

Poetry in a New Race Era

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The buzz is on. It is the beginning of summer and the anticipation is thicker than the layer of smog above the skyline. More than five hundred youth poets from across the United States and around the world are gearing up for the 13th Annual Brave New Voices (BNV) International Youth Poetry Slam Festival, to be held in Los Angeles, California, in July 2010. I can feel the excitement in the city. I imagine intimate words bouncing off the walls inside the Saban Theater on a night co-hosted by rapper and actor Common and actress Rosario Dawson. Who knew the convening power of poetry could reach so far? I remember my days as a novice educator, when poetry was confined to classrooms and, during open mic nights, to select cafés and clubs.

More than fifty thousand youth poets converged in local and regional competitions to determine who would constitute the representative teams that moved on to the July nationals. Once in Los Angeles, these teams faced rounds of competition during the weeklong BNV festival to narrow the field even further. In the end, four teams – Albuquerque, Denver, New York, and the San Francisco Bay Area – battled onstage for this year’s crown of new grand slam champion.

While the competition remains an integral part of the festival, the chance to consider the themes that youth participants tackle in their writing – voice, identity, citizenship, and leadership in the twenty-first century – is equally important. What

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do these themes suggest about the possibilities of poetry in a *new race era*? Indeed, what do they convey about inhabiting a new race era?

In the age of Obama, race has surfaced in new ways. Terms such as *post-racial* have been used liberally. With the election of the first black president of the United States, the notion that race has become a thing of the past is indicative of the politics and vestiges of color blindness. With Obama in the highest position of power, it has been argued that American society has either entered or reached the promise of a post-racial era.¹ Whether we embrace Obama's politics or critique his administration's domestic and foreign policies is beside the point. On the one hand, the stage was set with the historic electoral win on November 4, 2008. On the other, the stage was also extended for new conversations to take place, inspired, perhaps, by a renewed sense of the need to ask, what is at stake in these new times? To say that we are in a post-racial era without acknowledging the historical permanence of race and the everyday processes of racialization in America is not enough. That is, race as skin color and racialization based on difference continue to perpetuate assumptions and produce hierarchy in society.² It is still necessary to pry open such matters in discursive spaces and envision hope without shying away from politics. The age of Obama – reflecting the cultural intricacies of the man himself – is not the end of race but rather the beginning of new ways of engaging the complexities of it. In other words, it is an opportunity to assess the future of race.

According to social and education theorist Zeus Leonardo in an essay on race ambivalence,³ post-race thought in a so-called post-racial era requires vision: the vision to recognize how the history and

presence of racism shape the world today, in even the mundane interactions of daily life; to find language to express what may at times be difficult to invoke; and to acknowledge indignation without concretizing victimhood, disregarding optimism, or eschewing possibility. Post-race thought calls for moving forward and facing race head on, maintaining hope – the audacity of hope – in (re)configuring steps toward a more democratic order. As Leonardo conceives it, this moment is an opportunity to express ambivalence toward racialization without encouraging race-blind analysis. His conception envisions not a society without race, but one aspiring to that goal – and getting there by going through race, not around it.

I was in Washington, D.C., last year when the subject of this essay first came to me.⁴ It was late October, nearly one year since President Barack Obama's historic electoral win in 2008. I was thinking about youth culture in America today: who is shaping it? What has transpired, and what has been significant in recent years? What is it about the growing literary arts movement in various metropolitan areas? In particular, what is it about poetry? It seemed to me that there is a window of opportunity through which discourses about youth and, in turn, youth culture are being shaped. I wondered about the connection between this window of opportunity, the *new race era*, and poetry.

In youth poetry, identity and cultural politics are central to the art. Youth poetry encourages conversations that make explicit the asymmetrical relations of power based on various markers of difference, including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and language. It merges a particular genre of writing with existing practices of hip-hop culture. It differs

from an essay, play, or novel partly because it blends elements of literary precision and performance with the universal cache of hip-hop music, language, and style. The affinity for poetry is not without the influence of the culture in which it is embedded, and vice versa. Youth poetry allows micropolitics to converge, individuals to mobilize different identities (sometimes collectively), and norms of identification to play out.⁵ It makes apprehensive truths transparent.

