INTRODUCTION

I have never attempted to write history before, but this book has taught me how daunting it is to construct a narrative that connects dots among living people and real events. Perhaps the successful narrative is the one that makes those dots seem like the only ones the author could have chosen, those people and events the only significant ones that could have been connected. Yet that is not an honest narrative. An honest narrative might focus on the same people and events, but it would regularly remind its audience that another author would surely have chosen different dots or drawn different lines among them. There are details in this book that will surely be contested, or whose framing will not match others' experiences. I have checked the information I offer and the claims I make here in multiple ways, but at the same time, as is true for any researcher, my perspective is limited by my own roles within and beyond the field of youth spoken word poetry, and there are some details that are simply remembered differently by different participants. I offer here, then, my best attempt at telling *a* story about the field of youth spoken word poetry since its inception in the mid-1990s.

As I craft the final version of this introduction, it is the middle of October 2017, fall break at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, which means I get to work from home on this rare cool day in the Deep South. This summer, for the first time, the team from Baton Rouge (the Forward Arts All Stars) made the finals stage at the Brave New Voices Youth Poetry Slam Festival, and then . . . they won! Like many here at home, I watched a live, online stream of the performances and was sobbing by the middle of the team's first poem, "For Kaiya," introduced by Imani Sundiata and Jazmyne Smith and performed by Chazzi Hayes and Olivia Williams. And then I laughed, in humor and relief, at the team's second-round poem, "Ode to Soulja Boy," by Smith and Kalvin Morris. The Brave New Voices victory was followed in the fall by another national win by a Baton Rouge poet, this time at the annual Individual World Poetry Slam (IWPS) competition, where Forward Arts alumnus and first-time

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IWPS competitor Arvind Nandakumar took the title, becoming, at 20, the youngest IWPS champion to date. Even other competitors on the finals stage were tweeting out their support for Nandakumar, a poet who often writes about his experience with Autism Spectrum Disorder. For a local poetry community that had lost a beloved youth poet, Kaiya Smith, following her participation in BNV 2016, these events brought joy and, maybe, a bit of healing.

These joyous, moving moments occurred in the midst of complicated dynamics within the world of US spoken word poetry and in the society at large. Both Brave New Voices and the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI) elicited protests and criticism from some participants around decisions made by festival organizers. Challenges and "callouts" to dominant and authoritative voices have become prevalent in US politics and culture; in youth spoken word poetry, they have combined with generational shifts that are at times as difficult as they are inevitable. Meanwhile, like many urban centers, Baton Rouge has continued to struggle with serious economic and racial inequities. One place where these inequities are reflected is in police-community relations. The tensions between local law enforcement and black Baton Rouge intensified after the killing of Alton Sterling by city police officers in 2016. On July 10, five days after Sterling's death and following a widely-praised, well-attended, youth-organized march and rally at the state capital, the police department tipped its hand in a neighborhood near the city's small downtown area. The officers assigned to the rally had been a friendly and diverse group, but as participants returned to the starting point of the march at a church on Government Street that sits halfway between two highway entrances, they were met with a militarized force, a wall of police in helmets and riot gear arrayed alongside tanks. Authorities insisted that this force was necessary to keep protesters from blocking the highway, though there was little sign of anyone making such an attempt. Ultimately, the city dropped charges against almost all protesters detained during that standoff and other rallies that occurred in this time of heightened tensions, and an attempted lawsuit against protesters by one Baton Rouge police officer who was treated for a superficial injury was rejected by the courts.

There exists, too, a deep economic, social, and cultural divide between the south side of the city as represented by my own workplace, LSU, a primarily white institution that is the state's flagship university, and the north side, home to the historically black Southern University. LSU has had a disastrous decade due to the global financial crisis, the hostile leadership of governor Bobby

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Jindal, and continued defunding of public institutions in favor of unregulated, corporate interests. Nonetheless, it is in far better shape resource-wise than its colleague to the north. Southern's main campus is surrounded by north Baton Rouge, which has seen none of the investments that are so visible along the main thoroughfares of south Baton Rouge. Community members on the north side plead for a hospital with an emergency room, for accessible supermarkets, for attention to the crumbled infrastructure of their nearby public schools, while a beautiful new children's museum and a promised bike path linking LSU to downtown assure the southside folks enjoying the many conveniently located new restaurants and gyms that local leadership is working for them.

It is in this complicated, but not unusual, local context that I gained a powerful, firsthand experience with the social nature of spoken word poetry and the ways it could bring together people who otherwise might never have reason to interact. It was here, too, that I was invited into the work of youth spoken word poetry in a substantial and ongoing way. It was not, however, where I had my first exposure to the field. I first encountered youth spoken word poetry in 2003, while working on my doctorate at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Brave New Voices took place in Chicago that April. I don't recall now how I found out they were seeking volunteers, but I remember showing up at the Chicago Historical Society, where Young Chicago Authors (YCA) artistic director Kevin Coval quickly explained the details of the merchandise table just outside the theater where the top-scoring teams in the slam were about to compete. The poems I heard that spring evening, after packing up the t-shirts and passing off the cash box, were a revelation. I wasn't surprised to hear great writing from teenagers; as an obsessive poet myself throughout high school, and as an English teacher who would have taught nothing but creative writing if I could have gotten away with it, I was already a believer. The performance part was new to me, though—I hadn't known that young people were learning this remarkable writing-and-performance combination across the country. The truth is, I barely knew that spoken word poetry was a thing. That night, though, I saw skillful performances of poems whose subject matter was intense and intensely honest, and I wondered at each young poet's courage in talking about elements of themselves and their lives that I wasn't able to name to my closest friends at their age.

