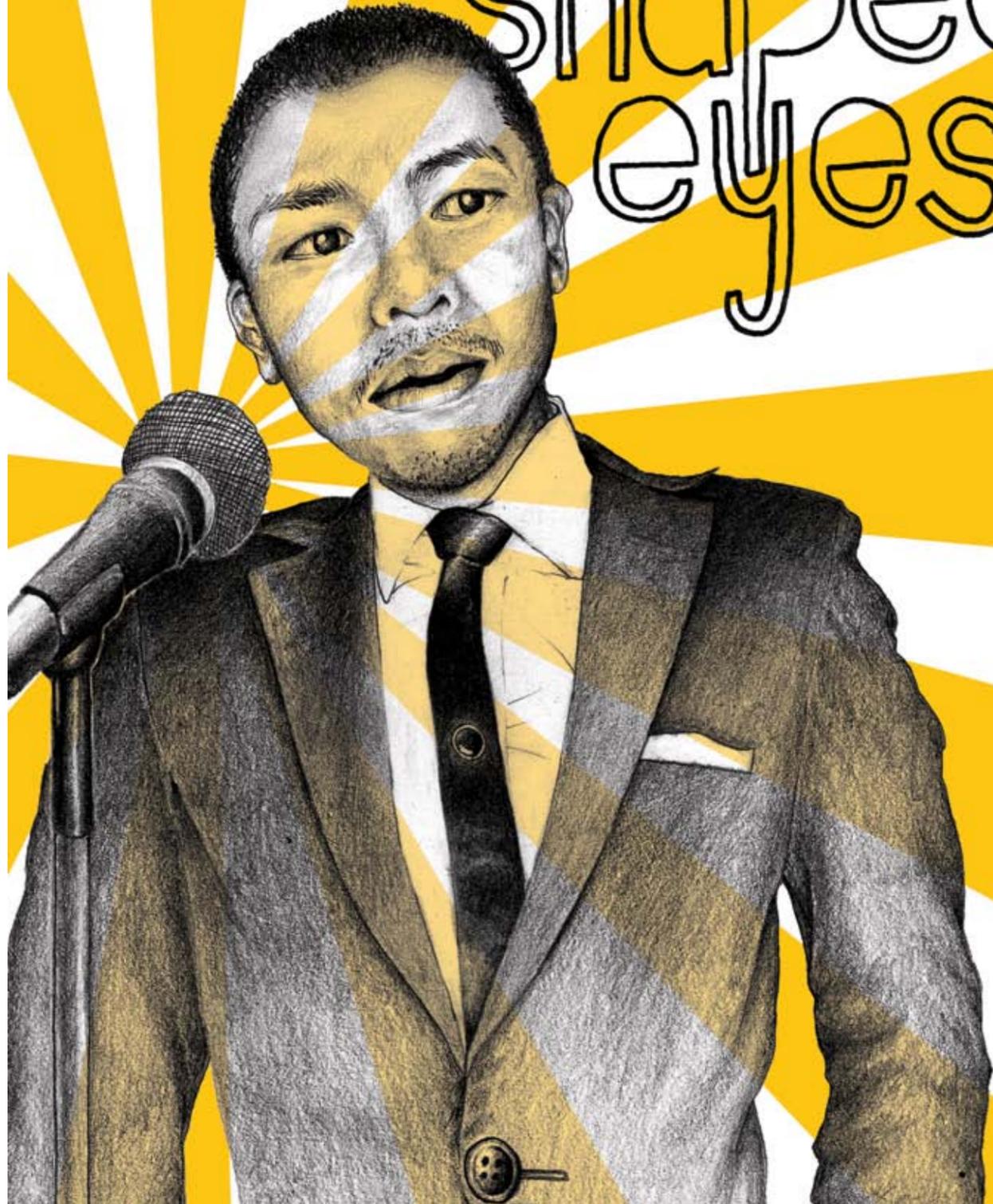


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SPEAKING IN TONGUES

Pulling the plug on slam poetry.

Writer Dino-Ray Ramos Illustrator Stephanie Kubo

FRESH out of college, I used to put “spoken word poet” on my resume. I know — this is the equivalent of adding something like “mime” or “bucket drummer” to your work experience — but did I mention I was an angsty Asian college kid in Texas with something to prove?

The road to my cringe-worthy resume title began in 2000 when I was invited to attend a performance by I Was Born with Two Tongues. The event flyer featured a close-up on an Asian eye, a finger pulling on the corner to make it even more slanted. I was intrigued.

I had no knowledge of who they were. This was long before Google answered all of life’s mysteries, so I had to rely on my imagination. Were they a singing group? A group of avant-garde performance artists? A circus act? Motivational speakers? It turns out they were E: all of the above.

Emily Chang, Dennis Kim and Marlon and Anida Yoeu Esguerra compose the pan-Asian spoken word poetry troupe I Was Born with Two Tongues. To have them come to Texas was quite exciting. My knowledge of the spoken word/slam poetry world didn’t extend beyond pioneering “angry black man” Kevin from *The Real World: New York* and neo-beatnik wannabes spouting off antiestablishment words at an open mic night.

I Was Born with Two Tongues’ performance was awe inspiring. With their words, they “slammed” hefty Asian American issues like Asian stereotypes and female fetishization. Their words, where they spoke of yellow power and isangmahal, could promote change and challenge thoughts. Spoken word was an outlet for anger and frustration — and cue my dive into its realm.

I thought I could be at the level of these poets. As a Filipino American journalism major at Texas A&M University I thought I had the skills, so I started performing at various “diversity” events around my school (where, at the time, the population was 83 per-

cent white). My performances received such great feedback that I was convinced I was a brilliant spoken word poet. I even thought I was on the level of the Tongues — when really my poems were derivative of theirs. I was a biter, but then again, original content is highly overrated.

Now in my 30s, I have calmed down a bit. The angriest I get is when my DVR fails to record the latest episode of *Community*. Don’t get me wrong, I still care about Asian American issues; I just learned how to control my anger and convert it into a polarizing sense of humor.

I do feel that there is a resurgence of spoken word/slam poetry. On HBO, I caught an episode of *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Slam*, where talented teens from

all over the country perform their original works. They were far better than I was or ever can be. It was refreshing to see a new generation of minds who were connected with the written word and their cultures rather than tweeting their thoughts about the latest episode of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Even so, these are young, changeable minds and they may not continue their paths in spoken word. When they reach a certain age, they will either follow the path of a witty journalist (wink) or evolve their talents into the elevated consciousness of Beau Sia (watch *SlamNation* for the full effect). Either way, they are using words in a smart way — so it’s a win-win.

I don’t have anything against people in the spoken word/slam poetry world. It takes a lot of guts for someone to get in front of a crowd of people and get drunk with their feelings about pressing, cultural issues. In fact, I urge everyone to try it at least once in his or her lifetime. Afterward, do some soul searching — a lot of soul searching — and nine times out of 10, you will discover that you are not a budding spoken word poet. You are just angry like everyone else in the world. Handle it in the most logical way: with lots of binge eating and two-faced trash talking. 🍷

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