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Young Black Poets of Baton Rouge

An ethnographic study on the black poetic perspectives, influences, and community ties in
Baton Rouge.

By

Kaya Lewis

Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Dr. Nikita Carney

Department of Sociology

Submitted to the LSU Roger Hadfield Ogden Honors
College in partial fulfillment of
the Upper Division Honors Program.

April, 2022

Louisiana State University
& Agricultural and Mechanical College
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Introduction

A poetic community describes any group that is collectively performing and producing works of poetry. Each poet brings a unique perspective and style to the collective. When joining together, the poets offer constructive criticism and creative insight. Through their collaborations, interpersonal bonds are formed. A black poet community is catered to the needs, desires, and experiences of black poets. The significance of their bond is reinforced by their reality of racial oppression. The bonds formed within their community strength the poets' desire to enact social and political change throughout the Greater Baton Rouge Area. Louisiana is currently home to a prosperous black poetic community.

For many participants in this study, poetry was not their only creative outlet. The young black poets of Baton Rouge are also photographers, videographers, models, designers, business owners, event planners, musicians, artists, and researchers. The versatility of these poets represents the expansiveness of their community. Robert Hayden (2018) eludes to this trend in *New Histories of African American Poetry and the Black Arts Era*. "Placing poets inside or outside of categories is, more than anything else, a critical convenience, a provisional move that fades as the scholarship thickens as we recognize ways in which poets often ignore borders, and as we develop readings that intentionally problematize existing categories." (p. 206) This has created an expanding network for creative expression. While poets pursue several creative outlets, their poetry ultimately molds their overall creative process. For example, a rap artist may utilize poetic literary devices, rhythms, and styling in their music. Most significantly, by seeking multiple creative endeavors, poets are able to reach a larger audience and connect with a larger community. Rather than focusing on their literary works, this study examines the culture and environment the poets have created through their literary works.

Literature Review

This study follows Charles Long's (1986) understanding of religion as expressed in *Significations—Signs, symbols, and images in the interpretation of religion*. "For my purposes, religion will mean orientation—orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world." (p. 7) With this understanding, poetry, art, folklore, music, clothing, and lifestyle can all be considered religious experiences. Writing allows poets to understand themselves, process their emotions, and connect with the world around them. Poets from various religious and spiritual backgrounds consider their writing to be a spiritual practice. Furthermore, Anthony Pinn describes a religious experience as "a human response to a crisis of identity, and it is the crisis of identity that constitutes the dilemma of ultimacy and means... And it is conditioned by culture and thereby related to history, although as the opponent of oppressive historical developments."⁹ A black person's religious experiences are molded by their black identity and the historical context of that identity. African Americans often face a crisis of identity as their familial ancestry has been erased by transatlantic slavery. Furthermore, black people are faced with a host of racial stereotypes and controlling images. Black people also face racial oppression at both the institutional and interpersonal levels. This generalized black experience leads black people to question their place not only in their country, but in the world. Many have turned to poetry (both as creators and consumers) to make sense of their reality.

Therefore, poetry is not only a religious experience, but one unique to black poets as their work is influenced by their lived experiences. Charles Long (1986) contends that religion is found not only in the church, but in the lives of the people. "The religion of any people is more than a structure of thought; it is experience, expression, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles,

and rhythms... This is especially true of Afro-American religion.” (p. 7) African American culture holds a religion that is unique to its people. Poetry expresses the experiences, motivations, and intentions of the writer. While there is not one single black experience, there are common themes shared by poets throughout the black community. Black poets present their writing in behaviors, styles, and rhythms that are intended for a black audience. Poems allude to central concepts and figures from popular black culture. Poets often write in African Vernacular English. Most importantly, black poets reflect the lives of black writers. While white audiences can still appreciate and enjoy black art forms, such as poetry, they are not sharing the same religious experience. Ultimately, shared life experiences develop a religious element into black art forms. Without historical and cultural context, the religion is missed.

With this understanding of religion, poetry is only one part of a larger spiritual movement. One ritual of this movement is the poetry slam. Performance scholar Jil Dolan (2017) illustrates the significance of the poetry slam in *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the making of slam and spoken word*. Dolan describes poetry slams as the "small but profound moments in which performances call the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.” (p. 7) In a sense, the poetry slam serves as a house of worship and a place of refuge for poets. For some, the poetry slam may be the one place they can truly express their emotions. Within the ritual, poets leave with a better understanding of themselves and a stronger connection to each other. Black poets have utilized the poetry slam as a stage for lifting spiritual and political consciousness—hence forming a spiritual movement through poetry. *Terror and Triumph: The nature of Black religion* by Anthony Pinn (2003) includes a quote from Dr. Robert Birt of Bowie

State University. In his statement, Dr. Birt argues “there can be no social liberation without liberation of consciousness.” (p. 174) Black poets hope their audience will leave the poetry slam with an elevated consciousness and a desire for social change. The poetry slam itself can be used to organize and recruit activists.

Also, from *Terror and Triumph*, Anthony Pinn elaborates on Dr. Birt’s statement. Pinn asserts that “new consciousness and struggle for liberation from fixed identity require connection to and work with like-minded people.” (p. 175) Surrounded by their peers, activists and poets alike are able to share ideas and offer new solutions. Liberation requires a team of activists mobilizing their communities. In the same way, the education of the masses requires a host of intellectuals sharing their work. This phenomenon is detailed in Javon Johnson's (2017) *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*. “The radicalism of slam and spoken word communities is located in our ability not to speak back to power but to imagine beyond traditional power structures even when we are caught up in them.” (p. 21) Black poetry often expresses anger and defiance towards, police brutality, incarceration, gun violence, and the lack of resources shown to black people. Black audiences uniquely relate to their testimonies. As they openly identify and resist their oppression, black poets form community.

