

TEACH LIKE A POET &
POETIC GIFTING: LIBERATING METHODOLOGY IN COMMUNITY-ENGAGED
ARTISTRY

By

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A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Poetic gifting, a term coined here, is the process of sharing creative scholarship in an impactful and wide-reaching way. This dissertation project is a poetic gift, and a model for creative scholars who want to work in the academy and alongside communities and non-academic groups simultaneously. As a community-engaged teaching artist and poet, I aim to ensure that my work "takes the shape" of the scholar. As such, this hybrid project features works of poetry, visual art, QR codes that link to videos, and a concluding essay at the end. I have drawn on my experiences as an educator, artist, and global citizen to craft what you will experience here. This is a new model for ways that scholarship is generated and disseminated. My hope is that this project provides a vision for fruitful collaborations between creative scholars and the communities that matter to us and sustain us.

PREFACE

The poems in this collection are the product of my *heartwork* as a community-engaged teaching artist. When I say "community-engaged," I mean that I write, teach, and perform poetry in communities that I care for, and that care for me in return. These are occasion-making poems, meant to draw people closer to one another. This hybrid collection embraces the image, too, the beauty of place, and the inspiration I draw from living as an educator and lifelong student.

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CHAPTER 1: TEACH LIKE A POET

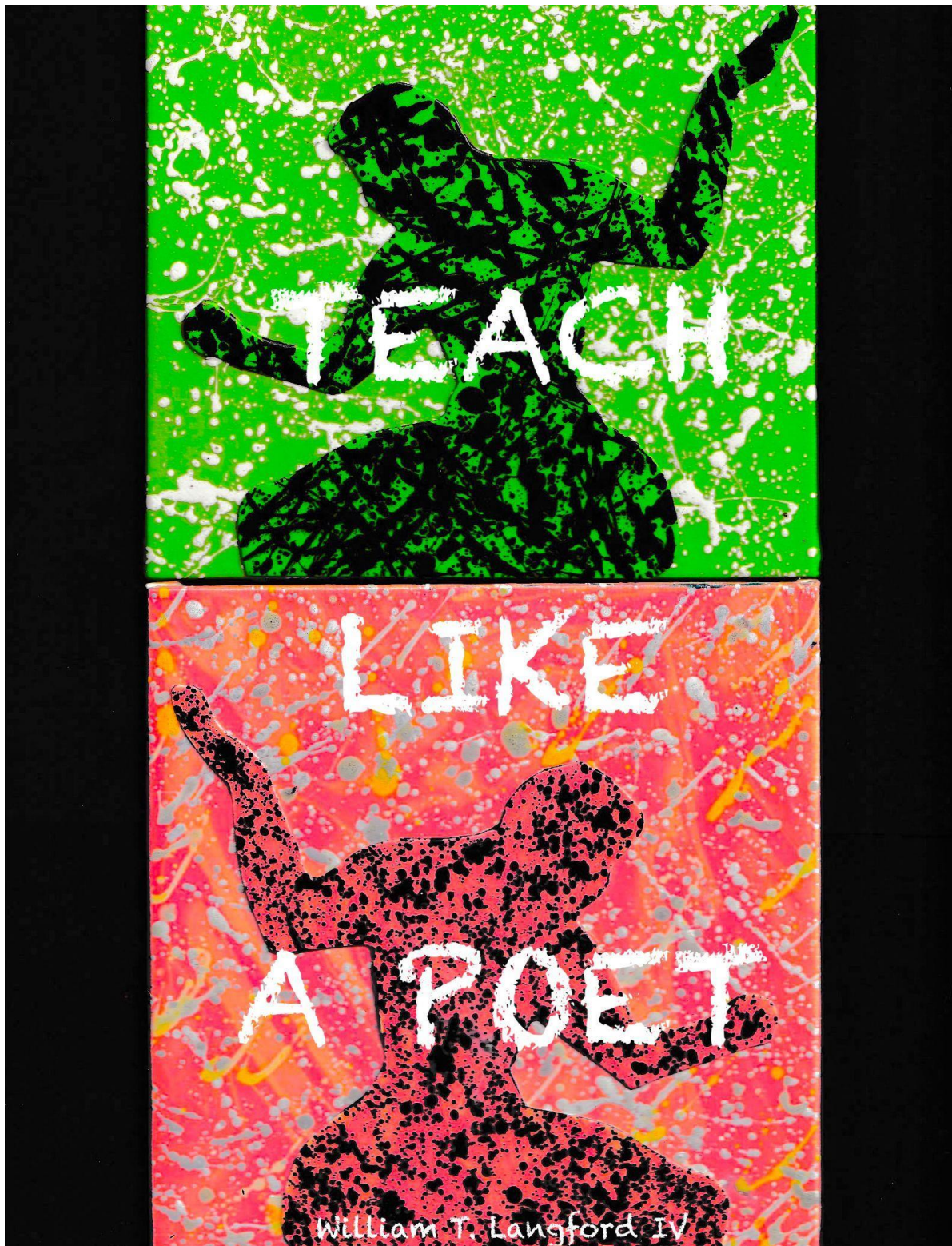


Figure 1.0 "Spirits of Detroit" 6x6 Oil on Canvas

Unlearning

To teach well
I think I must keep unlearning
the right way of doing things.

In the moment I master
the Tetris of seating 35 students
in a classroom built for 20,
I must acknowledge that maybe
they could have chosen for themselves.

To teach well, I must keep learning
from my frustrations:
not my ceasing, but by knowing
what snaps my pencil,
and facing it with grace
if I can.

Schooled



Figure 1.1 "Schooled" QR Code

Scan this QR code watch a video performance of "Schooled"

Kiswahili Lessons

Kiswahili Lessons
William T. Langford IV

For awhile,
I lived in a place
where I carried water
on my back—
a black bladder
with a blue straw attached.

A young boy pointed to this satchel and asked,
“Is it magic?”

Misunderstanding the Kiswahili word for water, “maji,”
I told him “No,”
and I was wrong, twice.

