred when we are buying miracles at reduced prices

Whereas the line from the Law speaks to the people to remind them of their sacred obligations, the poets point out the loss of the sacred when profits are made at the expense of those who are most vulnerable in a society. The placement of these lines make for a poetic and emotional resonance.

A similar effect occurs in the middle of this section. Morrell deliver the line “A moe i ke ala,” the part of Ke Kanawai that bids people to leave those who lie along the road in peace. Immediately following this Helela states that the only crime for Hawai‘i’s homeless is a lack of shelter and that “the streets are the only home they have.” Therefore, real crime is not that people lack houses and turn to the streets for a place to lie and sleep, but that the city, state, and police department are removing them from the streets in direct violation of the Law of the Splintered
Paddle. Following this both poets declare: “We are speaking for those who aren’t deemed lucrative.” Here the poets declare that their words are not just performed for advancement in a poetic competition, but offer testimony on behalf of a population in Hawai‘i denied a voice at all levels of society.

The poem performed by Helela and Morrell does not recount their own traumatic experiences, but as they state in their performance, is on behalf of homeless families and individuals in Honolulu. Here, the power of slam to wed testimony with poetry and performance is captured on video. As to the ability of their words to “penetrate deeply into the receptor” as Buiza writes, we are fortunate that in the recorded video we can hear the affirmative and empathetic responses of the crowd. The loud applause, exclamations of “wow,” screams and “woo’s” speak to the fact that a connection was made with their audience, their testimony was received. Much as Indigenous Pacific writers from Hawai‘i to Papua New Guinea and Aotearoa have used the written word to testify to the ravages of colonialism, Noa Helela and Keala Morrell used their performance to testify to the effect of continued occupation, colonial practice, and global capitalism on Hawai‘i.

Conclusion:

The three poems chosen represent a cross section of the kinds of testimony Kānaka have given through the medium of slam poetry. Noa Helela and Keala Morrell’s poem speaks to the effects of globalization and colonization at the societal level; Kealoha’s speaks to his own personal history, which is connected to Hawaiian historical traumas; and Tui Scanlan’s poem frames his personal experience as a means of exploring cultural and historical stories and pain.

These particular video performances were also chosen because they are recordings of performances, testimony, in front of very different audiences and each recorded instance of a
performance demonstrates that when Kānaka have the chance to tell stories that might not be familiar to their audience, they take the opportunity to not only share these stories, but present it as testimony.

These works are also political in that they not only critique the past, but the present as well. In addition to entertaining and educating audiences, the sharing of these poems is in itself an act of independence, an assertion of sovereignty, that places Hawai‘i and Kānaka ‘Ōiwi experiences at the center of a story. And, as evidenced from these videos, the poets are rewarded with strong affirming applause and verbal reactions. When they speak, the audience listens.
Chapter 3: As Long as We Have Language: Kanaka Poets in Conversation

Introduction:

The interviews I conducted for this thesis were done with Kanaka ʻŌiwi poets who either participate in slam or began their poetic lives as slam poets. I interviewed four Honolulu based poets whose ages ranged from early twenties to mid thirties. That these wonderful poets opened up to me is particularly humbling. Mahalo a nui loa to Jocelyn, Tui, Jamaica, and Travis, for sharing their manaʻo with me.

In August 2010 I moved to Honolulu from Massachusetts to begin my Master of Library and Information Science. At that time I was still very new to the community of poets in Honolulu, but not unfamiliar. I had met members of the 2008 and 2009 Hawaiʻi slam teams at the National Poetry Slam. Through social media I had kept in contact with different poets in this community and, upon leaving for Hawaiʻi, felt that there would be a space for me to not only express myself but also make connections. Since 2010 I have been beyond fortunate to make such connections with such a vibrant and committed group of poets. My own involvement with the community has been possible because of Youth Speaks Hawaiʻi, and later through Pacific Tongues as a poet-facilitator who (on occasion) conducts workshops aimed at youth. All of the poets I interviewed have at one time or another been involved with the youth slam, either when it was Youth Speaks Hawaiʻi or latter when it became Pacific Tongues.

As mentioned earlier, I first encountered members of the Hawaiʻi slam team in 2008 at the National Poetry Slam (NPS) held in Madison, Wisconsin. However, I was not a stranger to Hawaiʻi slam poets. In 2003 I spent the summer taking a class at the University of Hawaiʻi at
Mānoa. That summer I attended my first slam in Honolulu at a small gallery in Chinatown. Titled Hawai‘i Slam, this slam continues to this day. It was there that I first heard Hawai‘i Slam founder, and long time host, Kealoha. Four years latter when visiting family on O‘ahu I attended Hawai‘i slam again, no longer in Chinatown but in the Hawaiian Hut at the Ala Moana hotel. It was then that I first heard poet Travis Thompson perform his poem “The Americans Are Coming,” a critique of American imperialism in both Hawai‘i and Iraq.

In the summer of 2009 I attended the NPS held in West Palm Beach, Florida as a member of the Worcester Massachusetts slam team. That year Tui Scanlan was a member of the Hawai‘i slam team. This would be the first time I met Tui, but not the last time that year. A few months after NPS Tui did a poetry tour of the US, which included shows in Worcester. It also happened that this tour coincided with a performance by Jamaica Osorio at Clark University, also in Worcester. I had the chance not only to hear them both perform, but to hear them do work that was both shorter and longer than the standard three minute long slam poem.

I would become formally introduced to Travis Thompson in 2010 when he was still hosting the monthly youth slams. Many years later he would return to UH Mānoa to complete his bachelor’s degree in history and then enroll in the Pacific Islands Studies master’s program. Jocelyn Ng would become familiar to me once she returned to O‘ahu after she received her bachelor’s degree from the University of San Francisco and began her work with Pacific Tongues as its Assistant Director.

Each of these poets has their own poetic voice and style that is unique to them. However, one thing they all share in common, aside from being of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi ancestry, is that they all share powerful poems which not only entertain but also challenge and educate the viewer about the status quo. At different points in their lives these poets have also worked to nurture the next
generation of Hawai‘i poets, and even if they cannot always directly continue that work, their commitment is unparalleled.

I will note that this chapter does not include interviews by me with Kealoha. While this may be considered an oversight, or something lacking, I have made the choice to focus on the stories and experiences of Kānaka who have not usually received attention in regards to the questions I am asking about slam poetry in Hawai‘i. This in no way should be construed as a slight on Kealoha’s contributions to slam in Hawai‘i, rather I have used my thesis as a way to open up additional avenues for dialog.

The interviews were conducted in relaxed settings using either a video camera, or when that failed, my cell phone’s recording program. While I used an interview guide to ask my questions, there were of course follow up questions. I did not ask all my interviewees the same number of questions. In many cases it’s because the poets answered more than one question when addressing a particular topic or line of thinking.

While I had hoped this chapter would make use of all of my questions, the wealth of information and insight given to me by these poets is more than can adequately be addressed in a master’s thesis. With that in mind I have decided to include my transcripts of the interviews in the appendix of the thesis.

I cannot reiterate enough how thankful I am to these wonderful poets for sharing their time, their mana‘o, and their mana with me. Any and all errors or misrepresentations belong with me alone.

While this chapter is structured around the questions I asked the poets, the goals has been not to just include quotations, but weave together interviews in dialog with one another and with larger discussions around slam poetry as it related to Kānaka.
The Interviews:

The first two questions I asked naturally bled into one another and the were:

*When did you become involved in slam poetry in Hawai‘i?* and *What excites you about slam poetry?*

Each poet was brought into slam in similar, yet unique way. For both Jamaica Osorio and Jocelyn Ng their involvement occurred when they were in high school, which brought them into the Youth Speaks Hawai‘i (YSH) program. Jocelyn began participating in slams at Kalani High School, according to her slam poetry mentors Travis T and Kealoha had done outreach. However, it was an English teacher offering extra credit that made her get involved.

Osorio became involved because a friend of hers was performing in the YSH slam team final, but she didn’t really become active until she started attending the weekly YSH writing workshops. But both poets became involved because something in what they saw inspired them. Osorio said, “I was really excited about poetry in High School because it was a new, hip, way of expressing myself.” Ng had a similar reaction to Osorio, a sense of amazement and excitement that she was expressing her self at the age of sixteen. The sense of empowerment and exhilaration slam gives participants stems from the fact that it is but one of the few times someone may say their mind before a captive audience. The thrill, and importance, of this cannot be over stated. In fact all interviewees touched upon this.

Both Thompson and Scanlan came to slam in their early to mid twenties. Thompson is particularly interesting because not only does he come from an activist family, but his first introduction to slam poetry did not come from attending a poetry slam, but rather from film:
About 1999 I was watching HBO and saw – *Banging in Little Rock* – about violence in Little Rock, Arkansas. I was interested in social justice, and had been an activist for Refuse and Resist – this documentary had everything I was interested in. It was immediately followed by a documentary called *Slam Nation*.

I was like, what the fuck, and by the end of *Slam Nation* I was starting to write something, was literally moved to verse about my own analysis of *Banging in Little Rock*. I saw all these important voices in Slam Nation talking about all these issues, but outside of what I perceived in the documentary with Mumms The Schemer and Saul Williams, no one was talking about what I really wanted to talk about which was the police state, violence, crime, capitalism, the prison industrial complex, drugs, and that was the stuff I was interested in as a former skateboarding youth who had run ins with the law.

Thompson recognized the political potential in slam poetry. The film *Slam Nation* was the first full-length documentary about slam poetry. It centered around the 1996 National Poetry Slam held in Portland, Oregon and featured snippets of performances, interviews, and followed on a few of the teams that made it to the finals stage that year. *Banging in Little Rock*, the full title of which is *Gang War: Bangin’ in Little Rock*, a documentary about urban crime and gangs in Little Rock, Arkansas during the early 1990’s. The director, Marc Levin would later direct a film titled *Slam* which featured slam poet Saul Williams (who also appeared in *Slam Nation*). Thompson identified these films as giving him the urge to write because they addressed issues and of politics that were urgent.

Urgency is a powerful motivator for some slam poets. Scanlan encountered slam after returning home from Chapman University and finding many of his friends had either moved away, died, or were involved with crystal meth. Feeling sad, angry, and alone he said the impetus was there so “I took a fifth of whiskey to my face and screamed at a piece of paper all my frustrations about the crystal meth epidemic that has taken over these islands.” Later on when he was going to destroy his poem a friend encouraged him to instead read it in the open mic at Ong King, which to this day, remains a performance space for alternative artists and performers that
has been very friendly to slam poets. After that positive experience he kept reading and performing his work.

Osorio stated that the community aspect of the youth poetry slams, coupled with the weekly teen writing workshops really made her want to become involved:

Because the community was so vibrant and safe, in a lot of ways it was this welcoming, it was this safe space where I felt I could try new things, really, and that’s what really excited me about it. People were sharing all kinds of stories that I knew nothing about and at the same time I was being affirmed in the kind of stories I wanted to tell.

For a teenager to feel not only affirmation, but also safe, and free to share their voice speaks to the powerful need for such spaces. Osorio’s sentiments resonate with what Ana West and Susana Weinstein write about in their research on youth spoken word movements: “Most notably in YSW (youth spoken word) spaces, youth, rather than adult voices are central, vulnerability and exposure are celebrated, and individuals connect with one another across apparent differences in what Marc Bamuthi Joseph of Youth Speaks calls “energetic reciprocity”” (West and Weinstein 2012, 288 – 289). The sentiment that slam can be a place to connect through vulnerability and the sharing of ones stories is, I argue, not just limited to youth slams, but can become a feature of adult slams. Scanlan was particular about the ability of slam to offer healing:

… ultimately I like the fact that it’s free form, it’s a way of personal ownership of our stories and I love the healing factor from it. There’s uh, there’s a thing that happens when we acknowledge the pain in our lives and see a brighter day tomorrow. And when we give ourselves permission to validate our stories with our own voice, we silently giver permission for others to do the same - without saying they have the right to, once you stood up on stage and said your piece it

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19 West and Weinstein do not just celebrate the power of slams and spoken word in offering healing, acceptance, and empowerment to youth; they also critically engage the effects of revisiting trauma in performance on the well being of youth poets. This is an important study, which falls outside the bounds of this thesis, but is worth pointing out.
kind of clears the way for anybody else in the audience to know their story is valid and that their story is worth telling and worth listening to.

Those unfamiliar with slam poetry may be interested to know that, as I have stated earlier in this thesis, slam offers an opportunity for individuals to present testimony, or to testify, about their truths. For Kanaka ‘Ōiwi poets this gives them the opportunity to speak about issues relevant to them and the larger Kanaka ‘Ōiwi community. Where as Kanaka voices are usually marginalized, especially within the larger context of an occupied and colonized Hawai‘i, slam presents a space where stories counter to larger narratives may occur. Slam scholar Susan B.A. Somers-Willet that this type of space is increasingly common across slams in the United States and that it “suggests a specific political inquiry in its practice, on that slam poets make explicit in their work about identity: a challenge to the relative lack of diversity they feel is represented in the academy, the cannon, and dominant culture” (Somers-Willet 2009, 7). This is not to suggest that poetry slams are universally accepting, nor that they are free of problems related to accessibility, class, gender, sexuality, and race but rather that dialogs around these issues do find voice on the stages of many poetry slams.