The needs, motivations, and desires of any community are dependent on its members’ lived circumstance. Anthony Pinn’s (2003) *Terror and Triumph* reiterates the significance of one’s experience within relation to spirituality. “Religious consciousness is tied to historical processes and thus to a wrestling with the past and present in the construction of a future hoped to be different in tone and texture... Religion, then stems from the terror of losing oneself, of having one’s very being stripped away.” (p. 172) Wrestling with the past takes on a whole new meaning for black poets living in Louisiana.

Due to notoriously high and ever-increasing incarceration rates, Louisiana is known as the prison capital of the world. Located in West Feliciana Parish, Angola Prison is considered to have some of the worst conditions of any United States prison. The logistics of the prison are explained by the National Public Radio in *Angola State Prison: A short history | voices behind bar*. “By 2008, Angola State Prison had grown to 18,000 acres... It was a maximum-security prison with an inmate population that was almost completely African American, while the officers who oversaw them were entirely white.” The racism in Louisiana’s history cannot be denied as Angola prison sits on what used to be plantation land. Within the prison, incarcerated people refer to the officers as “freemen,” rather than guards. The name of Angola itself originated from the home country of many enslaved Africans. Still today, black Americans disproportionately suffer from mass incarceration. Even outside of the prison, racialized state violence persists in Louisiana.

The statistical analysis given by the Southern Poverty Law Center was presented by the Say Their Names Memorial. The data reveals that between 1980 and 2018, “the age-standardized mortality rate due to police violence was highest in non-Hispanic Black people (0.69 [95% UI 0.67–0.71] per 100 000).” On July 5, 2016, Baton Rouge police met Alton Sterling outside of a convenience store while responding to a call. Someone reported that a man had threatened a customer with a gun. The store owner later said that Sterling was not the man the complaint had been made towards. The interaction with police ended with Sterling pinned to the ground before being fatally shot—six shots at close range. A released video of Sterling's murder sparked a national outcry. Protests demanded justice not only for Alton Sterling but for every victim of police brutality and state-sanctioned violence. Even still, on May 2, 2017, the U.S. Department of Justice determined there would be no criminal charges against the officers involved.¹ The

constant and public loss of life has a detrimental effect on the black community. Grief, anguish, fear, and anger manifest in the work of black artists.

Throughout America's history, art has been used as a shield against racial oppression. A famous quote from poet and playwright Amiri Baraka is featured in Robert Hayden's *New Histories of African American Poetry and the Black Arts Era*. Baraka asserted that "conscious Black intellectuals" should be "soldiers" creating art to "function in the ghetto." (p. 211) This illustrates the importance of black poetic communities like the one found in Baton Rouge. Racial stereotypes and systematic oppression show black people in Louisiana a limited view of who they can become and what they can accomplish. Young black poets are working to break down those controlling images. Charles Long (1986) details the power of language in *Significations—Signs, symbols, and images in the interpretation of religion*. "If one is oppressed, unable to mold a meaning about oneself that can become cultural coin, one must nevertheless deal critically with the language about oneself." (p. 8) There is power in the word. Today, black writers no longer want their story as told from the white academic perspective. Essentially, poetry allows black writers to signify themselves rather than being signified by through white writers. Young black poets are religiously capturing their stories with their own words.

Nearly a century ago, Alain Locke described this motivation with his concept of the New Negro. Napier (1998) details the theory in *Affirming Critical Conceptualism: Harlem Renaissance aesthetics and the formation of Alain Locke's social philosophy*. "The role of the New Negro, as he understood it, was to use art to represent blacks in a fresh light, a new "racial utterance" functioning not only as myth-smasher but more importantly functions also as a means by which to fathom how positive self-identity could be developed and regulated." (p. 95) Black

Americans throughout history have been signified as the subordinate other. Poetry provides a platform to re-signify black identity and the black experience.

The cultural outpouring found in Baton Rouge can be explained through Anthony Pinn's (2003) *Noise and Spirit: The religious and spiritual sensibilities of rap music*. "It was a way of humanizing a dehumanizing environment. The music (and folk tales, decorative arts, and visual arts that make up this new Black culture) represents a style of interpretation, a stylized wrestling with life." (p. 3) Although in this quote Pinn is referring to the 90's Hip Hop era, his words ring true for the modern creative scene of Baton Rouge. Pinn continues, "levels of frustration and disillusionment were on the rise, but rather than violent reaction against their invisibility and dismissal by economic leaders, politicians, and others, some of these young people reflected on their life circumstances through creative manipulations of the visual and expressive arts..." (p. 221) In a sense, poetry provides a healthy outlet for aggression. Rather than turning to violence, black poets turn to their writing.

Many of the Baton Rouge poets look to the 90's Hip Hop era for guidance on how their community should operate. Artists such as Tupac, Lauryn Hill, and A Tribe Called Quest are regarded as creative ancestors. The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s is another source of inspiration. Both eras entailed a creative outpouring as well as a strong sense of community for black artists. In *Robert Hayden in verse: New Histories of African American Poetry and the Black Arts Era*, Smith (2018) confirms how strong "bonds of kinship" connected BAM poets and rappers as their words "inflected the spirit of young performers." (p. 214) Today, Baton Rouge poets look to these creative ancestors as an example of how they will uplift future generations. Ultimately the artists know they will be the creative ancestors of the next generations and act accordingly.