Poetry resonates with many individuals in various contexts; its language exposes social realities that are often steeped in the margins, especially for the young who are frequently attracted to reading and writing it because it is accessible to experimentation in a way that prose is not. In a study conducted in northern California, for example, I found that many high school students turn to poetry as a literacy practice inside and outside the classroom.⁶ Carolyn, a seventeen-year-old African American student, wrote the following poem to denote everyday experiences:

Can you see me?
When you think black
You think guns going glack glack
Sending shots through your neighborhood
Stores
There's no turning back
You wack, you scared
Can you compare
To all the lashes I got across
My back
Seek
The curse in my eyes
The flare of my nose
The adrenaline in my chest
The grinch in my teeth
The bitch in my breath
Why the hell
You gotta be so
Difficult

Listen to me when I tell you
What's on my mind
The truth
Twisted up but I spit it out
So let it be known
What the guns in their hands is all about
You
Don't see me
You see right through me
You want me locked up as much as the
next man
Do I look like a hoodlum to you?
I'm not the black you know
I'm the black you will know
So I ask
Once more
Can you see me?

Poetry is not a new phenomenon, but it has (re)emerged as more inclusive than ever, as well as more visibly connected to politics. For instance, President Obama's inauguration consisted of a celebration of the arts with world-renowned musical guests and artists. It also featured a commissioned poem, "Praise Song for the Day," by Yale University professor Elizabeth Alexander. The moment was not the first of its kind. Robert Frost shared a poem at the inauguration of President Kennedy, as did Maya Angelou and Miller Williams, respectively, at the first and second inaugurations of President Clinton. Every inauguration has had its share of artistic performances. But Obama's choice of Alexander seemed a conscious attempt to reach out to a particular school of black poetry – represented by Cornelius Eady, Toi Derricotte, Carl Phillips, Nathaniel Mackey, and Yusef Komunyakaa – that distinctly blends poetics and cultural politics, and that is both complex yet accessible in many of its references to readers of color. These poets are the children of the black literary and performance poets of the 1960s and 1970s, just as Obama him-

self is. At such a highly visible event, talented artists fill the stage and let their craft do its work. On a smaller scale, and complementary in spirit, are the local, regional, and national venues where emerging writers, who range in age and hail from various cities and towns, share their passion, thought, and experience.

Literary arts organizations such as Youth Speaks in the San Francisco Bay Area and Urban Word in New York City lead the way in serving youth ages thirteen to nineteen, providing them with mentorship and learning opportunities through after-school writing workshops, internships, and, most of all, formal spaces for sharing their work in front of large audiences. The pedagogical approach to spoken word poetry has been modeled after successful programs such as Poets in the Schools and Poetry for the People, which not only have influenced how poetry is taught in the classroom, but also have led to the proliferation of other programs.⁷ Innovative in its approach, BNV (with representative teams from San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Hawaii, Santa Fe, Fort Lauderdale, Ann Arbor, and Providence, to name a few) now includes a Brave New Teachers program. Training sessions and workshops have become a critical component of the week-long festival.

Aside from its popularity in hip-hop, theater, and literary arts circles, BNV is also a documentary series on the HBO cable network.⁸ The series is approaching another season, featuring rapper and actress MC Lyte as narrator (Queen Latifah narrated previously). The provocative topics presented onstage, projected by a single or by multiple microphones, are complex and often personal. Social issues and forms of inequality that teen poets encounter in their lives take the form of words, gestures, intona-

tion, and, in some instances, coordinated group performance. The power of this collective voice in one room is bracing. Not long ago, emerging and seasoned poets alike graced the same stage in an HBO series called *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, hosted by rapper and actor Mos Def. Successful in its late-Friday-night time slot, the show ran for six seasons. The BNV slam competition and documentary series demonstrate a resurgence of literacy as a means for young people not only to write about their lives and share their words with a large audience but, more important, to craft life trajectories with a literary cadence that challenges social norms and inequalities. The writing is a celebration of life and its meanings.

