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Speak About It, Be About It: Spoken-Word Poetry Communities and Transformative Social Justice

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Abstract
"Spoken-word poetry" and the knowledge we can gain from the poets who perform it are integral to the successful recovery of members of oppressed communities. Also known as "performance poetry," these powerful testimonials often mirror oral traditions, such as speaking circles from the African diaspora, Indigenous oral traditions in the Americas, and the spoken-word poetic communities of color and marginalized peoples. Poets within the spoken-word poetry communities of San Diego, California, who have been oppressed by interpersonal and state violence, mass incarceration, militarized policing, poverty, racism, sexism, the War on Drugs, and other systemic inequalities, learn from and support one another. This article views spoken-word poetry as public testimonials that may add to transformative social justice models for structurally-oppressed communities. It seeks to understand critical criminological approaches and analysis that add to the growing scholarship centering structurally-oppressed communities without pathologizing them in order to inform programming, policy and funding toward transformative social justice initiatives focused on healing communities and their members.

Introduction

Speaking publicly about experiences with structural oppression and obstacles to community healing may be integral to recovery and restoration for members of structurally-oppressed communities—communities that have suffered from systemic inequalities, including family disruption, police brutality, poverty, and racism, that negatively impact their well-being. Within spoken-word communities, people who have been victimized by these forms of oppression learn from and support one another at "open-mic" events.[1] This article views the public performance of spoken-word poetry in communities whose members experience multiple forms of structural oppression as testimonials of their experiences and as community-based actions against these types of oppression. As such, these

[1] Short for "open-microphone," "open-mic" events are readings in a public venue open to anyone who wants to read or recite his/her/their poetry.

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spoken-word poetry communities possess the potential to influence the implementation of transformative justice models for other structurally-oppressed communities.

The broad goal of the research for this article sought to answer three questions: (1) What are the economic, historical, social, and structural forms of oppression related by the poets of this community? (2) How is social pain talked about within these spoken-word performances? (3) What types of transformative justice measures are the poets and their audiences experiencing/and or enacting within the spoken-word communities of San Diego, California? To answer these questions, I examined public testimonials of pain at spoken-word poetry events in San Diego, California, where Blacks, Latinos, and poor folk have experienced systemic oppression. This study employed content analysis and extended case-study methods and drew upon Black feminist thought, critical criminological scholarship, and intersectional theory as tools for examining and comprehending my findings. I contend that understanding and identifying the intersecting structural oppression impacting poets' lives—and they ways in which communities address structural oppression—may help to suggest pathways that serve as lessons toward healing, and possibly toward transformative social justice within such communities.

In this article, I utilize Mill's (1940) concept of "vocabularies of situated motives." This concept views motives as "one which is to the actor and to the other members of a situation an unquestioned answer to questions concerning social and lingual conduct" (Mills 1940:5). According to Mills (1940), when we utilize motives, we are not describing social action per se, but are attempting to influence others and ourselves. Thus, motives are social instruments.

I collected public testimonies via spoken-word poetic performances within communities with histories and/or recent experiences of trauma related to structural oppression. While poets certainly express trauma and pain related to structural oppression, these public testimonies are also used as social instruments to motivate resistance. In honoring my Black feminist and critical race theory (CRT) roots, I start by situating myself in the material with my background and impetus for writing, performing, studying, and using poetry for healing. Next, I discuss the impact of historical police violence, the War on Drugs, and mass incarceration on communities such as those centered in this study. From there, I move into a discussion of transformative justice frameworks, Black feminism, and intersectional criminological theory before heading into the study design and methodology (including description of research sites). I then present my findings, followed by a discussion and a conclusion.

Growing Up in the "Crack 90s" and the War on Drugs

I grew up in the "high desert" about sixty miles northeast of Los Angeles, California, during the height of the War on Drugs—what I refer to as the "Crack 90s." Between the mid-1980s and 1990s, the area experienced an influx of residents fleeing the gang warfare and police violence of the greater Los Angeles area. Nightly newscasts featured images of infants trapped in incubators, shaking uncontrollably, as their tiny bodies processed drug withdrawal during their first days of life. These images were often attached to pictures of poor Black and Latino communities terrorized by militarized police forces. It was during this time that I found myself at police gunpoint for the first (but not last) time.

After spending an afternoon at the hair salon getting my hair cut, pressed and curled with Dudley's Total Control hairspray (nothing moved when you used Dudley's!), I met up with a few of my high school friends. The five of us—two young women and three young

men—all piled into my friend's parent's Cadillac sedan, and we headed out into the rainy night. We were about half way to our destination when we saw the flashing lights reflecting off the car dashboard. It was late, and the streets were deserted, so we were stopped right in the middle of the road. From the side mirror, I could see the sheriff's deputies crouched behind their patrol car doors. Through the crackling sound of their megaphone, the deputies instructed us to exit the vehicle. Once out of the car, and in the rain, we were commanded to place our hands behind our heads and interlace our fingers. We complied and were then instructed to walk slowly with our backs to them—and their guns. That traffic stop left an indelible imprint on me—so much so that I would return to it time and again in my own research. It also left me feeling angry, exposed, and vulnerable.