The importance of community has been consistent throughout African American history. According to C.S. Mills' (1999) *Kinship in the African American Community* "African Americans, both by choice and because of discrimination, created close-knit communities. These communities, like the extended family systems that developed, provided protection and support for their members. Neighbors knew one another and shared responsibility for community survival." (p. 37) Furthermore, the roles and structure are specific to the needs and values of the community. Fictive kin or kith are terms used to describe the familial-like kinship roles within a community. For African Americans, this practice is directly tied to the history of transatlantic slavery. Mills provides this historical context "In the kinship group, slaves received affection, companionship, love, and empathy for their suffering." (p. 30) Communal dependency was continued throughout the Jim Crow era, to the Civil Rights movement, to the modern-day.

In the context of African American poets, the black creative community is essential. Poet Adrian Matejka alludes to this need in *Let's stay together: Notes about black poetry & community*. "Poets need other poets—either on the page or in the world—in order to be our best selves. Poets need community in order to engage with and activate their visions and ideas." (p. 31) The formation of black poetic communities increased after the Civil Rights Movement. This was especially true for black poets in college—like many participants of this study. A timeline of black poetic communities is provided in *Robert Hayden in verse: New Histories of African American Poetry and the Black Arts Era*. According to Smith (2018), "When the federal government responded to 1960s social movements by using institutions of higher education to increase equality and opportunity, the demand for black poets and poetry on campuses expanded greatly." (p. 204) After the 1980s, African American poetics began experiencing "an unprecedented prospering, particularly if the category of poetry admits not only high-status

literary verse but also more popular, readily performed and commodified forms like rap and spoken word.” (p. 204) The rise of hip-hop culture affirmed the power of one’s word. Poetry and rap music are intertwined as poets became rappers and rappers turned poets. The relation between rap and poetry is undeniable when one observes the art of spoken word poetry. The revitalization of spoken word brought a new growth of poetry slam events. Once on stage, poets could directly engage and connect with their community.

In fact, the community bond formed by the poetry slam is significant enough that the term *slimily* has been used to describe the "slam family." Javon Johnson (2017) describes the *slimily* in *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*. Within the *slimily*, "sharing poems that celebrate the community as family, or referring to fellow poets as brothers and sisters or mothers and fathers, many participants use the scene as a way to create alternative families to fit their own realities.” (p. 82) This perspective is common within black poetic studies. In fact, the concept of a slam family is reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance era. *Affirming Critical Conceptualism: Harlem Renaissance Aesthetics and the Formation of Alain Locke’s Social Philosophy* provides this connection. W. Napier (1998) describes how the black poetic community of the renaissance operated. "As a community, they offered themselves the opportunity to share and exchange ideas which were by their very nature the driving elements of cultural growth. With such community comes the opportunity for internal support and the formal sense of critical responsibility to incite social change.” (98) A closer connection to community instills a desire to look after and protect the members of that community. In this way, black poetic communities encourage political activism and social engagement.

Research Methods

This research originated from an African American Folklore assignment. I was told to highlight an avenue of African American folklore and conduct an interview to practice fieldwork strategies. Throughout the semester, the class talked about the importance of rituals within African American Folklore and religion. After attending a poetry slam, I saw ritualistic aspects within the event. From there, I decided to research Poetry for the assignment that would later become my thesis. After the first several interviews, I realized the community aspect would be a central point to this study. However, I kept my interview questions and fieldwork methods consistent throughout the study. I originally planned to research the creative process that black poets used to write their poetry. Through their interviews, I intended to compare the vernacular of the poets to the rhetorical tools within their poems. The intention of my research was to answer what made black poetry inherently black.

Prior to collecting research for this study, I was already a member of the Social Boot Network. My role within the crew was connecting the team with interview participants for the Social Boot: Boundaries Unchained documentary. My previous research and work with Louisiana Parole Project assisted in the research and data collection for the film. My fieldwork for this study required attending several poetry slams and speaking to members of LaShift. From this, I was brought into their organization as well. It should be noted that I fall within the demographics of this study as I am a member of the overall black poetic community.

The research population includes 15 black poets ages 18-28, living in or from Baton Rouge. Within my fieldwork, I attended poetry slams, concerts, Taceaux Tuesday, and other creative pop ups. Attending a wide range of creative gatherings exposed the role poetry held within the community. At these events, young black people connected with fellow artists to

discuss their craft. Through this, I was introduced to a wide range of participants. Several entities that contributed to data collection include: Rosewoods BR, LA Shift, The Social Boot Network, Project Innovate Studios, Coldersac, and TaceauxTuesday.

Before the interview process could begin, each prospect was given a description of this research project and its purpose. If interested, they were given a few sample questions to gauge what the interview would consist of. From there, participants were provided a full list of the interview questions. They could either read the questions beforehand to inform their responses or wait until the interview actually began. It should be noted that because the participants were aware of interview questions and the general research topic, some may have felt compelled to include race in their answers.

Although participants were asked about black identity and black community, they were not pressured to answer a certain way. In several interviews, the participants mentioned race before they were prompted to. In this scenario, I then asked them to elaborate further. The proposed interview questions were intentionally kept broad as not to sway the participants to answer a certain way. They were asked to describe their background, their creative process, their inspirations, and their goals. The participants had control over their interview setting to ensure they were comfortable. Participants chose to meet either in a public setting, or at their home or office. Each interview was voice recorded and later transcribed and coded thematically using Microsoft Word. Before recording, each interviewee was made aware of the voice recording and its purpose. Participants were then reminded of their right to decline being recorded or interviewed altogether. Once verbal consent was given, the interview could begin. Following the interview, participants were sent a written consent release form. Although not required, participants could also submit pieces of their written work.

