

“Speaking Back” through Spoken Word Poetry

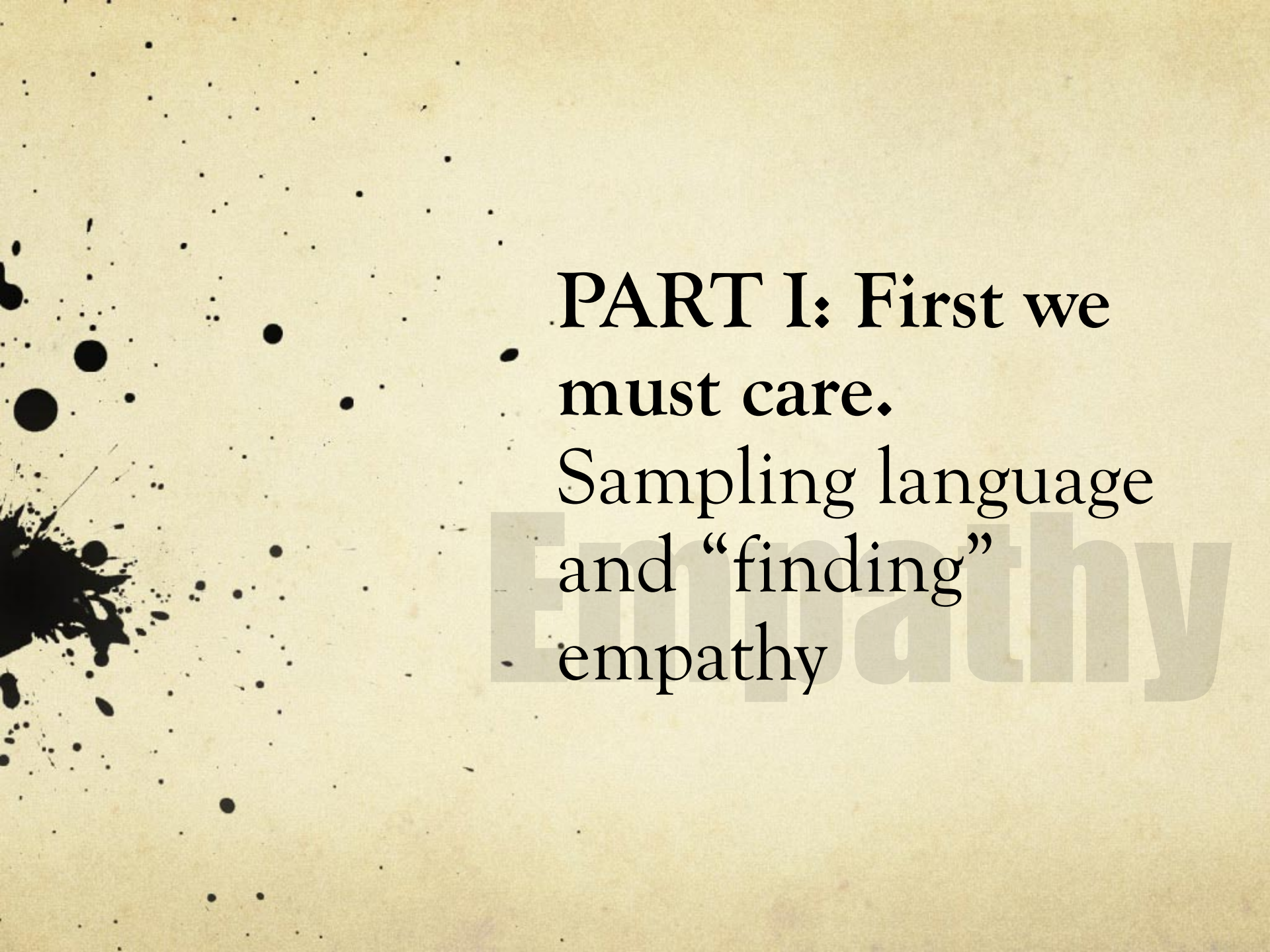
Maria McSorley

mcsorleym@tantasqua.org

Tantasqua Regional High School

Goals and Objectives:

- To analyze and write found, free form, and spoken word poetry as forms of social justice education and expression.
- For students to build on and use their foundational knowledge of the relationship between power and language.
- To engage students in authentic learning by speaking and listening to spoken word poems concerning contemporary oppression, both personal and universal.



PART I: First we
must care.

Sampling language
and “finding”
empathy

PART I: Found Poetry

For this poem, our focus is on the power that language has to inform others, in this case about people who have experienced horror and incredible tragedy in the form of genocide – the climax of oppression.