Like many of the young women with whom I went to high school, I wound up a young mother, and like many of those other young women, I raised my daughter alone after her father was incarcerated during the War on Drugs. With recidivism rates as they were at the time, my daughter's father spent the next ten years without being "free" on parole for more than eleven months at a time. During those brief times of *his* "freedom," I became a victim and then a survivor of interpersonal violence. I did not understand the structural influences on me, my community, and my relationships. What I did understand was that I was (still) angry—furious that we had all become statistics and casualties of the War on Drugs. My case added to the statistics of battered and abused women during that time. My former partner added to the staggering statistics of Black males incarcerated during the War on Drugs. The main source of that anger, however, was my daughter being added to the number of children raised by poor, Black single mothers in the United States (US) as casualties of that war.

Poetry as Healing

Poetry found me as an undergraduate college student. Although reluctant at first, I began to pour my feelings onto the page. I was in graduate school before anyone could convince me to read at an organized spoken-word event. Once I did, the empathy I received both during and after that reading was unexpected. As I performed my pain, I could hear members of the audience gasping and murmuring. After the reading was finished, a woman I had known since my undergraduate days embraced me and whispered, "How did I not know this?" I felt empathy in her embrace and I credit poetry in healing some of my pain. Poetry has been an integral part of my life ever since.

It is with this backdrop that I explore community-level resistance informed and supported by spoken-word open-mic events, where poems are used to interrogate structural oppression (Williams 2011a, b). Indeed, it is in the process of these interrogations that healing might begin. Healing in this context has the power to transform San Diego County and other communities like it. Therapeutic models teach how to package pain in poetic prose—in this case, that which was suffered due to structural oppressions. This packaging of pain due to structural oppression is potentially healing in two ways. On the one hand, making pain into an object which the poet can then distance from the self has potential healing power for the poet. On the other hand, audience members can heal by associating their own pain with that of the poets. This can be particularly powerful in the case of shame experienced by Black women and Latina survivors of domestic violence (including interpersonal and family violence), sexual assault, and rape (see Harris-Perry 2011; Loeffler et al. 2010; Ragavan et al. 2018; see also Crowley 2019). In addition, and as noted

above, poetry has the power to evoke empathy in audiences (Williams 2011a, b). For communities impacted by structural oppression, this empathy could lead to recognition—of being human, of being valued, of being part of our society.

Poets have a long tradition of speaking truth to power, calling out political, social and structural oppressions—Claude McKay's *If We Must Die* (1919), Langston Hughes' *I Look at the World* (1930), Amiri Baraka's *Short Speech to My Friends* (1964), Maya Angelou's *Caged Bird* (1983), Luis Rodriguez' *Watts Bleeds* (1991), Porsha O's *Angry Black Woman* (2014), and Danez Smith's *Tonight in Oakland* (2015), to name a few. Moreover, social movements against structural oppression have embraced poetry as an oral tradition by performing the "the power of language, the musicality of language, the vividness of language, to move people, to win the proverbial hearts and minds…to effect social change" (Camp and Heatherton 2016: Ch. 21). This article identifies areas of community pain, how this pain is associated with structural oppressions, and practical solutions via transformative justice models. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to provide some historical context for the confluence of these oppressions within the communities at the center of this study.

Historical Context of Racialized Police Violence, the War on Drugs, and Mass Incarceration

President Ronald Reagan's 1982 re-dedication to President Nixon's 1973 declaration of the War on Drugs created a federal drug taskforce, increased antidrug spending, and "demonized" both drug users and drug use (Cooper 2015). As a result, by 2000, the incarcerated population in the US had increased by approximately 1.1 million people. This increase was 206 times that of total US population increase of 12% during that time—and well above all other Western countries (Bobo and Thompson 2006). The prison population continued to grow beyond 2000, reaching 1.5 million in 2007 (Cooper 2015). It now stands at more than 2 million people, the majority of whom are serving time for drug convictions (Alexander 2011). Although people of different races use and sell drugs at similar rates, this increase was largely due to drug convictions of poor Black and Latino males (Alexander 2011; Bobo and Thompson 2006). Racial and ethnic disparities in arrests also increased during the War on Drugs: arrest rates for Blacks increased from 22% to 40%, while for Whites, drug-related arrests *dropped* from 77% to 59% (Cooper 2015).

While many Americans have supported policies that "get tough" on drugs, they did so under the false belief that illicit drug use and sales increased levels of violent crime. The truth of the matter is that when Reagan's War on Drugs was enacted, violent crime was *decreasing* (Alexander 2011; Bobo and Thompson 2006). More than a system of *crime* control, the War on Drugs functioned as a system of *social* control over poor, Black, and Latino communities (Alexander 2011; Camp and Heatherton 2016).

Today, against a dominant narrative of racial progress in the US, while violent crime has been decreasing, police brutality against Blacks in the US seems to have increased—especially in recent years. The constant barrage of grisly images of lifeless Black bodies—dead at the hands of law enforcement (Camp and Heatherton 2016)—has had a profoundly negative impact on the psychological health of Black individuals (Cooper and Fulilove 2016), who have borne witness to police brutality and killings of Black folk on television or in their own communities (Alang et al. 2017).

