

# **SESSION FIVE: A PERFORMATIVE CRITIQUE OF DEMOCRACY**

## **INTRODUCTION**

BLACKOUT ARTS COLLECTIVE (BAC): What's up everybody? Welcome to Blackout. I want to tell you a little about Blackout Arts Collective. We're a group of artists, educators, activists and other types of professionals who are dedicated to empowering communities of color through the arts, education, and activism. In 1997, a group of us came together and asked, "How can we use the space that is created by arts, activism and education to build a movement?" Over the last few years, we've started building that movement. We started having showcases in New York City venues. Later we grew and we started doing shows in Boston. Now we have a chapter in Boston and Philadelphia and one starting up in New Haven, and we're working to build a national network of artists who are committed to social justice. Last year we launched our national tour called "Lyrics on Lockdown." This tour sought to raise awareness about the prison industrial complex and to work toward the goal of building that national network. There are many of us all over the country and world doing this work. We need to come together. That's what we're here for tonight. Tonight we want to start the discussion of how we can use the arts to build a social justice movement, and you're gonna be involved with it. Hopefully later on you'll contact us and be involved in more ways.

We're gonna have an amazing event, basically a poetry battle, a poetry slam. All the work you're gonna hear tonight ties into themes from *The Miner's Canary*. The artists have been working hard to bring this stuff to you so you have to really let them know how excited you are, how much energy you have. Alright, alright. So we're gonna have this poetry competition. Poetry competitions have been going on since ancient times in various parts of Africa and Asia. My father actually came to this country winning a poetry competition in Trinidad, where they have calypso competitions. This goes way back. We're just continuing that tradition with the new spoken word movement and trying to figure out how we can tie this into a broader movement for social justice.

We're gonna do a little call and response to make sure that you all are alive and awake and excited about what you all are about to get into. You all are not at N.Y.U. Law School anymore. You all gotta make noise like you're somewhere else. So when I say, "Rise up my people," y'all over here, you're gonna say, "Rise up."

Rise up, my people, rise up, rise up! . . .

## BROKEN CURVES AND FREEWRITES

JENNIFER CENDANA ARMAS\*

my story is made of broken curves and unfinished freewrites  
 making a show with no clue of an underlying thread  
 eyes rubbed with irritation from lead paint, exploding pens, torn elastics and  
 loose screws

what *you*

doin' with your time now that you're out playing the game of life?

remember that game?

i thought everyone was supposed to have cute little cars that fit 6  
 and you could easily buy stocks and bonds or a horse ranch  
 or earn hundreds of thousands of dollars rolling a

3

retiring to a phat ass mansion by 50

i've never ridden a horse before  
 can't afford to buy the minimum for stocks  
 what life did they base that game on?

i watched lola y mommy  
 all the years  
 running home and work  
 dreams dead  
 or dying  
 (you're never sure when they never speak to you)  
 slicing carrots and folding sheets  
 i will not be like them  
 slicing carrots and folding sheets in lieu of hop  
 giving of myself to the detriment of myself  
 dreams dead  
 eyes closed

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\* jennifer cendana armas is an artist, educator and activist born and raised in New York City. She is a rapper, poet, actor, singer and writer. She is a member of the Blackout Arts Collective family and dedicates her work to her kids. Copyright © 2002 by Jennifer Cendana Armas. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

deaf to the glares of my daughter  
 i will not be the woman  
 to make those sacrifices

*can i start again?*

can i review the moment i have my will away  
 to all the fears haunting me since childhood  
 why spit in the face was called love  
 silence equaled obedience  
 review the moment when false truths and beautiful myths  
 made me deaf and screamed me ugly  
 greeted me good morning and tucked me in sleep tight

where was the will to speak then and how could i not hold it tightly in my  
 fist?

let me hear the moment i would not dream a  
 word  
 in  
 or  
 to  
 my heart and soul and spirit and mind

“tell me a story,” i’d ask  
 but none would come to me in time

“no- i don’t have any”

***HEY!CATGOTYOURTONGUE?!***

so full of fear i was  
 i could not even shiver  
 could not recognize  
 but with another’s words should i breathe  
 not crossing a street without  
 a hand

a hand

any hand

but  
 my  
 own

can we please start again?

and let me take it sssslllllllllllloooooooowwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww

because what if *i am* the what ifs

maybe *i am* the *i am*s

if i can

just

look me in the eyes

more than once without shame

this poem would be but a reference to what i will never be again

invisible