The truth is that
kutembea kubeba na maji ni uchawi.
To walk loaded with water is magic.

Meals divined
from millet, from sorghum,
self-rising flour, na maji safi kidogo
are everyday miracles here.

When the chapati dough
needs more give,
it is given water.

Years later,
I still carry my water
sometimes—
feeling its cold slosh
against my ribs
reminds me to say a prayer
before I dine,
for my people,
for my home
away.

www.WillThePoet.com

Figure 1.2 "Kiswahili Lessons" Poem

Written for The Shape of Us: Waterways and Movements Project (Imagining America)

A Letter to Teachers

Forget
everything
you know and
begin to learn
the difficult
and beautiful,
the urgency in our work.

Feel hope,
remember our power
to create
a parallel world,
sustain community,
value love.

Our being
lights boundaries,
disrupts them.

Pamoja (As One)



Figure 1.3 "Pamoja" QR Code

Scan this QR code watch a video performance of "Pamoja"

*Written for the Michigan State University Empower Extraordinary Campaign
Celebration on October 19, 2018 at the Breslin Center in East Lansing, MI*

Progenitors

(For my Verses music students.)

I know who'll sing my city's
song
of work
of pride,
I know who'll form the chorus
that'll raise the tide

Detroit's operetta
lies before your eyes
if you would but open
your heart
to hear it.



Figure 1.4 VERSES Final Listening Party w/ Students & Family

Legion

We come here to be a part of a legend.
This land was granted for that purpose.
A seed was sown,
and Kinsley Bingham
called us a college.

We come here to be a part of a legend.
Four years forth from gaining a four-year curriculum,
Our Forefather Spartans marched into Civil War.

We come here to be a part of a legend.
Booker T. Washington commenced the class of 1900
and thousands upon thousands of days since...

We are writing.
If MSU teaches but one skill
it is that, writing—scribing wildly into the future.

It is written
in the tremble of 46 thousand footsteps,
it is written in classrooms—
watch that professor sketch something epic-like
I've seen equations like-
Black and white like
Poetry- sprawl like
Fire bursts,
bright against the bubble
that says *change is bad*.

We are the unstoppable force
behind a moveable object—
that being renewal
that being progress.

Press our passion into the point of a spade,
and we will dig trenches at our feet,
line them with language
and pack them with prose,
send this Spartan Legion
marching in rows
towards a dawn of shapelessness,
and we will mold it
into fraternity
and we will mold it
with mortar

into a road that begins

here 61 thousand, 320 days into a legend we live,
let us break ground
like bread among us,
that we might be remembered
for a singular step
forward.

*Written for/Performed at the Groundbreaking Ceremony for Wells Hall, Michigan
State University*

From the Hood to the Holler

If the powers that be
have blighted the bright spots
that once were,
then perhaps you'll begin
the long walk
to justice.

And when your path is shrouded,
traveler,
you will alight
from the hope that carries you
to banish the doubt.

For there are mountains ahead and
valleys behind,
a whole future,
abounding,
with reclaimed time.

*Written for the Capital City Film Festival Poetry Project 2022
Inspired By From the Hood to the Holler (Film) By Pat McGee*

Uncommon Will



Figure 1.5 "Uncommon Will" QR Code

Scan this QR code watch a video performance of "Uncommon Will"

We Are Called (Spartan Nurses)

Vocavit bellum: "Luscinia,"
The war called, "Nightingale,"
and as if by
apparition,
Florence
arose to her calling,
a profession arose in rows,
closing ranks,
to heal a legion in Crimea.

Vocati sumus nutrire.
We are called together, to nourish.
The vocation
we harken to
speaks
in our commitment
to those for whom we care—
from birth
to death,
we are stalwart.

The vocation we harken to
speaks in our capacity,
built to burgeoning,
teaching teachers to teach teachers
to reach communities,
to coax unity
from disarray,
to guide management
from diagnoses.

Our calling
resounds
in our preparation for practice,
our anticipation of need,
wrought
by the praxis
of bedside care,
speaks
in the breadth of our research,
echoes
from gerontology to epidemiology,
decides
that we can live fully at *any* age,
turns the page

on medicine that treats only symptoms,
trades the Cartesian
for something more realistic,
the holistic healing
of the body.

It echoes
from the corridors of Giltner Hall
to the cracked pavement
of Leogane, Haiti.

The humanitarian nurse
practices mindfulness amidst the rubble.

Our calling resounds
In John Hannah's bronzed footsteps
Making strides for Civil Rights
giving rise
to the call
to call us
a *College*.

A Spartan nurse
does not simply materialize,
white coat and pinned lapel,
No, they are *wrought*,
by the agoge of clinicals,
by the rigor of lecture,
through lessons of service.

What we unearth here,
what is honed
with mindfulness,
with care,
moves us *forward*.
We send it forth
unto the world
to nourish it.
Vocati sumus.
We are called.

Spartan Nurses Answer.
Written and Performed for the MSU College of Nursing Awards Convocation, 2017

Nexus (Mackinac Bridge)