In a similar vein, I asked all the poets this question: In what ways does your poetry address racial/ethnic/indigenous identity?

This question was of special interest to me as I had noticed that many Kanaka slam poets, though not all, do address these aspects of identity in a lot of what they write.

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20 African American scholar and slam poet Javon Johnson has a good article examining and critiquing his home poetry venue in regards to homophobia, sexism, and Black identity. Written from a place of love, it is one of the few pieces that challenges the openness and inclusiveness of slams and performance poetry. See: Johnson, Javon. “Manning Up: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Los Angeles’ Slam and Spoken Word Communities.” Text and Performance Quarterly 30, no. 04 (October 2010): 396-419.
Ng was straightforward and said while she does address identity in her work it was her exposure to fellow youth poets and adult mentors “really sparked a lot of topics within myself and as we learned together.” She also said that without her involvement in slam she would not have gone away to college in San Francisco where she became even more aware of her own racial identity.

While Scanlan was not to explicit with how his work address issues of racial, ethnic, or Indigenous identity, he rightly pointed out that for many people “… even in the midst of oppression and occupation and all of that stuff, the whole Polynesian experience currently, we forget to stand up for ourselves and speak out…I use this tool as a way to intelligently dissent, to speak my mind and ruffle some feathers.”

Thompson responded by recalling that his family, and father in particular, made him aware of Hawaiian history at an early age. Coming of age in the early to mid 1990’s Thompson felt that he was aware of what many of his peers were not. In regards to slam as a way to address these issues he said: “I think I had just been angry about the overthrow of the (Hawaiian) Kingdom since grade school and ever since then I’ve been acquiring tools to relate the story to people who a. don’t know it b. don’t care about it and c. might be in a position to do something about it.”

This is similar to what Osoio said in her response to the question: “it was always about being Hawaiian, speaking Hawaiian, sovereignty, all of those things and that (slam) was an immediate and direct way to for me to engage with my identity as a Kanaka Maoli.” While she did not locate her drive in anger, in our interview she did state that for her the roll models she had for speaking about Hawai’i were great Kanaka activists: “you know my, my orator roll models growing up were Haunani-Kay Trask, my father, Lilikalā Kame‘elehiwa (Kanaka activist, chanter, scholar, and professor of Hawaiian Studies), George Helm (Kanaka activist,
musician, and composer who led the struggle in the 1970’s against the bombing of Kaho‘olawe) these are really straightforward, like, speaking to the people kind of orators. And that’s the kind of poetry I always wanted to write, or the way I wanted to inhabit the stage and so I’d say that’s probably my approach to dealing with those issues, in particular.”

Both Thompson and Osorio come from Kanaka activist families. Thompson is the son of Pete Thompson, a former land rights activist and ethnic studies instructor at the University of Hawai‘i. Osorio is the daughter of Jon Osorio a musician, activist, and professor of Hawaiian Studies at Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies. That these two poets would address the politics, history and identity in their work speaks not only to their commitment to activism, but to telling stories that challenge other discourses about Hawai‘i. As Thompson put it, “The system for the rest of the world to know about Hawai‘i, is the Polynesian Cultural Center and Hawaiian Airlines ads about Hawai‘i.”

Therefore, when these poets do address Kanaka ‘Ōiwi identity and experience, they come from a place informed by activism and this runs counter to those institutions mentioned by Thompson.

While I was interested in seeing how these particular poets addressed Kanaka ‘Ōiwi identity, I knew that that was not the sum total of what they write about. I wanted a further sense of who they are as writers and performers:

What other themes are addressed in your work?

Ng stated how she addresses other themes related to identity “A lot of gender, sexuality. Being a woman. Being a queer woman. Being … a lot of identity, I think when I started out in poetry though I was addressing more political issues um I was telling other peoples stories I was,
you know, it was more dis-attached you know? And as my relationship with poetry grew it became more personal.”

Osorio indentified the theme of Hawaiian sexuality as one she was exploring:

I’ve written a lot about Hawaiian sexuality and gender and I’m very particular in the ways, or I try to be particular in the ways that I talk about Hawaiian sexuality and gender and really not mark it as queer. Um as a particular project in saying that queerness is this category that was created as non-normative to – describe non-normative sexualities – and I understand how queer communities particularly on the continent, and here, are created as these hopeful safe spaces for people who have been disenfranchised by their sexuality. But my project, one of the things I try to touch on in my writing is really decentering this idea of a normative sexuality that queerness is then, like, opposed to, right? So one of the things I try to write about is retelling these stories of desire and not saying “this is a queer poem” No, this is a poem about desire. This is a poem about desire that is completely rooted in ‘āina and is rooted in our mo‘olelo is rooted in our ancestors. So that hopefully people can see those stories as a part of themselves …

That Osorio grounds her more recent work, and discussions of sexuality and gender, within Kanaka mo‘olelo points to the potentials that slam might open up for Kanaka poets specifically. Having said that, Osorio was clear that she no longer writes or performs for slam, but is grateful for the opportunities and experiences it has afforded her, especially being able to hear other peoples stories.

Scanlan related this question to the issue of slam as a potential site of healing:

… the themes and subjects that I gravitate towards are the ones that are hard for me. And I know that if they are hard for me, that based on the human – to – human communication concept somewhere in our guts and our souls we know each other – that we’re similar if not completely the same – that like, if it’s a human experience and I’m having this, then I know other people have had it, too.

So when I talk about the difficult stuff - the stuff that’s difficult for me to express, I know that has have to resonated with at least 10% of the audience, right, at the very least 10% and if I can find a way to make that digestible, palatable to the other 90% of the audience than I’ve done my job, whether or not they agree with me you know.
In making this comment Scanlan bridged theme, in this case difficult or emotionally hard themes, with connection to an audience. He argues for poets tackling tough themes as a means of connection, and I agree because, as Osorio mentioned earlier, slam can be a safe space for talking about particularly hard issues. Also, as both Thompson and Osoro pointed out, slam provides the poet with a fairly willing and attentive audience. With that context in mind, Scanlan’s comment can be interpreted as helping an audience reach some form of catharsis through slam poetry.

In his answer to this question Thompson said that he tries to make his public writing very political. While he does have more personal poems he said that whenever he goes to another slam, especially on the American continent he always chooses to do his poem “Americans.” This poem, which is mentioned in chapter 2, talks about the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom as the start of America’s long history of overthrowing foreign governments. In the particular context of performing in America Thompson states:

If I’m the only Hawaiian you’re gonna see in this room or on this stage, or on this microphone. If I’m the only Hawaiian you’re gonna hear, this is the only narrative I’m gonna share with you. And I have other narratives I could share with you, but fuck that, I want you to know about the Overthrown of the Nation (Hawaiian Kingdom) cuz you might not fucking hear it ever again out of anyone else mouth in your life time!

Thompson is basically saying that while he may have other themes and topics he has written about, it is important for audiences to hear a uniquely Kanaka story, especially when that audience may never have heard a Kanaka ‘Ōiwi voice before. When the opportunity is there to provide a different narrative about Hawai‘i he takes it. As Thompson said, “I’ve always of had a politically minded sort of … using poetry as an apparatus to spread my political agenda.” While
this might be off putting to some poets, Thompson understands that the need to tell Kanaka centered stories about the place he is from is important.

Perhaps the most intriguing question I asked these four poets was:

*Do you think there is a connection between Kanaka Maoli oral traditions and contemporary slam poetry? How so, and why or why not?*

Given my line of inquiry in this thesis, these questions were of special interest. Without blinking an eye all of the poets affirmed there is a connection. However, each of them went into greater detail as to the particulars of that connection.

Ng located her response as part of why Kanaka poets are drawn to slam as form of expression: “we are a people of oral traditions, I think that’s the biggest appeal. It’s such a link to our history. Of sharing stories, of sharing of our selves. And I think, at least for our – a lot of the poets that I know, the ones who speak up, the ones who have been on the teams I know that has been a big pull, and if you listen to the pieces that their writing, that it’s our responsibility in a sense to continue that tradition.” Ng’s concluding comment about responsibility is especially insightful as it indicates that she understands that slam is part of the continuation of traditions. While tradition can be invoked as something solely of the past, Ng has placed it squarely in the realm of the present and to the future.

While Thompson did say that historically Hawaiians were an “oral and aural people” he linked his experiences as a poet to his family, especially being a kid at family gatherings where:

… this would get us around my dad’s generation and my granddads generation. And at that time I would tell you that my granddads generation were the real comedians, the real hamsters, would crack a joke about anything – follow up jokes, even physical pranks. I don’t know, they’re just hamming it up and they weren’t necessarily drunk to be hamming it up just grateful to have another party. To be the center of attention, the center of attention is a big thing in the
Thompson household and the Akana’s and the Honohono’s and all the other Hawaiians we are now related to.

Thompson then connected this recollection to his memories of his grandfather, who would call up his house to tell his father jokes. If his father wasn’t there, Thompson’s grandfather would have him listen to the joke then repeat it back to him to make sure he got it correct. While not a “formal” tradition, this oral connection clearly left it’s mark on Thompson as evident by his fifteen years of participation in slam.

Interestingly Scanlan drew upon Kanaka and Pacific Islander traditions of ocean voyaging:

The drive to continue reaching outward to continue exploring other islands and colonizing them – Hawaiian or Polynesian style – the fact that everywhere we went we brought our stories with us and the fact that they changed over time because we changed over time. Or, maybe it was the other way around, we changed because they did. But either way, the stories were integral to our survival – even far away from home we remember the things that our ancestors sent. Spoken word has been with our people since the beginning. That’s why the story still goes … we were here when the world was dark and turning and hot.

Much like Ng he places these traditions not only as part of the past, but the present as well. His final reference, “we were here when the world was dark and turning and hot” is a direct allusion to the Kumulipo which in its prologue opens with image of a hot earth with the heavens turning in great change. This reference not only underscores Scanlan’s awareness of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi oral traditions, but his statement that the “spoken word has been with out people since the beginning” implies that it has not left. That, it is continuing to this day.

Like the other poets, for Osorio there was no issue in connecting slam to past and continuing oral traditions. For her, slam was “very much influenced by traditional forms of storytelling in Hawai‘i.” She continues:
… it is reminiscent of the way people told mo‘olelo, right. It’s non-linear it’s performative, it is embodied, right. 
… what’s exciting I think in recognizing this connection to a deeper past in oratory and storytelling, is that there are these 4 to 5 generations between us and a clear celebration of that kind of storytelling, that we are really trying to unlearn. And it’s not like – in those 4 to 5 generations people have been sharing stories, they have been dancing hula, they have been writing mele, but it was under attack, right, and so much of it had been silenced or wasn’t affirmed and I think what’s great about slam poetry is that if we can see this connection all the way to this deeper past than we also can mediate this relationship with the last 4 to 5 generations of colonialism in Hawai‘i. And start to understand how it is the way we told stories had to change, but even through that change how it is so the same and it’s still a part of who we are.

Osoro grounds her discussion of Kanaka oral traditions in mo‘olelo and colonialism. Her response points to a nuanced understanding of what slam can mean for Kānaka and the stories they tell. Her statement that storytelling had to change speaks to the adaptive nature of Hawaiians who not only continued oral traditions, but starting in the nineteenth century, adapted to and utilized print and writing technologies to perpetuate both stories and culture. Her analysis not only reinforces the responses of the other poets interviewed, but provides further insight in regards to slam’s place within Kanaka ‘Ōiwi culture and expression.

Conclusion:

These four Kanaka ‘Ōiwi poets reiterated the importance of slam poetry as an important form of expression. While they may have come to slam at different times in their lives, or for different reasons, what they shared was a love of the spoken word and of the possibility of slam as a vehicle to share stories. Without a doubt Jocelyn Ng, Travis Thompson, Jamaica Osorio, and Tui Scanlan recognize the importance of this art form to the continuation of oral traditions. But, just as important they understood how necessary it is to speak and be heard. All of them knew how special it was to have an audience who not only receives stories, but also interacts with the
performer. That slam might be a site of healing and safety, in addition to empowerment, was not something I had originally considered. That Scanlan, Ng, and Osorio hit upon aspects of this is vital to understanding why slam may be attractive to many Kānaka. While a clear connection to our past and continuing oral traditions is one aspect, a space to speak, be heard, be understood, and begin a process of healing the wounds of occupation and colonization is an insight I would not have gained without speaking to these four.

