



## Book Review

### The Fifth Element: Social Justice Pedagogy Through Spoken Word Poetry

Endsley, Crystal Leigh. (2016). Albany, NY: SUNY Press. ISBN 9781438459851 (cloth) US\$75.00; ISBN 9781438459868 (paper) US\$20.95. 184 pages

ERICA KELLY  
Lambton College, Canada

Crystal Leigh Endsley's *The Fifth Element: Social Justice Pedagogy Through Spoken Word Poetry* (2016) explores the potential of spoken word poetry to build relationships and to initiate change. Endsley employs "fictionalized autoethnography" (p. 137), weaving together recollections of her experiences with a collective of spoken word artists, creative writing (both her own and students'), and personal critical reflections and theoretical interpretations of the art they created together. The goal is to produce a text that is intentionally disruptive and to argue that "spoken word poetry can be a powerful agent of change" (p. 66). She draws on the work of bell hooks and many others to theorize the connections between activism and art.

Endsley's work often slips out of easy definitions, circling back and building throughout, a style that is clearly part of her strategy (and as is fitting for a book in SUNY Press's *Praxis: Theory in Action* series). Early on, she traces spoken word's debt to hip hop, its "rowdy 'cousin'" (p. xvii), and explains that her title comes from this realm: the fifth element is understood within the hip hop community as "knowledge of self" (p. xvii), and in both hip hop and spoken word, self-knowledge is a central "social responsibility" (p. xvii) for poet and for audience. Both hip hop and spoken word poetry, Endsley maintains, create communal "spaces for the creative and energetic pursuit of social justice" (p. xviii). Spoken word performance can increase self-knowledge in both poet and audience, a process that ideally leads to challenge and growth, both individual and collective.

*Correspondence Address:* Erica Kelly, Lambton College, 1457 London Road, Sarnia, ON, N7S 6K4; Email: [erica.kelly@lambtoncollege.ca](mailto:erica.kelly@lambtoncollege.ca)

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Collective Energy is the case study at the heart of this book. A group of nine spoken word artists at Penn State University, Collective Energy was born through a “need felt on campus by students of all colors to have a venue for creative expression in relationship to their pressing cultural, historical, and social issues” (p. 139). The group held weekly meetings to workshop and rehearse, and its members performed together at venues on campus, and later, internationally. Endsley is both a member of the group and its leader (a role she complicates throughout), and she records the group’s weekly meetings as well as culminating interviews with each of its members. She builds her analysis on these experiences, incorporating both poetry and interviews from members of Collective Energy. She also recounts details from several of their performances, and the active role of an audience in performance poetry is central to Endsley’s argument. In her description of the interaction between the poet and the audience, the book’s relevance to pedagogy becomes clear. Much like the teaching experience, performance poetry is a “process focused on relationships rather than a final product” (p. 38). She frames performance poetry as “an invitation” (p. 92) to reimagine reality; the audience’s responsibility is to “co-construct” (p. 116) meaning during the process of performance.

But what happens when the audience fails? One of the most interesting tensions of the book surfaces when Endsley describes the confrontation that occurs between two groups of students. Besides her work with Collective Energy, Endsley taught a literacy methods class to a group of pre-service teachers at Penn State. She relates that, as the “only identified person of color” (p. 61) in that literacy class, she often felt placed in the role of spokesperson for otherness. She invited the literacy students to attend one of the spoken word performances for extra credit. These literacy students hadn’t attended spoken word performances before “because they did not think the programs applied to them personally... since they were the majority on campus” (p. 62). Their reactions in the performance’s aftermath make for some of the most interesting moments of the book. Endsley explains that part of the challenge is the genre, which upends some of the conventions of audience: the literacy students weren’t treated as passive recipients of entertainment but were instead implicated and held responsible, spoken to and called on directly. The veil of fiction they’d expected had been removed. But the content, too, troubled the students: because the goal of these performances is to challenge privilege and to involve the audience directly, friction surfaces between audience and poet. The performances mark a struggle for territory, threatening the stability of a privileged audience (p. 61). Many of Endsley’s literacy students perceived this confrontation as hate (p. 62), and they were angry at having been made to feel uncomfortable through both the style and the content of the performance.

