

Seattle Poets Use Rhymes for Revolution

I first stumbled upon local slam poetry troupe **Ringside and the Revolutionary Poets** at the Northwest Folklife Festival, where they'd been invited to showcase some of their work. Accompanying the poets were teenagers involved in Seattle's **YouthSpeaks**, an Art Corps affiliated program for teens who want to grow in the art of writing and performing poetry.

The caliber of the Ringside Poets — a group that brings together some of Seattle's most *renown* slam poets — is what initially reeled me in.

Their unapologetic, urgent dedication to *activism* and social issues in our area is what made me a dedicated fan.

A Revolutionary Night at the Red Lounge

Ringside and the Revolutionary Poets perform regularly at **Capitol Hill's** [A Taste of The Caribbean](#). Inside the restaurant is the **Red Lounge**, a wood floored space scattered with tables and centered toward a corner stage where various acts perform for patrons feasting on what contends to be the *best jerk chicken* in Seattle. The stage is enveloped in a faux brick wall reminiscent of New York comedy clubs and bordered by snake lights that change colors rhythmically.



Jerk Chicken & Johnny Cakes @ A Taste of the Caribbean

By 8 o'clock, the Red Lounge is so *full* of people seats are no longer available. Perhaps in lieu of the Johnny Cakes and poets, they're here to witness the genius of **Nikki Etienne** (*aka Mamma Nikki*), who takes the stage to inform the crowd of the slam format with such energy and charm you can't help but set your drink down and listen.

“Now I know some of y’all weren’t expecting a poetry slam,” she says from the microphone on stage. “Well, get ready ‘cause you’re here now.”

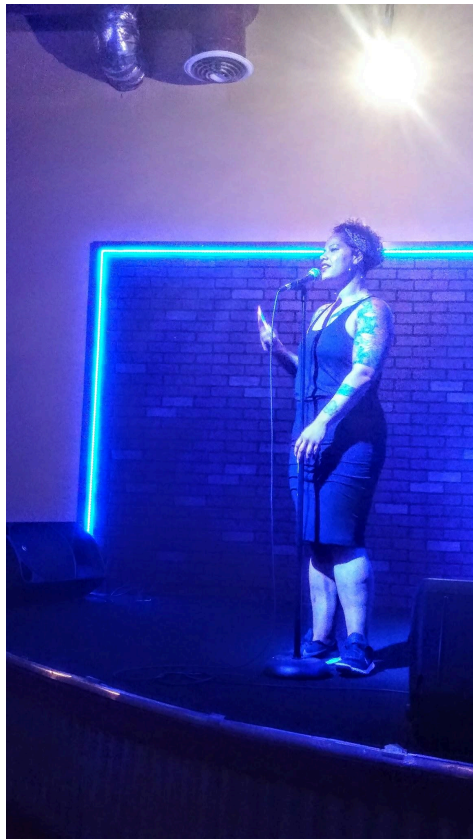
The poets in the crowd, along with some obvious fans, seem to chuckle knowingly, anticipating what I can only imagine is a consistently unpredictable audience response.

Gender, Racial and Social Justice 101

Attending a slam with the Ringside Poets is like taking a *crash course* in gender and racial equity, LGBTQ rights and social justice. *Combined.*

That’s because all of the poets are thoroughly involved in activism for these movements. They’ve got the resumes — and the first hand experience — to back up the authoritative voice with which they speak for these Seattle communities. If you’re not open to learning about these topics, the content can disrupt your sense of peace in the world — but that’s *kind of* Ringside’s goal.

Ringside and the Revolutionary Poets is the brainchild of Nikki Etienne and **Nikkita “KO” Oliver**. Both women have been involved in Seattle’s slam poetry scene for a number of years, and have had such a wide impact on Seattle’s culture, social justice and political movements that their names are *colloquial* around here.



Nikkita “KO” Oliver delivers a performs at the Red Lounge.

These days, Etienne's focus is on music with her band [Holy Pistola](#) and advocating for LGBTQ rights with gigs like [speaking](#) at Seattle's Pride Festival.

You've Probably Heard of KO

Oliver recently completed both a law degree *and* a master's degree in education from the University of Washington on a full ride public services scholarship. She works for a project called [Creative Justice](#), an arts-based alternative to incarceration for youth.