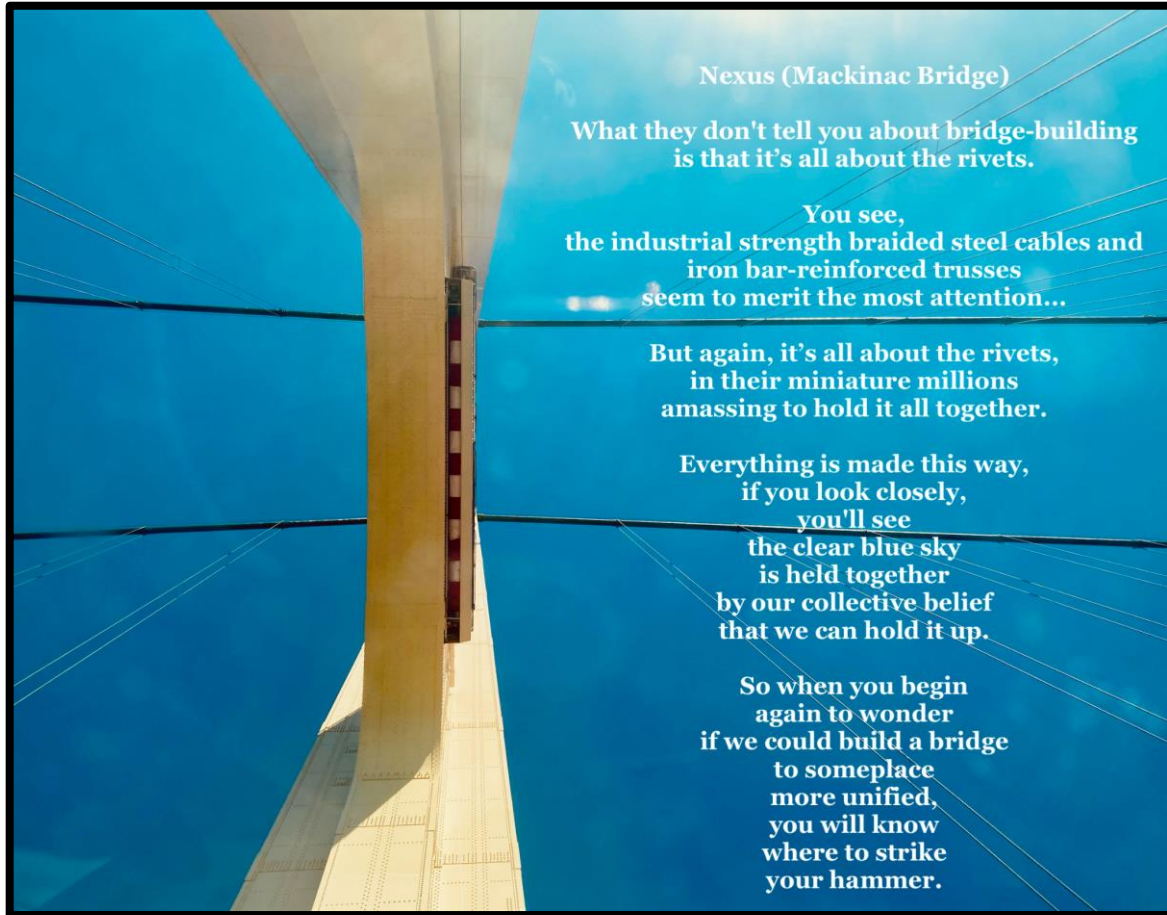


Figure. 1.6 "Nexus (Mackinac Bridge)" Original Poem + Photograph

*Written for/Exhibition in Poetic Visions of Mackinac Art Exhibition, Mackinac Island,
MI*

Maple City Nights (Glen Lake, MI)

Glen Lake's narrow beach
illuminated crescent
holds its water close

Boats at anchor list
tossed joyfully by the surf
like toys in a bath

At the horizon
the rise of a Sleeping Bear
hides a resting sun.

One rises at dawn
the other awaits her cubs
for eternity.

Written & Performed at the Peninsula Writers Retreat, Glen Lake, MI

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore



Figure 1.7 "Sleeping Bear Dunes" 8.5 x 11 Original Painting

Michigan Lakeshore, 1811

The Eureka
and Bishop's crew
were finally stocked
with whale oil, backstrap, and
as much fish as they could haul.

They could never know that
211 years later,
a magnet fisher in a paisley vest
would reel in the remnants of Bishop's expedition
on the shores of Glen Lake.

They set sail for further shores
than ever before:
where every star is a lighthouse,
beyond the turquoise seal
that separates
the cold from the frigid
of the water.

Written & Performed at the Peninsula Writers Retreat, Glen Lake, MI

Chef Michigan

On a clear or cloudy day
here, you can see for miles
what makes us.

The salt of the earth mined here
makes meals and ends meet,
makes Italy, Germany, Chicago & Detroit meet.

The nexus of us may be that
all our breads are
broken

and shared among friends,
or whole & held close.

Try our tortillas,
our wheat,
a steam-hot injera,
or perhaps our matzah brie.

We share culture
in a meal,
in our minds.

When we make room
for seconds.



Figure 1.8 "Chef Michigan" Original Photo

*Written/Photographed for Poetic Visions of Mackinac Art Exhibition, Mackinac Island,
MI*

Making a Coney Dog, Detroit Style

Naturally, you'll use all-beef hotdogs,
Koegel brand, so perfectly pink and plump.

Fresh is a must, but any bun will do
to swaddle this Detroit delicacy.

Layer on beanless chili (a service
to us all), with bumpy bits of spiced beef.

Top with yellow onion's ghost white insides,
granules strewn like salt on an icy walk.

Add a single stripe of yellow mustard
for the purists; ketchup for the tourists.

Nest in a hinged white clamshell container
for the greasy take-out jewel inside.

Of course, you'll need a strong-stomached people.
Find them waiting tables, schooling children.



Figure 1.9 "Making a Coney Dog, Detroit Style" QR Code

Avatars

We've made it!

The future
weighed us
and found us packing
love for our earth, its oceans
its asylum seekers
its meek and many weary,
found us making music
in the waking hours of tragedy
forging art in back alleys,
making amends
for amendments late to the docket.

Congratulations.

We're notorious for missing the forest for the trees.

It is now your mission to ensure that we
don't miss the road for the digital milestones,
miss the movement
for the buckshot of tweets, scattering matter

when what matters is a smattering of facts,
splattered roughshod over one-hundred and forty characters.

It verges on haiku:
the art of saying so much
and so little,
so briefly.

It is your sacred duty to ensure that
we never forget the moment
smartphones took the place of lighters
at concerts where the bass was especially heavy.

Make sure our next generation of iterations
remembers the time
when the word of mouth
was the word
and the word was good.

I read that the volume of data on Wikipedia alone
cannot be housed by any library
of sensible size.

A veritable Alexandria
stretches before our fingertips
and yawns at our inability to contain it.

I implore you
to contain it,
to write the word
or speak it
to not wait
on change
but to be it,
to be more
than avatars.