The current climate of aggressive policing also impacts Latino communities. In 2012, California had an estimated undocumented immigrant population of

approximately 2.8 million people (Baker and Rytina 2013). Although immigration laws are civil, not criminal (Patler and Branic 2017), the Latino prison population in the US grew by almost 50% between the years of 2001–2011, reaching over 330,000 (Kilgore 2011). By 2013, this number would grow to almost 480,000 (Patler and Branic 2017). Such individuals are held in deportation facilities for one or more years before their eventual removal, prolonging the negative impact and trauma associated with mass incarceration for incarcerated individuals and their families (Patler and Branic 2017). Prolonged detention prior to deportation impacts families economically, emotionally and psychologically, resulting in "secondary prisonization"—the experience through which "legally innocent people come to experience the effects of incarceration indirectly due to their sustained contact with the correctional institution, characterized, for example, by dealing with guards and being subject to invasive searches (Comfort 2003, 2007, 2009)" (Patler and Branic 2017: 23). It is clear these are the consequences of institutionally enforced structures rather than individual or community pathology; as such, solutions to such oppressions must also be focused at the institutional, rather than interpersonal or individual levels.

Transformative Justice Approaches

Initially, I approached spoken-word at poetry open-mics as similar to the type of community conferencing one encounters in restorative justice programs. When one experiences late adolescence the way I did—and when one spends one's young adult life in communities disrupted by structural oppression—the gnawing question is "restore *to what*?" A disrupted state? While restorative justice programs seek interpersonal healing, they do not attend to the structural causes of oppression disrupting these communities (Kelly 2011; Morris 2000; Nocella 2014). While useful, restorative justice theories have varying definitions and implications and do not adequately address structural forms of harm.

Key to *transformative* justice—in contrast to restorative justice—is the focus on structural forms of injustice, such as those that construct poverty and support state violence, and connecting how past experiences relate to the present health of individuals, families, communities, and offenders in envisioning a better future (Kelly 2011; Mingus 2015; Morris 2000). Transformative justice moves beyond the immediate needs of all community members toward the structural oppressions that impact them in the present and impede their futures (Capeheart and Milovanovic 2007), while empowering communities to heal from violence and trauma without involving social services (Mingus 2015). This perspective recognizes harms at the economic, political, and social levels, while addressing imbalances of power (Mingus 2015; Nocella 2014).

In recognizing the socio-structural conditions that contribute to individual and community harms, transformative justice seeks to empower individuals and communities through community-based justice (Nocella 2014) so as to affect change at these levels (Capeheart and Milovanovic 2007; Mertens 2007). As this study seeks to identify thematic elements of structural harms via spoken-word poetry within communities impacted by structural oppression, utilizing the lens of transformative justice provides a more comprehensive analytical framework.

Black Feminist Thought and Intersectional Criminology

In conjunction with Black feminist thought as a critical social theory broadly supporting principles of social justice and empowerment for all oppressed peoples (Collins 2000), I utilize intersectional criminology. As an analytical tool, intersectionality requires its practitioners to investigate the interstices of categories of sameness and difference in relation to power (Cho et al. 2013). Intersectional criminology, therefore, requires an additional critical analysis of these intersections related to the social control of crime, individual and group experiences with crime, and criminal justice responses thereto (Henne and Troshynski 2019). Utilizing Black feminist analysis situates spoken-word poets as "knowledge agents" who link their experiences with their own ideas and standpoints to investigate systems of oppression impacting their lives and well-being. Utilizing Black feminist analysis also allows the researcher to look beyond the traditions of social disorganization, focusing instead on the ways in which members of these communities organize to resist structural oppression.

In looking at the spoken-word poetry community of San Diego, California, my research is further situated within the changing social conditions unique to this area and its community members—more specifically, at how multiple intersecting oppressions are relayed by poets in communities suffering from disruption and pain. This framework requires me—and researchers, more generally—to look at the ways in which interlocking systems of oppression function within individual experiences as classed, gendered, and racial (Collins 2015). Essentially, an intersectional analytical framework understands that overlapping identities, such as those relating to ability, class, gender, race, and sexuality, should not—indeed, *cannot*—be isolated from each other. These identities are co-constructed while underlying and shaping intersecting and interrelated systems of power. Intersecting power systems result in a socially constructed and complex set of inequalities for individuals and communities, such as those oppressed by poverty, racism, and sexism, as well as police violence associated with the War on Drugs.

Finally, my research takes into consideration the five tenets of CRT analysis. First, it acknowledges that racism is a fundamental organizing framework of our society. Second, it challenges the idea that laws are race-neutral and that color-blindness masks white privilege and power. Third, it recognizes that Whites act in their own self-interests and advance the interests of people of color only to the extent that doing so benefits Whites. Fourth, it submits that those who experience racism are best able to understand it. And fifth, it adheres to a commitment toward social justice (Sleeter 2012).

Study Design and Methodology

Extended Case Study Method and Setting

This research utilized the extended case-study method of data collection that requires researchers to build on preexisting theory, connect the present to the past and the future, and then move from the micro to the macro by extracting the general from the unique (Burawoy 1998). The two sites chosen for this research were distinct in time and space. My data consisted of preliminary observations (including site selection) September–December 2017, then field notes and audio recordings of poems collected January–March 2018 at

two sites, which I analyzed through Black feminist, CRT, intersectional criminological, and transformative justice frameworks.

