

# Words Are Serious, Words Are Divine

by Kewulay Kamara

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

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

What is said is done,  
What is done is said.

Words are serious  
Words are divine.

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

Poetry is personal communication that transcends all because it always remains intimate. It permits us to be personal. When *Poetry Dialogues* provided the youth opportunity and encouragement to express themselves on issues of personal concern to them, ink flowed from their pens more easily. During group discussions, we were able to demonstrate that our realities are all part of one reality. When the connection between the personal and the communal was made, all apparent timidity receded.

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

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## The Poetry Dialogues

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

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

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Photo by Martha Cooper

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

## Words Are Divine

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slave families sat cramped in the stifling bowel of a slave ship turned into the “slave gallery” of a magnificent church, to hear their master praise the Lord for their fortunes, they hid their pride in clouds saved for their descendants. From the “slave gallery,” we traveled back to those who were left behind in Africa — the mothers who came home from the fields to find their children gone. While poignant expressions of pain were to be expected, it was the triumph and hope in the writings of the young participants that brought me to tears. They made me recall the Jali expression:

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

In the tradition of the praise singers, we offered praises, at a church on the Lower East Side, at the Dodge Poetry Festival,



Photo by Martha Cooper

*The sanctuary of St. Augustine's Church, where young poets wrote poems about the "slave gallery."*

and at the Bowery Poetry Club. Praises in words take different forms: oratory, poetry, or rap. Praises ground individuals,

bring families together, and uplift communities through affirmations of history, reality, opportunity and destiny.

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

Let us offer praises for:

Words never die,  
Words never rust.

*Kewulay Kamara is director of the non-profit center Badenya.*

### Me and My God

For no moment of my life, have  
I been free  
Free to work at my own pace  
Free to go to school  
Free to worship as I please  
I wish to be free  
I wish to pray uncessingly,  
But I can't because I'm cramped  
So close to other sweating bodies  
around me that  
We seem to be taking our breaths  
in unison  
And as we breathe we sway to the  
organ music  
To distract ourselves from  
discomfort  
We sway while trying to pray to God  
for strength  
Trying to make it through one more  
week, just one more day  
But as I pray, I must comfort my  
master's child  
Sit and rock my master's child,  
Forced to love those who despise  
my very breathing,  
And as I try to pray, I wonder  
If God can see me hidden away  
In a small upper dungeon in the  
midst of the unsightly,  
Black, swaying, sweating bodies,

Slowly dying sea of blackness,  
Can that God they speak of see me?  
I just want to praise Him one Sunday  
without being a slave  
Hold my own babies instead of my  
master's  
They control my daily activities,  
family structure, survival,  
Control my words so much  
That I wouldn't even recognize the  
phrase "I love you,"  
In my own native tongue  
And they think they have controlled  
my worship  
By hiding me away from my God  
But while I'm swaying holding onto  
my master's baby instead of  
my own  
With my clothes sticking to me in  
this intense heat,  
With the stench of hot, baking,  
black bodies encompassing me,  
With the preacher talking about a  
God who probably can't see me  
I'm gonna praise Him  
No one will control my worship  
No one shall deny me my God.

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

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