Putting such passion, thought, and experience into the language of poetry has real-world implications; it is indicative of the everyday practices of young people. Featured poems from the 2009 slam competition include titles such as “Fish, Grits & Buttermilk Biscuits” by eighteen-year-old African American Britney Wilson, a BNV poet from New York. The challenge of having cerebral palsy intertwined with the courage to break social molds takes on a particular force as she describes her own battles, ambitions, and dreams. Another poem, “Change,” by nineteen-year-old African American B. Yung, also a BNV poet from New York, points to the historical struggles of being a young black male in American society. He performed his four-minute poem at the Urban Word NYC Slam Finals; here is an excerpt:

Every time I write a slave poem, my paper
bleeds
[...]
Society never wanted me to make it
So I guess the gravity ain't the only thing
That's been holding me down lately

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But I don't hate you, as a matter of fact I
don't even despise you
I think I love you more than I can love half
of my ignorant brothers
And I know, I know my brothers ain't as
personable
But you got to understand, it's kind of hard
Teaching high school boys that whips and
chains
And "whips" and "chains" are symmetrical
So from the bottom of my heart
I am sorry that we are the way we are
But you got to understand, these mother-
fuckers told us
That change was going to come
And I am just so tired of waiting⁹

Other examples of poetry come in a variety of multimedia formats. Chinese Taiwanese American Kelly Tsai's "By-Standing: The Beginning of an American Lifetime," a five-minute spoken word video and winner of the War and Peace Award from Media That Matters, was featured in its Seventh Annual Film Festival in New York.¹⁰ The following excerpt signals humanity and responsible action in a multiracial society:

My friends, my family, my lovers, myself
We who sit back into what our lives were
like before
Making our convictions seem trendy
Yesterday, I went to study happy people at
Navy Pier
They don't go to rallies or conferences
They don't talk about war
They wait for a sunny day and go to Navy
Pier
They smile beneath their sunglasses
They hold each other – close
They eat ice cream that they paid too much
money for
They take advantage of the opportunity –
to love
They are lucky and everyone in this world
should be as lucky

Never, nowhere, anywhere
This is why – NO WAR

In an artist's statement released by Zu Zu Films,¹¹ twenty-something Kelly Tsai noted the relevance of the spoken word video:

In 2003, I was asked to perform at the Not In Our Name Rally in Chicago, which over 4000 people ultimately attended. I felt moved and compelled to write a poem at the most human level that spoke to the existence of war throughout our lives even in times of so-called peace. My hope was to tear ourselves away from polemics and rhetoric to understand at a fundamental level that war affects us all and that for every one person that suffers at our hands whether near or far, we all bear the consequences as we deprive each other and ourselves from the essential human right to peace that gives us the opportunity to live our lives however we choose. Unfortunately nearly 4 years later, the message is still relevant today.

Similarly, numerous spoken word artists have produced their own videos and used YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, and other social media sites to share or distribute their work. Armed with such new media technology, artists have a growing interest in taking poems from the page to the stage and onto the screen. Convergence and remix are at the fore of production. A recent example involves the fictional character Claireece Precious Jones, from novelist and poet Sapphire's *Push*.¹² In the novel, writing poetry plays a key role in various stages of Precious's life. The character pens her pains and struggles and, in the end, offers many lessons about life as it is experienced by some youth in impoverished urban communities. One of the poems that appears in *Push*, "Ever morning," conveys that experience:

everi morning
i write
a poem
before I go to
school
marY had a little lamb
but I got a kid
an HIV
that folow me
to school
one day.

Precious, the 2009 film adaptation of *Push*, garnered critical acclaim: directed by Lee Daniels, the film received various major awards, including the 2009 Sundance Film Festival's Grand Jury Prize and three Screen Actors Guild Awards.¹³ Although my intention is not to argue for the perpetuation of the culture of poverty or the commodification of youth culture, it is important to note that there are economic as well as political and cultural factors that open up different opportunities and spaces for minorities to be represented in the media. Some representations challenge existing stereotypes, for example, of black and brown youth from impoverished communities as pathologized beings; others reinforce them, often to great success at the box office.¹⁴ However, it is beyond the scope of this essay to address the role of culture industries, media marketing strategies, and complex economic apparatuses in building on the "popular" to create and sell cultural products and, in turn, shape culture.¹⁵ The primary point here is that poetry has emerged in youth culture as more powerful than ever. It is worth exploring the possibilities for verse to inform ongoing programs and policies that support young people.