*Performed for [The Fulbright Program Presents: An Evening of Poetry](#) &
[Publicly Active Graduate Education \(PAGE\) Fellows Lightning Talk](#)*

Jesse Owens: A Poem for Trayvon Martin

Jesse Owens won four medals in the 1936 Berlin Olympics:

The 100 Meter,
the 200 Meter,
the 4 x 100 relay,
and the long jump.

For his winnings,
they let Jesse
walk in places
Blacks back home
are chased from

not with hounds on heels now,
but the wounds still fester,
hang, like
we did.

Feel it now
Trayvon laid low
and the promise of forty acres
to run

feels
hollow.

Howl

free
black boys,
free black girls
writhing in this wasteland—

Your dark skin frightens us.
What do you do in the dark?

161,880 square meters to run

runagate, *renagatus*
runaway, fugitive

run.
Jesse,
Trayvon,
Owens,
Martin,

run.

The gun's hammer is cocked,
and you're on the
auction block
starters' block.

Tray, Jesse, Owens, Martin
martyred.

When asked what his secret to success in the games was
Jesse said, simply
I let my feet spend as little time on the ground as possible.

Jesse Owens jumped 26 feet (and eight inches).

February 26th, Trayvon Martin
is found dead in Sanford Florida.

Mothers
tuck us deep in the dark folds of your breast
where their hounds can give no chase.

Fathers
you have made us strong,
but now you must teach us
to fly.

Dear City

For the Phillip Morris smog
the cigarette-tinged night sky that it will not turn loose
and from this valley, these mountains, I cannot breathe you deeply,
can't brace my falls against your stump,
your roots, deep and distant.

We are reminded by the moniker our city will never shake: Motown.
We are reminded by the earthy howl of dust and glass, winding
through (the long abandoned) Central Station.

We must, but no longer are steel, City.
Can no longer bear, from this particular womb,
such rugged fruit to feed our children.

Dear City,
I long for the sprawl
of your interstate,
green bridges' steel ribcages,
expanding
with the breath
of graffiti,
sprawling, like
exodus.

Oh steel city,
scraping Canada with your untamed borders,
how I steal you in my dress: the twist of my cap—
Honolulu blue lion
roaring from its brim—
with the sticker affixed.

Oh steel city,
oil slick,
slipping
from me.
City I left.
Oh steel city.

Shop Around

I can't help myself,
I'm that stubborn kinda fellow
when I'm alone I cry.
I heard it through the grapevine,
What's going on?
Trouble, man.

Mary Wells
is "shopping around for that Motown sound
and so do we Marvelette the news on our doorsteps:
that Detroit is finally on the rise,
some Ford Falcon on cinder blocks,
climbing through the ashes
of the ghetto,
a resurrection of our catalogue of woes,
a rose-gold recollection of our greatest hits.

The saints and the spinners would have you believe
our hope died in the riots,
the contours of our Bing Steel body
misaligned by the fires,
by the blight.

The temptation's to say
Detroit sees new light
in the Q-line,
in suburban flight
directly into our core,
but you cannot remix and
you cannot
remaster
Cass Corridor with erasure.

This rare earth cannot be so easily purchased
FedEx'd, signed, sealed, delivered
to your doorstep.
They forget
we got that soul clap in our bones
we got that Church-On-Every-Block
Jesus.

Please, Mr. Postman,
deliver us some truth.

Tell 'em 'bout Black Bottom:

how we bounce back from devastation
like dandelions,
gnarled and still shinin',
Joe Louis on the ropes,
gliding through shots to the body.

THIS is the Motown Sound
a supreme, three-part Copacabana cornucopia
to uncloud your cornea and
God is writing this album
from the top down.
We're living for the city,
we're headed for higher ground.

I've watched Detroit,
thought drowned,
thought derelict,
thought defunct,
rise
like the Earl of Funk.

Through our intellect,
the eyes see, brothers,
the miracles on every corner:

Detroiters, hustlin' harder,
from the Check 'N' Go
on Campau,
to the wonder of young Stevie
sound checking the Apollo.

From bowls of beans
to Beans Bowles
fingertips building an Empire
on the Boulevard,
so my lady
can go dancing
in the streets,
can click her heels
three times in a warehouse

brimming
with enough mortar
to brick back every barbershop,
every black business cropped
in the reaping,

so we can stand in the shadows of Motown,
in the footsteps
of Martin, marching down Woodward
undeterred,
toward
something that feels like our dream
undeferrred,
and bathe in the cool
of Hughes.

My lady no longer
sings the blues,
she is as fond as ever of your mahogany
Detroit
is the sound of young America
hungry and full
and hungry and full
of music
like tides
the push and pull
of our penance

like
tithes cast upon the plate glisten
if you would but lend your ear
to listen

*Written and Performed for the Motown Museum's Motown Mic: Spoken Word Artist of
the Year Competition*

Landbank

This single-family fixer-upper
is priced to *move*.
Give it a few coats of eggshell—
no, seashell—
you know what?
Let's go with some nice artificial siding,
there's just no hiding the way
a few decades
of housing discrimination
can ruin a perfectly good coat of paint.
You know what?
What say we
scrap my finders-fee?
While the crenellated moldings
are the original mahogany,
unfortunately,
the community
that gave this neighborhood its
je ne sais quoi
is not included in this listing.

For full disclosure:

We're currently unable to provide
your family
with Black grannies
in silk hats stacked with flowers.
As such,

the delegation will not be available
to empower your testimonial
of urban renewal
with the requisite *amen*.

No Rolls Royce Phantom
will escort a teenager in a pink tuxedo
and black Jordans to the prom.
This is a *peaceful* community.

No booms, and absolutely
no baps
will wake you from your beauty winks.

No complicated daps
with palms

slapping together
like thunderclaps
will be exchanged
on your street corner.

No inexplicable shirtless man on horseback,
no creamsicle Camaro,
no ice cream truck
bumping trap music through metal bullhorns
will parade on *your* block.
Don't you worry.

In that moment
after the streetlights
click
on
you will not be disturbed by the cheers
of buzzer beaters
drained as the shot clock expires!
or last touchdowns scored
or the cacophony of mothers
Pied Piper-ing their children home for the night.