San Diego County, California, borders Tijuana, Mexico, to the south, and Orange County, California, to the north, with border patrol checkpoints on all major freeways leading in and out of the county. San Diego is also a sanctuary county (Griffith and Vaughn 2017), meaning that it limits its cooperation with the federal government's efforts to enforce national immigration laws. US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) poses a real threat to individuals and families in San Diego County, as evidenced by the arrest and detention of Maria Solis, a pregnant mother and domestic violence survivor, in 2017 (American Civil Liberty Union of San Diego and Imperial Counties 2018). Solis, a single mother to three young children, ultimately chose "voluntary" deportation, rather than continue to be separated from her children (like many Black parents incarcerated in California's state prisons), put her unborn child at further risk, and fight deportation by ICE (NBC San Diego 2017). Solis' story is an example of how institutional oppressions impact individuals wherever they are situated within the matrix of oppression. Her class, documentation status, ethnicity, familial status (mother), and gender were all implicit in the institutional oppression she faced through her detainment, then forced decision to leave the US and return to her country of origin, rather than be separated from her children.

Accounting for 33.1% of the population of San Diego County (County of San Diego 2018), many Latina/o families and individuals have already been impacted by ICE and the failed War on Drugs. According to California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation data from December2018—the most recent data available—the total prison populations for Blacks, Latinos, and Whites were 28.4%, 43.8%, and 21.2%, respectively (CDCR 2018). The state population for these groups, however, was only 6.5% Black, 39.3% Latino, and 72.1% White (US Census 2018). The disproportionate incarceration of Blacks and Latinos relative to their overall population in relation to Whites, resulting, in particular, from incarceration from drug charges (Beckett et al. 2006), is but one glaring example of the forms of structural oppression community members face resulting in the systemic breakdown of families—a painful reality for many in San Diego. Community members are fed up, and community-level resistance to structural oppression is present (Camp and Heatherton 2016).

Cafe Cabaret

Cafe Cabaret in the North Park neighborhood of San Diego, which hosted the "2nd Tuesday Jihmye Poetry and Revolutionary Poets' Brigade" open-mic readings, was founded by friends—one who was a former member of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense and the other a Vietnam Veteran and poet for peace. North Park is an area experiencing active gentrification. The cafe was a locally-owned Caribbean-influenced holdout run by a man and his wife.[2] Set on the corner of Adams Avenue, the exterior held a fountain, where one could find the emcee honoring his ancestors and their land (not so much an Indigenous land acknowledgement, but a recognition of the poet/emcee's adopted familial placement) before he took the "mic." There was bright green paint and art from local artists on the walls, and the small cafe had plants interspersed between tables. The location of the mic

[2] Café Cabaret has since closed, but the "2nd Tuesday Jihmye Poetry and Revolutionary Poets' Brigade" open-mic continues at another local spot.

tended to change. (On one night, the mic was placed in the middle of the cafe. On another, it was located just inside the entrance. On each occasion, poets' chapbooks would be on display and for sale.) Bubble glass behind a light fixture left cool shadows across the wall. The crowd was a mix of races, ages, and genders.

This community of poets, whose motto was and continues to be "Inspiration, Motivation, Contamination," has strong ties to the surrounding areas of San Diego County. It is diverse in age, class, country of origin, gender, race, and sex. Prior to its closing, the cafe also hosted a reading for the poets featured in the San Diego Poetry Annual—a publication that is run completely by volunteers. Any poet who has performed at one of their readings across the county may submit. On any given Tuesday at Cafe Cabaret, open-mic audiences might have heard pieces about state power and violence, the War in Iraq, mental illness and suicide, the resilience of a Native American teen mother, mass incarceration and the War on Drugs, and white privilege.

La Bodega Art Gallery

The La Bodega Art Gallery[3] in the Barrio Logan neighborhood hosted both the Palabra and Black Xpression open-mics. Barrio Logan is situated near South East San Diego, split by the Coronado Bridge, and surrounded by an industrial waterfront, freeways, and a US Naval base (Naval Base San Diego). The neighborhoods' residents have a history of civic engagement. For example, in response to residents' demonstrations and lobbying efforts, the 1.8 acres of land that had devolved into a trash dump after construction of the Coronado Bridge was expanded in 1970 to the 7.9 acres now known as Chicano Park. This area has been designated as an historical site and is recognized for the large murals created among bridge columns by Chicano artists.

Barrio Logan residents are proud of their ethnic identities, with 91.24% identifying as Hispanic compared with 33.1% of countywide residents (County of San Diego 2018). Barrio Logan's residents are also younger and poorer than the average San Diego County residents. According to recent figures, the average adult in Barrio Logan was approximately 26.6 years of age and earned $15,000–29,999 per year compared to the average income of 41.8-year-old white San Diego County residents making an average of $71,758/year (County of San Diego 2018; ESRI n.d.; SANDAG 2017). The setting (La Bodega Art Gallery) was just around the corner from Chicano Park, in an open space with interchanging art from local Chicano artists.

The Palabra open-mic was part of the gallery's mission to enrich and engage their community through art (https://www.facebook.com/pg/labodegagallerysd/about/?ref=page_internal). On one-night, Chicano art lined the walls. Metallic pieces with images of Latina women draped across low-rider cars.[4] On my first night observing, I took my seat as a woman who looked to be 25–35-year-old was already on the mic. She spoke in mixed Spanish and English with her eyes closed and raised her fist when speaking of her people. She held a notebook in her hand but did not look at it very often. One immediately felt the welcoming energy of the audience as they engaged in a chorus of snaps and affirming "mm hmm's" to the poet. As is common within these types of open-mic events, members of the

[3] La Bodega Gallery owners announced in late 2019 they would close their doors due to an unaffordable lease increase. An outpouring of support from locals helped raise enough money to stay in the space, however, the owners chose to relocate to another Barrio Logan location.

