

Je dis ça, je dis rien / I'm just saying,... saying nothing

Artist's Statement

I fell in love with the French language in middle school and continued learning the language through my high school career, but when I arrived at CMU I was not sure if I would ever have time to take a French class in college. Thankfully, in the Spring 2024 semester, I was able to enroll in one of Professor Sébastien Dubreil's courses, French and Francophone Sociolinguistics (82-304). Through the coursework that led us to conduct linguistic and cultural explorations via creative projects, I connected with French culture and language in a deeper way than ever before. One particularly meaningful assignment for me, the very first project of the course, asked us to write a slam poem in French — a daunting task, but one that would ultimately be extremely rewarding.

Our exploration of slam poetry in class had taught me that writing a slam poem was far more than simply writing a poem. A slam poem's oral delivery requires the artist to consider their *sound*: their volume, their cadence, the way their words fit and flow together. The poet plays with their language and explores how words that are phonetically related can be paired together and placed in a context that emphasizes an idea or draws out a new meaning — all while addressing a subject of some cultural, social, or personal significance.

Even before I knew what direction my poem would take, I knew I wanted my slam to be an internal reflection of my thoughts about my identity as a Korean-American who doesn't speak Korean. Going from my hometown in a majority-white neighborhood to CMU where I was surrounded by a larger Asian population than I'd ever been around before was a shocking cultural shift, and I saw an opportunity to reflect on how I have struggled since arriving here with my sense of belonging in both communities. I had never been able to fully process how I fit in either my home community or in my new environment here at CMU, and this poem was my attempt to understand this struggle and come to some type of conclusion.

In this poem, I chose to address my feelings about my cultural belonging and a heritage language that I don't speak by writing in a language that I am learning. Yet, as I began to write, I began to feel that I lacked so much of the linguistic complexity that I needed to capture the emotions I was feeling and processing. How was I supposed to think through emotions in another language that I had hardly been able to understand in English?

As I began to craft this slam, this question brought me to a standstill. I felt that I needed to use complicated metaphors to express complicated emotions, but I didn't have the French proficiency to express myself the way I wanted to. I only started to make progress on the poem

when I began to keep my writing simple – I pivoted away from the metaphors, and began to write plainly about how I felt.

Surprisingly, writing in French forced me to scrape away the excess emotion and dive into the center of what I was really feeling. Finding rhymes, idioms, and wordplay to maintain the spirit of a slam poem still took time, but the process became much easier when I stopped trying to overcomplicate my writing.

So, whether or not I fully succeeded in remaining faithful to the tenets of slam poetry, the included poem, “Je dis ça, je dis rien” achieved what I aimed to do from the beginning. By the time I finished my poem, I had begun to understand my emotions surrounding my identity better than I had before, which is exactly what I had hoped to explore with this piece.

- Lillian Keith