

More Than A Poet: Taking Words and Fighting Back

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## **A School Radio Show Begins to Grow**

On a Thursday night, Enyel Dizenzoantonio, Enyel to his friends, reclines in his chair, headphones draped across his neck. He's about to start his regular show on Purchase College's Radio Station, WPSR. The station's entrance is positioned in the corner of the hallway on the second floor of Purchase College's eatery, Dhall. It's easy to miss if not looked for carefully.

Five other people sit in the small room, although more stream in during the hour-long show. All of them are Dizenzoantonio's friends, each one aspiring rappers and musicians. Each one hoping to share their talent with the Purchase community and beyond.

The lights are off, yet the walls glow in blue and purple hues. A medium-sized couch is against the wall, crowded with rappers preparing to perform their pieces. Old CD records align the wall's empty spaces. The music Dizenzoantonio begins to play resembles a modern hip-hop version of elevator music.

Dizenzoantonio begins to rap. He raps about his life growing up in poverty. He raps about his mother's struggles to feed him. He raps about honesty and will. His hands move instinctively when he raps, edging and underscoring his words.

He stops.

"That sounds mad clean bro," Angel Sanchez, another rapper said.

"These shits I just be cooking up in the crib," Dizenzoantonio responded.

Sanchez is next. He is bundled from the cold outside, a beanie barely covering his black curls that stick out from underneath.

"I got something for your right now," Dizenzoantonio said. He turns to a song he wrote just a few days ago.

“This beat is fire,” Sanchez said. He bops his head to the rhythm of the beat. Sanchez tells Dizenzoantonio how he’s been working on a beat for the last two weeks. “This song definitely has inspired how I want to start it off.”

Sanchez sits next to Dizenzoantonio and dons another pair of headphones. When Sanchez starts to freestyle, Dizenzoantonio urges him on, banging his fist against the desk in excitement. A large grin spread across his face. When Sanchez finishes, everyone in the room starts “dabbing him up,” pulling him in for a handshake before sliding their palms across.

“I’m always tryna collab bro,” Dizenzoantonio said to Sanchez. “You’re not gonna get your bag if you’re trying to exchange hate.”

As Dizenzoantonio switches beats, he looks around the room.

“Anyone else tryna spit some heat?” he asked. Everyone looks away. It’s unclear whether they’re nervous or trying to think of what to rap before responding.

Another rapper in the room, Evan Lesoule, tall and dark-skinned with a grin plastered on his face, sits in the seat beside Dizenzoantonio. When Lesoule raps, his words come out fast, clean and concise. Almost every word rhymes. When he’s done, he too receives quick hand dabs and encouraging words.

Dizenzoantonio checks his Instagram live, and notes there are only two live viewers. Instead of feeling let down, he declared in a loud voice, “I’m still grateful.”

Another rapper, Carlos Rivera, sits beside Dizenzoantonio. A native Puerto Rican, Rivera loves music. Yet, when Dizenzoantonio begins to play a beat, Rivera struggles. He takes long pauses to think of his next verse. After every pause, Rivera raps fast, spitting only short rhymes in Spanish. He asks Dizenzoantonio to change the beat more than three times, explaining his inability to rap over the chords.

When Rivera is done, there are minimal claps throughout the room. However, Direccionantonio shows his support, clasping Rivera by the shoulders.

“Let them know your name bro,” Direccionantonio said. “Let the people know who you are.”

Rivera smiles, pushing himself closer to the microphone. “My rap name is Pinguino,” River said. He spells his name before leaving the seat.

Direccionantonio plays another one of his beats before the show ends.

“I thank everyone for coming out and for everyone on the live,” he said, dabbing those who leave the studio space. “Come through again next Thursday for a good time.”

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## **Political Rap**

With the political climate peaking below the state of equilibrium, those from underrepresented groups are finding ways to make their voices heard. Youth and young adults are using words and writing to tell stories of their hardships— using the rhymes of poetry and rap to engage members from in and outside their social circle. Young adults are using poetry and rap to protest the injustice they face in their communities and shed light on their personal experiences.

Young people, no matter the decade, rap. Direccionantonio, a junior communications major at Purchase College has been rapping since a young age. Born in the Dominican Republic in 1989, in the capitol, Santo Domingo, Direccionantonio grew up in what he describes as a “small and makeshift home.” He remembered having his home built from cinderblocks and zinc. In the Dominican Republic, zinc is a non-expensive aluminum type of material used to put roofs on homes.

“When I was born, I remember Hurricane Georges and my mom telling me Hurricane Georges was coming through and it just blew out the window,” Direccionantonio said.