These discussions remind me of a part of the chant “Kūnih ka Mauna.” This chant, which is often chanted by halau hula upon entering special sites is an appropriate place to end this:

Mai pa’a i ka leo
He ‘ole ka hea mai ē

Don’t withhold the voice
it takes little to respond. 21

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Conclusion: Ha‘ina ‘ia mai …

“there is singing in everything” – Leialoha Perkins

“Though we do not sound like our ancestors, we still practice their traditions” – Travis Kaulula‘au Thompson and William Nu‘utupu Giles

I began this with the stage, and I return to the stage. The most recent time I performed a poem was on February 13, 2015 at the Pacific Tongues Second Saturday reading held at Mark’s Garage in downtown Honolulu. The theme for the reading was “healthy relationships” and was sponsored by the Queer-Straight Alliance at Kapi‘olani Community College. The reading was well attended with somewhere between forty and sixty people in the audience. The event was hosted by Jocelyn Ng who asked poets a head of time if they would like to read, being conscientious of creating a safe and welcoming space, Jocelyn made sure the performers reflected a wide range of ages, gender and gender identities, sexual orientations, and racial backgrounds. Of course, as the reading got close to the final performers she asked the audience if there was anyone else who might want to get up on the mic and share a piece. Joyfully, there were about three audience members who took her up on the offer. After all the performers shared their pieces – from experienced poet to first timer – people hung around the venue and continued to have conversations.

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This may seem like an inconsequential aside, or a strange place to conclude a master’s thesis, but if we think of a stage as a place where a poet not only interacts with the audience and performs their work, but also as place where all in attendance are invited to engage the past, present, and future – then it makes perfect sense.

Slam is at a very interesting point in Hawai‘i. While the monthly Hawai‘i Slam continues in its twelfth year to provide an engaging space for poets to slam, Pacific Tongues has taken a different direction in terms of its Second Saturday shows. As of writing this, Second Saturdays has shifted to a combination of invited performers and open mic. Unlike past events, the shows are themed. Future themes include: West Papua, specifically the occupation of West Papua by Indonesia and a show to benefit relief efforts in Fiji following Cyclone Winston. These themes reflect Pacific Tongues efforts to reposition itself the US continent and more towards an engagement with Hawai‘i and its place in the Pacific. While the organization is de-emphasizing slams, it remains committed to teen outreach through weekly writing workshops and having poet-facilitators in Hawai‘i schools. Pacific Tongues has even sent a team of people to Moloka‘i to conduct workshops for high school students. The inter-scholastic slam competition, where students from different schools (mostly Oahu) compete on school slam teams, still continues, but has expanded into a festival that includes workshops rather than just a competition.

As a poet-facilitator with Pacific Tongues I am happy with this change of direction. The reorientation on the Pacific and Hawai‘i is a welcome step. It isn’t that dialog with communities on the US continent is a bad thing, rather, that this direction places Hawai‘i poets, youth in particular, in conversation with communities in the Pacific. Due to the American presence in Hawai‘i and it’s domination of our lives, it can sometimes be hard to remember that we –
Kānaka and Hawai‘i – have strong connections with the Pacific. While America has controlled Hawai‘i since 1898, our ties to the Pacific are ancestral and stretch back thousands of years.

Having said that, it must be pointed out that 2015 saw the adult slam team take second place at the National Poetry Slam (NPS). The first for a Hawai‘i Slam team, one of the remarkable performances at the NPS finals stage was a poem titled “Oral traditions” by Travis Thompson and William Giles. Quoted at the opening of this conclusion, this poem was performed in front of hundreds upon hundreds of people and may be one of the first times that both Kanaka ‘Ōiwi and Sāmoan poets were heard on the finals stage of NPS. Their poem, which included the connections to, and continuation of, Indigenous Hawaiian and Pacific traditions was a clear articulation of culture. Their performance, much like the 2008 and 2009 Youth Speaks Hawai‘i slam teams, opens up the space and possibilities for other Indigenous slam poets to be heard. Their voices serve as inspiration.

If from the stage we can look forward then we can also look back. As I stated in my introduction this thesis has one of it’s origins, in the time I began writing and performing my own work. Now as I look back on this specific project there are certain conclusions I can make: when Kānaka poets use slam poetry to express themselves this is an articulation of our culture. This articulation has greater meaning and significance if placed with in the context of the continuation of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi and Pacific Islander oral and literary traditions. Slam has also become a space to voice grievance and frustration – at oppression, occupation, colonization – but it also serves a place where healing occurs, in part by voicing these concerns but just as importantly, by processing experience through the mediums of writing and performance. From the interviews I conducted I came to understand that, for at least some Kānaka, the need to
express one self not only opened up new creative avenues, but was informed by a larger sense of tradition and the potential for it’s growth.

In conclusion it seems appropriate to not only return to the stage and look out, but to leave with a small quotation from a poem I wrote, the first I feel was written with a fuller sense of connection to who I am as Kanaka ‘Ōiwi:

“The truth is this:

Kānaka have never prayed alone
into Pō.

As long as a single Kanaka exist
we have thousands of ancestors
in front of us and we will be ancestors
to generations after.

our prayers
our stories
from our own mouths
and written with our own hands
echo long
throughout

Night and Day.”

- “Legacies (Revisited)” by David Keali‘i, 2011
Appendix
Kanaka ʻŌiwi Slam Poet Interviews
Travis Thompson Interview:

Me: When did you become involved in slam poetry in Hawai‘i? AND What do you know of how slam poetry got started in Hawai‘i?

“About 1999 watching HBO and saw – “Banging in Little Rock” – about violence in Little Rock, Arkansas. Interested in social justice, activist for Refuse and Resist – this documentary had everything. I was interested in. It was immediately followed by a documentary called Slam Nation.

Was like WTF, and by the end of Slam Nation I was starting to write something, was literally moved to verse about my own analysis of Banging and Little Rock. I saw all these important voices in Slam Nation talking about all these issues, but outside of what I perceived in the documentary with Mumms The Schemer and Saul Williams, no one was talking about what I really wanted to talk about which was the police state, violence, crime, capitalism, the prison industrial complex, drugs, and that was the stuff I was interested in as a former skateboarding youth who had run ins with the law.

So I watched slam nation, was completely wrapped up in that, loving the presentation, the subculture that was doing this, was creating expression that loosely I’d always observed the males in my family getting up on so apboxes at public or private events.

I come from a long line of storytellers – my grandfather, my dad.

I was watching Slam Nation and after that came on this Sundance award winning film, Slam, starring Saul Williams, and Beau Sia plays a bit role in there as well (*Saul Williams and Beau Sia are poets and performers who go their start on the 1996 Nuyorican slam team, and were featured in Slam Nation.)

By the time Slam was done I’d written my first “slam poem” and didn’t title it until a year latter. It’s called “War Cry.” It’s my analysis of the police state and in there I’d took a line from Rage Against the Machine and quoted Mummia Abu Jamal, had a quote from Huey P. Newton, Zappata, you know what I mean – it was a call to a people’s war against America.

It was my own 20 year old, semi-pseudo-Marxist ramblings and of course in there was an analysis of what it meant to be Hawaiian and what I was instilled in growing up from who my parents were and what I knew as a student of history.

That’s how I first heard of slam was this documentary and this film, and by the time the film was done I’d written my first poem.

I didn’t know what to do with it except share it with my comrades at Revolution Books where I used to staff twice a week. I shared it with all the activists circles and groups and meetings before our events. I’d share it before events for Mummia Abu Jamal, which was a hot topic at the time, against police brutality – the October 22nd coalition was relatively new back then – which
was started up by a bunch of mothers who had lost their sons to police brutality – So every October 22nd Revolution Books would hold a rally, protest, a punk show or hip hop show, and I would get up and share these poems.

Then I was working at Coffee Talk (coffee shop in the Kaimuki section of Honolulu) and back when the Honolulu Weekly existed (a now defunct weekly arts and news paper) and I was reading about all the events on the events section. I always wanted to know what kind of cultural events were going on because it was a great place to take dates, meet people – like-minded individuals and then I saw “slam poetry” – and oh I just saw a movie about this and it inspired me to create art for this thing I didn’t know was in existence here and I went down to Kaka‘ako that night after my shift and there was a poetry slam hosted by Jesse Lipmann (Local slam poet, considered the godfather of slam in Honolulu). And much to my dismay it was the second of it’s kind, there had already been this first one that happened. At that event, Kealoha wasn’t there, I think Makepa was there, the Direct Descendants Crew, Katana was there, all these poets – most of whom are gone now – but Gary Pak was there, Richard Hamasaki, certain literary people who I’d known through other affiliations either through family friends or school. That were either there or I imagined them to be there, or were there at the next one.

Richard Hamasaki was definitely there, and he may have even been the feature, it was at a place in Kaka‘ako. Jesse may have known about the place because Richard Hamasaki may have recorded some of the songs for The Spider Bone Diaries, Red Flea productions. He loved Westlake (deceased Kanaka poet) so he would bring Westlake poems back to music and record them. Amplified poetry he called it. So when I got there I signed up um went up first, I read in the thing you needed to have two poems to compete so I wrote my poem on the way there on the bus, waiting for the bus, on my way there, finished it outside … it was what I thought was a rhyming slam poem, you know, it was about like being in slam, in poetry slams even though I’d never been to one. It was about being what I – it was basically all my expectations of an event:

* Making slam gestures *
“Words fly through the air” you know –
connecting in the ear drums
and souls light on fire”

It wasn’t even that clever

I went up first. I drew my name out of the fucking hat and went up first just said my name was “Tavis” and he (Jesse) as he was walking away from the stage he said ‘that guy smells like weed’ and I may or may not have had marijuana on me, I don’t know, but you know for first impressions I was like this is not going great for me.

Anyway I went up there and I did my dinky ass poem and it got horrible scores, so anyway the second round came and I was made to go last in the second round and then that’s when I did polished – well not comparatively speaking – but that’s when I did that poem that I’d written that was HBO inspired, and when I did that then the whole fucking place erupted into like - y’know – applause and people approached me immediately after and wanted me to do this thing at Native
Books, and visit this school and wanted me - you know, who are you? And Makepa was like come do you live on the windward side where Hip Hop Boys record, lets record that you know? I was like what? Who is this? What is this? And I had accolades all of a sudden, instantaneously and then Jesse was like “Yo sign this email list and I’ll let you know when the next one is” and so

And I don’t know maybe the next one wasn’t until another 3 months, but at that point I felt really validated, you know like … there was a Native Books event within weeks of that and they had me perform there and I did the same poem, and you know I didn’t really understand slam aesthetics the way I do now and didn’t really understand performance and all of that, I mean, I was just trying to have something memorized by Native Books.

And then it just seems like within months of the Native Books thing Jesse had another one, Katana hosted one and then by I guess - the events just kept happening, I kept getting on microphones, everyone started knowing I was writing more and more poems, political ones about these political events we were having, you know, whether it was about homeless or education or police brutality.

And then I would go to these slams and either get first or second or third either at Jessie’s things or I’d go to Katana’s things – she used to call them red shark events, slam jams, they would be at campus even, here at UH and I’d either win first, second, third, or like people’s choice and then T’har(b/p)o would have slams at his place. Same thing, I’d always was coming the top three or top five or whatever. And then Jesse had me feature at the Arts at Marks Garage. And then shortly, quickly right after that Kealoha organized the first slam

Me: was this all, like in 99 to 2003, or was it 99/2000?

Kealoha’s first slam on King Street at Studio One was Spring 2003. Between me watching the documentary and going to Jesse’s slam … I don’t know how long that period was. It could have been maybe even a year.

Me: But at that time you had been going out and performing that poem at different things, right?

Only in audiences that I knew intimately like the aunties at revolution books and the activists at refuse and resist. Refuse and resist become (Nion) and that became World Can’t Wait. But I’ll always have a place for Refuse and Resist in my heart.

From 1999 to 2003 there were just a bunch of informal, maybe not even 3 slams a year, I think. Maybe 3 slams a year maybe – One hosted by Taharva, maybe 2 hosted by Jesse, and maybe one by Katana.

Me: I know Jesse, who are the other two?

Taharva, also goes by the name of DJ Sovereign T, he used to throw what were called key parties or loft parties up in Chinatown before there was anything happening in Chinatown. After
Taharva was cool with Jesse then Jesse approached him about using the venue – and then Jesse and Taharva would hold events there. But Jesse also had this new born with him, Malaiya, so Jesse was infrequent. There would be these events he would flyer and talk about but he wouldn’t be there and then Taharva would say “well we’re going to do a writing workshop today because I’m not in the competition.” That’s when I first met Kealoha at one of Taharva’s things that Jesse had organized and Jesse may or may not have been there. And Kealoha was definitely a bright voice, when Kealoha spoke he has. When he spoke he had experience in it. He was the most advanced I has seen in live and in person. And then it was just, that’s the way it was from 99 to 2003. Studio 1 was the first thing I had seen that really resembled what I saw in 2003.

