

This week, we will prepare to throw down and perform slam poetry! We will also try to understand the misunderstood.

SlamNation

After learning what slam poetry is, watch and score 5 performances. But before doing so, co-construct a scoring rubric as a class.

Performances	<u> </u> (out of 2.5)	<u> </u> (out of 2.5)	<u> </u> (out of 2.5)	<u> </u> (out of 2.5)	Score (out of 10)
“Poet Breathe Now” by Aaron Gottlieb					
Comments:					
“What Teachers Make” by Taylor Mali					
Comments:					
“Explaining My Depression to My Mother” by Sabrina Benaim					
Comments:					

“Lost Voices” by Darius Simpson & Scout Bostley					
Comments:					
Comments:					

Rough Draft of Assignment 3—Describe someone you consider misunderstood by society

I. Read the following excerpt from the article “Kanye West is Misunderstood” by Brian Doherty.

Shortly after Donald Trump won the presidency, Kanye West, the successful and controversial hip-hop artist and fashion mogul, tried to start a conversation about political pluralism. On stage during a show in San Jose, California, he admitted something he knew would alarm a lot of his audience: While he hadn't actually voted, if he had, it would have been for Trump.

"That don't mean that I don't think that black lives matter," he clarified. "That don't mean I don't think that I'm a believer in women's rights. That don't mean I don't believe in gay marriage." Still, West told his San Jose crowd, it was time to "stop focusing on racism.... We are in a racist country, period...and not one or the other candidate was gonna instantly be able to change that because of their views."

Most of his friends and family were for Clinton, he conceded. And he knew none of his political ruminations were apt to please his fans. "I guess we're just not gonna sell out the rest of the tour now," he said, presciently. *New York* magazine chided him afterward for turning himself into "basically the uncle you really wish you could avoid at Thanksgiving dinner," and R&B singer John Legend told a French

magazine that "for Kanye to support [Trump's] message is very disappointing."

A week after the San Jose show, West canceled 21 remaining tour dates, was hospitalized for "stress and exhaustion," and disappeared from public life and productivity for a year. He later attributed his troubles that week to trying to wean himself from an opioid dependency; he has since publicly identified himself as diagnosed bipolar, and he often talks about when he is or isn't on his meds.

He became active again in 2018, releasing a string of albums that he either performed on or produced in early summer. This time, it looked like his politics might not hinder his creative ventures. His solo record *Ye* quickly hit No. 1. A week later, a collaboration with Kid Cudi called *Kids See Ghosts* debuted at No. 2, while *Ye* held on to No. 5.

But during this same period of artistic fertility, he also dove back into politics, doubling down on his support for Trump. The cultural storm he generated by praising the president didn't initially drive away his core audience, but it did result in months of increasing pressure that culminated in a late October announcement from the singer that he would be eschewing political arguments to focus on just being creative. The bumpy road leading to that declaration demonstrates the toxicity of politics today—and, as collateral damage, likely ends West's ability to use his influence to do real good for real people.

'The Mob Can't Make Me Not Love Him'

West's public announcement of his bipolar diagnosis and struggles with addiction were a relief to admirers who hated the president. It allowed them to write off the Trump talk as a side effect of stress, mental illness, and/or a drug problem.

Then, in April 2018, after being absent from Twitter for over a year and having released no music in the interim, West tweeted a photo of himself in a "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) hat. People got mad all over again. In response, he tweeted that "the mob can't make me not love" Trump. "We are both dragon energy," he said. "He is my brother."

West also struck up an unlikely ideological alliance with Candace Owens of the right-wing advocacy group Turning Point USA. Owens, a black woman who pushes black support for the Republican Party, became a frequent public companion, including at the release event for West's *Ye* album, which he issued about a month after launching himself as a born-again MAGAite.

Hearing "love" anywhere near "Trump" caused the tastemakers of hip-hop and respectable popular culture to see red, as West well knew it would. In his songs, if not always in his copious interviews, he has frequently been his own most intelligent observer and critic. Despite his reputation as an arrogant maniac, he consistently looks on himself with usually wise judgment and vivid self-awareness.

In response to the MAGA controversy, West and rapper T.I. rush-released a duet single, "Ye vs. the People." In it, T.I. stands in for "the people," capturing the baffled incredulity of Trump-hating Kanye fans. "This shit is stubborn, selfish, bullheaded, even for you," he raps.

"You wore a dusty-ass hat to represent the same views as white supremacy, man. We expect better from you."