Direenzoantonio grew up surrounded by music. He was raised in a household of mostly women. His grandmother, aunts and mother always listened to music and this influenced Direenzoantonio greatly.

For Direenzoantonio, life is about generalization. Many hardships and violence he experienced and saw growing up caused him to develop faster than peers who were from more affluent families. He describes the women in his life as being dedicated hard workers, putting their “time and dignity on the line” to make sure his life was better than some of the people he knew. His voice is solemn when he speaks on his past in the Dominican Republic, thinking back to when his mother struggled to support him.

There were times when Direenzoantonio’s mother couldn’t afford to buy groceries to eat. Instead of feeding herself, she gave all of her food to him. When Direenzoantonio would go into the kitchen and turn on the lights, there would be cockroaches running rampant in and out of the food.

“I’ve had to learn things from being embarrassed from shit I got myself into. I’ve seen a lot of moments and situations where I really was privileged and I was really ahead of a lot of things people complained about and I didn’t see it that way,” Direenzoantonio said. “I still complained that I didn’t have enough. I still felt like I wanted more.”

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## **The N.W.A**

One of the many poetic forms is rap, a vocal technique. Rap became popular during the 1980’s when hip-hop began to take form. African-Americans used rap to protest racial injustice, including police brutality. One popular rap song that ties in with social activism is “F. The Police,” by the N.W.A. Released as part of their *Straight Outta Compton* album in 1988, the song became an international success despite the controversy over the song title and song itself.

*Straight Outta Compton* was one of the [first rap albums of its kind](#). The album had a warning sign, "Parental Advisory." The song's name and the song itself sent a strong political message. When the song was released, the term "fuck the police," became a line of protest. In a 1989 interview for [SPIN magazine](#) Ice Cube said, "Our people been wanting to say, 'Fuck the police' for the longest time. If something happened in my neighborhood, the last people we'd call was the police. Our friends get killed; they never find the killer. 387 people were killed in gang activity in L.A. in 1988. Nothing was said about that. But when this Korean girl got killed in Westwood, a white neighborhood, now it's a gang problem. As long as they was killing each other, there wasn't nothing said." In the interview, Ice Cube referred to the death of Karen Toshima, a woman who was killed by a stray bullet.

The N.W.A left a legacy for more black artists to step forward and protest racial issues through song and rap. In this generation, Kendrick Lamar is an artist who uses his music for political activism. His song, "Alright," is the epitome of using rap music to evoke change in America. "Alright", a song from Kendrick Lamar's third album *To Pimp a Butterfly* is known as a protest song. Protest songs are music that tie with political or social movements. In his song, Lamar focuses on being black, where he references his life growing up and the racial disparities in America. The song refers to the novel, 'The Color Purple,' a novel about a black southern woman who struggles to find her identity as she deals with past abuse from her father. Lamar brings themes of hardships and perseverance to his music. He raps on overcoming. According to Melinda Morgan's article, "[Kendrick Lamar- Using Rap Music to Evoke Change in America,](#)" "this allusion adds depth to the message of the song, which is to fight back against oppression and fight for change." The themes from *The Color Purple* shows the [true meaning](#) of the song: "Though the United States is not in a place of racial equality and we are living with tremendous amounts of discrimination and injustice, we're going to be alright. "

In one of Lamar's lines in the song, he states "N\*\*\*a, and we hate po-po, wanna kill us dead in the streets fo sho." This rhyming showcases and sheds light on the injustice and brutality the black

community faces by the police. Looking at the underlying meaning of using po-po, and fo' sho, Lamar raps that officers shoot to kill. Like some other political rap songs, rhyming is a great way to engage your audience. With the title being, "Alright," the song is an implication for a better life, free of police brutality and racial injustice and inequality. The rhymes make it a vocal poetic form of protest. Lamar raps on issues he feels passionate about. Lamar's music is a voice for the minority community, including being an inspiration for Dorenzoantonio.

"With music as an art form, if you're genuinely telling people how you're feeling, someone will be able to relate," Dorenzoantonio said. "If you're trying to do what fans want you to create, then it doesn't feel like a genuine experience.'

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### **Poetry and Promoting Mental Health**

Poetry and spoken word have been used for years as tools for social activism. Activists and those who might not deem themselves activists, use their words to shed light on issues they deem unjustified.

In contrast to their elders, young adults are not afraid to write and speak on issues meaningful to them. "Poetic texts can provide insight into the lives of others, and can generate important discussion in the process of their interpretation," according to author Victoria Foster's, "[What If? The Use of Poetry to Promote Social Justice.](#)"

Reshon Witter is a 21-year-old Bronx-based poet inspired by Rupi Kaur. Kaur is a newly renowned poet who published her book, "Milk and Honey" in 2014.