There was so much juice there. So in 2003 I went and in the first three slams I made the second round, top 3 or something. Met everyone basically: Selah, Melvin, Intrepid, the whole crew and then Kealoha called us up to …

The question was how did I get involved with slam poetry … and the first organized slam event (travis went to) was organized by Jesse Lipman holding an event he called “Word Stew,” it was in Kaka’ako. It was a sound studio and yeah. There was just an ad in the Honolulu weekly and I already had this poem, one of them, from the HBO experience.

I’ve talked to Jesse about, he came here and he would … his wife was involved with Nā Mea Hawai‘i, Native Books. And they would have Gary Pak do something, have authors come and read. And Jesse was coming from the slam tradition in Chicago, and even in college and he had actually moved here with him from college. She was called something like Ghetto Geisha or something. The two of them were really looking for a place to get oof – to get the jump off. A place where … so these are all the authors, that’s great, but where is the living word? Where is that kind of stuff? Y’know, what do the people here have to say. That kinda thing. Jesse would probably tell a much more eloquent story. Mine is just finding him.

Me: What excite you about slam poetry?

Travis: “ Well, I dunno, There is peaks and valleys. For the first 5 or 6 years it was like, I wonder what this person is gonna say next? I wonder what the next person is going to say? I had never thought of it that way. You know, just the reflecting. Seeing my life explained through someone else’s metaphor. I never met them! And I don’t know who they are but, man, they just summed up exactly how I felt about something that I’d never been able to articulate. They did it for me! That was before I started feeling like – there was a time when that became jadedness. How this motherfucker just said it so eloquently, you know every thought I’ve had has been explained by this guy. There’s no point in me saying it … but you know what I mean. That happens when you are a slam coach or something. It happens when you watch slams from a competitive perspective and you rate stories on their points. The same thing I love about open mics, is the same thing I love about slam poetry, or anyone who is an eloquent storyteller. Like wow, thank you! I really like the everydayness of it too. I am not here to see some author who is a master of some topic or subject of some book and they are going to, you know, like, talk about their genius or their project. It’s going to be some busboy that’s gonna tell me about some sort of life story or lesson
or just explain sex or the adventure of them taking out the trash or whatever. You know, making the mundane interesting.

I think what interests me about slam poetry is what interests all people about art: how will this be expressed? what expression will I see? I don’t really feel that way about all art, but I think all who are interested in art, you know what I mean, find that thing: wow, wow, that was a really interesting way to express it, you know? And I love the three minute bangers at most, 4 their really going long – and for my attention span it worked, from the history of oral tradition in my family it worked.

*Me:* We sorta touched on it but, in what way does your work address racial, ethnic, or indigenous identity? And I know you work touches on that, too.

*Travis:* I can’t remember when I had an awareness of the overthrow (of the Hawaiian Kingdom). But it must have happened in grade school at some point. And then I was like the only kid who knew about it.

*Me:* even in the 90’s?

*Travis:* Well by the 90’s I’m a teenager. I was in grade school in the 80’s. My friends didn’t know about it. They must have assumed something, there was royalty and then there was “government” you know, like, american history is not this huge thing they teach grade schoolers. At least the truth in it. So I had a political awareness, or at least a – I don’t wanna say political, because I don’t think I could have described to you what politics was in grade school. But I was made aware of the overthrow of the Hawaiian government and what that means for Hawaiians, that was made aware to me by my family, by my father – by grade school. So there was this narrative I was holding onto that it was weird we weren’t talking about it in (Under?) schools.

And I went to a Waldorf school. So a waldorf school is like a history of Eurocentrism, Euro history. In elementary school I was learning about King Darius of the Persians, Alexander the Great and the greeks. I was learning the origin stories of Rome, Macedonia, and Britain and you know, Emperor Constantine and Charlemagne. I was learning European history. All these people that were overthrown as a people and all these Empires that went and invaded these other people and these great wars made for these great stories. God bless Mr. Frangelo … for being a great storyteller. He was this Australian guy who loved classical music and had a lisp and he spit. He spit when he spoke, especially p’s, b’s, and d’s – but he was a great speaker and I loved how he told a story. So I really gravitated to learning history that way. Again it matched up to the sort of oral tradition of like watching my family get down at parties and talk a lot of shit.

I think I had just been angry about the overthrow of the Kingdom since grade school and ever since then I’ve been acquiring tools to relate the story to people who a. don’t know it b. don’t care about it and c. might be in a position to do something about it. I’ve always held firm to the belief as an activist that if people just knew about something they’d be compelled to do something about it and make a change in this world. The obligation of knowledge. And I think when I was first writing – as a Hawaiian I feel like some days like some days we could still do nation within a nation still of soemthing and other days I feel like that’s a fucking pipe dream, let’s do communist overthrow – I think big.
And then there are other days were I’m like I’m just gonna be a rad history teacher and let my students deal with these questions…

I had been waking around with at least this awareness of this great injustice that had happened to my ancestors and how I could see very visibly how it was still affecting Hawaiians at large in the community and my dad would tell me the stories of how he met mom. My own origin story comes from the story of Hawaiian land resistance and struggle. And so at a pretty young age, at least in grade school, I remember getting trouble for saying the presidents on the dollar were just these dead haole’s – who should matter to me why? The dollar matters to me, even in grade school, but why do these dead haole’s matter to me? Because at Waldorf school their not even giving you american history, it’s very Eurocentric perspective and point of view. I only went there for 5th and 6th grade but in that time we didn’t talk much about no cherry tree that came in 7th and 8th grade and that’s where I learned it at Robert Louis Stevenson intermediate.

But I was politicized through all of that and I was questioning through all of it. I used to rationalize it for my own personal gain: why should I go to a white man’s school? why should learn the white mans agenda? Why should learn white mans history? That’s not who I am, that’s not why I am here – you know what I’m saying, its not serving my people, my culture – when really I just wanted to cut school and be me there was no political agenda behind my boycotting class it was just the justification for stupid childish personal behavior, basically.

And when I started to write poems and poetry I was already an activist

my first poem talks about smashing class systems, all right, my first poem talks about these police in their riot gear like bulls on parade, you know, I’d rather die on my feet than … living on your knees. These are quotes from my first poem.

So by the time I had found slam poetry it was like perfect for me, it was a perfect way for putting my “advanced political outlook” and putting it into what I considered to be a more effectively mass – for mass consumption.

I used to watch Carolyn and Liz and CJ and Joy and all the aunties at the (Revolution Books *RCP) book store, and Nick, and we’d put them up on microphones to speak and they’d ramble on they’d talk exactly about the topic, but peoples attention spans, my own even, weren’t hanging in there for this 10 minute presentation about why the revolution was needed now, you know?

What do you think is important about slam as a mode of expression?

I was like, man, you know these slam poems are calling for a revolution in 3 minutes or less and if they’re inspiring me – and I’m this un-inspirable mother fucker that’s been jaded – by the educational process and whatever, then what the fuck can my poem do to someone?
Rhetoric is designed to shape arguments and what does that better than, like, slam poetry? Slam poetry is poetry for the stage. And poetry in and of itself is this great use of rhetoric. An artform, an expressive use of rhetoric. Making you feel something you had only thought, smell something you’d only tasted. Fucking up all a that shit, making new wrinkles in your brain just because you hear a great poem. Someone said something that you’ll never forget because they said it in this descriptive way. It’s life changing, you know?

And it was exactly what I was looking for. I was always arguing these flyers need to be smaller, there’s too many words on this (referring to Revolution Books Fliers).

Our communications need to be like this, make shit more expressive. And when they come we can’t just talk their ears off on the mic.

*Me:* You’ve talked about your earlier themes, we’re talking about a good 15 years of poetry, what themes have you looked at?

*What other themes are addressed in your work?*

You mean since?

*Me:* Since, during, all the way up to today …

*travis:*

A few years ago there was the Punahou carnival and I had this big emotional response to it because of a friend of mine who had committed suicide like shortly after.

And then I started doing these NaPoWriMo’s (National Poetry Writing Month) but they were really for me and not for people, writing whatever topic was on my mind for that day. But I’ve always tried to make my public writing very political. And then my very personal writing – I just haven’t gotten to anything clever.

And when I’m asked to write stuff for English classes, I had a love/hate relationship with any kind of poetry writing class/creative writing class. Basically up from 1999 until I took Lyz’s class (Lyz Soto slam poet and executive director for Pacific Tongues) two years ago.

I didn’t like the whole form. I didn’t like learning all these forms, I’m pretty decidedly free verse.

*Me:* Which is funny because many poems of yours rhyme don’t they?

*Travis:*

I just think that happens from a hip-hop generation standpoint, that’s what I’m arguing because I used to make a concerted effort to rhyme but I don’t do that anymore. Now I think there’s this rhythm or cadence that comes up, and I don’t know if that’s hip-hop or Hawaiian, or what. You
know Hawaiians – this is what I learned in Arista’s (Noelani Arista Kanaka historian who teaches at UH Mānoa, focuses on Hawaiian language documents) class when I looked into analysis of mele and stuff like that. The use of repetition, repeating things, and I teach this in my poetry classes – anaphora and tissurephy(?) starting a bunch of lines with the same beginning – is anaphor and then beginning a bunch of lines with the same ending. And basically hammering a way at prompts, to hammer a way at a point.

* we both mention the kumulipo – at the time when _

It’s in all religious scripture. Anything that is important you fucking repeat it … and Hawaiians pretty much made it a point to use that. I read this for (Ariasta’s class) her class, I read all this, did all this analysis of all this mele for Queen Emma – when she was alive … a lot of shit happened in her life … her husband, her kid, her traveling, the election of Kalākaua, all these things happening in her life. Hawaiians cared profoundly for what happened to Queen Emma – how she was feeling, what she presented to them. And they wrote a lot about it, especially in the Hawaiian language newspapers, you know. When I started seeing like all the – about 4 years ago – all these, I guess, couplets. The way they put lines together and started them same, or ended the same – I was like “holy shit” I’ve been doing this.

These days I write papers, man. When I was taking Lyz’s class I wrote a bunch of poems about whatever – and I really like those poems, but I didn’t call them slam poems. I still to this day really feel, for the most part, unless I have an older piece or it has to be memorized. When I’m slamming at a slam, it’s usually always in a competitive vein. Or as a political reason and as an example: I’ve been to the Nuyorican and on that stage maybe half a dozen times, either as a competing poet or sacrificial poet (calibration poet before a slam starts) and I’ll pretty much always argue for my right to do “Americans,” because that’s the only narrative I want to share. I’m the only Hawaiian you’re gonna see in this room or on this stage, or on this microphone. If I’m the only Hawaiian you’re gonna hear this is the only narrative I’m gonna share with you. And I have other narratives I could share with you, but fuck that, I want you to know about the Overthrown of the Nation (Hawaiian Kingdom) cuz you might not fucking hear it ever again out of anyone else mouth in your life time!

As a couch for Youth Speaks Hawai‘i (Youth slam, predecessor of Pacific Tongues) that was one of my main points, too. All right, we’re gonna go to the mainland, what are you gonna do, tell them what they know? Or are you gonna tell them some shit they can’t ever know. Some shit only a million people in this world know (??????) by virtue of living here and maybe only a million of them actually know from being a part of a culture that is of here, you know? And then only a couple hundred thousand can go (to the mainland for BNV) because they’re teenagers in that culture of here, and only the dozen of you know because your slam poet-teenagers in the culture of this place, that is unlike anywhere else in the fucking world.

So you wanna go and you wanna do a poem about parents? That’s cool. But I would really love it kids if we could come with some poems about here. Cuz if you don’t tell them what it’s like here, they’re never gonna know what it’s like here. Because that’s not how the system is set up.
The system for the rest of the world to know about Hawai‘i, is the Polynesian Cultural Center and Hawaiian Airlines ads about Hawai‘i.

Me: So you can say that one of the things that slam can do is sort of push against those types of ideas about Hawai‘i?

Well yeah. Slam is just another form of art, and art is another form of media, and all media is meant to communicate something. So if you’re gonna do that in an audience based art form which slam, competitive slam is: guaranteeing you a room of a captive audience, that’s gonna be listening intensely to what your saying – I cannot guarantee this outside of that space and time. And when you get that captive audience what are you gonna say kiddo? And if you’re Alaka‘i or Itai (former YSH slam members) you’ve heard me say that 8 years in a row!

I would go into Farrington (High school in Kalihi predominantly Filipino and Pacific Islander) and “Everyone things this about Kalihi” I’d go to Waianae (Large Kanaka community) and “Everyone thinks this about Waianae” you tell me. How many kids go to Waianae (High school?) How many are gonna be into poetry, how many are gonna be on a stage with a captive audience listening to their every fucking word.

Now: You just gonna get up there and do a poem about butterflies and puppy dogs? You can do that, cuz there are butterflies and puppy dogs in this world, and everyone loves them. But not everyone goes to Waianae, not everyone lives in this neighborhood and is capable of expressing themselves like you are kiddo.

I’ve always of had a politically minded sort of … using poetry as an apparatus to spread my political agenda.

Me: Cool. It’s funny you mention “Americans” because it’s the first poem I saw you do. At the Hawaiian hut in 2007.