In addition, she assists protest efforts in a legal sense, advising activists who may “*catch a case*” in the midst of a rally; she was caught in an [article](#) in the *Seattle Times* last year for protesting police brutality alongside another Ringside Poet.

Oh, and she [helped](#) **Macklemore** and **Ryan Lewis** compose the song *White Privilege II*, performing it with them on *Stephen Colbert's Late Show* back in January.

Live from the Show

The idea for Ringside — to have a consistent group of poets write new material and perform it regularly — emerged from the desire to “*create a safe space for people of color to come and express themselves.*” Everything from the inception of the group, to where they perform — “*a black-owned business is important to us*” — has a direct impact on the Seattle communities that Ringside cares about.

Mamma Nikki calls two poets up to the stage: [Troy Osaki](#) is first, a third year law student at Seattle University who currently interns at Creative Justice and does legal presentations at a local juvenile detention center once a month.

Then [Blu the Baqi](#) rises to the stage, a social services worker specializing in domestic violence treatment and who just released her first poetry anthology, [How To Write A Fire](#).

Mamma Nikki informs us that traditional slams dictate the competing poets cannot get too close to each other but, “*If they want to get this close,*” she hovers inches from Blu's giggling face, “*that's alright. I mean I've seen it happen before. It ain't pretty but it's allowed.*”

Osaki is up first. Osaki is young and performs poetry with the confidence, cadence and rhythm of a seasoned MC. The first poem I heard of his “*reimagined the world colonized by people of color*” as such:

“White culture appropriated by indigenous cultures/Birkenstocks/tanning beds/a tapped keg/white fiction characters portrayed by actors in whiteface/Donald Trump detained at airport security.”

Why the pot-stirring content? When I asked him, Osaki says, “*I think it is important to create art that shifts people's hearts, feelings and what they think. Changing laws and policies can only do so much.*”

The bottom line, he says: “*Real social change will come through a shift in culture, and that's what art does.*”

Mamma Nikki adds, “*It's like that Nina Simone quote, ‘You can't help it. An artist's duty is to reflect the times.’*”

After Osaki's performance Blu takes the stage and introduces a piece about "*what it is like to be a black woman in America today*":

"I shed blood every month just to clean out my womb..." she says. "They shed blood every month just to clean out the hood."

After Blu's performance Mamma Nikki takes the stage again, the poets flanked to her sides, as she asks the crowd to cheer for who they think should win this round. Blu beats Osaki out.

Next up is [John Eklof](#), who the poets call Malcolm because — to be honest — he *does* have the same air as Mr. X. The tall, dignified posture of a man enlightened; a fedora tipped just to the right of his head; astute glasses and an *intimidating* tendency to be totally silent for a moment at the microphone before he performs.

In a soft voice he recites with a smile, "*The war on drugs ain't a war on crack smoke. The war on drugs is a war on black folk.*"

Eklof writes about race for the *International Examiner*, a publication dedicated to Pan-Asian coverage in America. He also serves as the Culture Center Coordinator at South Seattle College, promoting racial equity on campus.

After Eklof's performance is the *featured* poet for the night: [Donte "Da Queen" Johnson](#). Johnson is a Starbucks barista with a huge local presence who happened to be commissioned by the city to perform his poem "*Seattle*" at the 2014 Mayor's Arts Awards.



Donte "Da Queen" Johnson & Blu The Baqi (L)

Three more Ringside poets were not able to be present that night. They are:

- [Jerrel Davis](#), a young man known especially in south Seattle for his work in the community
- **MC Call**
- [Shelby Handler](#), the ambassador between Ringside and YouthSpeaks and advocate for the Seattle chapter of the Coalition of Anti Racist Whites

Before I left, I ask Oliver why the group feels their activism — and poetry — is so important to do in a city that is already known for its progressivism.

*"Because we have so much space here in Seattle to educate ourselves and to be vocal and to challenge the system, **it has to die here first**," she says.*

"That's a part of the the reason why Nikki and I are so passionate about keeping this space safe for our art and activism. Maybe if they hear [one of us] do a poem, they might be more open to having a real conversation."

You can experience Ringside and the Revolutionary Poets *every last Friday of the month*, beginning around 7 p.m. at [A Taste of The Caribbean](#) in Capitol Hill.