"In all honesty life inspires me as a poet, whether my own experiences or the experiences of those surrounding me," said Witter. "During 2016, Rupi Kaur's "Milk & Honey" became popular and her story inspired me to share mine when I was struggling to find a creative outlet."

Witter published her poetry book, “Neoteric” in 2019. The poems focus on depression, heartbreak, suicidal ideation, confidence, self-love, and self-empowerment. All these themes revolve around mental health, which Witter believes needs to be promoted. Witter can’t remember how she learned of the word “Neoteric,” yet defines it as meaning “new and modern.”

Witter remembers being passive in difficult situations throughout her life. She wrote her book to share her story. In her words, it was “something brand new and the experience was simply that-neoteric.” Witter wants to use her poetry to shed light on mental health issues in the black community.

“I believe that in the black community, mental health is a topic very seldom openly discussed, when we as a community experience higher rates of trauma,” Witter said. “I think these topics are important and the goal is to just serve as an inspiration for other people to live in their truth, share their stories, empower themselves, and overcome any hardships.”

Witter is Bronx-born, coming from a family of four children. During her childhood, her siblings envied her for being a “good child.” Without a way to express her personal feelings, she took to poetry at a young age. New York City specifically inspired her creativity due to her exposure to the arts, fashion, and the city’s fast-pace lifestyle.

Two of her favorite poems are from her own work. One of her poems, “January,” is about how one’s essence and charisma can become a superpower. Witter loves this poem because as she grows older, she wonders where she gets the ability to do certain things. She considers herself to be down-to-earth and multi-faceted.

“My next favorite is Potent and that goes, “and there is it, the happiness you thought was impossible without him, her, them; you wear it well,” Witter said. “I love this because it reminds me that I can be happy no matter who leaves my life. My happiness is not in my attachment to people, it is in within myself.”

Witter believes poetry is underappreciated in the category of the arts. The world has shifted to a digital landscape. People are reading their books more online than buying physical copies. People are more focused on social media than the power verbal words can bring. Witter realized that her generation does not appreciate paintings and other physical art forms. She blames technology and the need for them to “merely take a picture on Instagram and go.”

Witter believes that children and youth are creative beings. They require engagement in the arts and ways to explore their creative expression. When children express themselves, they gain confidence. Spoken-word poetry allows artists to find comfort through expressing themselves in their community, according to an article by the State Press.

Poetry Slam event organizer, Wendy Williams, wrote in the article how after research, participants in their ASU poetry slam improved in their grades, school participation, confidence, leadership skills, and “improved revision skills and use of poetic devices.”

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Similar to how rap became a stepping-stone in vocal activism, poetry was generationally used for political agendas. Romantic poetry held similar power in pushing political agendas, according to Gaura Narayan, the Associate Professor of Literature at Purchase College.

“Romantic poets were actually changing things up, which is why they wrote the ways in which they did,” Narayan said. “They also took their inspiration from the royal ballad of Scotland, which maybe was the rap poetry of the day.”

The poetry was sung, which may have added to the inspirational aspect of their work.

For Narayan, poetry is intensely political. Romantic poetry is the poetry of revolution. Romantic poets had audiences rethinking social organization. Their origins are in orality. Narayan considers herself

to be an “army brat.” Her father was in the Indian army and her mother was a professor of literature. Her mother studied British romantic poetry, a poetic form Narayan began to study and teach herself. Inspired by poetry, one of her favorite literary pieces is the English romantic poet William Wordsworth’s poem, “Tintern Abby.”

“There are times in my life where I read that poem every day,” Narayan said. “It calms me. I just feel better about everything when I read that poem.”

“It is convenient to claim that writing is inherently an activist occupation—especially for those of us who write from a “marginal” experience—and it is true,” wrote curator Melissa Forbes for the [Poetry Foundation](#).

As a curator who focuses on queer, feminist, and POC voices, Forbes wrote that activists get their protest ideas from their stories being raised in underprivileged communities.

“As literary activists, we can amplify marginalized voices by sharing resources, but we can also create something new,” [wrote](#) author [Suzi Garcia](#). “This means not only sharing publishing, reading, and residency opportunities, but also being sources of knowledge, guidance, and friendship.”

### **Overcoming with Poetic Rap**

Another young adult focusing on mental health is 22-year-old north New Jersey native Tynelle Berrian. Similar to Witter, Berrian began writing poetry at a young age. Unlike Witter, Berrian branched into rap.