I entered the research with several assumptions. I assumed that writing poetry was a religious or spiritual experience due to the rituality of both the poetry slams and writing itself. I assumed that the participants were in some way influenced by their black identity and their experience living in Louisiana. Although these assumptions were proven by my findings to be true, that was not the direction I originally planned to take with this study. Throughout the interview and fieldwork process, connections were found between the participants. These connections were presented through a similarity in interview responses as well as their interpersonal connections. Baton Rouge has an entire community of young black poets who work both independently and collectively. They come together not only as poets, but as comrades facing similar systems of oppression.

Findings

The data collected from this study consists of fifteen ethnographic interviews. The participants are made up of young black poets either living in or from Baton Rouge. Their interviews reveal similar motivations behind their poetry— spirituality, black identity, and community. Their words express a common sentiment. This work aims to highlight the overlapping perspectives of these poets and their work as well as the significance of their perspectives. The findings of my research have been broken into three central categories. These categories influence and inform each other to create what this study will describe as the Baton Rouge Renaissance.

Influence of Spirituality

First, participants used poetry as part of an evolving black spiritual movement. Despite being from different spiritual and religious backgrounds, nearly every participant agreed that

poetry was a spiritual experience. How the poets go on to define a spiritual experience aligns with the conclusions from *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black religion*. Anthony Pinn's (2003) description of religious experience as "a human response to a crisis of identity, and it is the crisis of identity that constitutes the dilemma of ultimacy and means.... And it is conditioned by culture and thereby related to history, although as the opponent of oppressive historical developments." (p. 173) For the purposes and context of this study, spirituality is one category of the African American religious experience.

Poetry has long been used as a method to understand, express, and release one's emotions. The participants of this study felt their writing was a therapeutic and spiritual experience. Ugonna Njoku (Ugo) is a current student at LSU as well as a poet, photographer, and film director. In his interview, Ugo expands on the concept of spiritual poetry.

You're drawing from how you feel in that moment or how you may have been feeling in that collection of moments and that can be a very heavy thing sometimes. That can be a very joyful thing sometimes. That can be a very scary thing sometimes. But in all of that, you're kind of toying with your conscious. You're in a workspace. You're basically playing with play dough. I feel like there's a very spiritual component to that because then once you've kind of made those thoughts a reality—whether it's creating a book of poetry, making a song, or anything like that—it's something that's yours forever and you'll always have some sort of pride in it. I don't think I know anyone that's ever created something in terms of poetry or even music that isn't proud in some way of what they've done. I feel like pride itself can be a very spiritual thing.

Poetry allowed participants to say and express what they normally could not. Writing allowed them to channel and understand their deepest emotions. As a photographer and

videographer, and the creator of 808TV, Taij Stewart has worked closely with Ugo and many other participants. In his interview, Taij relates the creative process to the spiritual practice of meditation.

If you've ever been in a deep creative process, you realize you're not really thinking. You're just in this Zen state, and it's kinda comparable to a meditation state... Once you master meditation and just learn to be in the moment and flow with creativity, you just let it flow and you don't judge... So, I definitely take that spiritual aspect into my creation every time.

Several participants mentioned raising vibrations, supporting emotional well-being, and being an inspiration and role model. Within these practices, the participants' black identity serves as motivation for their poetic spiritual movement. Participants use their poetry to spiritually uplift the black community. Jasmine Johnson (known as Malu) is a student at LSU as well as a poet, writer, model, and activist. When asked to describe her poetry, Malu first described a spiritual movement:

So, it's a lot of raw emotion tied with energies and connections and all these intimate relationships with people, or like, intimate relationships with the experiences I've had. So, it's me tapping into pain, tapping into anger, tapping into all these things that actually make me as a person. That's what my poetry is and that's what I try to introduce to people because sometimes people don't know how to talk about their emotions in an effective way, so that's what my poetry is. It's just relieving all these feelings, and those feelings could surround sexism, racism, classism, poverty, all that type of stuff. That's what I'm trying to relate to people. So yeah, spiritual movement, that's my poetry

Part of Malu's spiritual movement is working with other poets who are on a similar path and providing the same inspiration she gains from her contemporaries. Several poets mentioned another participant as an inspiration in their interview. This often occurred with neither participant knowing who else was interviewed. In her statements, Malu illustrates the impact poetic communities have on their poets. The artists she works with inform her not only her writing, but her spiritual movement. Malu mentioned another member of LaShift as an inspiration

Those are people who are most inspiring to me right now and other poets that I've worked with as well, they inspire me every single day. Like, Cada of course, Haze, all of them. Just hearing them sometimes if they actually talk about a conversation and everything. It just opens up the words, or the inspiration itself.

LaShift is a nonprofit in Baton Rouge aiming to bridge the gap between art culture and the general community. They host regular poetry slams for local poets to express their passions without feeling weighed down by their circumstances. Poets offer each other creative insight and critique of their work. As mentioned earlier, poetry slams have great spiritual significance for African American poets. Members of LaShift also regularly volunteer around the greater Baton Rouge area.

One of LaShift's poets and executive members, King Cada, explains how community service is an essential part to the spiritual movement. Cada's spirituality is what motivates him to engage with the Baton Rouge community.