Travis: If you and I were to go to Albuquerque to on a poetry tour or something, every time I step off this island to do a poem somewhere “Americans” is one of my openers. It the one that I always feel like, you might block me out after you hear this poem, but at least you’ll hear this one. You might block me out after “Tongue Bath” (another poem of Tavis’s) and then you won’t her Americans even though I’m doing it. This is my opener

Me: So how would you say that audiences have reacted to your poems?

Travis: I did a poem about Katrina, after it happened and some political analysis. I got .01 as one of my scores. At Hawaiian Hut way back in the day.

I’ve also been boo’d off the stage. I was at Pearl Kai intermediate school with Selah (Honolulu slam poet from the early 2000’s), and maye Melvin (Chamorro slam poet and co-founder of YSH), Kealoha, Intrepid (early 2000’s slam poet) and I was doing that poem, “Religion.” “I don’t believe in God/But I’m a religious person…” and the poem is about like you can believe in what you want and still be a good person. But I couldn’t get through the first verse because as soon as I said “I don’t believe in God”: Booooooo! Intermediate kids, loval intermediate kids,
booming me off the stage. I was like wow! This has never happened. And it’s never happened since.

I’ve also done events like MLK Day parades, at the end where they’re at the rotunda over at Kapiolani park and people have come up to me and been like: why so much violence in your poems? Like in “Americans” or “War Cry”

Do you want violence? Well, I’m not a pacifist. Maybe MLK was, and that’s what you call irony or whatever. The man (MLK) came to a violent end and violence is an American tradition. All we do, and all we’ve become has to do with violence.
So you can criticize me for that, and I’m open for it.

I do believe that if you are a public performer in your art … anytime you step your art outside of a vacuum, you are opening yourself up to criticism. How you want to deal with that is on you. But, I do not believe in the right for any artist to be above criticism. Or else, don’t be an artist.

When I crafted “Americans” I was in NYC actually, I was organizing protests against the republican national convention in that city that year. That’s the year they re-elected Bush (george w.) A lot a people wanted to know, including activists – educated activists, people of color even, why are you hear? As if there is no injustice in Hawai‘i. As if there is no sort of political, you know, reasoning in Hawai‘i. As if it’s the paradise that they all came to see in their Hawaiian airlines commercials. And whatever films had portrayed us. And I was like, ok this is why. What the fuck am I doing here?
In that poem it was immediate that I connect the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom to our incursion into the Middle East … to Gulf War II.

I guess I was foolish to think other activists would know the plights of other Native and Indigenous people around the world. And then I started thinking, what do I know about modern day Algonquins, about the Huron, what do I know about the people that named Manhattan. I mean there’s not a stature, there’s not a Bishop museum for them, I mean if there is where the fuck is it? And how come it’s not as important as the statue of liberty, right? That’s a drowned narrative. It’s either been silenced or what ever the fuck it’s been. And I wasn’t gonna be a part of that, so, I made a decision 11 years ago that I ever get a chance to speak on a microphone somewhere that’s not of this place… then you are gonna walk away knowing:

A) Hawai‘i was an overthrown kingdom
B) We’re (Americans) are still overthrowing places, Hello.
C) I’m not down with it

Cuz the bartenders at Nuyorican were like, Yo you did that last year, or whenever I end up at the Nuyorican. And then one of them has to bring up “but the Japanese own everything in Hawai‘i” and I’m like that was the 80’s brother. The Japanese don’t own anything now, but you can google it.
Me: Do you think there is a connection between Kanaka Maoli oral traditions and contemporary slam poetry? How so, and why or why not?

Travis: I think Hawaiian by virtue of not having a written language historically, tend to be oral and aural people. I just remember … I’m an only child but I have lots of cousins on my Hawaiian side of the family. When we would … of course we’d play, at every family get togethers, and because there we were so big there were a lot of family get together … this is before Kapolei, existed. I blame Kapolei for splintering my Hawaiian family. So this is like the 80s or early 90s when Kapolei didn’t exist

When they were only as close as Aiea or Manoa or Kalihi there wasn’t the Thompson diaspora there is now. At all the Hawaiian get togethers, I’m an only child but I was kickin it with all the cousins and everyone of the same age, of which there were many. Eventually we’d have to eat and when the food came out. And this would get us around my dad’s generation and my granddads generation. And at that time I would tell you that my granddads generation were the real comedians, the real hamsters, would crack a joke about anything – follow up jokes, even physical pranks. I don’t know, they’re just hammering it up and they weren’t necessarily drunk to be hammering it up just grateful to have another party. To be the center of attention, the center of attention is a big thing in the Thompson household and the Akana’s and the Honohono’s and all the other Hawaiians we are now related to.

When my grandpa, to me he was the best storyteller in the family, he would call the household and if my parents weren’t home he used to leave jokes that he had come up with or heard or that he remembered or wanted to tell my dad. And he would leave these jokes on the voicemail, but they were these long winded many minute jokes that more than half of them he was never able to finish because the tape would cut him off and he’d be sudden with his joke and he wouldn’t notice. Or he would call back and say “I don’t know where I was when the tape cut off so call me if you wanna here the end of it”

So then if I was home and I would see grandpas number on the caller ID I’d answer it because he’d have something interesting to say. He’d probably tell me: “tell your dad to pick this up” or whatever and here’s a joke. So he’d call me with all these long winded jokes I’d have to tell my dad when he got home. So my grandpa would make me practice and tell the joke back to him.

Me: I mention that Haunani-Kay’s dad would have her stand and recite political speeches.

Travis: For our Public History and Commemoration class, Kosasa (Karen Kosasa, teacher in American Studies at UH, Japanese) had us watching the 1993 Sovereignty Sunday speech she gave about … fuck Dan Inoye, and bring back Akaka, and fuck OHA too, and you know … we are not American, we are not American, we are not American, you know, I was there for that speech. But of course, being 35 now and knowing more about the world and history, especially of this place now – and of that era of the 90’s in particular … yeah the speeches mean so much more to me now than it did in that moment and time. And I knew it was a heavy speech, even at that time. My dad was standing there like don’t forget this speech, or this moment. And I always knew Haunani-Kay Trask informally and she would always be introduced to me as aunty. We would be at all these different events or planning meetings and Jon Osorio (Hawaiian activist, scholar, and musician who teaches Hawaiian studies at UH) and I’d be kicking it with his son Kāne and we’d be playing basketball. I don’t know, it was just Aunty Haunani, I think I
probably would have known her better if she had a kid my age at that time. Til then she was like you know she was the “angry aunty Haunani who as the haole husband”, you know what I mean – whose really cool by the way – so my grandpa use to call and he’d quiz me on these jokes I used to have to tell dad

Interview pau here
Jocelyn Ng Interview:

When did you become involved in slam poetry in Hawai‘i?

I became involved with slam poetry back in 2006 – what happened was, so Travis, Kealoha, they had come and done outreach at my school (High school) but I wasn’t really interested and it wasn’t until my English teacher had asked me to do extra-credit poetry and, um, it was an after school thing – it was actually a competition, I had no idea it was a competition, and it was for Kalani High School’s first interscholastic poetry team and it was the first year Youth Speaks Hawai‘i was doing interscholastic poetry slam and it turned out that I made the team and Melvin (Won Pat Borja) actually ended up being the coach.

Me: so the coach for the Kalani High School team?

Joce: Yeah, and after that I’ve just been involved – I wasn’t involved with Youth Speaks Hawaii at the time, it was strictly the high school slam poetry club and then it wasn’t until 2007 when I tried out for the travel squad (the YHS slam team that competes at Brave New Voices) and then … the rest is history.

What excites you about slam poetry?

I think that, what excites me right now is how I am continuously finding new ways to love it. You know I think my relationship with slam poetry has definitely transformed over the years and, um, but in good ways, you know?

Me: Can you give me examples?

Like back in 2006 it was very new, it was very like “oh my god I’m expressing myself at 16” you know and after all the journeys you go through being in different competitions, different events, hearing so many different stories, meeting so many incredible writers and performers and educators and artists in general has really opened so many doors – really opened so many perspectives and hearing everyone’s relationship with poetry as well, you know, really makes you reflect and be conscious of your own relationship with it and how it changes.

In what ways does your poetry address racial/ethnic/indigenous identity? Can you provide an example?

I will say that when I first started doing poetry I wasn’t really touching upon those things and I think more than .. not until I was on the Pacific Tongues/Youth Speaks Hawai‘i crew, competition crew, I actually really started writing about my racial identity. Um, before that I wasn’t really, you know it wasn’t something that I ever thought about, it wasn’t a topic that ever pressed my “oh I need to write about this” but being kind of around mentors like Lyz, Melvin, and Travis – you know, really pushing those boundaries and also the people I was on the team with like Jamaica (Osorio) and Ittai (Wong) that really sparked a lot of topics within myself and as we learned together.
Me: With that in mind, do you think you would have thought about those types of issues – you know like racial and ethnic identity – had you not been in slam poetry?

Joce: That’s a good question cuz honestly I don’t think I would have done a lot of things without slam poetry, for example, like going away for college. Yeah, I think about that and … Pacific Tongues had a really big impact for instance, me going to college really. Um, like I knew – my family had always supported me going to college but it wasn’t like pushing me to apply out of state you know Pacific Tongues was really that big influence for doing that. And going out of state really made me more – being outside of Hawai‘i – culture shock, really becoming aware of racial-ethnic-identity-

Me: You went to Mills, right?

Joce: No, I went to USF (University of San Francisco), yeah so, I don’t think I would without slam poetry, without spoken word, I don’t think I would be as conscious or aware of my racial-ethnic identity.

What other themes are addressed in your work?

Identity in general. A lot of gender, sexuality. Being a woman. Being a queer woman. Being … a lot of identity, I think when I started out in poetry though I was addressing more political issues um I was telling other peoples stories I was, you know, it was more dis-attached you know? And as my relationship with poetry grew it became more personal.

What do you think is important about slam as a mode of expression?

And when we talk slam, do we mean slam as a competition or slam as in spoken word?

Me: I’m thinking of both actually.

Joce: Oh, okay. When I think of slam, competition, and expression – um you know, wow that’s such a big question. Because … my whole beginning relationship with poetry was through competition, you know, and that was such a good fuel because – I’m a competitive person, I love it, I think it made me write more, it made me really dig deep more, you know like, and seeing so many amazing performers just be vulnerable and share of themselves, you know, and a lot of that – witnessing that was in a competition mode, but it was healthy. It was a healthy competition mode. And I’ve seen it be very unhealthy for other poets, and I think we’re really lucky with Pacific Tongues and Youth Speaks Hawai‘i because our facilitators such as Lyz and Melvin, they’re very conscious of that.

Me: What do you think having that healthy competition does for you as a poet, a writer, and a performer?
Joce: I think it … I think it, as a performer it makes you conscious of what you’re really trying to say, you know? But at that same note I think it’s not so much what happens on stage, but what happens after you get off. And how do you facilitate that trauma (*discuss trauma? article from Harvard …) if you share that part of your self. And, you know, Anna West has an article you know … “Call and Responsibility” that I read, I think that’s the main part of what Pacific Tongues is really trying to cultivate more is: after we hear the trauma on stage, how do we heal the poet off stage. I think that’s a big part of expression in this art form is that so many of us share such dark and deep things that we may not share with families or friends, but we have a good community that catches us and is able to reflect with us. And that is such a key part in this art that we do.

How do audiences react to your poetry?

I think it depends on the venue.

Me: Ooo. That’s an important thing. Explain to me a little more about what you mean by that.

I think, you know, venue makes a huge thing about how people react to what you’re saying. For example having things in bars, and people who’re going to bars don’t wanna be listening to maybe, you know, to deep thought, they want to be entertained. You go to … but if you go to a competition like First Thursdays (Hawaiʻi Slam) it’s a competition but at the same time people still want to be entertained. Or they want something that’s, they don’t want to think too much.

The venue definitely influences how the audience reacts. For example, I think if you go to UH there are so many beautiful readings that happen, that audience is so different than the audience at Second Saturday Open Mic (Monthly reading and poetry open mic put on by Pacific Tongues) and both hold such important spaces, you know, in our community, but I think – yeah, I’ve been received very differently in both, but nothing negative just – you know slam crowds the host already cultivates that “let’s make some noise if you like something” whereas if you go into a reading sometimes the slam poets in the audience are the loudest ones, hahaha. Who’s snapping and making those moaning sounds? That’s the slam poets.

What makes the performative aspects of slam so appealing to both the poets and audiences?

The performance aspect, man, it brings – it brings something that page poetry can’t, it makes it so… it adds that extra flavor to each poet. I remember watching Def Poetry, when I was like in high school, and being like “Oh my God!” Like I had never seen someone read poetry like that! And actually use a stage and use their arms and use different inflections in their voice. I think the beautiful thing with spoke word is you can break so many boundaries.

Me: what kind of boundaries do you mean?

