

The Gathering of Voices Becomes a Place

A Conversation with Anna West

Vincent A. Cellucci

Vincent: Can you inform us about the mission of Humanities Amped and how it's rooted in your hometown of Baton Rouge?

Anna: Thank you for including me in this conversation about the poetics of place. As you say, I am dug in here in Baton Rouge, my home city. I have returned here multiple times, despite the draw to take my efforts as an organiser and educator of critical youth literacies practices to places where the meaning of the work would be more widely legible. And yet, it is the illegibility of Baton Rouge that draws me back here, like a puzzle, or a Sisyphean rock I must contend with.

I am my mother's daughter. She, too, was a deeply dug-in Baton Rouge educator who taught first graders to become readers and writers in a trailer turned into a classroom. These days, I walk down the long corridor of a windowless public school to literally the last possible classroom on the left, where I teach high school students who travel almost two hours across a miasma of subdivisions to reach this little space we call Humanities Amped.

Our mission to 'model and share transformative educational practices that result in people's power to shape their world' feels immense against this little quotidian classroom. In some ways, we are hiding in plain sight, something akin to a 'Freedom School'. The goal is to hold open a modest space for reading, writing, and dialogue. This space is a way of saying simply that working-class, primarily Black and immigrant youth deserve the opportunity to think, to be critical researchers of their worlds, and to feel the vibrancy of their collective power in their words and proximity to one another. The meaning of this is only discernible if you first understand how dispossessed our community is from these forms of power, and how that dispossession is normalized, unremarkable, invisible in its

everydayness, such that it is only noticeable when the silence is ruptured.

I say ‘we’ and ‘our’ here in the sense that I am shaped by the unspeakability of these dynamics as much as anyone. I falter most when asked to give the elevator pitch for Humanities Amped, despite twelve years of shaping it. What I can explain reads better as a yes/no flow chart:

Do you understand how the rise of techno-rationalism as the prevailing logic of schooling has foreclosed meaningfulness as an important attribute of learning in the era of high-stakes testing?

Yes?

Do you understand that youthful rebellion against meaninglessness draped in empty appeals to authority is a natural, human response?

Yes?

Do you recognize that these conditions lead to the de-skilling of many people, ultimately weakening their capacity to tap into language, analysis, research, cultural resources, and the imagination as a way to resist further dispossession?

Yes?

Do you realize that there is a silent but insidious belief held by many so-called educators and educational institutions that ‘these kids do not want to be educated?’

Yes?

Do you know how wrong they really are?

Yes?

Do you know that for people’s minds and hearts to change, they must first see that it could be otherwise?

Yes!

It is at the end of this reasoning that we set our practice, faltering often, towards an embodied ‘otherwiseness’, as the philosopher Maxine Greene urged. Our classes and initiatives, held together by just a handful of people, work within the greater fold of the public schools to breathe some life into the classroom as a space of democratic engagement and voice. We read and write with social purpose.

And we hold public forums, such as the longstanding youth open mic Fresh Heat, as spaces for not just youth creative personal expression, but as intergenerational, youth-driven meeting grounds, where the practice of literature is oriented towards naming the otherwise unnameable and proclaiming the otherwise unsayable. In this configuration, youth exist as apprentices to the craft of literature, but also as full practitioners in the civic and social structures raised together with the community of adults who practice ‘holding’ open the space for such forms of exchange.

The connection to Baton Rouge is the deep hunger that

exists for such forums and outlets here, especially opportunities that are not secretly meant for ‘those’ people and not ‘these’ people. My former student and now colleague, T. George, often says that the underlying value proposition of Humanities Amped is that ‘Everybody eats’. In other words, no one is turned away without sustenance, and there are no prerequisites for entry. By coming to the table, you form a network of mutuality with those beside you, sharing what you have to offer and taking what you need as well.

Vincent: Keeping place in mind, can you describe the value of youth open mics?

Anna: What I love about the poetry open mic is that it is structurally a polyvocal platform for anyone who believes they have a poem to share. It differs from social media platforms in that it is an embodied, temporal performance space with no commercial investment. As an oral tradition, and especially here in the South and throughout its diaspora, spoken word is a descendant of the Black church, in which testifying is an experience of communal recognition thrumming with the call and response tradition: ‘Everybody make some noise!’