It's real easy to give love to your universe. It's really easy to give that energy out. It's so—I promise to God, it's easy... I have a nonprofit organization and we gave away more

than a thousand plates just from about seven hundred just ourselves, and then the rest volunteer work.

Through poetry slams and community service, the poets are following the lead of renowned poet and playwright, Amiri Baraka. Baraka contended that “conscious black intellectuals” should be “soldiers” creating art to “function in the ghetto.” (211) This quote is provided by D. Smith in *Robert Hayden in verse: New histories of African American poetry and the black arts era*. Malu captures the motivation Baraka shared while describing her poetic community.

I love the scene here. It's just very loving, very collaborative sometimes. Ya know? Very like we're a team—because we know that if we don't do this together then we're not gonna get out of here. We're not gonna make it out. We're not gonna share the work that we have. So, when we all come together and just do great things, it's a vibe. It's something that I wanna be a part of.

One strongly held value within Baton Rouge's black poetic community is Ancestral connection. Many poets operate with the hopes and struggles of their ancestors in mind. One poet, Wakai alludes to this connection.

We're reaping the fruits of everything that was before us and now we're just channeling it and giving it to the people under us.

What Wakai expresses in this statement is the true essence of a spiritual movement. In fact, ancestral connection is central to African American spirituality and religion. Several participants look to their ancestry both for creative and spiritual guidance. Ancestral worship and devotion have been key elements in Malu's spiritual journey. In her interview, Malu speaks about her ancestry in relation to creativity.

You just feel so connected to your ancestors and you want to make them happy because we're still here where they died and everything else. My family line probably actually started like in Alexandria [Louisiana] and I'm still stuck in this same exact place because nothing has changed. So, it's like I feel a connection sometimes. I feel like I'm being told to be great or do something greater.

Establishing herself as a poet is part of the greatness that Malu speaks of. As a poet, musician, and photographer, Wakai also seeks guidance from his ancestry. In his interview, Wakai elaborates on how his ancestors motivate his poetry.

I feel like we're all just like—we're just channeling different things from our ancestors, and we're just using that to get a direct connection... And I feel like putting out vibrations into the universe is the closest way to channeling everything that's been in your like, family lineage or like, just being a product of your environment, you channel the things that are around you.

For many artists like Wakai and Malu, their art is closely aligned if not inseparable from their craft. Even for poets whose ancestry is not tied to Louisiana, the connection is still apparent. In his interview, Ugo related to his Nigerian ancestry.

Being Nigerian and of the Igbo tribe, a lot of times growing up-- from what my parents have told me-- there were storytellers in the village and things of that sort. The storytellers would recite music and kind of poetic saying and African proverbs and things like that.

This statement also demonstrates how African rhetorical traditions continue to influence young writers today.

Influence of Black Identity

Ancestral connection leads to the second theme which is the influence of blackness and the black experience. For many participants, ancestral connection and black identity are tied to Louisiana's history. Malu's poetry reflects her experience as a young black woman living in the deep south. Many of the struggles she faces were also faced by her ancestors- poverty, racism, sexism, colorism, etc. Because of this, Malu felt her poetry would be similar to any poetry that her great-great-grandmother may have written.

I feel like if we were to go down some generations, it'll probably just be the same thing because this was passed down to me. Ya know? It was passed down to me from my great-great-grandmother. She had to experience the whole sharecropping and that part of slavery. So, like, just hearing that-- hearing the stories that she actually went through, it's like I don't see it being far from me.

Throughout this collection of interviews, participants discussed the racial oppression they've seen and experienced in Louisiana. Poetry has then been used to cope with their experience as young black people. The poets of this study work towards breaking racial stereotypes as they demonstrate a multi-dimensional black identity. In a sense, the participants use their poetry to signify a new definition of blackness. This need to uplift and redefine blackness stems from the participants' views of the black community as a family. Furthermore, young people are inspired by poetry when the community around them is also inspired. It is necessary to highlight again, that every participant in this study is black and lives in the same geographic area. Because of this, their community shares an understanding of the oppression they face.

In general terms, the participants of this study felt heavily guided by their experience as black people in Louisiana. In her interview, Malu expressed how her black identity was foundational to becoming a poet.

*If I wasn't black, I don't think I'd be a poet. Being black is the reason I'm a poet probably. *laughing* Just relieving all of those emotions and things that I feel surrounding the black experience- it helps a lot with my, ya know, spiritual movement, and trying to uplift people, and being an activist. That's the only way I can release those emotions because it's a healthier solution than anything other people have gone to.*

In their interview, poet and member of The Social Boot Network, Iyian Paige seemed to agree with Malu's statements.

*I'm black every day. Obviously, as one is *laughs* um, so my experiences—I wouldn't say... tainted is the wrong word... My experiences go hand in hand with me experiencing life as a black female.*

In her interview, poet Olivia James expanded on this,

I would say my poetry is very centered around Baton Rouge and very centered around Louisiana culture in general and how Louisiana transcends into some of our experiences...I feel like it's impossible for it not to translate into the work. Just the struggle of being a black woman—it's impossible for me to write anything without that weight coming off of the page.

As a poet and member of LaShift, Stxtic, felt his black identity didn't directly correlate to his poetry, but that it still had an influence.

Being black, my experiences in this reality and in this world affect kinda how I think and how I move, but overall, it's still the soul. The sound doesn't really have a race regardless. So, indirectly for sure.

Ugo followed in this sentiment as his Nigerian heritage is part of his black identity.