You can add some theater into it, you can add… just seeing, just going to Brave New Voices and seeing my first team pieces and being like “oh my god I didn’t know you could have four people on a stage and have like choreography and synchronized singing and you know, like stepping
(stepping – ) at the same time and it being like – I didn’t know poetry could do that” I think that really blew my mind seeing that for the first time but it also inspired a lot of new writing after seeing that, you know, seeing people like – and I think poetry is continually growing like that, people are continuously bringing something new and I think that’s exciting.

What reasons do you believe Indigenous poets, especially Kānaka Maoli are attracted to slam poetry as form of expression?

I think it – that’s a big question, too. I think that the biggest is that we are a people of oral traditions, I think that’s the biggest appeal. It’s such a link to our history. Of sharing stories, of sharing of our selves. And I think, at least for our – a lot of the poets that I know, the ones who speak up, the ones who have been on the teams I know that has been a big pull, and if you listen to the pieces that their writing, that it’s our responsibility in a sense to continue that tradition. 

Me: This is a follow up: Whenever poets compete from here they are telling stories you can’t hear anywhere else, has that been intentional, do you think?

Joce: I don’t think it’s intentional. I don’t think we go in thinking I’m gonna write a poem no one else can write about. I think it’s just like tell your story, you know, and it just so happens that we’re telling a story that nobody else can tell. Nobody else is coming from these islands, nobody else is coming from our history and that goes for any Indigenous peoples, you know. You go somewhere else they’re gonna sound different, because that’s their story, that’s where they’re coming from. I think this is who we are, this is what we are going through, I think this is just it. Sharing our truths.

Where do you think slam poetry is headed in Hawai‘i?

This is such a good question – I was just having a discussion with Harrison (Ines) about this last night. I think we are in a very interesting place right now. I think – I can’t speak for everyone – but I know with me and my friends in the poetry community we’re trying to push through boundaries now. I feel like slam poetry’s been a little stagnant for a little while in Hawai‘i, in the sense of no one’s really bringing something innovative to the stage you know at the slam competition – I’m not speaking for other poetry venues but at the slam competition sense, or spoken word in general, I think we’re gonna push the boundaries a little more in Hawai‘i and I think it’s gonna be exciting, and I think it’s healthy that we continuously evolve and transform the art – the living word, you know, because it’s gonna happen whether we do it or not. Because if it’s not me it’s gonna be the next generation, if it’s not that generation it’s the one after them, you know – there’s gonna be a poet coming up that’s gonna write something that’s gonna blow somebodies mind and it’s gonna be so fresh. And I think it’s so beautiful that this poetry, this art form is evolving and growing whether we are pushing it or not.

Interview pau here
**Tui Scanlan Interview:**

*When did you become involved in slam poetry in Hawai‘i?*

I came back from Chapman University dejected from and burnt out a little bit from the theater department and I was convinced there was no art in Hawai‘i. So I - totally convinced of that – So I came home and just got to work and wasn’t even thinking about it, you know. And someone on set said you should – and I got made because all my friends were doing meth when I came back from college, or they were in jail or they were dead or they had just like moved on to somewhere else, yup. So I didn’t really know anybody, so I was totally sad, didn’t know what to do, convinced all through college that I couldn’t write and then I – the impetus was there and I took a fifth of whiskey to my face and screamed at a piece of paper all my frustrations about the crystal meth epidemic that has taken over these islands and uh, I was gonna burn it but someone said you should read that and I was like “where?” and he goes you should go to Ong King (a venue in Honolulu’s Chinatown for alternative arts and performances, has been generous to slam poets, and holds a weekly open mic) it’s an open mic and I was like “what’s Ong King?” And everything just kinda tumbled down from there

Me: *About what time period was this, mid -2000s?*

Oh, this was, I came back 07 so like June or May of 07

Me: *So Ong King, that was back when they had their open mic?*

Tui: They still have it currently, Christian DeLowery AKA See/Cee was the propietor at the time, super hippy, love that guy. I read it out loud and I’d been doing theater for like – I don’t know, 5 years, dedicated, undergrad, BFA stage performance – so I was use to public speaking, you know and I get on stage and I read this thing and my knees start shaking uncontrollably, this is the first thing I’d ever written from myself and I’m not spitting somebody else’s play or poem or whatever – it’s my first. I’m shaking uncontrollably, I could not will the tension to release which was completely foreign to me. That’s when I knew, that’s when I knew I had to keep doing this, this meant something to me. Whereas theater kind of died out for me a little bit, I saw a bunch of divas and bullshit going on the stage – low and behold there are divas in every art form involving a stage – in everything.

*What excites you about slam poetry?*

I like that it’s free form, for the most part, like here are clichés and there are like styles of performance that are kind of standard, par for the course, you expect to hear a cadence --

Me: *If you close your eyes you can hear the slam poem*

Tui: Right, right, you can hear the cadence that people typically identify with as a slam poetry cadence, right. But ultimately I like the fact that it’s free form, it’s a way of personal ownership of our stories and I love the healing factor from it. There’s uh, there’s a thing that happens when
we acknowledge the pain in our lives and see a brighter day tomorrow. And when we give ourselves permission to validate our stories with our own voice, we silently give permission for others to do the same - without saying they have the right to, once you stood up on stage and said your piece it kind of clears the way for anybody else in the audience to know their story is valid and that their story is worth telling and worth listening to.

That kind of double healing thing – in confessing sins – or – in confessing my guilt and alleviating myself and it helps heal the audience like if I shed the pain of a situation, vocally, live for other people my sound waves will physically reach out and touch people, so I guess, I love the intimacy of it I love it as a healing art – or it can be – I love the power of it, the personal empowerment of it, and I love that there’s no way to only do a subject once. Like there are types of it that are content based poems that – and it’s fucked up to that we need a “slam strategy”*

The validity of each person’s art form is kinda taken away from the whole competition thing, the competition thing I feel sucks away the soul of it a little bit, but in that, drives people to do better based on arbitrary numbers. It’s so dumb that we’ve built out our souls to 5 numbers. You know, here let me cut out this piece of myself and now judge it.

And that’s the thing that I think bothers me about it, but ultimately the art form itself is – the, the power in it of the spoken word, of saying stuff live to people. Like saying stuff in front of people is something we don’t so anymore. There’s so many filters that we have. There’s the phone, the laptop, the computer screen, the TV screen, there’s fucking movie screen – snapchat, twitter, and facebook – we’ve gotten so worried social networks and social connections we forgotten to stand in front of people and be people of our word.

It’s an art form that requires me to be a man of my word

_In what ways does your poetry address racial/ethnic/indigenous identity? Can you provide an example?_

Ahhh the thing that I love about the court jester is he’s the only person that can look the king in the eye and spit in his face, metaphorically speaking. He was the only one who could look the king in the eye and tell him the truth, right, boiled down no sugar on top, openly laugh in the kings face. And I think that’s an important thing that we get to do sometimes. And even in the midst of oppression and occupation and all of that stuff, the whole Polynesian experience currently, we forget to stand up for ourselves and speak out. We’re so busy being angry about stuff that our grandparents told us we should be angry about we forgot why we were angry in the first place and now its just blanket generalization anger, now it’s just being mad at anyone who grandpa told me to be mad at.

Rather than expressing that anger vocally it turns into this misdirected amount of energy that … ultimately is harmful to our future more so than it is to our present, yeah, and like the act of speaking a story and having others acknowledge it’s validity, whether or not they agree with it, is an important part of a process of healing, right. And if we can only be angry and only be violent and only be every other stereotype people label us, with out an intelligent way of, how do you
say it? Revolution – God it has so much shitty connotation to it – like, not revolt, but dissent. Intelligent dissent. If you cannot intelligently dissent from oppressive powers than there’s no point in dissenting at all. You might as well just be banging tin cups on the bars of the jail, you know what I mean? Your just making noise now, your just making noise to mess with people to make them angry.

So, the way that I approach it I use this tool as a way to intelligently dissent, to speak my mind and ruffle some feathers without … hurting anybody, like all those people that I disagree with are still people, you know, still have hopes and dreams and fears and nightmares and I think it’s – there’s a basic human element to everything we do and we can speak to each other from that place that is human, ultimately. And this is the most efficient way that I’ve found to do that.

*What other themes are addressed in your work? What types of experiences do you like to write about?*

I like to talk about the elephant in the room, it gets me in a lot of trouble at family gatherings. Umm their like – polite conversation is generally defined as avoiding the uncomfortable, the difficult, or the disputed, right, you don’t talk about religion and politics at dinner, right, all the things your not supposed to say. I think half the reason why we have so many problems in those areas is because we don’t talk about it, we don’t talk about what’s going on in us is effecting the way that we interact with the world and the way that the world effects how we are living internally, right? And externally, it’s one big cycle. So the less we talk about stuff the harder it is to talk about stuff.

I like to talk about the things that are difficult for me to talk about, the stuff that’s like … like talking about the dad piece, “Legacy,” that was an actual thing and it was a really hard experience to be a part of as a kid, a third grader, and it took me that long to talk about the experience, what it was like to lose my dad and then grow up without him. And then not have kids yet, but want to be all the great things that he was to me. And it took forever to process that, I was a pissed off teenager until like, 19, and realized it’s not gonna benefit me.

The themes that I like to talk about, or the themes and subjects that I gravitate towards are the ones that are hard for me. And I know that if they are hard for me, that based on the human – to human communication concept somewhere in our guts and our souls we know each other – that we’re similar if not completely the same – that like, if it’s a human experience and I’m having this, then I know other people have had it, too.

So when I talk about the difficult stuff - the stuff that’s difficult for me to express, I know that has have to resonated with at least 10% of the audience, right, at the very least 10% and if I can find a way to make that digestible, palatable to the other 90% of the audience than I’ve done my job, whether or not they agree with me you know.

*Me: the two poems that I’m thinking of in particular are the “Hands” piece and even “Waypoints” – these are two of my favorite by the way, and the “Father” piece – you’ve talked a little bit about “Legacy” but what got you to write “Waypoints?*
Holy shit waypoints I was outside of a club I was getting ready for a set, Jazz Minds, right. And this … he wasn’t Tahitian … so this Polynesian dude from another set of islands goes up to me, hammered, right. And he heard some of the stuff I’d done at the club from the week before, or something, and he was like: You know which one you gotta write, man? And I was like, I dunno man, tell me. Tell me something. And so he goes on this long narrative, just kinda drunken rambling, rattling off different factoids about Polynesian navigation about how like, uh, like the trade routes were like an octopus and each island was a leg, right … uh … Te Ao Uriuri like, he tells me this, right – Te Ao Uriuri means the darkness to the light. I remember that …

Me: which language was that?

Tui: I have no idea, no idea!

Me: I’ve been trying to find that out

Tui: I have no idea, that’s the worst part, what was this guy? But yeah, so the guy – in lavalava and tank top and red faced drunk is telling me all of these things and uh … You know really, uh, it all happened in a night. That poem all came out in 20 minutes and it got like 50 words cut from it and two stanzas shifted. One of those. The lightning bolt struck and it stuck in the battery immediately, 100%!

And you know the real – the galvanizing moment in that was thinking about being in California as a student and even, even thought I am very quote-unquote “articulate,” even still, the fact that they couldn’t place which minority I was in California, regardless of how well that I speak, was … upsetting. I felt a full disconnect from my people, from my land. I felt like their land was dead or had been or a long time, entombed in concrete and asphalt – people constantly gave me the “you’re the biggest Mexican I’ve ever seen” That was literally like the open line every other day!

Me: Where in California were you?

Tui: I was in Southern California, Orange County. The city of Orange, old town Orange – fucking … cookie cutter Benzes and Beamers and blue eyes and blond hair … not only that THE most crotchety, Republican elderly community that I’ve ever seen in my life! Staunchly Republican and staunchly conservative and staunchly racist but kept it under the auspices of “you’re from Mexico, you immigrant” so yeah just like the aspartame of racism, you know. Diet racism … they kinda loved me, but they kinda didn’t know what to do with me.

Yeah so it was that, but not only that I didn’t feel a sense of identity but that they didn’t even know that my cultural identity existed let alone that it should be respected. The dumbest questions about Hawai’i: do you surf to school? Apparently they don’t know how fucking waves work. If there’s a circular wave approaching Oahu I’m not gonna be happy and head to the mountains.
So yeah … that. That was one of the big things, like every other day: where are you from? where are you from? where are you from?
Where the fuck are you from? Tell me something about the place you live! Besides the fact that the “best coffee in the world” is at that one Starbucks on the corner of Tusken and Chapman … historical San Diego been here for like 50 years – kiss my ass, man. 50 years? 50 years!? Do you know what we doing in the 6th century? 12th century migration, kiss my ass!

So yeah, finding my own identity from being in California and having none, being allowed none, them not giving a flying fuck what mine was.