[4] A customized vehicle with hydraulic jacks that allow the chassis to be lowered nearly to the road (n.a. 2018a, b, c).

audience empathized and gave healing energy back to the poet through their verbal and physical displays, such as snapping their fingers and making positive exclamations. There is love in these spaces. Encouragement. When poets stepped to the mic for the first time, they were met with audible support, encouraged when they faltered, and given the time they needed to express themselves.

Black Xpression

La Bodega Art Gallery also hosted the Black Xpression open-mic on Fridays. Upon walking in, one immediately felt like family. This feeling of family was by design. The co-founders of Black Xpression are four young Black community members who wanted to create a space "for the community by the community" (http://www.kpbs.org/events/ongoing/black-xpression-open-mic/) that was open to everyone in which community members could experience all of the positivity and none of the negativity of Black culture. It was designed to be a safe space where people from all areas of Black culture could express themselves in ways that might not be safe for them to do so in other public areas, particularly in the current sociopolitical climate of hate and racial discrimination in Donald J. Trump's America (Marcin 2017; Siddique and Laughland 2017).

Black Xpression began mid-2016 with a group of student performers from the community at a local restaurant. The open-mic was also held at a local church on Logan Avenue in Barrio Logan before moving to La Bodega Art Gallery (Daily Aztec 2017). Its co-founders' link to local colleges was evident each Friday night as young and creative people of color gathered from around the county to share themselves, their experiences, their joy and their pain with each other. One of the co-founders was quoted as describing the open-mic in four words—"Black. Empowerment. Unity. Community" (Daily Aztec 2017)—but pointed out that this community is for anyone who has felt silent or "othered."

What is striking about the Black Xpression open-mic[5] is how young, positive, vibrant, and Black this community of poets is compared to the Cafe Cabaret community of poets. Loud hip-hop music plays during breaks, keeping the energy level high. At Black Xpression, the common call and response is, "If you feel it (call) Express it (response)!" At one Black Xpression open-mic, the gallery, which had hosted Palabra two nights before, was completely transformed. The stage had been replaced by a brightly painted low-rider car. Local vendors, selling food and jewelry, bags and chapbooks, lined the back walls of the gallery. An all-Black-woman poetry group was selling African items. I purchased two beaded bracelets from them and gave one to my daughter when I returned home. The space was *very* Black, but not homogenous. It was very diverse in terms of Black culture: young mothers with children, old folk, young men and women flirting and playing around together. There were even a few members of the Nation of Islam standing near the back.

[5] Black Xpression continues at the World Beat Cultural Center in Balboa Park, San Diego, California.

Findings and Discussion

Deep Memories: Racism, White Supremacy, and Police Brutality

> 1999, this is a nation with no determination to make reparations for its history. Tattooed target tumbleweed, bits of brutalized black bodies blown from the Bronx to Jasper to Riverside to bits of black hide. Walled in the hood, walled in the jail, pent up in projects just waiting for the mail, totally depleted hitting the street. [Sharon Elise, poet]

One very poignant way in which poets of the "2nd Tuesday Jihmye Poetry and Revolutionary Poets' Brigade," Black Xpression, and Palabra communities addressed structural oppression was by providing historical context and connections to contemporary issues of police brutality and mass incarceration. Two local Black women poets (both educators) read pieces about mass incarceration. Sharon Elise, one of the two, concentrated on children and women, reading,

> Lock up our children. Like slaves, they have no child, hood streets await them lined with cops and paddy wagons. Call them adults and have them collect death penalties after they have learned how to steal and kill and go to prison in your concrete nightmare. Now lock up the black mothers of Africa, the fastest growing population of people in these prisons, the fastest growing population.

The other, Kimberly Elaine, focused solely on women:

> In skins of henna, bright red Bwindi, and orange and blue-flowered silk hijab. You are beautiful in your prison cell, pressed into garbage and scores of addiction and scars. You are beautiful in your bluest black skin, Irish red mane, bounce in that Afro and thumbing bass guitar.

Poets at both sites and at all the open-mics spoke both directly and through the use of metaphor, taking audience members on a journey back to slave masters and patrols, Jim Crow, the relegation of Native Americans to reservations, state-sanctioned lynching, institutional racism, and high-profile cases of vigilante racism and violence against Black girls, women, boys, and men. Cheryl H., a white woman, spoke of memories she would only later comprehend fully:

> Emmett Till was murdered in muddy Mississippi. I did not know…Sixty years later I realize how time has it way of exposing the taste of Snickers and snobbery. Mom never said why she cut my playtime short when I went to Amara's house. To my granddaughter I say, let's get to the bottom of a box of cracker jacks and ask some questions.

Sharon Elise performed her piece addressing police brutality from the not-to-distant past reading, "*Target, demure black immigrant made a fatal choice being black and in view of the local blue boys*," while clearly drawing on memories from the larger Black community across the US to express her pain.