There are a lot of perspectives that make up who I am and my writing kind of reflects that. I'm from—born in the deep south, but also along with that, my parents are immigrants from Africa. So that's kind of a double consciousness that I had to kind of try to make sense of growing up.

Taij Stewart felt that blackness had such a strong influence that a non-black audience wouldn't fully comprehend his work.

It's like some things that black people go through as we live this life experience, other people can't understand it. So, some things you may see in my videos, like it's something that only black people can understand, like some dialogue, words, music... I always take back from the culture.

Stewart's words are similar to those of Anthony Pinn (2003) as he discusses African American music genres in *Noise and Spirit: The religious and spiritual sensibilities of rap music*. “The formation of healthy consciousness through the use of musical forms such as the blues was deep, so deep that the white cultural voyeurs missed much of its meaning and content... When the blues were played, enjoyment by white folks often entailed a process of signification they failed to get.” (p. 6) As a poet, musician, and member of the Coldersac collective, Runday, felt this element worked to his advantage. In his interview, he explained.

I feel like being black has influenced my artistry in so many ways, because it is at the foundation of like, art itself, and well specifically hip hop and our genre, black people are

at the forefront of it, and black people inspired it. So, whenever it comes time to tap into whatever vibe I need to tap into to introduce something new to that genre, I can tap into these vibes because I'm a part of this community... I feel like I have a closer connection. I know I have a closer connection just by being black

Throughout the United States and the larger African diaspora, black people are met with similar struggles of oppression. Louisiana in particular is known for its history of slavery, the Jim Crow era, and the Civil Rights movement. Louisiana falls behind in terms of health care, education, economy, infrastructure, crime & corrections, and natural environment. The reality of living in Louisiana heavily influenced the majority of participants in this study. Malu expressed how poetry and creativity can serve as a defense to life in Louisiana.

We're always looked at as the cursed state. So, for creatives, I want them to actually bring life back into this place because it's been very dim for a long time. We always got hurricanes. We always got floods. The sunny days don't last long. So, I'm like, creatives, they can actually like take those sunny days, exploit it, go crazy, and share this with the world.

Malu's words reflect those of Alain Locke's concept of the New Negro. W. Napier (1998) elaborates the concept of the New Negro in *Affirming critical conceptualism: Harlem renaissance aesthetics and the formation of Alain Locke's social philosophy*. Napier provides a quote from Alain Locke stating, "here we have negro youth with arresting visions and vibrant prophecies; forecasting in the mirror of art what we must see and recognize in the streets of reality tomorrow, foretelling in the new modes and accents the maturing speech of full racial utterance." (p. 94) Ugo maintains this theory and contends that young black artists are continually bringing a new light to Louisiana.

Living in Louisiana comes with knowing the statistics... And so, a lot of times I say that pressure can either bust pipes or create diamonds, but a lot of times with myself or people from here, we've managed to create diamonds. And despite all the craziness that goes on around us, We've managed to put together our own spaces, our own realities, that are far in contrast to some of the pain that we may have grew up around or may have grew up in. So, it's greatly influenced my approach to life-- and the approach of my contemporaries as well-- to realize we kinda see ourselves as diamonds in the rough. We ignore all the negativity and just try to keep it pushin.

Wakai this thought continued in his interview.

It's a genuine love and appreciation for ourselves and just like, everything that we create, being that we're black, and being that we feel like we have a voice that needs to be heard, it's just about helping each other be heard. And I feel like that's what we're really trying to push.

It can be noted that the participants often use “we” rather than “I” statements. In this, they are demonstrating how they represent the overall black community, not only themselves.

Influence of Community

The third theme is then the importance of kinship roles and community ties within the black creative scene. Throughout African American history, black people have relied on kinship communities for basic survival as well as emotional and intellectual support. Now, we see the young black poets of Baton Rouge relying on their community and kinship ties to navigate the world around them. They offer each other tangible support in accessing equipment and studio space, learning new skills, and building network connections. Promotion is another common thread between the participants of this study. With every album drop, poetry slam, YouTube

Video, and photoshoot—the different creative workers supported each other. In this modern era, social media is also a large component of the connectedness of the community. By promoting each other, artists can elevate the Baton Rouge creative scene directly.

Not only is there a mass amount of art being produced in Baton Rouge, but it is also being produced collaboratively and with intention. Through these collaborations, creative workers inspire and critique one another. As a model and the founder of Project Innovate Studios, Zahir Muhammad as worked to connect Baton Rouge artists to a wider audience. Originally from D.C., Muhammad offers an outside perspective into the Baton Rouge poetic community.

We as a community in Baton Rouge are all helping each other to reach higher stages, and I feel like that's such a unique thing that is not happening in a lot of other places, because a lot of places may have the diversity of talent, but they don't have the community factor. And so, the fact that we have the community factor, and the diversity of talent allows us to completely exhaust all of our talent and all of our art together. So, I feel like Baton Rouge is a community. It's a family.

In an attempt to amplify the Baton Rouge community, Ugo created The Social Boot Network. Ugo describes The Social Boot as a network of young people aiming to use their talents, whether through film, sport, fashion, research, art, or any other form of expression to redefine traditional viewpoints of what is expected in these forms of expression.

It is a point of reference. So, what that means is there is a creative/ production house component to it. We make our own productions—whether that's film, or ever little commercials, things like that. Then, there's also a social component to it where everyone

kind of gets together and we just kind of bounce ideas off each other and try to inspire ourselves to do more.