West counters that his wearing a MAGA hat rebranded it: "Make America Great Again had a negative perception. I took it, wore it, rocked it, gave it a new direction. Added empathy, care, and love and affection." He analogized reaching out to the MAGA world as "like a gang truce, the first Blood to shake the Crip's hand."

Justice for Alice Johnson

Anti-Trumpers in pop culture remained on T.I.'s side. The current cultural mode, after all, is constant watchful hostility against one's political enemy and all who stand with him (or her).

A couple of West's subsequent public pronouncements fed the assumption that anyone, even a black man, who supported Trump must be soft on racism. He made a certifiably outrageous statement to *TMZ* in May: "When you hear about slavery for 400 years...For 400 years? That sounds like a choice."

Yet when West explained himself later, he touched on a line of political philosophy that goes back as far as the 16th century: the controversial idea, associated with classical liberal theorist Etienne de la Boetie, author of *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, that where rebellion is physically possible, the oppressor often forces on the oppressed a mindset that on some level justifies the slavery to the enslaved.

As West put it later, "My point is for us to have stayed in that position even though the numbers were on our side means that we were mentally enslaved."

In late September, Kanye tweeted that "we will provide jobs for all who are free from prisons as we abolish the 13th amendment." He meant—as would be obvious to anyone familiar with the details of that constitutional amendment or the lingo of the modern prison reform movement—the part of the 13th that allows involuntary servitude for "punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." Kanye was advocating an end to the often brutal yet completely legal practice of forced prison labor. But confused onlookers, thinking of the 13th only as the amendment that largely abolished slavery in the United States, assumed crazy Kanye wanted to send blacks back to the plantation.

For his apostasy from standard liberal opinion on Trump, West became a victim of "cancel culture," the practice of completely writing off anyone—celebrity, relative, and everyone in between—who does or says something sufficiently disagreeable. Yet West's public attachment to the MAGA cause had already freed a woman from jail. In June, Trump took a meeting with the rapper's wife, reality star and media mogul Kim Kardashian. She asked him to commute the sentence of a 63-year-old black grandmother named Alice Johnson, and he did so.

In October, right before a controversial televised Oval Office meeting with West, Trump told Fox News that he was on the artist's side when it came to America's penal system. "There has to be a reform," he said. "It's very unfair to African Americans, it's very unfair to everybody, and it's also very costly." The president added that if a conflict arose between West's vision on prison reform and that of then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Trump would overrule Sessions in favor of West.

It wouldn't be fair to infer that West and his wife were the primary influence on Trump's surprising embrace of criminal justice reform; the president's son-in-law Jared Kushner is its biggest supporter within the White House itself. But in May, less than a month after Kanye's MAGA tweeting began, Trump hosted a prison reform summit at the White House. "Our whole nation benefits if former inmates are able to re-enter society as productive, law-abiding citizens," he said. And Johnson's release does seem directly connected to the president's relationship with the Kardashian-West.

During their notorious October White House meeting, West physically embraced the president, told the country to lay off Trump because if he doesn't look good we don't look good, and said that wearing the MAGA hat makes him feel like Superman. He reinforced Trump's proclivity for trade protectionism via calls to bring manufacturing jobs to West's native Chicago. And he used the air time to offer, from beside the leader of the free world, a consistent positive message of mercy and reform for people stuck in the prison system. West was at the very least a prominent public part of the chorus of voices in Trump's ear that led him, in November, to say he'd be happy to sign the FIRST STEP Act if both houses of Congress can agree on a final version. That bill would, among other things, shore up re-entry programs and job training for federal prisoners and make it easier to rack up "good time" credits toward earlier release. The legislation, which has bipartisan support on the Hill, would also reduce some mandatory minimum sentences for repeat drug offenders and limit the sentencing impact of possessing a firearm while committing a nonviolent offense.

The only two policies West explicitly spoke in favor of in his meeting with Trump—more industrial jobs in America and prison reform—are perfectly consistent with a 21st century progressive political agenda. These are also the only items on Trump's policy slate that West has ever actually endorsed. The rapper has been looking for points of agreement and commonality in places where other people from his world are blind, and he's been crucified for it.

2. Listen to the clean version of "Ye vs. The People" ([youtube.com/watch?v=VS-ecKU2b80](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VS-ecKU2b80)). Do you agree with Kanye West or The People (T.I.)?

3. For homework, we will be writing a description of someone we consider misunderstood by society. Begin writing a rough draft on a separate sheet of paper. If you cannot think a misunderstood person now, then write an entry of Kanye West. Attach your rough draft to your homework for potential bonus marks!