None of that.

What you're buying here isn't a house.
It is an investment
in the future of this city,
a home,
someplace
quiet.



Figure 2.0 "Landbank" QR Code

200 Years of Black Art



Figure 2.1 "200 Years of Black Art" Mixed Media Collage

Debut: MSU Social Justice Art Festival

Belle River, Louisiana

Here, on the bayou:
Roots deeper than waters,
harbors open to all walks.

Levies are taxes
in most places: same case here—
the water's knocking.

No dam to hold it,
no nurture from this nature,
and we will remain.

Got 400 years—
Native, French, and Spanish too—
of blood, here, and roots.

*Written for the Capital City Film Festival Poetry Project 2023
After Belle River (Short Film) By Guillaume Fournier*

Luna

I've painted the moon
in all its silent glory,
in countless iterations.

Beaming from corners
of my landscapes and spacescapes,
impossibly light.

I never guessed though,
that when I got a puppy
who I named Luna,

that she'd fetch me peace
with the curve of her body,
curled like a donut.

My Jack Russell terrier
shakes the night sky with her bark
when the darkness will not stay
where we can see it.

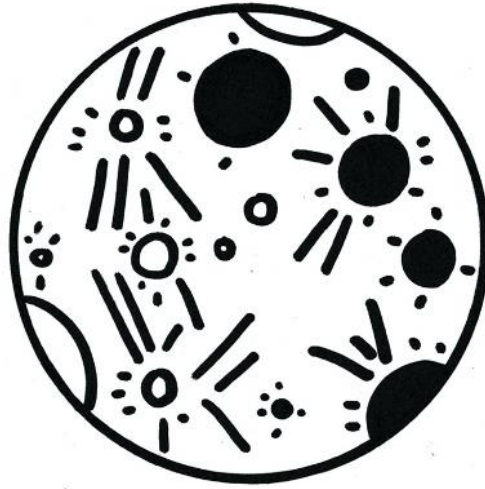


Figure 2.2 "Luna" Original Poem + Painting

'Nam and After: William E. Langford III

Young, with lead capped molars,
his curling fro
is close cropped,
kept close,
like many a revolutionary
called up
back then
for exigent circumstances:

to rumble
in a jungle
so far
from his lover.

I imagine
the shouldery bulk
of his 21-year-old body,
lifting Kool
to lips,
reminded of the taste
of peppermint candy,
reminded of home

in all that
muck and sweat,
all that green,
pressing
down,
like the threat of
night
here.

*We grew close here,
my father says
of the Black grunts
and the white grunts,
No color on the battlefield.*

And after?
I ask.

*I'll tell you everything.
We're
maimed,
he says,*

*and there are no
purple hearts
for the after:
it was not a decent time,
he says.*

I believe him.

I want to believe in war—
in all the dirt and sand
caked beneath the humvees,
and the droning of tanks and the loading of M-16s
and the slapping of backs and loading of packs,
the mix of iron and oil in the air, the ping of spent shells, trickling onto pavement, the
sticky sweet smell of chew, the steel plates in the mess hall and so far, far away, the
politicians.

I want to believe,
from behind my school desk,
that the war is far away,
that the war is over
for my Father.

Detroit: Exodus

It is heavy, heavy, reeeal heavy
and we're back brother
like barbershop crisp high-top fades
and kicks
in the barbed bosom
of the city that harbored us
hardened us
and made us shine
with smoke on its skyline
tectonic plate-like shifting pavement
and steel in its breath

We're on the I-75
I'm shotgun in your Chevy
It is heavy, heavy, reeeal heavy
We're back brother
Like Bob Marley's "Exodus" is on wax
and spinning in reverse
calling us home
home
is where my heart is buried in a tar

It is heavy, heavy, *reeeal* heavy
like oil sands
sweat glands pouring crude
these rude boys
and American girls
dolls, addie-kink curls
locked,
cocked back and loaded
goaded into entering the
inviting night of
my city's rumbling belly

It is heavy, heavy, reeeal heavy
with Coney dogs
and strip malls
We're back for both
back from both coasts
with pea coats and stubble
and it's different

we're older
from here, of here
Detroit bred here

and fed here
but left here. . .

We're part of a generation
that must take flight
to fight our Reputation

We *are* the Exodus,
Yes
and we will be the Genesis
of a Detroit built of books
and the bright crooked tooth smiles
of children whose bright future will be no myth, brother
Our evolution will be live and televised for those eyes cast askance
live and televised for the fair-weather fans
our winters are too harsh for you

It is cold in the D
and we're tucked deep Southeast in the mitten
It is fitting then
that you fear what it is we do in the dark
Hark, my burning lover calls my name

So sip your wine, tourists
Enjoy your casinos
We've gone,
but we'll be back
You've spent just enough time gambling
to know you should *always* bet on black

CHAPTER 2: POETIC GIFTING: LIBERATING COMMUNITY ARTISTRY

In the spirit of creative scholarship recognized by the university, and drawing on arts-based research, my dissertation expands upon my first chapbook of poetry, *Detroit: Workers, Teachers, Lovers* by asking the question: *What does it look like to use the arts to engage with communities that are important to me? What does it mean to be a community-engaged teaching artist, and how do I use my passion for the arts to fuel the work that I do in ways that are fulfilling and personally inspiring?* These questions matter to educators, leaders of community organizations, and artists who want to engage with communities that are important to them. Similarly, this work holds potential for envisioning scholarly research differently. What might it look like for educators to make art while teaching the arts? My dissertation aims to answer these questions through the lens of my experiences as a poet and educator who happens to hail from Detroit, Michigan.

When I say, "community-engaged," I mean that the work I do is rooted in my relationships to specific individuals, informal groups, and organizations that matter to me. These ties sustain me and help grow the work that I do. When I say "community," I am speaking broadly of the different academic, social, and artistic communities that I am a part of. Many of these communities are place-based, and closer to home for me, while others are further afield, such as my art/education work that focuses on youth in Kenya. The connecting threads between my work and these differing communities are woven with a spirit of reciprocity, and a genuine passion for the arts. That is to say, some of the most fruitful community-engagement experiences I have had have given me the chance to *give back*—as a poet and as an educator alike.