Through the spoken-word poets of San Diego, California, one can learn the history of law enforcement officials as agents of White supremacy in the US. Police are described as predatory animals lusting after bodies to kill—sometimes invisible, unseen but always felt, as they search for their next target to kill. Poets depict scenes of previous times, showing the long reach of denial:

> One day about 1965, he said to me, "You know, you don't know how lucky you have it." I mean, because you see, right now he followed the great lawmen like Earp and Bat Masterson and we don't allow people to carry guns into town. You no longer have to be afraid to [get] shot in church or at the store or in the school by some crazy cowboy riding a horse, just a thought. [Joe Moloch, poet]

In some pieces, metaphor is mixed with vivid descriptions of young, Black death. In one piece by Sharon Elise, we are taken on a death journey of three Black young girls, "*Sweet voices singing grownup songs. Sweet babies swinging on homegrown wrongs. Bomb in the Sunday school…. Bomb in the brownstone. Target, little brown girl wearing braids and played tag was it. Don't protect it. Don't see life in it. Watch it die. Watch it die. Make it a dirty toilet death."* We are also reminded, in this same piece, that life at the intersections of race and gender is fragile for Black women: "*Target, little more grown girl out to party, maybe stayed too late, maybe partied too hardy, leapt up sleeping in her car to keep herself safe, boom, she was hit. The long end of her grave.*" [Sharon Elise].

Joe Moloch, a white local veteran poet, brought these memories of racist violence to the forefront, when he read, "*I think about the national anthem and the silent protest of players who kneel in memory of boys who died for being black and staying outside after dark."* Anywhere in America, it seems, Black and Brown bodies are constantly in the crosshairs of police hunting parties—as evidenced, most recently, by the death of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer (in May 2020)—and the poets do not let us forget these bodies are also female—like Breonna Taylor, shot dead in her home in Louisville, Kentucky (in March 2020).

Now They Want the Neighbors, Too: Racism, State Violence, Mass Incarceration, and Latino Communities

State violence by agents of ICE (as well as its prior incarnations) was also present in the spoken-word poetry performed at open-mics in San Diego. Mass incarceration in the form of private border prisons has grown significantly in the last decade, with immigrant inmate population increasing from 4800 in 2002, to 26,249 in 2017 (Gotsch and Basti 2018). Much sociological and criminological scholarship has examined the effects of mass incarceration on Black communities, particularly Black males, but far less attention has been paid to how this system of oppression impacts Latino communities. As noted above, although immigration laws are civil, rather than criminal (Patler and Branic 2017), the Latino prison population in the US grew by almost 50% between the years of 2001 and 2011, reaching over 330,000 (Kilgore 2011). By 2013, this number would grow to almost 480,000 (Patler and Branic 2017). Much of this growth was facilitated by the USA PATRIOT ACT (officially, Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act), which included immigration laws mandating prison time for felony convictions that had resulted previously in only deportations (Kilgore 2011). The private prison industry capitalized on the new provisions, controlling nearly 50% of the immigration detention industry, but only 8% of total prisons in the US (Kilgore 2011).

Individuals are held in deportation facilities for one or more years before their eventual removal, prolonging the negative impact and trauma associated with mass incarceration for incarcerated individuals and their families (Patler and Branic 2017). As noted above, prolonged detention prior to deportation impacts families economically, emotionally and psychologically, resulting in a type of "secondary prisonization"—the experience through which "legally innocent people come to experience the effects of incarceration indirectly

due to their sustained contact with the correctional institution, characterized, for example, by dealing with guards and being subject to invasive searches" (Comfort 2003, 2007, 2009) (Patler and Branic 2017: 23).

Anthony, a local Latino poet, spoke about the familial impact of ICE, reading, "*Breaking up families who have been here for decades and even generations, watching little kids cry as their mom and dad get taken away by these assholes that call themselves ICE, yeah. They're ICE because their veins are filled with ice because they have no warm blood."* Anthony's piece indicates that his pain and anger during "secondary prisonization" is tied to the current presidency, when he continued,

> Let us also remember that he is a paranoid, misogynistic, self-righteous, racist piece of excrement. I used another word but I wanted to use that one. And he is a sorry excuse of a human being, and yet all that fit your Christian values? Trump and his father purposefully passed on well-qualified minority tenants and rented the same space to qualified white folk.

At Cafe Cabaret, stereotypes about Mexican immigrants were addressed directly. Anthony stepped up to the mic and apologized for the current of anger running through his poems as of late and told the audience he would read a piece inspired by President Donald J. Trump that he wrote as a therapeutic exercise:

> Breaking up families who have been here for decades and even generations, watching little kids cry as their mom and dad get taken away by these assholes that call themselves ICE, yeah. They're ICE because their veins are filled with ice because they have no warm blood. They're a bunch of servants. And that fits your Christian values?

This piece encapsulated much of what was expressed by other poets at the other regarding immigration. Mass incarceration in the form of ICE detention centers and the trauma of family disruption and separation were also expressed in these spaces.