*Note audio became unclear at this part of our discussion.
From notes: Mentions the poem “Hands” - size big angry or stupid or on a hair trigger or cruel. Strength, real strength is from a place of peace and gentleness. I’m gonna be strong with people, not against them.
Societal expectations that as a big Hawaiian-Samoan guy with a big frame and big hands that he must be stupid or violent. This contradicted his experience with the men in his family who would be caring with his sisters, aunties, etc …
Misjudged whole life for being big, and an angry teenager due to dad passing away. No idea what to do with the sadness from dad passing away, grandpa passing away … the anger. For 10 years, then decided to turn it into art. All of these things. Yin and Yang within Tui …

*Audio clear again at this part:

What do you think is important about slam as a mode of expression? * see tui’s comments on healing

How do audiences react to your poetry?

I don’t fucking know, I learned a while ago that my voice caries and that – ways to communicate what you’re doing, obviously vocally communicating to express wants, needs, desires, questions … all that stuff. But there’s in our vocal melody ways to impart and inflect different emotions and meaning … and they happen naturally, people forget about them. Everybody’s got a vocal melody, right, so not manipulating them but using them to guide the story using those vocal fluctuations both melody and harmony to move through those as a means of storytelling rather than just a visceral response to something is … a way to give people pictures of what’s going on in my head. Cuz you feel it – you can feel it when someone’s – like when grandma’s crying or when your sister’s laughing or your cousin is being spiteful; you can feel viscerally what’s going on. So to use those as storytelling tools helps, I feel, guide the narrative and take people on a journey … it’s not so much about each individual – though the individual reactions are very important to me … it’s very important to me that individuals go away with a sense of hope and they feel uplifted. I very rarely do dark pieces because I feel there’s so much darkness already, so much bleakness, so much pain already happening. I feel it’s an important responsibility as a performer and a writer to uplift their audiences. Ultimately my goal on stage is for them to experience a journey together where they’ll be sitting in the audience listening to what’s going
on and completely forget what they were thinking about. I hope they forget what they about for like 3 minutes and they when they’re done with it they look around and see other people have the same experience as they did … I haven’t been booed off stage yet!

What reasons do you believe Indigenous poets, especially Kānaka Maoli are attracted to slam poetry as form of expression?

I would say a cultural connection to oral tradition, like uh … it’s in the blood man, you used to, in Elizabethan terms, they would sit back and memorize and entire Shakespearian play. People in the audience would have to pay attention, they couldn’t read – over here, too. There wasn’t a written language, because there was not written language everything had to be memorized you know like an 8 hour Kumulipo chant. That they would memorize these incredibly long things and that’s how we passed down our history, how we passed down stories of gods and stories of heroes and tragedies … that innate need to express oneself vocally, I think, is intrinsic to Polynesian experience. From the moment you’re born you’re making noise, Bred for sound, you know like, you hear a Sāmoan choir, Kamehameha Schools Concert Glee Club, all those Polynesians in one place making sound together – it’s such a powerful wave. I’ve never – since being in that choir – I’ve never found that sound again. The things that happen when Polynesians concentrate their efforts in making sound together. Incredible. We were built for this.

And then, you know, like to the other side of that. When your mom is screaming your whole name in perfect pronunciation: Tuia’ana … Scanlan you get your ass home now! You hear that four blocks down the street. You’re made for sounds. I remember somebody told me we were singing a song that Palani Vaughn (Kanaka musician and composer) wrote called “Ka Hulauana” … I love that song … it’s all about traveling by sea. In the beginning the men in the choir chant … it’s a choral representation of the village coming together to chop down a tree and carve out a canoe, right. You can hear people yelling “Huki ‘ao’ao” – dragging the tree down from the mountains, burning out the inside. The women come in with this big sound that happens – it’s a song about Polynesian navigation and the way that it was arranged was such that there’s a really somber moment in the song to signify when Eddie (Aikau) died and you know a bunch of people went out and risked their lives to prove that we were more than just stupid monkeys in the pacific, you know. And there’s another part of the song that parallels the first voyages, where you can here the men in this really rhythmic cadence to their singing and, uh, the women screaming over the top is meant to signify how as their husbands and sons and brothers would paddle out, that their loved ones would stand on the mountain side behind them and scream out: “I love you, I miss you” you know, wail their farewells on the off chance that they never saw them again … and the men keep just paddling, gotta keep paddling, just gotta focus on the stroke, don’t focus. Just heart breaking, and that image has just resonated through everything I’ve done. That’s where the line come from: “Release the sails and let the wails of our loved ones propel us to the safety of a shore that never before had been seen.”

I can’t even speak about that song without almost bursting into tears. That was with Concert Glee. Either in 2000 or 2001. (At Kamehameha Schools)

So yeah, that, that idea. The drive to continue reaching outward to continue exploring other islands and colonizing them – Hawaiian or Polynesian style – the fact that everywhere we went
we brought our stories with us and the fact that they changed over time because we changed over
time. Or, maybe it was the other way around, we changed because they did. But either way, the
stories were integral to our survival – even far away from home we remember the things that our
ancestors sent.
… and even sailing across the ocean, across those massive distances paper would have fallen
apart, but the word kept, never rotted, just changed like water poured into a different vessel.
Spoken word has been with our people since the beginning. That’s why the story still goes …
we were here when the world was dark and turning and hot (ref to Kumulipo).

Me: To my knowledge you’re one of the few people that’s done beyond coast to coast (at the
National Poetry Slam – two teams in different places)

Tui: I think I’ve got the record now for the farthest to travel to compete on a (slam) team with
my own money. It’s something stupid like 6,000 miles away (Tui competed on the Portland,
Maine poetry team in 2011)

Interview pau here
Jamaica Osorio interview

*When did you become involved in slam poetry in Hawai‘i?*

So my first experience with slam poetry in Hawai‘i was in 2005. I was, I kinda happened upon the first Youth Speaks grand slam finals, it was actually at the architecture auditorium, here at the University of Hawai‘i. I kinda just stumbled upon it, my friend was in it, so I went, I shared a poem but I didn’t really know anything about it. It wasn’t until – I competed again in 2006, didn’t make the team, but in 2007 I made the team and that’s when I became really a part of the community. I started going to workshops – before then I hadn’t really been going to workshops – I was a piss poor athlete in High School so I just didn’t have time. So in 2007, joined the team and really started – because of being on a team and being diagnosed with arthritis I had a lot more time on my hands and I really started to integrate into the community. Yeah, ever since then.

*What excites you about slam poetry?*

I was really excited about poetry in High School because it was a new, hip, way of being myself, right, and I grew up in an activist family, around an orator (Jamaica is the daughter of Kanaka activist, scholar, and musician Jonathan Kamakawiwoʻole Kay Osorio) and I grew up on the stage singing and dancing really poorly. And so, because I went to a Hawaiian immersion school that was really about learning these stories (Kanaka stories/histories) and sharing these stories – I’d witnessed my father do that in his own way – slam poetry seemed like a younger, more hip way to do that, right. So it wasn’t just getting on stage and sharing a speech, in the way you could in speech and debate, right, um it was creative it was – immediately connected to kind of forms of expression that I felt were really a part of who I was, as being a Hawaiian, and there was a lot – because the community was so vibrant and safe in a lot of ways it was this welcoming, it was this safe space where I felt I could try new things, really, and that’s what really excited me about it. People were sharing all kinds of stories that I knew nothing about and at the same time I was being affirmed in the kind of stories I wanted to tell. I could talk about Hawai‘i outside of my home and people really did listen and I think I – I felt like when I spoke people cared. And they tried to understand, and I don’t think that’s very common outside to certain communities, so that’s what really excited me about it.

Me: *that’s what I find interesting is that you have a captive audience, you have to hook them in rather quickly ... you mention growing up with an orator and I know who you mean, but could you tell me quickly who you mean by that?*

Yeah.

My father is Jonathan Kamakawiwoʻole Kay Osorio and he is a professor of Hawaiian Studies at Kamakakoʻokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies, long time Hawaiian contemporary musician – since the 60s really, 60s and 70s, and a pretty well known Hawaiian activist in the community. I grew up going to rallies with him. My earliest memory is the 1993 rally at the palace to kind of mourn the overthrow, the centennial of the overthrow. And because of my father’s activist
background they (parents) sent me to a Hawaiian immersion school. So really that was, my whole upbringing was in that movement, because of him.

*make connection with Travis at the palace.

Me: How long were you in Hawaiian immersion school?

I went to Ke Kula Kaiapuni o Anuenue from 1st grade, they didn’t have room in like kindergarten class – so I went from first grade until the end of 6th grade.

Me: I remember you – didn’t you used to have a poem about not being able to go to the bathroom ...

Yeah there’s a poem about being in a Hawaiian immersion school

Me: and not being able because you didn’t know how to ask (in Hawaiian)

Yeah they were pretty strict.

Me: I love the trauma of that

Hahahaha yeah,

I’m really happy I went to an immersion school, my problems with the school were way less about curriculum and more about just not fitting in there. But I would say, I do have critiques about the way immersion schools are run but I am also very sympathetic to the conditions under which they operate. I think the biggest thing is they just needed to do more … if I were a parent in that situation I’d feel like I would really try to facilitate more of a conversation with my child on why you’re here other than just to learn your language and that this is important because it’s your culture … and thinking that because kids are young there not prepared for a more nuanced conversation but really trying to have that conversation – that was really the critique I was trying to get at in that poem

In what ways does your poetry address racial/ethnic/indigenous identity? Can you provide an example?

So when I started writing, probably from the period, and this has continued really, since I started writing even before competing as a poet … it was always about being Hawaiian, speaking Hawaiian, sovereignty, all of those things and that was an immediate and direct way to for me to engage with my identity as a Kanaka Maoli. As I moved on and when I went away to college I started writing poems a little differently and I almost felt like I really wasn’t engaging in that relationship as much but I’ve come to look at the poetry, actually, as still maybe indirectly engaging with what it means to be a Kanaka Maoli woman on the continent. Like so maybe I was writing about loneliness or homesickness or anything, but there was some kind of trace of the imagery and metaphors that are really rooted in the Hawaiian ‘ike (can be translated as thinking, thought, insight, knowing). And then as far as race goes, when I was at Stanford I
studied in comparative studies in race and ethnicity and I was actually really interested in critical race theory and how bodies are racialized so I started writing a lot more about race issues, mostly in the continental United States not so much in Hawai‘i. I hadn’t found a way to actually talk about race in poetry the way I’d like in Hawai‘i but I’d say that my – my engagement with those things is often very direct. I take a very direct approach to activist issues to issues of racism, to issues of ethnicity and ancestry because I find I – generally that’s generally the kind of writer I am but, 2 I want to make it as overt and clear as possible. This is my stance, this is what I think about it, these are the conditions and the structures that allow these things to happen and you know I’m not the kind of person whose gonna get on stage and wrap all that up in pretty and really thick metaphors. That’s just not the kind of poet I am and some people can do that really well, but I say my style really follows that of, the kind of … you know my, my orator roll models growing up were Haunani-Kay Trask, my father, Lilikalā Kame‘elehiwa (Kanaka activist, chanter, scholar, and professor of Hawaiian Studies), George Helm (Kanaka activist, musician, and composer who led the struggle in the 1970’s against the bombing of Kaho‘olawe) these are really straightforward, like, speaking to the people kind of orators. And that’s the kind of poetry I always wanted to write, or the way I wanted to inhabit the stage and so I’d say that’s probably my approach to dealing with those issues, in particular.

What other themes are addressed in your work? And understanding that as Hawaiian identity is tied to land ... uh, although it is different for Hawaiians growing up on the continent rather than having grown up here.

But I think that’s still mediated through some kind of relationship, or lost relationship to land. So I guess starting there, when I do write about identity I write about ‘āina a lot, that’s something to me, as someone who grew up here, they cannot be separated.

Um, I’m more recently I’ve written a lot about Hawaiian sexuality and gender and I’m very particular in the ways, or I try to be particular in the ways that I talk about Hawaiian sexuality and gender and really not mark it as queer. Um as a particular project in saying that queerness is this category that was created as non-normative to – describe non-normative sexualities – and I understand how queer communities particularly on the continent, and here, are created as these hopeful safe spaces for people who have been disenfranchised by their sexuality. But my project, one of the things I try to touch on in my writing is really decentering this idea of a normative sexuality that queerness is then, like, opposed to, right? So one of the things I try to write about is retelling these stories of desire and not saying “this is a queer poem” No, this is a poem about desire. This is a poem about desire that is completely rooted in ‘āina and is rooted in our mo‘olelo is rooted in our ancestors. So that hopefully people can see those stories as a part of themselves and then when we look around at these queer people, right – even when we use queer as this great … and I do believe queer has come to be this affirmative term, so I don’t believe that queer is this bad word – I just don’t think it accurately portrays Hawaiian sexuality. So try to get people to see that this desire is in this mo‘olelo, so this is a part of my history. So when they look at queer people: they are part of my history. This is a part of who we are. So when I say ‘I’ a Kanaka Maoli – I’m trying to get people to understand that when I say that, I am intentionally saying that I am the kind of person who is rooted to my ‘āina, rooted to these mo‘olelo, and because of that I evoke desire in a very particular way that is very Hawaiian and not queer at all.
And so one of the things I’ve been trying – I haven’t really written about that much is – how do we mediate between the material needs of young, urban, and rural Kanaka Maoli and others who are queer and need that space – who are same sex desiring and need that space to be safe and feel that they have a home and a community while also not continuing this divide between quote “normative and non-normative sexualities.” To me I think that’s a really important thing we need to – it’s my way of kind of dealing with homophobic Hawaiians and racist, like, queers, you know? Like I don’t want to deal with any of you guys, let’s get back to basics this isn’t about queerness, this isn’t about marriage this is about how we fir into our stories and I’m just as much a part of our stories as any other Hawaiian.