I draw creative inspiration from Detroit's deep well of musical talent, and so I am drawn to the community of artists and organizers who keep that legacy alive today at the

Motown Museum. The Motown Museum hosts guests from around the world and close to home in the same studios where legends like Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross, and The Funk Brothers made musical magic. The Motown Museum also pays homage to the label's track record of recording spoken word artists such as Langston Hughes, and Margaret Danner in the form of its spoken word competition, *Motown Mic: The Spoken Word*. In 2017, I toured the Motown Museum, and inspired by what I experienced, I wrote a poem entitled, "Shop Around," which reflects on narratives surrounding Detroit's resurgence. I went on to win the title "Motown Mic: Spoken Word Artist of the Year" with my performance of "Shop Around" at Detroit's Garden Theater. I remember standing in front of the crowd of 500 Detroiters of all walks of life like it was yesterday. It felt especially good to recite the lines,

*Tell 'em about Black Bottom,
how we bounce back from devastation like dandelions
gnarled, and still shining,
Joe Louis on the ropes,
gliding through shots to the body*

to an audience who truly understood the feeling of being counted down and counted out—only to rise to the occasion when it matters most. It is a uniquely Detroit story that I love to tell, because it educates, and because it celebrates the power of storytelling. A stage, big or small, can catapult a piece of art to new heights and purposes. I have been fortunate enough to share "Shop Around" with audiences around the world, in the form of my live performances, videos, and the publication of my first book of poetry, *Detroit: Workers, Teachers, Lovers*.

I have also passed on my knowledge of poetry and performance to youth in Motown Museum's Spark Day Camp for middle-school students exploring careers in music and songwriting, Michigan State University's VERSES: Exploring Literacy Through Lyrics & Song Program, and across the city of Detroit, at a host of educational institutions. This is to say that my work as a poet often leads to new opportunities and epiphanies as an educator. There is a symbiosis of sorts to the community and academic projects that I choose. I ask myself, "*How can my creative practices inform the scholarly work that I do in classrooms and with communities?*"

Poetic Inquiry as Methodology

Poet-scholars such as Natalie Loveless (2019) identify this mode of scholarship as "research creation", where scholarship takes the shape of the scholar. As a Black scholar and poet, I am excited to tell my story with poetry, and to point to new, liberating ways to engage in scholarship. Loveless describes this liberation in her description of research creation:

“[...] a relatively new turn on the art-academic stage, gives those of us operating as artist-researchers/researcher-artists the opportunity to re-envision and re-craft—to re-story—our practices and labor, and, perhaps most importantly, our pedagogy, within university ecologies.” (p. 27)

This project speaks to the ways that I connect with my community through poetry, as well as the scholarly implications of poetic methodologies in and outside of classrooms. As an educator, I aim to help my students tell their own stories and grow their confidence in doing so. I celebrate my students' creative growth, and I show my respect for who they are, and what they know. As an artist, I aspire to create art that is easily accessible, authentic to my lived experiences, inspiring, and educational.

From a methodological standpoint, I collect ethnographic notes from different artistic, educational, and social spaces, or participatory learning communities that I am a part of, as well as photographs, and personal reflections as I seek inspiration for my creative writing. Poems that I create from relevant workshops, prompts, and with inspiration from experiences in these communities are a major part of this work. Fisher (2005) identifies "Participatory Literacy Communities (PLCs) as those which are organized around aspects of literacy such as spoken word poetry, open mic events, bookstore events, writers' collectives, and book clubs." Participatory Literacy

Communities hold as idiomatic that literacy is critical, a social practice, and learned through social participation. (p. 117-118) The poets, Motown Museum staff, and regular attendees of the Motown Mic: The Spoken Word competition provides a superb example of a participatory literacy community where I take on roles as an artist/performer and roles as an educator.

There are several ways that I approach poetic inquiry as a writer. Let's use "Belle River, Louisiana" (p. 33), a poem I composed after screening the film *Belle River* (2023) by Guillaume Fournier as an artist participating in the Capital City Film Festival Poetry Project. First, I might ask, *what strong impression I have from my experience?* During the screening, I took a few notes on elements of the film that struck me: the strength of a community living through a recurring natural disaster, and the ways that culture can resist erasure. We hear that spirit of resistance in the lines:

*No dam to hold it,
no nurture from this nature,
and we will remain.*

After the film screening, I made a point to learn more about the Belle River community and its history, by watching related documentaries and gleaning what I could from recent news articles. There is often room to combine background research with the experiential when engaging in poetic inquiry. I learned that the people of Belle River, Louisiana are largely of creole descent, and have resided on their land for centuries:

*Got 400 years—
Native, French, and Spanish too—
of blood, here, and roots.*

The influence of that research on the resulting poem depends on the poem, writerly

intention, and or course, inspiration. Writers engaged in poetic inquiry take different pathways to crafting finished poems. Guiding questions I ask myself in the process also include: *what do I want to share with others who have/have not experienced/seen the subject of the poem, what questions do I have about the subject of the poem based on my experience, and how can I show a new side of a familiar subject?*

This mode of scholarship, *poetic inquiry*, holds great possibilities for connecting with communities and classrooms in ways that challenge traditional notions of scholarship. Poet scholars have a growing tradition of working in schools and connecting with students through creative writing, open mic events, and poetry slams. Poetic inquiry presents opportunities for scholars to learn by creating poetry, through teaching poetry, and reflecting on that process—all in equal measure. Helen Owton (2017) speaks to the power of poetic inquiry as a [...] a ‘revitalizing and galvanizing mode of thought for humanistic study and teaching, making available means of engaging with and producing texts that are both very fresh and steeped in poetic tradition. (p. 10) This is to say that while the concept of poetry as scholarly methodology might strike one as novel or new, the art form itself is rooted in ancient literary tradition. Poets have always sought to understand the world around them, and to create meaning through an exploration of what is and what could be. Poetry can distill meaning from perspective, reflection, and experience. Poetry crafts probing questions that can guide us toward new discoveries.