So I was primed the following spring when several high school students I was teaching in a Saturday enrichment program said they wanted to form a team for Louder Than a Bomb (LTAB), the hugely successful, citywide Chicago

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teen poetry slam. I had no idea what it meant to coach a slam team, but I quickly discovered that a big part of the task involved driving poets not yet old enough for licenses from one rehearsal or performance space to another. Happily, YCA held informational meetings for the LTAB coaches, which is how I first entered the crowded, creaky, book-and-paper-filled, graffiti-muraled Wicker Park offices of the organization. Three years later, I would return as a researcher just beginning to learn the contours of the work happening at Young Chicago Authors and so many other energetic and slightly ramshackle spaces around the country.

The team I coached that first year was composed of ninth graders, none of whom had written much or, for some, any poetry before, but they were excited by the idea of performance, by the youth poets they had seen, and by the hip-hop rhythms and wordplay they imagined incorporating into their work. One young woman, Rosa Moreno, was obsessed with Kanye West's newly-released first album, *The College Dropout*, especially the song "Jesus Walks," and I remember a conversation we had about whether audiences would recognize the lines she quoted from it in one of her poems. It's funny to me now to think I was doubting a teenager's sense of what other teenagers around her city were listening to at any given moment. I had just begun one of the great learning periods of my adult life, during which the west side Chicago teenagers who were featured in my dissertation (and first book, *Feel These Words: Writing in the Lives of Urban Youth*, 2009) schooled me in all things hip-hop, including how deeply connected they felt to its music, history, and artists. Under their tutelage, I would soon discover the common practice among rappers of pulling great lines from one another to incorporate into their own songs in the spirit of dialogue, homage, or challenge. Over the years, I would continue to find this intertextual practice one of the most striking and satisfying features of hip-hop's lyrical and musical style. At the time, however, I was actually a little worried that the Louder Than a Bomb powers-that-be would consider Rosa's quotation a form of plagiarism if she didn't say in the poem that they were not her words.

My own skill set, to the extent that I had one that was relevant, was mostly in the writing of poems (though, if I'm honest, I didn't know much about poetry itself yet either). I knew which poems I liked; I knew I had once liked the feeling of writing my version of poetry; I knew that I enjoyed making my classroom a place where students got to write poetry and lyrics and talk about what they were writing. Naturally, I worried about how I would coach the team in performance. My only experience in that area was when I was corralled into

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coaching the drama team for a national academic festival when I taught at a private school in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in the mid-1990s. For some reason, people assume that English teachers are experts in newspaper production, theater direction, and other extracurricular pursuits whose processes are neither instinctive nor simple. In that instance, I made my best effort and lucked out in meeting a young actor who agreed to give my poorly-guided thespians some quick—and amazingly helpful—lessons. A similar opportunity presented itself one day during my LTAB coaching. I was in line at a pharmacy and felt a tap on the shoulder. I turned around, and the young man behind me asked where I had gotten my t-shirt—I was wearing the festival shirt that was my reward for the previous year's volunteer stint. It seems that those t-shirts ran out quickly, and even some of the competing poets had not managed to get one. I thought about giving him the shirt off my back—I did. I really liked it, though. At that point, along with feeling slightly guilty about my wardrobe, I also realized that I recognized him. The poet was Alvin Lau, and I remembered his team's polished performances, their humor and professionalism on stage. I told him I was coaching a team for LTAB and had no idea how to help them with performance. "Would you be willing to come out to a rehearsal and work with them?" I asked tentatively. He was, and he did, and I learned what would turn out to be a useful lesson: in youth spoken word poetry, everyone is a potential resource.

In coaching that team, I was reminded of the special relationships that can form among adults and young people when they embark together on work outside of the classroom. I knew that the arts did some magical work in terms of helping young people make sense of themselves and their worlds, but the intensity of those months of writing, critiquing, revising, and practicing while sharing meals and rides and inside jokes and a heartbreak or two brought home to me the powerful emotional and social development that occurs when youth and adults connect through artistic practice. A moment that stays with me involved the only boy on the team, who was less eager than willing to participate but was utterly necessary, as without him, we wouldn't have had enough poets to qualify. He lived on the north side, in Humboldt Park, unlike me and the other team members, so I would often pick him up first or drop him off last. Our conversations went in many directions; on this day, we passed through a popular neighborhood inhabited largely by young, quirkily dressed white people who ate at vegetarian cafés and browsed in dusty used bookstores (these still existed in the early 2000s). Suddenly, he said, "Look at all those white people.

