

Of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

At CCP, poets of a city's soul

*I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the
world*

— Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Michelle Myers

is an associate professor of English at the Community College of Philadelphia and host of the Emmy-nominated "Drop the Mic" show on CCPTV

I love my students. I accept them for who they are in the moment that I meet them, the moment during which our journeys through our respective lives intersect.

I accept that they have had experiences that I cannot ever imagine or know, and that these experiences have made them profoundly beautiful people in their own right. And I value them and their presence in my life for as long as they happen to be there.

This love for my students is one element that serves to shape my teaching philosophy as a professor at Community College of Philadelphia. Within the pedagogical spaces of academia, it is just as important to cultivate the students' spirits as it is to enrich their intellects, and these two goals must go hand-in-hand to foster student fulfillment and success.

In order to accomplish these goals, I try to facilitate opportunities to form a bridge between students' academic and creative lives. This is what compelled me to collaborate with CCPTV, the college's cable television station, to create *Drop the Mic*, a spoken-word competition TV show, which was nominated for an Emmy in its first season.

As a professional spoken-word poet for the past 16 years, I have experienced the transformative power of spoken-word poetry. I have witnessed people moved to tears and reach their hands out to grasp for each other, for their loved ones, for me, because they experienced some personal revelation — some powerful understanding — about themselves and their relationship to and with other people.

And I know that poetry can provide opportunities for understanding and healing and forgiveness, crossing imaginary boundaries constructed by perceived differences in race, culture, gender, age, or religion. At its essence, poetry is about sharing the love, and this experience of establishing a profound connection with others is something I aspire to pass around to students at CCP.

The student demographic at CCP truly represents the people of Philadelphia — perhaps more so than at any other college in the city. As such, the students' poems on *Drop the Mic* are testimonials to what it means to be a Philadelphian. Their voices are strong and proud, as well as angry and filled with pain at times, yet still hopeful. Even when they are mourning lost family members, calling out false lovers, or railing against racial prejudices, they are celebrating life, untamed though it may be.

And they trust us to listen and to understand — to

accept the deep feeling present in their words that would move us at our very core if we would just be open to it. For example, who can deny ever feeling the profound sense of isolation that Charmira Nelson, our first-season champion who will graduate next month, describes in one of the new poems she shared during Season Two, a poem titled "My Birth Certificate is a Lie"?

*I didn't know anyone.
I was this borrowed body that breathed for the hell
of it,
This walking corpse that looked alive but felt dead.
I was sick of living in my dreams and sleepwalking
through society.
Reality does hurt.
But it's better to feel pain than to be numb:
it shows that you are alive.*

Who can't identify with the confusion that lingers when a romantic relationship is slowly ending, as Van Johnson recounts in a poem that was also performed during Season Two?

*Or let another story begin:
Let me ask you,
Have you ever held on to someone,
but they let you go?
Time goes by so fast,
but love seems to leave so slow.*

Within this process of sharing and active listening, untranslatability does not pose a barrier, should not even exist, because their "song" is ultimately ours as well, and we work together to release meaning and to connect on common ground as people who deserve the right to be treated with human dignity.

I feel blessed that Allan Kobernick, director of CCPTV, could share my vision and that he, along with our amazing crew and panel of judges comprised of faculty, staff, and alumni, is committed to providing a space at the college and on our TV channel for our students to be celebrated for being who they are, enabling them to proclaim Self, as Charmira does at the end of her poem "My Birth Certificate is a Lie":

*I was born, again.
It took me 17 years to live.
17 years to describe my identity.
17 years to say, "I am present," and mean it.
Today, I am present for all the years you thought
you knew me
when I didn't know myself.*

As these students stretch their voices and their words take flight across the city of Philadelphia, they sound this generation's mighty "yawp," exalted and unrestrained. And daring us, whether on campus or in the city, to join them.

✉ mmyers@ccp.edu