Poetry is rooted in Western scholarly tradition as well. Language and literacy education scholar Dr. Kedrick James (2017) notes that the first instance of the term *poetic inquiry* occurs in a 1921 edition of the *Bookman Journal*, wherein Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson reviews the novel *A Child's Garden of Verses*, writing,

"Of writing for "love of lovely words" the book holds little, but something of that great spirit of poetic inquiry that was Milton's and Browning's there undoubtedly is. (p. 23)" Stevenson points to the capacity of poetry to examine the subject in a way that expands our understanding. He writes that "the spirit of poetic inquiry, fulfilled by this love of words, can aspire to grow a tree of knowledge. So it is that poets meet the academy on different paths—as agrarians, as mystics, as magical adepts working with the energies of texts to discover the hidden jewels of non-literal comprehension." (p. 24) These "jewels of non-literal comprehension" represent the myriad of ways that poetic methodologies explore uncharted academic territory. Poetic inquiry is a tool for understanding the world around us through the lens of creative discourse, in civic, educational and social spaces alike.

The art and poetry featured in this collection are demonstrative of my passion for poetry, education, and community-building. In the same way that this collection features ekphrastic poems (poems that *respond* to works of visual art/photography). I also teach my students to draw inspiration from the beauty of the world around them. As a member of the Peninsula Writers group, I recently led poets in a writing workshop in which I drew a series of images, and then encouraged writers to insert their own short story/poem into the margin. Participants delighted in imagining what the "Vend-o-Matic"—a magical vending machine might dispense. Others selected an image of a phone battery with 80% power and crafted all manners of tech-related comedies of errors. I was thrilled to see the artists embracing the opportunity to think of the ways that words and images interplay and the way that creating one type of art, such as a painting or photograph can give us inspiration to create another type of art, like a poem or a short story. Throughout this collection, I draw on inspiration from my travels in

order to craft poems that have a rich sense of place. Several of the poems in this collection are directly inspired by the site of the Peninsula Writers Conference, including "Michigan Lakeshore, 1811" and "Unlearning". I aim to show creatives and educators that they can and should draw creative inspiration from their lived experiences, and the beauty and uniqueness of the world around them.

Through poetry and visual art, I have chronicled my journey as a Spartan, Detroiter, and lifelong learner. At the same time, I have inspired and educated potential students and those long faithful to MSU, with poems that reflect on the university's traditions, and the transformative power of unity and higher education, such as "Uncommon Will". In the classroom, I have used poetry to inspire students to tell their stories, with confidence and clarity. My hope is that those who read this collection feel inspired to connect with their own community organizations, in ways that feel authentic and self-sustaining. I hope this collection inspires educators to continue creating art while they sow seeds of knowledge through the work we do in our classrooms.

Poetry is with me on the page, the stage, *and* the classroom. I know that when I tell *my* story through poetry publications & performances, and teach spoken word to groups of students, I promote authentic, humanizing interactions, and amplify voices from communities that I support, and that support me in turn. As the Lead Language Arts Instructor for the VERSES Project at the MSU Community Music School, Detroit, I led youth in a weekly open-mic that welcomed *all* genres of art, from trumpet solos to sonnet recitations. I taught students my own tools of memorization: to recite their poems again and again, until they could perform them without error—returning to the beginning after each mistake—or to record themselves and play back the audio until it was second nature. Students, including those poet/scholar Dr. Janine Certo's (2018) Averil Elementary

Poetry Project (where I served as a poet and guest lecturer) noted that "memorization and movement honored their subjects more than reading from the page" (105). These are lessons that students learn directly from my teaching, and also indirectly from my own memorized spoken word performances.

In the early weeks of Verses, I reminded students to support their peers as an audience: to focus their attention on the performer, and to listen with empathy, or to snap their fingers in moments of poems they especially like (so as not to drown out the sound of the performer's voice). By the end of our semester together, the group developed its own culture and traditions for enlivening the space. The room was filled with supportive cheers and fingersnaps. When a student struggled with a solo performance of a song, a peer would join in to make it a duet. When younger students were nervous, I witnessed older students take on the role of peer mentor. Moments of great bravery and vulnerability became a beautiful norm in my work with the dynamic group of Detroit-area teens in the Verses program.

For poets like myself, tradition manifests in the dynamism of poetry slams and open mics—both of which carry with them the legacies of orality, of griots and the art and power of storytelling. Maisha Fisher's (2003) study of African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities affirms this idea. She speaks to the tradition of sharing poetry aloud, noting the commonality that "open mic venues have varying rules of engagement, but a permanent commandment across venues is for the audience to listen with an open mind "(p. 365). Creating spaces that support active and open listening lay the groundwork for examining the impact of spoken word poetry.

My Verses students expanded their *Critical Literacy* (Wray, 2006) skills by analyzing the lyrics to popular songs, like the theme song for *The Fresh Prince of Bel-*

Air, which I recited from childhood memory. Students noted how the regular pattern of rhymes (In West Philadelphia/born and *raised*/On the playground is where I spent/most of my *days*) made the lyrics almost impossible to forget. Through this example, I also taught my students that their own lived experiences were great areas to explore when brainstorming topics for poems and songs. In the summer of 2018, a Verses Student Band known as The Voyce demonstrated that they took these lessons to heart in the debut of their original song, "The Right Lens":

When you end up reviewing your past mistakes
Will you fight till the end
and do what it takes?
If you need to sit down
and take a look around
to hear the sweet sound,
then I'm down.

The songwriters delight in the use of end rhyme, in parallel with the Smith example. There's an element of memorability because of the consistency of the rhymes, and the familiar, conversational tone. Similarly, these lyrics indicate that the authors are engaging in critical self-reflection: students looked to their own lived experiences as the subject matter for their songs. There is also an important emphasis on sharing and listening to one another's stories, as individuals, and as a community. I saw that students want their stories to be told and *remembered*. This is essential to the work that I do as a community-engaged teaching artist: I create spaces that encourage authentic self-expression and empathetic listening.