Berrian has a competitive nature. He’s tall, lanky and has a head full of braids. Berrian was exposed to rap through his friends. He once considered himself to be terrible at rapping, but challenged himself to compete with those around him. Most of his topics focus on mental health and relationships. He said his goal is to “understand oneself and those around him.”

“I think rap has become more diverse over time. It used to be about social awareness and then it became about the hood,” Berrian said. “Those topics are still dominate, but now you have rappers coming from the suburbs with different stories.”

Berrian looks up to socially conscious rapper J. Cole, a comedian called Eddie Griffin, and musician Alicia Keys. Berrian connects with J. Cole’s music and his themes based on their similar interracial background. Back home, being an interracial kid was almost taboo.

“For him to have a target on his back yet he’s able to talk about it and break down those social barriers as a mixed kid from North Carolina,” Berrian said.

Berrian loves Eddie Griffin’s ideology of “not giving a fuck.” Using comedy to break down barriers and talk to the public, Berrian is awed at the way Griffin portrays his comedy. Berrian considers Griffin to be full of layers, similar to his music style- where some of his raps are full of curses and profanity, some revolve around religion and praise, while others are abstract combinations. Alicia Keys, is the only artist that makes him cry.

“It’s the art of resilience,” Berrian said of rap’s importance. “It’s like an amazing atmosphere where you find people of different backgrounds.”

This past summer, Berrian found out he’ll be a father. He realized his need to figure out his life to be a father figure. He considers himself to be an overcomer, having been raped as a child. His struggle continued for years until his family moved. Berrian didn’t have the confidence to tell his mother until years later— especially due to the stereotype surrounding rape from another man.

“I struggled with figuring out my sexuality,” Berrian said. “It took time for me to realize that was me just being confused and not knowing what’s going on. “It was me thinking it was the norm but I realized it’s not my norm.”

After realizing he wanted to be the perfect father figure for his child, Berrian knew he had to talk about it. He began performing his music and realized the importance of connecting with others and “owning his hurt, understanding it, and taking the steps needed to heal.” Berrian uses his words to combat the stereotypes of what it means to be a biracial man. He’s combating the stigma of sexuality. When he performs, he inspires those who listen to speak up about their own issues without being fearful.

“I want my listeners to be open to themselves, their pain, and their misery,” Berrian said. “They have to be vocal and know to never be silent.”

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### **Impacting Our Youth and Social Change**

In 2002, Aaron Zimmerman, a Brooklyn native, started The New York Writer’s Coalition for youth and adults to spark their creativity through poetry. The Coalition began after he was leading workshops in a housing resident called Prince George. The people who lived there were either low income or homeless. The residents were always attentive during the workshops and seemed to find joy in writing. That’s when Aaron thought of the idea to start his own non-profit.

“Poetry is so wide-ranging. When young people discover poetry, it’s really exciting,” Zimmerman said. “It’s a form of self-expression that is inherent to human beings—so when you discovered it, it was already there within you.”

Youth write poetry because they find it simple, according to Zimmerman. For Zimmerman, poetry is about expanding horizons, hearing new voices, and the possibilities that come with language. Language has a major impact on a person’s life. Zimmerman believes the older generation use poetry to express thoughts in a non-literal way by “sneaking up on the issue.”

“For adults, poetry is a community building endeavor,” Zimmerman said. “It brings them together to share their work and work on their craft—similar to young people.”

During the coalition's summer workshops, many of the leaders bring random themes into focus. The youth are separated into groups based on age range. Workshop leaders brainstorm theme ideas to spark creativity. Some prompts include nature, a color, or rhymes. One popular prompt used during the workshops is to have the students write down two truths about themselves and one life. This sparks creativity.

"We are at a time where young poets of color are being heard more than before," Zimmerman said. "With movements like #Black Lives Matter, poetry has had a place in it to express ideas and concepts that are new."

During the time of the Civil Rights Movement, poets would rally together and use their words to protest and spread the need for change. When Congress passed the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1865, abolishing slavery in the U.S., segregation was still intact. 1968 was an intensive time during the movement, where activists and creatives worked together. According to the [Poetry Foundation](#), poets such as Margaret Walker, Nikki Giovanni, and June Jordan were influenced by the civil rights movement and used their work to instill "a sense of pride in one's identity, to praise freedom fighters and honor fallen leaders, to chronicle acts of resistance, and to offer wisdom and strength to fellow activists."

"This intersection between social justice and art forms are merging out of necessity," Zimmerman said. "This is the way of expressing outrage over our world and the horrible things our government is doing."

Young artists such as Dizenzoantonio, Berrian and Witter plan to continue their creative work. Despite physical restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they are utilizing social media to build an impact.

### SOURCE LIST

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