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Gentrifiers! I hate them!" I wanted to say, "Hell yeah!" but I also wanted to hide. Who was I, after all, if not a highly educated white woman living poor in a historically Mexican neighborhood, teaching working-class Latino kids on the weekends while earning an advanced degree with research that focused on the literacy practices of poor Latino and black kids and that would hopefully lead me to a coveted tenure-track job as an English education professor? Students would sometimes give me a pass in these situations: "You're not really white," they would say. The fact that I spoke reasonably good Spanish after three years teaching in Bolivia seemed to distinguish me, for some students, from other white teachers they had encountered. And my physiognomy threw them—my Jewish heritage is clearly legible in my dark, curly hair and in my olive complexion that can turn deep brown in the summer. I had always been conscious of that heritage, growing up in a white, working-class neighborhood in Philadelphia as one of two Jewish kids in my class through elementary and middle school; I embraced the identity but always felt different from my friends whose families were all one kind of Christian or another (as I understood it at the time). But whiteness I took for granted; it wasn't until I moved to Chicago at age 26 that I was pushed to begin understanding myself as white, with all that entailed—especially the privilege of it (I should acknowledge here that not every Jewish person identifies as white; a friend told me her view was, "I'm not white, but I have white privilege." Me, I don't think that matters much to people who are oppressed by whiteness, so I keep it simple). It was youth spoken word poetry that challenged me to interrogate the identities I carried in the world by choice or by perception. The socially oriented subject matter of this poetry was part of that, but even more, it was the relationships and community of youth spoken word that began to make me feel accountable for the privilege that had long been invisible to me.

This consciousness-raising for adults and youth in youth spoken word poetry occurs partly because it is not easy work—if it's done right, everyone is challenged, everyone gets comfortable with constructive criticism, and everyone faces some very real fears. For me, coaching that first team, my biggest fear was that I might not know enough to get these young people where they wanted to go. For them, there were various insecurities, but overarching everything was the requirement to get up on stage and perform an original poem, which meant self-revelation and risk. Minutes before they were to participate in their first-ever poetry slam bout, most of the team was in the women's bathroom, one girl in a stall sobbing to her boyfriend on the phone while the others stood by the sink

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trying to talk her out. Yet, when our team was called for the first round, that same poet walked up to the stage and performed her heart out. I was amazed, awed, blown away by her accomplishment, and by all of them. They did not get good scores, so I quickly learned another common youth poetry lesson, which is that the scoring in a poetry slam can feel like the enemy of everything you have worked hard to accomplish. I could feel the team members deflating as the first-round scores were read, and for the first of many, many times, I wondered about the purpose of putting numbers on poems—one of several questions I explore in this book.

In the fall of 2004, freshly minted PhD in hand, I moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to begin my career as an English professor. That year, as I immersed myself in the department and community, I told people over and over again about the work being done at Young Chicago Authors, and how much good that kind of work would do in Baton Rouge if only someone would get it going. In a shocking moment of good fortune, a graduate school friend in Chicago sent me an email after that first year to tell me that Anna West, Young Chicago Authors' program director, would be moving back to her hometown of Baton Rouge and that, of course, we should meet and work together. The rest is history—a history that is partially told in chapter 3 and that has brought me to this culmination of a decade of intensive collaboration and learning.

Back in 2005, I couldn't have foreseen that more than a decade later I would be putting the final touches on a book on the subject. I have published articles throughout the course of the research (2013, 2012, 2010)—one with West—and I have drafted many a chapter outline over the years, but the book struggled to be written for what felt like far too long. There is some value, it turns out, in the long view. It is easy to fall in love with youth spoken word poetry, and, for a time, I did. For a former high school English teacher, it felt like all the best parts of teaching (talking with young people about writing, sharing beloved authors and texts with them, developing projects together, learning how to trust and learn from one another) with none of the parts I didn't like (telling students how to behave, assigning grades, monitoring for dress code violations). That still holds true, largely. But as I have both documented and participated in the field at the local and national levels over time, I have noted my own shifting responses to the people and practices I have encountered much as I have observed the attitudes and practices of others. Certain dynamics have recurred often enough to reveal themselves to me as ongoing patterns, rather than as the isolated events they may have seemed in

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a shorter-term study. Overall, I continue to believe strongly in the power of youth spoken word poetry to affect young people's lives in positive ways, but that belief is nuanced by an understanding that even in overtly critical, counterpublic (Warner, 2005) spaces, there are centers and margins, there are egos, and there is evidence everywhere of the dominant ideologies that can never be fully externalized. This book attempts to present these complexities in all their rich detail and to account for the staying power of youth spoken word poetry as a site of intellectual, emotional, social, and artistic growth for people of all ages despite the inevitable challenges such work presents. My purpose in making this contribution, despite my certainty that it will not get everything right, is to provide documentation of where the field has been so that those who are even now developing its future might feel grounded in direct and indirect pasts full of people whose efforts have always been, as ours are now, stumbling and hopeful.

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