Themes relating pain and trauma to immigration and ICE raids, loss of community and family members due to deportation, harsh conditions in deportation detention facilities, and violent coyotes emerged at all open-mics except for Black Xpression. At the same time, poets resisted by speaking of oppression through beautiful imagery. For example, Jeannie read: "*Cardboard butterflies of orange and black symbolic of migration on…walls. They dance and flutter their paper wings and dreamed of a time when there would be nothing dividing them. No walls, or laws, or fear. No border patrol…no detention centers.*" One recurring subtheme within this area was death, even as a call to resistance. Julia, a poet at Palabra read: *"give me liberty or give me death—I say give me consciousness or I am dead, for liberty is an illusion for the poor, the colored, the oppressed. So my people awaken, arise, resist. Take up your arms and lift up your fists…."*

The concept of death related to borders and border crossing appeared in all of the open-mic settings, albeit in different ways. Sometimes death was treated as cold; at other times, it was the cold that *caused* death. More often, the cold was the final state of death for loved ones. To be sure, this is not so uncommon by itself. But it was *the ways* in which the poets *performed* their losses, *the ways* in which they *spoke of* their ancestors, and the pain that their enslavement continues to cause them. One poet read:

> Only when the cape around the green uniform was made of nooses…1,000 nooses, 2,000 nooses, 4,000 nooses…It was the firestorm of innocence lost, burning from racism, racism… Pray for them the lost ones…The guitar plays the song of tears, for

> the lost ones…In the shadow of 4,000 shameful nooses. Shadow capes of…the border patrol. As each one dies a new, ugly, white noose appears….

Counting off in this way reveals a consciousness linking past and present pain.

Many of the poems these were situated historically and tended to center around assimilation, incarceration, and segregation. At Palabra, the dead were remembered as being moved from one space to another by agents of state power, creating a community of migrants from the north, east, and south who are laborers and travelers with shared struggles. As Julia shared,

> What is wrong? Love, that I cannot see you. "What happened?" They say. Left in the night, frozen and forgotten…lost in the rain, lost in the stream, lost in the thunder. That big black can still hear. The weeks, months, and years gone by. Lost in the 1,001 Mexican–American, Chicago Native American nights, that not only we believe we're something more and more as far away tears only reminds me of how intensely we trilled in delight in the ghosts of our past. Together how heaven and hell united us as one. Past the trouble of our own blood's weight and defeat.

From these poets, we see that "the border" is an all-encompassing but unseen force that is everywhere. For this community, we understand that "the border" is both nonexistent and exists in one's mind: it both defines countries and divides them. Phil, a poet featured in the San Diego Poetry Annual, relayed this message clearly:

> The region we live in includes an international border but it isn't defined by the boarder. That's one of the reasons we do this book. To show that there is humanity across the border…. All the bodies are boarders, who carry real big walls in stone and iron. Race, sex, color. We open our gates to report what we deny. Meaning unexpected infections. All of the bodies are boarders and as well as that, it doesn't matter that the boundaries are walls…but when we fight ourselves in the effort to let others inside.

One early evening, Jeannie spoke of immigrants as butterflies: "*I fly by my own laws. I freely cross your cruel walls however high. I just flutter my wings and fly. I flew daily among them as hundreds arrived. On both sides of that slithering serpent of rusted steel.*" The imagery of the butterfly flying freely over the barrier of the border speaks to its inability to prevent movement and restrict lives.

We See All Y'all: Links between Multiple Forms of Structural Oppression

Poets at the open-mics at Cafe Cabaret and La Bodega Gallery provided a deeper understanding of the links between structural oppression and state violence. Brutality at the hands of police and ICE, poverty, and racism—and their connections to mass incarceration, including the rise of deportation facilities—emerged in the poetry at both sites. Utilizing an intersectional criminological framework rooted in the tenets of Black feminism—and as alluded to above—I view poets as "knowledge agents" concerned with expressing the interlocking nature of systems of oppression.

Poets at the Palabra open-mic and at the "2nd Tuesday Jihmye Poetry and Revolutionary Poets' Brigade" were more connected with state violence related to immigration and border patrol, ICE, and the Trump Administration than at the Black Xpression open-mic, even though the Palabra and Black Xpression open-mics took place at the same location.

Themes related to mass incarceration as structural oppression were also situated historically and defined within poetry performed at all three open-mics. In addition, family disruption, mental health, police brutality, and poverty as causes leading to mass incarceration emerged across all of the open-mic readings. Significantly, poets approached these issues as overlapping, or interlocking, rather than occurring independently.

At all of the open-mics, poets often expressed their sentiments regarding mass incarceration using the language of being hunted, unwanted, and under constant attack, whether structurally or interpersonally. ICE and Immigration and Border patrol agents were expressly called out at the "2nd Tuesday Jihmye Poetry and Revolutionary Poets' Brigade." This may be due to the close ties this group of poets has to the 100 Thousand Poets for Change or 100TPC (https:100tpc.org) organization focused on immigration and social justice in the area. Moreover, both open-mics were held at Cafe Cabaret, where poets tended to be, on average, older, white, working- or middle-class, and may have received more formal education than those at Palabra and Black Xpression, both of which are communities mainly of younger poets of color.

Youthfulness, however, does not negate the ability of young poets of color to be "knowledge agents" analyzing the interlocking systems of oppression impacting their lives (Lacques-Zapien and Mendoza 2014). In fact, as part of their resistance to poverty and the structural mechanisms blocking the growth of Black community wealth in San Diego, the founders of Black Xpression forged a connection with a local entrepreneurial organization aimed at establishing and increasing Black wealth in one of the historically Black neighborhoods in South East San Diego.