“In a few seconds, we had ceased to be men. Had the situation not been so tragic, we might have laughed.” (36)

“Those whose numbers had been noted were standing apart, abandoned by the whole world. Some were silently weeping.”
(72)

“One day when we had come to a stop, a worker took a piece of bread out of his bag and threw it into a wagon. There was a stampede. Dozens of starving men fought desperately over a few crumbs. The worker watched the spectacle with great interest.”
(100)

“I became A-7713. From then on, I had no other name.” (42)

Sampling Language & “Finding” Empathy

Excerpt from pages 83 - 84 in new addition - [the night before the death march begins.](#)

Participant Lines Selected:

- Ex. “Once more, the last night”

Student Samples

The Symphony of Death

By: The poetic students of B
Block (Spring 2015)

Just a few more meters and then it will be over.
I kept repeating it to myself.

I was dragging this emaciated body that was such a weight.
And I hated that body.
Only now did I feel the full extent of my weakness.
I was no longer arguing with him, but with death itself.

Death, which was settling all around me, silently, deadly.
It would seize upon a sleeping person,
steal into him and devour him bit by bit.

The idea of dying, of ceasing to be began to fascinate me.
I saw myself in every stiffened corpse
All I had to do was close my eyes to see the whole world pass me, to dream another life.
But I had no right to let myself die.

Though I tried to put it out of my mind, I couldn't help thinking there were two of us
It was as if Juliek's bow had become his soul.
When I hear that piece by Beethoven, my eyes close.
And out of the darkness emerges the pale and melancholy face of my
Polish comrade bidding farewell to an audience of dying men.
He smiled.
I soon forgot him. I began to think of myself again.
My body and I.

We were stronger than cold and hunger,
stronger than the guns and the desire to die,
doomed and rootless,
nothing but numbers.
We were the only men on Earth.

The road was endless

We had the feeling of being alive

Don't think, don't stop, run!

These words of encouragement, even coming from the mouths of our assassins were a great help

“Faster you tramps, you flea ridden dogs!”

It was like running while asleep

All I had to do was close my eyes to see a whole new world pass before me, to dream of another life.

I knew that to sleep meant to die.

The idea of dying, of ceasing to be, began to fascinate me

Never before had I heard such a beautiful sound. In such silence.

I saw myself in every stiffened corpse.

Death enveloped me, it suffocated me.

I was biting my way through, searching for air. No one cried out.

Nobody asked anyone for help. One died because one had to. No point in making trouble.

An icy wind was blowing violently

Chilled to the bone, our throats parched, famished, out of breath, we pressed on

If one of us stopped for a second, a quick shot eliminated the filthy dog.

When the SS were tired, they were replaced, but no one replaced us.

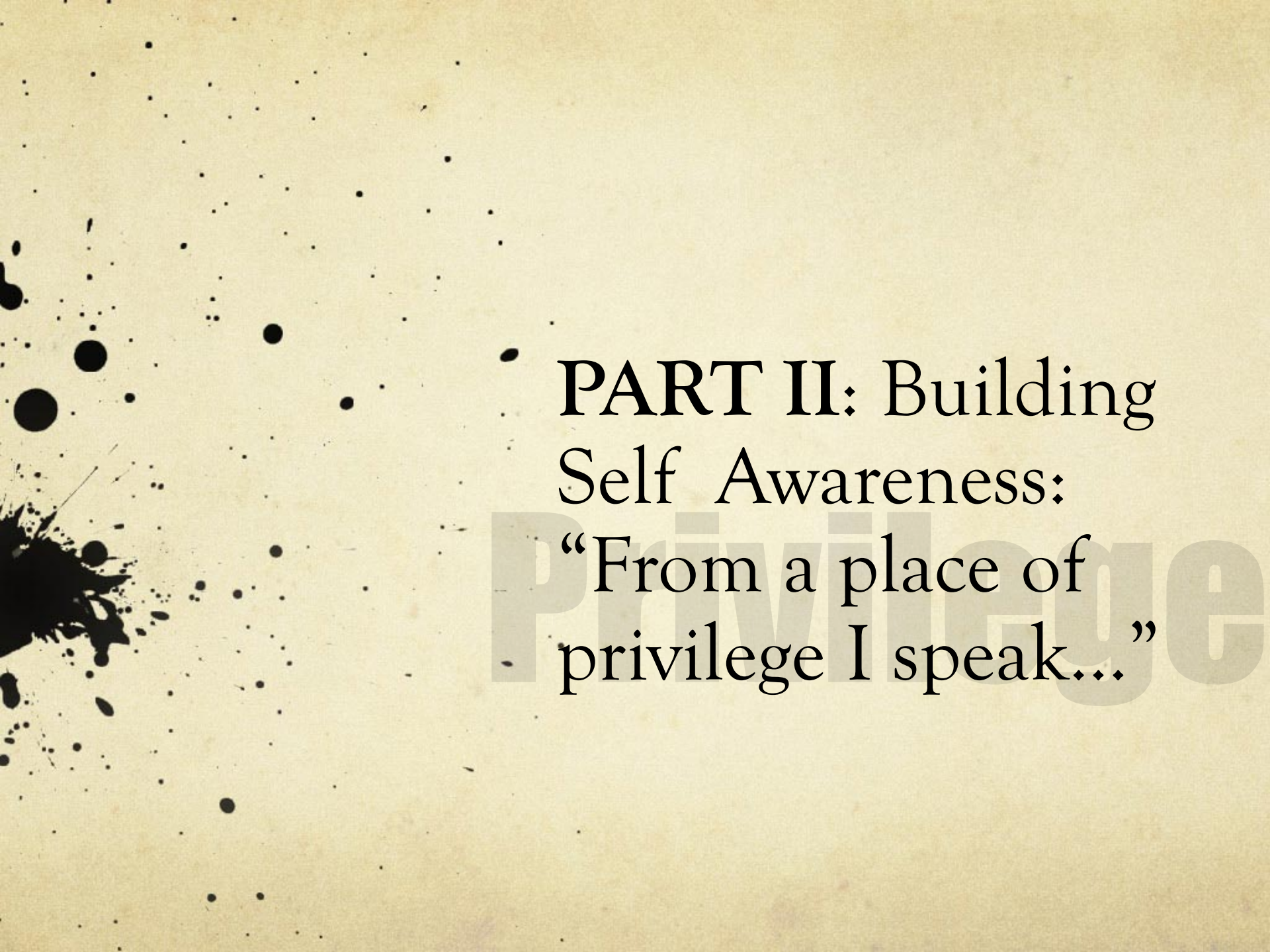
I couldn't help thinking there was two of us, my body and I

