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Children Authoring Activism: Narrative Intimacy and Power in Youth Slam Poetry

While people often attribute Marc Smith, a white man, with the creation of slam poetry in 1989, scholars such as Javon Johnson remind us that hip-hop and spoken word poetry are more accurately traced back to Black and brown youth in the mid-seventies following the Black Arts Movement (17). This matters for two main reasons: first, that young people have always had a hand in this genre; and second, that it is inherently a genre of political activism and resistance. Johnson argues that “[t]he 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” (21). For this project, I am interested in the ways that youth slam poets imagine beyond the traditional power structures of both race and adolescence by authoring their own art of resistance.

In particular, I draw on Robin Bernstein’s theories of racial innocence, Katharine Capshaw’s understanding of cross writing in children’s Harlem Renaissance literature, and Sara K. Day’s ideas of narrative intimacy in order to explore the ways that youth poets reinscribe aetnonormative notions of childhood and innocence in their poems for political gain. It is my contention that, in order to flip traditional notions of power in both authorship and activism, these young people knowingly and ironically rely on their audience’s ideas of childhood in order to promote a seemingly innocent ethos that will comfort their majority adult audiences; in so doing, they gain the viewers’ trust. I argue that youth poets intentionally curate these spaces so that they maintain narrative control in order to insist that their political ideas, agendas, and identities finally be heard.

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