Of course, the angry reactions that Endsley fielded in the days following the performance are testimony of the students’ learning: the “power was shifting” for the audience (p. 64), which was uncomfortable and upsetting,

and also vital. Part of the goal of performance poetry is to spotlight the “friction between discourses” (p. 132), and staging such confrontation is challenging for all involved. Endsley briefly recounts her strategies for follow-up with these students, but this story of discomfort could have been developed into an even fuller consideration of audience: performance poetry attempts to open up new spaces of possibility for audience members to step into, but what happens when the audience refuses the invitation to responsibility?

This brief window into a frustrating experience could also have opened up a reflection on what happens when the performance itself fails. Spoken word poetry is tied directly to activism here. Endsley argues that, because performance poetry showcases the gaps between the real and the imagined (p. 107), it’s a revolutionary medium. The performer is positioned as teacher, enacting “a political critique of injustice” (p. 116) for the audience as student. While Endsley admits that “no singular outcome can be guaranteed” (p. 5), the implication seems to be that the performance is always productive. Spoken word challenges audiences by bringing into the spotlight the power relations that are intentionally veiled. It’s dangerous, and for these same reasons, Endsley argues, it’s productive and it’s essential. Some of the book’s discussions, however, remain unfinished, perhaps in part because it’s the process of the poetry instead of the content that is Endsley’s focus. When some of the Collective Energy members resist the attempt to label their poetry as activist or political, one of the group’s mentors insists that “everything is social justice” (p. 89). While a definitive answer isn’t possible here, the equation of performance poetry with activism could be interrogated more thoroughly, and Endsley could more fully explore complex terms like “social justice.”

Endsley argues throughout for the potential of spoken word performance to create space for powerful societal change, and her argument is convincing. Her pedagogical circumstances, however, are quite specific: she’s teaching to a “hand chosen” (p. 41) group of promising artists who have self-identified as being interested in social justice, student artists who are now volunteering their time in the interest of growth and collaboration. The group’s foundational contract cited Maulana Karenga’s theories on the responsibilities of socially-committed art. And while the members of Collective Energy sometimes questioned the applicability of labels like “activist” and “political” to their performances, it’s clear that all members were interested in exploring such possibilities.

Few of us enjoy such circumstances; because I often find myself teaching reluctant learners, I was skeptical that Endsley’s reflections would resonate with my own teaching experiences. This book is useful for understanding spoken word as a form of activism, but is it useful as a pedagogical tool to those of us who don’t teach performance arts? Is it useful for those of us whose students aren’t committed to activism on the way in? Endsley’s honest reflections on the process of learning, both students’ and her own, make her

work relevant to those outside of her specific field. In her work with *Collective Energy*, she learns about engaging and connecting diverse points of view and teaching students to do the same; respectful and generous listening and thoughtful response are shared goals for most teachers interested in social justice pedagogy, and Endsley self-reflectively explores her process of attempting to instill these practices in her teaching. At its heart, Endsley's mission seems to be teaching students about speaking and listening. She focuses on building a relationship – a solidarity that “values difference” (p. 112) – between performer and audience, but it's clearly one that can be created between any willing speaker and listener.

Endsley states that this is not a “handbook that will end with clear outlines for best practices” (p. 96) but an honest exploration of a lived experience. In its deliberate confounding of easy categorization, the book itself is a form of activism. Performance poetry is meant to throw audiences off balance, and the book employs a similar strategy; the text “demands the coperformance of the reader” and “challenges traditional boundaries” (p. 138). In its mix of academic and personal, creative and analytic, this is a challenging and destabilizing text; it's also rewarding and affirming. Endsley demonstrates that a shared space of productive dialogue – whether a stage or a classroom – can create at least the “courage to act against and reimagine the things that bound us” (p. 57).