What would he do without me. I was his sole support.

I shall always remember that smile

The Run

By: C Block -
Fall 2014



PART II: Building
Self Awareness:

“From a place of
privilege I speak...”

Context: The Holocaust and Pastor Martin Niemöller

In Germany, first they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.

By: Pastor Martin Niemöller

“I was not...”

a socialist

a trade unionist

a Jew

... so I AM... ?

Connections to Contemporary America – Recognizing Oppression and Privilege in 2015

First they came for:

- The poor
- The women
- Those of color
- The immigrants
- The disabled
- The uneducated
- The LGBTQA+
- Etc.

But I did not speak out because I am:

- White
- A man
- Able-bodied
- Economically stable
- Educated
- Heterosexual/Cisgender
- American born
- Etc.

POEM #2 – “From a place of privilege”

- Free form poetry – students select one privilege they experience to “speak from” and use poetry to express what they gain, avoid, or lose from such a position in modern America.
- Guidelines are minimal to allow for student creativity:
 - Must be at least 30 lines
 - Must be organized by stanzas
 - Must be reflective and specific
 - The poem should illustrate students’ awareness of the privilege they have concerning one topic.



PART III:

Finding a voice
against hatred,
prejudice, and
stereotypes through
Spoken Word Poetry

Speak BACK

Context: The Modern Jewish Experience through Vanessa Hidary's "Hebrew Mamita"



"Bartender, tell me I don't look Jewish. Tell me I don't act Jewish." 'Cause I'm thinking, I'm saying, what does Jewish look like to you? Should I **fiddle on a freaking roof for you?** Should I humor you with **oy veys** and **refuse to pay?** Oh, 'cause you know how we like to **"Jew you down."** "Jew you down," I'd like to throw you down. 'Cause I walked here long miles on hot sand to publicly repent my sins. 'Cause I almost forgot, six million died without having the option of giggling on bar stools. Almost forgot that concentration camp survivors are now a dying generation that my children may never have the sensation of seeing in person. And if you must see me as that **blood-sucking Jew**, see me as that pesky mosquito that bites and sucks the prejudice right out of you. Don't get it twisted 'cause you might live in New York City where you can buy knishes at stands for \$1.50. We only make up 2.2 percent of the American population. You see, many in other parts of the country are not feeling me. I'm not trying to compete in a contest of oppression. Just feel the need to mention the miserable tension I feel in my heart when people say things like, **"The Blacks and the Jews, oh, they just don't get along."** Just feel the need to say I can't be the only exception to the rule, just the one right now **using my poetry as a tool to maybe change just one heart tonight...**

Teaching through speaking

...'Cause I'm the Hebrew Mamita, long lost daughter of Abraham and Sarah, the sexy *oy veying*, Matzah eating, Chutzpah having, non-cheaping, non-conspirasizing, always questioning, hip-hop listening, Torah-scroll reading, all people loving, pride-filled Jewish girl. Bigging up all people who are a little miffed 'cause someone tells you don't look like or act like your people. Impossible. 'Cause you are your people. You just tell them they don't look, period.

Spoken Word Poetry as a “teacher”

Students then choose what they want to speak back about – going back to the initial discussion of oppression, privilege, prejudice, and hatred.



Thank you!