Resisting Poverty

Poets from Black Xpression joined with community members working to feed homeless youth in the area with freshly baked goods. Providing fresh-baked food is a measure of humanity that is often not provided for homeless and indigent community members. Having experienced first-hand the dehumanization of county-managed food banks, I was struck by the compassion and kindness of this gesture. This mode of resistance also links with another structural factors impacting poverty in Black communities—unequal access to adequate public education and the school-to-prison pipeline. Rather than leaving the communities from which they came, the young Black college students were giving back to the community by making connections between college students and social justice organizations and local community members.

In March 2018, the Black Xpression community joined forces with "Soulcial Workers," for their clothing drive, "Benefit 4 Brotherhood." This clothing drive was focused on obtaining professional menswear for individuals twelve to twenty-six years old. Soulcial Workers is a local San Diego area nonprofit community arts organization with a mission "to restore hope, inspire healing, and nurture creativity for all youth in vulnerable populations" through "Attitudes, Awareness, and Relationships Training." Through this collaboration, the Black Xpression community of poets is working within a transformative justice approach in attending to the fallout of structural oppression in their community.

According to their Facebook page, the Soulcial Workers organization, founded in 2015 by a former foster youth, focuses on "Transition Age Youth" (ages 14–25), with a mission to:

> Inspire social change by utilizing performing arts as a tool to build connections. To create avenues for intercultural dialogue and enhance community through shared

> experience…encourage youth to be critical thinkers; to develop their own identities, respect culture and diversity, and build resiliency in their own experiences. We use various art mediums for personal and artistic development; engaging youth in discussion about culture, community, and the complexities of their every-day experiences. Most importantly, empower them to use their voice to challenge social norms and create change where needed. Participants gain these skills in fun, interactive learning environment that promotes creativity and healthy self- expression, and provides collaborative opportunities and grants to create social change in their own communities. (https://www.facebook.com/pg/TheSOULcialWorkers/about/?ref=page_internal).

Through this collaboration, whether knowingly or unknowingly, the Black Xpression community was engaging in transformative justice. The Soulcial Workers collective is a living example of how the power of pain packaged in performances can help make connections with and heal members of disrupted and structurally oppressed communities, such as youth separated from their families and growing up in foster placement.

Connection-Making Though Poetry

Each of the open-mic communities included in this study supported local businesses though their events. As mentioned above, Black Xpression and Palabra were both held at La Bodega Gallery in Barrio Logan. During both events, local vendors were present, and consumption of their goods was actively encouraged, particularly at Black Xpression. Every Friday, local restaurants, retail clothing stores, original artists, musicians, and poets sold their chapbooks, clothing, compact discs, food, and jewelry. Individuals and groups who participated in the open-mic venues also engaged with other institutions in the larger San Diego community.

Poets from Cafe Cabaret open-mic communities continue to conduct writing workshops all over the county that are open and accessible. Workshops for veterans also take place. San Diego has a large veteran population, due to the presence of its naval base, and so these workshops speak directly to how this community of poets identifies and addresses the pain of members of their community. Often, new poets attend these writing workshops and then come to perform their pieces at one of the open-mics, where they are welcomed and supported. Crossover between local open-mic readings is common, as new and welcoming venues gain popularity, new community members are often brought in by word of mouth, or through emcee announcements.

Although emcees rotate within the community and at the various open-mic events, it was through the emcees at Cafe Cabaret (“2nd Tuesday and Revolutionary Poets’ Brigade”) and La Bodega Gallery (Palabra and Black Xpression) that community events, other open-mics, community projects, and organizations were most often mentioned. Indeed, once, while introducing an upcoming poet, the emcee at Cafe Cabaret announced receipt of a grant that enabled a group from this community to conduct poetry-writing workshops. One of the remarkable findings from this site is that poems from these workshops are included in the San Diego Poetry Annual, which, as mentioned above, is a publication edited, printed, and donated to local area public libraries by a group of volunteer poets.

Conclusion

While the impetus and motivations for founding spoken-word communities via open-mic readings varied from site to site, what is clear across all sites was the need to create community spaces where individuals can come, have their stories heard, and build and maintain healthier communities together. Whether they want to reinvigorate the long history of Chicano art, as with Palabra, or feel the need to create a safe space where young Black community members can express themselves safely, as with Black Xpression, the desire for a sense of community within these spaces was palpable. At every open-mic site visited for this research, community members expressed a need for these communities in a way that feels like it is *required* for their lives. Often, expressions of belonging emerged in the descriptions of these spaces. Poets and audience members alike conveyed the feelings they experience in spaces like these when poets take the mic. This sense of belonging is accompanied by acceptance, love, and room for growth.

That members of communities disrupted by structural oppression take their need for healing into their own hands, invite and share space with community members inhabiting various spaces within the matrix of oppression, and are doing so toward the health, wellness, and vibrancy of their communities, is revolutionary. The communities examined here engaged in and continue to strive for transformative justice through spoken-word poetry as resistance against structural oppression in forming communities around their pain, and in small, but direct ways, addressing it. These are not merely interpersonal issues that can be solved by restorative measures; they are *structural* and thus a structural approach to healing is necessary. In forming community *around* the spoken-word, poets highlight, address, and resist racism, state and interpersonal violence, and structural oppression *through* spoken-word poetry as fantastic examples of community-based transformative social justice practice.

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