Through this, fellow creative workers have been introduced—thus strengthening the bond of the community. When talking about The Social Boot crew, Ugo explains how the group was formed

I want people to realize that they're a part of something that there's a lot of care put into. So, it's not just something that's being done out of the spur of the moment. It's something that's being done for the long term. So, all of that strategy and all of that approach is how I handpicked, for lack of a better term, some of the core of what has become the Social Boot.

Ugo's current documentary, *The Social Boot: Boundaries Unchained* featured a spoken word poem from Wakai. In his interview, Wakai talked about what it was like to work with The Social Boot.

But now it's just a bunch of creators who just genuinely love creating. So, it's easy for me to want to work with this person. I want to pull up to their show because I understand we coming from a mutual place. Like, it's mutual understanding we're doing it for the craft, not for things that come with the craft.

The interactions happening between black poets and artists in Baton Rouge can be compared to other creative eras and movements in African American history. Participants cited the Harlem Renaissance, the 90s Hip-Hip era, and the Black Arts Movement (BAM) as guidelines for how their community should operate. The Black Arts Movement was formed by “bonds of kinship” according to D. Smith (2018) in *New histories of African American poetry and the black arts era* (p. 214). The artists of the Harlem renaissance held a similar motivation

according to *Affirming Critical Conceptualism: Harlem Renaissance Aesthetics and the Formation of Alain Locke's Social Philosophy*. W. Napier (1998) contends that "As a community, they offered themselves the opportunity to share and exchange ideas which were by their very nature the driving elements of cultural growth. With such community, comes the opportunity for internal support and the formal sense of critical responsibility to incite social change." (p. 98) Now, The Social Boot network follows in the tradition. Members of the black poetic community like to refer to the present era as the Baton Rouge Renaissance in tribute to the Harlem Renaissance. Their nostalgia speaks to the significance of ancestry within African American religion and spirituality. Essentially, the black artists of the aforementioned eras are viewed as creative ancestors. In the same way, participants feel they will be the creative ancestors of future generations of black people. In his interview, Ugo relates The Social Boot Network to the movements of his creative ancestors.

One thing about art history is sometimes things are looked at in terms of movements, and so in movements a lot of times people would gather at certain forms. Different artists of different varieties, different walks of life., everything like that, would gather, and they would just do what we know now as networking, fellowshiping, and celebrating.

One product of The Social Boot Network was The Function. To an outsider, The Function may appear as any other cookout, party, or social event. However, the Function essentially served as an unconventional family reunion for young creative people in the city-including many participants of this study. Several artists recalled the significance of The Function in their interviews. For many, the Function was a glimmer of hope for what Baton Rouge could be. Amid gun violence and racist club establishments, young black people often struggle to find a safe and welcoming place to meet. The Function was a refreshing change from

the typical “party scene.” At the event: one artist did a live painting throughout the night, several artists brought their clothing to sell, and food was provided by a group surrounding a grill. All this happened while rappers and poets joined to freestyle over the music that was playing. In any direction, there were several cameras held up to capture every moment. Most significantly, young black people were able to relax, meet new people, and talk about their creative ideas. In his interview, Ugo recalls The Function.

Different artists were talking about different ideas. There’s, I’m sure, stuff brewing that I don’t even know about because there was so many different avenues of people connecting.

In planning The Function, Ugo felt guided by the creative black culture of the 90s.

So, even in the beginning of hip-hop, people would go to block parties in New York and B-Boys would dance, graffiti artists would tag, DJs would scratch music, and MCs would rap over that. And so, my, I guess, modern form of that—I was looking at The Function through that historical lens in which a lot of people from different perspectives were coming to this one spot in Baton Rouge that they hadn’t necessarily come to before. It was kind of people from the artistic scene here, but it was also college students that may have had some sort of creative itch. So, I knew putting these two very powerful demographics together, something special would erupt from that.

Just as they look out for each other, the participants of this study hope to support the next generation. In his interview, Ugo demonstrates the impact black artists can have on their younger peers.

That motivation transfers not just creatively, but if they wanna do things such as-- being a doctor, being a lawyer, just choosing a better path. A lot of times the reason for

whatever crime may occur is just because these kids aren't given anything to motivate them or look forward to. So, they see the fast way out and that creates a cycle. So, it's on us. I mean, the government may not be doing what they need to do. It's on us to kind of blaze that trail for the next few people to do what they have to do. So that's what I feel like needs to happen. That's what I feel like is gonna happen.

As a poet, rapper, photographer, videographer, film director, and future health care professional, Ugo is already opening new doors for black artists. He serves as an example of what is possible as well as a guide for where to begin. Several participants in this study even mentioned Ugo as an inspiration during their interviews. As an example, Malu looked to Ugo as a role model for her younger brother and black kids like him.

I want BR to take it to the world. I don't wanna be recognized just for funny stuff or like jiggling or, ya know, all that type of stuff. I want it to be serious, something that causes a movement here and that way my brother can actually like look up on tv and see like- "Oh Ugo made this fucking documentary that talks about everything", and it's like- "Oh I wanna do that!" cause he already watches YouTube and everything like that but the certain people he watch are always talking about violence or this negative stereotype of black men, and I want him to see something more. Something great.