Poetry is an occasion-making art form that manifests poetry slams, writers clubs, moments of protest, and more. Poems in this collection have featured in Michigan State University ground breaking and commencement ceremonies ("Legion" and "We Are Called", respectively) and Welcome Week events for newly admitted students, as well as community art exhibitions, such as *Poetic Visions of Mackinac* ("Nexus" and "Chef Michigan") and the Capital City Film Fest ("From the Hood to the Holler") in Lansing. Poetry has a profound ability to inspire critical hope—"which boldly stands in solidarity with urban communities, sharing the burden of their undeserved suffering as a manifestation of a humanizing hope in our collective capacity for healing" (Duncan - Andrade, p.190). This critical hope is one display in my "Spartans Will" suite of poems, including "Uncommon Will", "Pamoja", and "Schooled". Each of these poems explores the rigor of academia and the potential it holds for self-empowerment and community building. In "Schooled", I encourage students to conjure hope from their uniqueness, to take on the challenge of higher education:

You penciled in
a chat with your mother
which begat the fear that you're out of your depth
which begat something nasty
deep in your chest. . .

You can expel it.
You are wanted here.
You are different.

These chains are
begging to be broken.

We're choking on the
dust of indifference
but we're spitting back
our insistence that
coexistence is not enough.

Critical hope asks us to consider what is possible and what stands in our way. This critical hope is essential for students navigating institutions of higher education. I am especially proud of the opportunity to inspire students of color, marginalized students, and everyone who believes in the grand project at work in our colleges and universities.

My work as a community-engaged artist links theory, action, and practice—one of the core principles of the MSU College of Teacher Education. I make art and teach students to make every day. I am an improved practitioner at both as a result. This collection holds potential for fellow community-engaged teaching artists, as an academic exploration of what it means to do this work in ways that are personally sustaining, while engaging in on-going critical self-reflection. Educators with a love of literacy will learn from this creative dissertation project, which explores themes including: connecting across boundaries, the connection between visual art and the written word, and the role of language, culture, and art in strengthening community ties.

Poetic Gifting

The notion of *poetic gifting* is at the heart of this work. These poems have *lived* and *breathed* through my live performances and publication. Because I am a practicing creative scholar, I embrace the opportunity to share my work widely, with non-academic and academic audiences alike, in dynamic formats. This work provides guideposts for ways that poet-scholars and public scholars can disseminate their art and scholarship in order to that are excite, reach far flung groups, and engage with communities and organizations that matter to them. For example, I traveled to the Mission Point Hotel Mackinac Island to debut *two* original ekphrastic poems, "Chef Michigan" and "Nexus", as a part of an intergenerational art exhibition. The poems celebrate ways Michiganders bond over food and group projects (respectively). The pieces remain on display for visitors to the from all over the world to enjoy as inspiration and poetic gifts. I am also a frequent participant in poetry slams and poetry readings, such as my live performance of "Schooled" and other poems from *Detroit: Workers, Teachers Lovers* at the RCACH Theater—a free event for all. Poetic gifting embraces opportunities to celebrate communal achievements too—like the work of researchers and students at MSU's Facility for Rare Isotope Beams, as referenced in my original poem and performance of "Pamoja" at the MSU Breslin Center:

So
we harken
back
to seeds
planted in this land
granted
the promise to flourish,
to manifest
the rarest dreams of
isotope beams and

trilling strings
in a sprawling pavilion.
Our carillon's calling
Spartans to new missions

These "new missions" are the call to envision the ways that we can use our gifts to give back to people and places that nurture us. "Pamoja" (a Kiswahili word meaning "as one") is a poetic gift to Michigan State University, as a part of its *Empower Extraordinary Campaign*. It celebrates the power of unity, generosity, and higher education—to help us dream boldly, and manifest those dreams into reality. In addition to writing and performing this poem for attendees at the *Empower Extraordinary* event, I also worked with Michigan State University to create an original video performance of Pamoja, and an online publication of the poem, with embedded hyperlinks to relevant references from the piece. Poetic gifting also entails seeking out opportunities to share my poetry and scholarship in such a way that it reaches the hands of folks in my community directly, and in as many far-reaching formats as I can manage.

Poetry is meant to be read aloud and listened to, and I embrace that belief while increasing access to my scholarship by performing and recording my work. Poems in this collection that are intended to be listened to/watched live include QR (Quick Response) Codes, which link to video performances. Ideally, this will speak to the variety of ways that people enjoy consuming poetry, be it by reading it aloud themselves, or listening to the artist's rendition. Moreover, this video content is intended to be shared further via URL, in digital spaces, with the distinct advantage of being freely available on the web. I utilize QR codes in *Detroit: Workers, Teachers, Lovers* for the same purposes: to expand the reach and impact of my work.

The poetic gifts in this project have *already* made their way into the hands of thousands of people in communities I live and work alongside. Recently, I joined the Editorial Board of *Riverwise Magazine*, a publication dedicated to engaging Detroiters civically and creatively through educational outreach and community projects. As an editor and contributor to the magazine, I have serialized the publication of poems and images from this collection, including: "Kiswahili Lessons", "[Dear City](#)", and "Nexus (Mackinac Bridge)" in individual issues of *Riverwise Magazine*. "200 Years of Black Art" (my entry from the MSU Social Justice Art Festival) served as the rear cover art for summer issue XIX. Each issue of *Riverwise* reaches up to 30,000 individuals within the distribution network. This means that poems in this collection have already reached nearly 100,000 people in Michigan—free of charge. This matters so much because it holds potential for conceiving of scholarship differently, and incorporating local media, such as newspapers and magazines into the slate of academic journals and periodicals where academic work is typically found. Ideally, scholars will should consider what skill sets we hold, and ways that we can *gift* our skills and creative talents to the communities that matter to us. I feel like this engenders a scholarly and creative reciprocity that holds great potential for growing closer ties between creative educators/educational institutions, and the communities in which they are situated.

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