As we negotiate matters of identity and cultural politics in a new race era, we must remember the potential power

of words in the movement toward individual and social transformation. My own research affirms the idea that poetry can be used as a form of critical literacy both inside and outside school. That is, rooted in the poetry process are literacy practices that assess traditional and social texts to negotiate the relations of power that inform them. As a medium of expression, poetry can be one means for moving educators a step closer to improving educational practices and, ultimately, can accelerate literacy achievement for traditionally underserved students. It creates learning environments that allow youth to take part more fully in their own learning process. Likewise, it can give adults a way to make sense of youth's social worlds – to enter everyday imagination and lived experience. It extends words into action for the sake of alleviating human struggle. Words as speech acts perform actions in themselves or convert to action in the process of recontextualization. In my encounters with youth poets and other emerging writers, I have discovered that the dialogue we have through writing is sometimes a necessary reflection to ease the pain of experience with courage and clarity. Sometimes, it is about releasing fantasies and taking pleasure in the sublime, or celebrating the randomness that springs up daily in our lives – the kid who jumps at the chance to play, laugh, and love or be loved. Other times, it is about working through indignation without dwelling on anger and deepening wounds.

A personal anecdote is illustrative of my point. I teach at Washington University in St. Louis, live in a residential neighborhood near campus, and speak English. (I also speak Tagalog and Spanish.) I am a Filipina American. Recently, I approached a white local contractor to erect a fence in my backyard. In our interaction, he asked what I am, where

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I come from, what I do for a living, and how I learned to “speak English well.” It was as if I needed to legitimize my status and personhood to this white male contractor. In hindsight, and perhaps in fairness, this small business contractor may have found it necessary to ask such preliminary questions because of problematic experiences with past clients; it may have been a wise business practice to gather a bit of information before commencing a job. Perhaps I reacted hastily to my suspicion that, had I been white, the interrogation would not have occurred. Whatever the case, the encounter triggered memories of other moments in which I had been made to feel similarly singled out. Was it a race moment that called forth the stereotypic assumption of Asian as “forever foreigner”? Did the English language binding us in that moment evoke a common yet shifting ground of who is American (or who is not)? Perhaps it was a matter of gender and gender relations underscoring who had power in that moment. Perhaps it was a matter of attribution or even paranoia prompted once again by difference. Such thoughts came to my mind.

In the field of critical race theory, such negative interactions have been labeled *microaggressions*.¹⁶ There are different forms, some subtle, others more explicit in nature. In documented studies of African Americans and their families, psychologists and sociologists have long held that microaggressions result in stress over time.¹⁷ The stress of having suffered repeated indignities, whether they are committed wittingly or not, impacts the psyche and worldview of individuals whose lives are shaped by such seemingly small yet ubiquitous and constant forms of oppression. Being refused service, being followed in a store, being ridiculed for having particular observable traits, being stigmatized

for a linguistic accent, and being treated as inferior: all these experiences occur in day-to-day interactions, making them mundane and ordinary; yet when sustained over time, they can produce harsh and extreme effects. To challenge the contractor during our interaction, I posed the same questions back to him. Later, I jotted down what transpired between us. It was the impetus for an art-making process. I drew on the experience, reified it in words, and in the end transformed it to share with you, the reader. The process parallels what emerging and seasoned writers have done with their subjective experiences. The following poem attempts to capture my experience:

Microaggression. When are racist and
sexist jokes not
Racist and sexist? One could argue that
they depend on
The context, person, or tone. To whom?
Too many have
Let their guards down and dangerously
assume jokes are
Only jokes. Subtle ones, at best, betwixt.
Comfortability
And camaraderie at each end, inevitably
soft laughter
In between. The privileged (in this case a
middle-aged
White male) does not realize the joke, the
ramifications
Of the joke or transparency through which
the joke reveals
Itself. Normalcy of ignorance and sense of
entitlement
Privilege the teller to say what is really on
his/her mind.
There are untold stories here. Stones still
unturned. It is
Time once again to rage about curiosities,
the elephant
In the room. It is time to revisit the past.
Otherwise, we

Risk the chance of bequeathing dangers
we have known
For several generations. All bets are on the
table.