In W. Napier's (1998) *Affirming Critical Conceptualism: Harlem Renaissance Aesthetics and the Formation of Alain Locke's social philosophy*, the words of Alain Locke relate to this as African Americans have always used poetry and folklore as a way to signify themselves as people. He claimed the purpose of art was "to represent blacks in a fresh light, a new 'racial utterance' functioning not only as myth-smasher but more importantly functioning also as a means by which to fathom how positive self-identity could be developed and regulated." (p. 95)

As a poet, writer, activist, and podcast host, Malu actively works to ensure a brighter future for other creatives as well as the larger black community. Through her work, Malu shares an authentic view of the black female perspective. Her writing powerfully captures the emotions shared by everyone in the community. In her interview, Malu described the motivation behind her poetry.

I wanted to do that for people. I wanted to inspire people—evoke emotion. And so, from then, I was doing poetry and that's how I got introduced to it.

Feelings of anger, grief, sadness, joy, and love connect the audience to Malu's poetry. Furthermore, she consistently advocates for the black community. This extends to her fellow poets in Baton Rouge to whom she offers, support, collaboration, and guidance. Ultimately, it is the community that drives Malu as a poet. Through engaging with her fellow poets, she has expanded her craft in several avenues beyond poetry. After finding these connections, she began introducing others into the community and more creative spaces. Both Ugo and Malu hope that by uplifting the Baton Rouge creative scene, they are opening new opportunities for the future generations of black kids.

Led by their connection to the creative community, the young black poets are actively forming the foundation for a prosperous future. Their writing serves as a method of political resistance and spiritual advancement. For this reason, it is crucial to document the role community ties play in the production of Baton Rouge folklore.

Discussion

This collection of interviews asked young black poets in Baton Rouge to describe their poetic work and community. Through this, three conclusions can be made. First, the participants see their writing as a spiritual experience and means to a larger spiritual movement. Second, the participants are greatly influenced by their lived experiences as black people in Louisiana. Finally, these poets have formed an intricate community that is paving way for the next generation of black artists. The three points must be noted together as each element is inherently connected. Observing how these poets guide their contemporaries provides a new perspective into their work. Highlighting their motivations and influences provides even further context.

I was originally viewing poetry as a religious and spiritual experience from the writing process itself and the ritual aspects of poetry slams. While I held that assumption, that was not the intended focus of this research. However, as the fieldwork progressed, I found the significance of this community was in the shared perspectives, intentions, and motivations of the poets. The poets shared similar sentiments in there interviews—sometimes using the same phrases, citing the same poets as inspirations, and sharing the same hopes for the future of their black poetic community. Most significantly, this research exposed an entire underground creative scene that I was largely unaware of prior to conducting fieldwork. While I was aware of the possible influence black identity would have on the poets, the findings exposed the extent of that influence. The variety of participants also illustrated how connected the poets of this community were to each other—both in their literary productions and interpersonal lives.

In their writing, poets discuss political theory as well as the complex realities of oppression. This is significant in three ways. First, the audience is exposed to new understandings of modern race relations and study. Second, fellow black poets gain a sense of

comradery from their similar testimonies. Finally, it provides black poets an outlet to cope with their oppression. The success of their resistance relies on the connection provided by the poetry slam and other creative collaborations.

In conclusion, black poetry is a religious experience shared by black writers. Their poetry reflects their black identity either directly or indirectly. Speaking directly, poetry exposes racial oppression and generational trauma. Indirectly, poems reflect the writer's lived experience. For black Americans, lived experience is heavily influenced and impacted by race. Poetry slams serve as the connection between, black identity, community, art, and religion. The community formed from ritual poetry slams is instrumental to the creative, emotional, and spiritual well-being of black poets. Through their community, poets assert themselves not only as artists and intellectuals, but as people.

The findings and literary review of this study aim to illustrate the current black poetic culture as a renaissance. Several participants even named the current era as the Baton Rouge Renaissance. Without knowledge of the local black poetic community, that claim may seem outlandish. However, this study defends the poets' claim of a renaissance. The defining factor of a renaissance period is a renewed intellectual and cultural interest. A renaissance occurs at a shift between generations, and between eras. There were several transitional moments for the young black artists in this study. Alton Sterling was remembered in several interviews. Sterling's death had a monumental impact on the black youth—especially in Baton Rouge. The viral video of his murder was a constant reminder of the justice never received. When George Floyd and Breonna Taylor were murdered in 2020, history seemed to repeat itself. Only this time, the whole world was listening. The weight of every life lost to police brutality remained heavy on the black community. There was a lot of grief, anguish, sorrow, anger, and fear—all with nowhere to go.

Emotions were heightened by the Covid-19 pandemic. In a time of quarantines and social distancing, people were isolated from their communities.

The black youth of Baton Rouge lost their sense of community while simultaneously experiencing heightened emotion and stress due to racial oppression, police brutality, and constant protesting. So, they found themselves looking for new ways to communicate. Art served as an outlet for all the heavy emotions brought by the events of 2020. Some remembered how they used to write stories in middle school or how they used to paint as a kid. Others used their time in isolation to focus on the craft they were already pursuing. During this time, young black people had rediscovered or found their passion for art and literature. As Covid restrictions lifted, people were rejoined with a renewed appreciation for their community. Now in Baton Rouge, a growing coalition of young black artists is gathering. The creative, spiritual, and intellectual all work together to form the Baton Rouge renaissance.

Although still carrying heavy emotions, the artists have now found relief from their experience. The renaissance is formed by young black people using their art to communicate with the world around them. The participants of this study illustrate the versatility of the community as they take on several creative outlets, on top of their academics, careers, and community service. These conclusions are confirmed by the participants' allusions to the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, and the 90's Hip Hop era. The transition happening in Baton Rouge isn't just significant—it's intentional.

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