Using the language we have to describe the relationships we have – aikāne, kōkoʻolua, ʻipo, all of these things that are – with the exception of aikāne, which has to be same sex – they’re all gender neutral. A woman can say that about another woman, a man can say that about another man. And Hiʻiaka and Pele wouldn’t call what we do queer.

Me: That’s why sometimes I get uncomfortable and nervous when people start “queering” certain things. I’ve never felt the need to queer my ancestors.

Jamaica: yeah, they’re already queer

What do you think is important about slam as a mode of expression?

Well particularly for young people I think slam is a great way to get young people who are not experienced writers feeling comfortable in some kind of mode of expression, right. And I’d say my experience of this success comes a lot from seeing how great Pacific Tongues i.e. Youth Speaks Hawai’i is at running workshops for all levels of writers. Slam offers an opportunity for people to get on stage and not be polished and to share whatever their truth is and that’s very different than telling someone they’re not a writer unless they’ve published a book or their not a writer until they’ve published a poem, they’re not a writer until they have a fancy blog. Slam poetry is an expressive mode of the people. I mean sometimes you’re gonna go to a slam and your gonna hear a lot of poems that may not excite you that much, but what is exciting about the movement is that anyone, at any given day, can get on the stage and talk. And can write and I think that … while I wouldn’t say that there is no gate keeping in that, cuz there is always some kind of bullshit gate keeping in everything, but I’d say the doors are much more open. And I think it does a lot of very important youth social work that’s really necessary. And I’d be all kinds of fucked up if it weren’t for Youth Speaks.

How do audiences react to your poetry?

I think it depends on what kind of poetry I’m doing. You know when I started it was a lot of yelling, I still yell quite a bit, I don’t really write slam poetry anymore so I’d say there are differing reactions and it also depends on what kind of audience I’m speaking to. But I’d say there are two very different reactions to my early work. The first was “wow that’s one really angry Hawaiian girl” and the other one was just like sense of pride that people had and the best
example of that is if you look at any of the – the best example – if you look at the “Kaona” poem (written and performed with Ittai Wong, performed at BNV finals 2008) and “Kumulipo which is a poem I performed for the White House and their both linked onto my own YouTube page, I still get emails every time someone comments on it. I’d say overwhelmingly over 99.9% of the comments are people expressing how proud they feel, how sad, how it pulls – gave them chicken skin, how it pulls at them, or that I was expressing – or Ittai and I – or I was expressing things that they felt, but that they didn’t know how to express. On those two videos and “Kaulana Nā Pua” there are very few comments that are just clearly written by idiots about how we should just be proud Americans or “You should be proud to be Americans otherwise you’d be speaking Japanese or Russian”

But for the most part with that poetry the response – it’s been made clear to me there is a huge group of Hawaiians, both in and outside of Hawai‘i, because there’s a lot of continental Hawaiians commenting on these YouTube videos that are looking for way to talk about being Hawaiian and they want to have their voices heard but they don’t even know how to articulate those voices because they don’t have the space to articulate those voices. So their exceptionally grateful when someone gets on stage and tries to share a part of that story.

And I think when I started, at least in 2008, I really viewed – and good or bad, and you can say this is good or bad – but I really viewed my purpose as trying to be one of those voices and now I see myself as really just trying to make space for other voices to tell the same stories, or different stories, right? But I’ve been very lucky that the stages I’ve been on and the captive audiences I’ve been offered, for the post part the response has been overwhelmingly positive cuz of things I’ve put on stage. Which is surprising considering some of the outlandish, I think, but yeah, and then when I do some of those yelling things or I sing there’s a bit of excitement. You know we try to do things a little different ever once and a while, right. There’s always that great feeling when the audience is really hyped over you doing something – “Kaona” was wild, the response to Kaona was insane.

Me: did you guys have footage of the unedited HBO, cuz HBO, they do a mildly okay job of showing how excited the audience was, but not exactly

The HBO version that is online, sucks! They cut the poem up into pieces, they hacked the poem! I hate that most people who have seen that poem see that version because they cut out all kinds of lines. The poem, in my opinion barely makes sense any more with the scenes they took out. That’s because a video editor who doesn’t know anything about poetry, and doesn’t know any thing about Hawai‘i was like, “Oh, I like this line. Oh, I like this line.” which is why when ever I show it, when ever I send it to people I always send them Darron’s (Darron Cambra is a Portuguese American poet, slammer, and former Youth Speaks facilitator in Honolulu) YouTube version because it was from semi’s, it shows the audience reaction, and it has the whole damn poem.

Me: is that one his page?

Yeah his name is Dtale’s, it’s on You Tube, but if you look up Kaona it’s the one – obviously everyone want’s the clip done by HBO cuz it’s got this great quality, you know – the other one,
is in my opinion one: a much better performance cuz, - so HBO filmed the semi’s version but there was something wrong with the room that the sound quality was off. But that performance was so much better than the finals stage. When we were on finals stage – the theater we were in, in DC, the space was so big and they didn’t have any monitors. You know like when you play music, and usually at poetry events you don’t have monitors but if you’re in a space that big you need monitors cuz we couldn’t hear anything. So we were just screaming the whole time because we weren’t sure if anyone could hear us. So the performance is kinda like “why are you guys screaming?”

So that’s a whole other level of the problems of slam poetry and monetizing it for HBO, but there’s that.

*What makes the performative aspects of slam so appealing to both the poets and audiences?*

If you’ve ever been to a poetry reading, and you’re anything like me, 99% of the time it’s exceptionally boring. I think that’s one of the things, that slam poetry made poetry cool again and not boring, exciting even, but I also thing there is an essential part of who we are as people that we want to express ourselves. So to be in a space where someone can be on stage and I can express myself from the audience – like I can pound my feet, I can holler, I can say “mmm-hmmm,” or I can snap my fingers. I think that, that is a welcome change to what it means to be an audience member. this idea that we sit in a theater and we’re dead silent the whole time, most of the time I feel like you can’t laugh, can’t express, you can’t cry with the person on stage. I think slam has really tried to liberate both the performer and the audience from these kind of bullshit rules about what it means to be in that relationship. I think that’s what’s exciting about that.

*Where do you think slam poetry is headed in Hawai‘i? And I think this is an interesting question to ask since you and I know of the newer direction of Pacific Tongues, too.*

Right, so I’ll start by saying that even though somehow I am on, and I am grateful and this is true, somehow I am on the board of Pacific Tongues, I know very little about the day to day operations. I’m not at all directly involved. I am in complete awe of the way Jocelyn, and even Harrison (A Filipino poet from the Kalihi section of Honolulu. Former Youth Speaks slam poet not mentor and poet-facilitator for the Farrington high school slam club) have really worked really hard, and other in Pacific Tongues, to keep it going and to really make it flourish. So I’ll preface with that, and if I say things that are counter to what they’re doing, it’s because I don’t know what the hell is going on.

*Me: I said Pacific Tongues, but I do also mean slam, as a whole in Hawai‘i*

Right, and I’ll also say that – one of the reasons I don’t write slam poetry anymore is that I have very little interest in the slam scene, particularly the adult scene. And nothing specifically ever happened to me, but as a youth poet I saw so much drama going on there. And I don’t want to get into the details of that, but I felt so much wrong that I didn’t want anything to do with that.
And I think we were lucky that Youth Speaks Hawai‘i was lead by someone as strong and level-headed as Lyz Soto that we were really insulated from it. But we still saw like, wow, there’s some bullshit going on over there. So for me I was like I don’t want anything to do with that. So I don’t slam for Hawai‘i slam, I have nothing against people who do, but I don’t slam for it, I don’t go to the slams.

I think… I think slam poetry offers a unique opportunity to get young people writing and expressing themselves but I also slams, that slam communities can become this – this place of creative inertia where people just get stuck in this particular kind of way of telling stories, particular mode of expression that I can find really – when it goes to the extreme – really sad and annoying even. Which is why I don’t go to adult slams. Not to say there aren’t good poems being read there, just to say that I’m waiting for people to push outside of that (slam). That’s one of reasons I’m really happy, from my outside position looking in, at Pacific Tongues at the things that it seems like they’re doing.

You know Lyz is pushing them, Lyz and Jocelyn, and all the other mentors are pushing the team – or what was the team, I don’t know are they still the team?

Me: I dunno it was kinda confusing when they mentioned it Saturday.

Right, but how they’re pushing them to write like, things that aren’t slam poems and I head some of the stuff they’re working on. They’re working on 10 minute, 20 minute pieces! That’s what’s exciting about where the slam community – what was the youth slam community is going. You know they’re not going to BNV, which has it’s pros and cons, but I think we should celebrate the fact that they’re really focusing on where they are in the Pacific and they’re really trying to push young people who have worked in slam to be like, “Okay this is one mode of expression now let’s see what we can do if I open up the boundaries of this” and to me that’s what’s exciting. I think that slam can be this great thing but at the end of the day it is one rung – it is one rock in this ahu (Hawaiian altar, platform) one frickin wrench in the tool box, that if we’re gonna be really serious about talking about performance and literacy and storytelling then we need to be giving them way more than just slam. And that’s what’s exciting about Pacific Tongues because I see them doing that. And I can tell that they’re doing that because when I see Pacific Tongues poets reads or when Lyz plays me a 20 minute piece by 3 or 4 young brown women, I’m like this is crazy! In the best way possible so that, that’s what’s amazing about the movement.

What reasons do you believe Indigenous poets, especially Kānaka Maoli are attracted to slam poetry as form of expression?

Spoken word – so not just slam – is very, is to me very much influenced by traditional forms of storytelling in Hawai‘i and I think that’s why a lot of us immediately gravitate towards it, it is reminiscent of the way people told mo‘olelo, right. It’s non-linear it’s performative, it is embodied, right. And that’s so different from the way those of us who were raised on Disney movies, right, it’s so different than the way the mainstream tells stories but it is so natural to us and the way that our ancestors tell stories and that those of us who are privileged enough to have
kūpuna who knew stories, or be around people’s kūpuna who knew stories – to me, it totally mirrored that kind of relationship – audience to speaker and speaker to story to land and all of that. And I think that’s at the root of why there are a lot of Indigenous, I think a lot of the poets who – a lot of the spoken word poets who I adore and respect are Indigenous. And I think, and I can only speak of Native Hawaiians, but as a Native Hawaiian I think it’s very natural.

Do you think there is a connection between Kanaka Maoli oral traditions and contemporary slam poetry? How so, and why or why not?

Answered this above,

Me: To me what’s interesting about Hawai‘i is that – not all of our types of our storytelling have made it down to today or, you know, oral arts and competitions, but the fact that there is that space, I think that is embodied – mostly by hula – but I see it with some other people who do storytelling, someone like Moses Goods who is also trained in hula – that there is this continuing, living, evolving, you know, oral tradition that I do think informs what happens here.

Jamaica: Right and if you really – there’s, what’s exciting I think in recognizing this connection to a deeper past in oratory and storytelling, is that there are these 4 to 5 generations between us and a clear celebration of that kind of storytelling, that we are really trying to unlearn. And it’s not like – in those 4 to 5 generations people have been sharing stories, they have been dancing hula, they have been writing mele, but it was under attack, right, and so much of it had been silenced or wasn’t affirmed and I think what’s great about slam poetry is that if we can see this connection all the way to this deeper past than we also can mediate this relationship with the last 4 to 5 generations of colonialism in Hawai‘i. And start to understand how it is the way we told stories had to change, but even through that change how it is so the same and it’s still a part of who we are. And I think we’re at a really exciting point in time where we have You Tube and social media that, you know, I can share a poem online and someone in Wisconsin can watch it and say “I’m a Native Hawaiian whose lived in Wisconsin my whole life and you made me want to pick up a book about Hawai‘i” You just did something, and I don’t know why, but it gave me chicken skin and that is something you can’t – and that’s why I’m pushed away from slam because that’s something – I don’t care how many times you give me a 10 – show me a girl on the continent, in the dead of winter tell me she just bought Kamakau (Samuel Manaiakalani Kamakau, 19th century Hawaiian scholar, historian, and newspaper columnist whose writings are considered canonical to Hawaiian history) like that’s the best thing ever

Interview pau here
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