The quest for answers continues – whether in thought, in poetry, or in other forms of writing. If we are to envision a hopeful world, a place rid of oppression, then we ought to will ourselves to engage in deeper conversations. The stakes are higher in these times, yet they are opportunities for

us. Naming infractions and injuries offers a beginning for expanding discourse in a new race era. As youth poets have demonstrated in notebooks, classrooms, workshops, slams, and elsewhere, writing about what matters most is where the possibilities lie. Our lives – and the lives of those who have yet to put their truths into words – depend on it. Time will tell who will broadcast the loudest chants and deliver the most compelling poems.¹⁸

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Thomas L. Friedman, “Finishing Our Work,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 2008; Shelby Steele, “Obama’s Post-Racial Promise,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 2008.
- ² Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
- ³ Zeus Leonardo, “After the Glow: Race Ambivalence and Other Educational Prognoses,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (forthcoming).
- ⁴ Many thanks to Zeus Leonardo for an engaging conversation then and the continued dialogue present here.
- ⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Politics of Identity,” *Dædalus* 135 (4) (2006): 15–22.
- ⁶ Korina Jocson, *Youth Poets: Empowering Literacies In and Out of Schools* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).
- ⁷ Maisha Fisher, *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007); Korina Jocson, “‘Taking It to the Mic’: Pedagogy of June Jordan’s Poetry for the People and Partnership with an Urban High School,” *English Education* 37 (2) (2005): 44–60; Ruth Kim, “Spoken Art Pedagogies: Youth, Race & the Cultural Politics of an Arts Education Movement,” unpublished dissertation (University of California, Santa Cruz); Jen Weiss and Scott Herndon, *Brave New Voices: The Youth Speaks Guide to Teaching Spoken Word and Poetry* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2001).
- ⁸ For more information on each organization, visit Youth Speaks, <http://www.youthspeaks.org>, and Urban Word NYC, <http://www.urbanwordnyc.org>. For schedule and details on BNV’s Annual Youth Poetry Slam Festival, visit <http://www.bravenewvoices.org>. Video clips of past episodes on HBO as well as sample poems performed by various teams are available at <http://www.hbo.com/bravenewvoices>. The series based on the BNV Festival held in Los Angeles aired on HBO in Fall 2010.
- ⁹ These and several other poems from teams Ann Arbor, Fort Lauderdale, Hawaii, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Santa Fe are featured on HBO’s website, <http://www.hbo.com>. Full episodes of the BNV series, interwoven with narratives about each poet, may also be viewed via HBO On Demand or purchased as a DVD set.
- ¹⁰ The video can be accessed via <http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/films>. For more information on the artist, visit <http://yellowgurl.com>.
- ¹¹ <http://www.zuzufilms.com>.

¹² Sapphire, *Push* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

¹³ *Precious* was also nominated for three Golden Globe Awards, including Best Motion Picture, Best Performance by an Actress in a Motion Picture (Drama), and Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role in a Motion Picture (Drama); actress Mo'Nique was nominated, and won, in the latter category. Additionally, *Precious* was nominated for six Academy Awards, including Actress in a Leading Role, Actress in a Supporting Role, Director, Film Editing, Best Picture, and Adapted Screenplay. Mo'Nique won in the category of Actress in a Supporting Role, as did Geoffrey Fletcher for Adapted Screenplay.

¹⁴ For a related discussion, see Zeus Leonardo and Margaret Hunter, "Imagining the Urban: The Politics of Race, Class, and Schooling," in *International Handbook of Urban Education*, ed. William T. Pink and George W. Noblit (New York: Springer, 2007).

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, Classics Series (New York: Routledge, 1991); Henry A. Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Henry A. Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

¹⁶ Daniel Solorzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso, "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students," *The Journal of Negro Education* 69 (1–2) (2000): 60–73.

¹⁷ Grace Carroll, *Environmental Stress and African Americans: The Other Side of the Moon* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997); Chester M. Pierce, "Offensive Mechanisms," in *The Black Seventies*, ed. Floyd B. Barbour (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1970), 265–282.

¹⁸ I would like to thank Gerald Early for the invitation to contribute to this volume. His critical feedback pushed the writing and further shaped the ideas presented in this essay. I would also like to thank all the poets and writers whose works are included, allowing for a fuller illustration of the topic.