The open mic is an example of what scholar Django Paris has coined a ‘culturally sustaining pedagogy’. This lively, porous relationship between audiences and spoken word poets is not just showcasing cultural practices; it is also invoking and strengthening cultural practices by inviting more and more voices to join into an inherently pedagogical space, where teaching and learning are happening among practitioners who are differently positioned in terms of both experience and skill. Sometimes people talk shit about open mics, like, ‘What about all the *bad* poetry?’ But they are missing the point. The pleasure of open mics is not the sum of the performances. The larger space of witnessing that emerges from the repetitions, the intertextual play, the anomalies, the sudden strokes of genius and failures, forms an imperfect, always digressing, chorus. That chorus is where place is made. There is no coherent, singular narrator; rather, the gathering of voices becomes a place to be with and among one another.

Baton Rouge is a college town, a capital city, a petrochemical hub, and a relatively high ground from the effects of coastal erosion in South Louisiana; thus, it is a place people both move to and away from. Despite this transience, the youth open mic creates a sense of intergenerational belonging. While youth use the space to summon a generational belonging to one another, an accidental outgrowth is a sense of intergenerational belonging that grows among the adults. Our shared witness of the youth, as we listen to them express their joy and pain, creates a feeling that these are ‘our kids’, and thus, we become bound to one another

in our ethical relationship to them. In other words, our act of listening turns us into the ‘village’ that can ‘raise the child’.

When I grew up in Baton Rouge in the 1980s and 1990s, my generation felt the absence of spaces to gather and recognize ourselves, much less a space to be acknowledged on our own terms by older generations. Outside of school and home, there was the mall and the church, spaces that seemed more interested in policing our youthfulness rather than engaging it. In a suburban landscape with virtually no public transit system or gathering grounds, there was nowhere to tap into what we could have been the ‘village’, which would have been for us a place to be seen, and to play out the inevitable dramas of becoming a person in the world. For my peers and me, this lack of recognition meant that we tapped into hidden, often psychic spaces where we could circulate our desire to imagine a larger life: poetry passed in hallway notes, weed smoked behind our parents’ garages, sneaking out of sleepovers to drive down River Road in cars with strangers who cut the headlights just for the thrill of it. I had language and books, a loving family, economic and racial privilege, to keep me from some, not all, of the traps that surrounded me. It is a gross understatement to say that my generation could have used an outlet. I saw too many of my peers, rich and poor, fall into the stupefying hands of addiction, abuse, and early death. Black kids were, and *are*, exponentially more likely to be eaten alive in this atmosphere of repression compounded by White supremacy institutionalized in the criminal ‘justice’ system that regularizes spaces like juvenile detention centres, probation offices, courtrooms, and police stations. The people doing youth poetry work, most of whom also ‘come from’ this place, whatever the decade or locality, are imbued with a desire to build something that was missing from our own youthful lives. We see the power of spaces where people can grow up being witnessed and loved publicly by their community. For young folks who have no other access to this kind of nurturing, an open mic is an oasis, allowing you to experience not only your own rhetorical force but that of your peers, and thus your generation. This rhetorical force is itself a precondition of political and social power.

Vincent: How do these open mics relate to the national SLAM poetry scene?

Anna: A larger national and, to a lesser extent, international network of youth spoken word organizations emerged in the early 2000s. These (inter)national gathering grounds and their networks have lost some momentum in recent years, first with the exhaustion that many organizers and young writers experienced navigating the deep contradictions of youth poetry slam as a format, and eventually due to the interpersonal harm

that ricocheted between the small network of organizations holding those forums together.

I'm less interested in rebuilding that national scene at this point in my trajectory as an organiser and educator. I stopped taking young people to national slams like Brave New Voices when I began to see the potential harm of asking them to navigate the complexity of representing themselves and their communities on a scale that could not be responsible for their stories. The nation has a consumption-based way of reading the Deep South as pathological, and Baton Rouge's identity often gets engulfed in the stories about the South, about New Orleans, and the burden of that representation is a lot to put on young people, many of whom are often traveling outside of the state for the first time.

The incursion of digital spaces into youth spoken word's live performance spaces did a lot to compound the potential for that kind of harm. When digital modes of publication took off in the early 2010s, it meant new negotiations over the ethics of inviting youth to present themselves, often quite vulnerably, in the midst of their own becoming. In my evaluation, much of the good work of holding space for youth voices was being devoured and exploited by a toxic celebrity culture. This was amplified by poetry slam competitions, where the illusion of winners and losers made it easy to contort what had been functioning as grassroots popular education into something more like reality TV, which is exactly what HBO did with its *Brave New Voices* documentary in 2008.

That said, there is immense power in providing young people with access to travel and look at things from new perspectives. We work closely with another program, Andover Bread Loaf, located in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which is fascinating because it is the home of the old textile mills that once processed the South's cotton and was later home to some of the first labour strikes in the country. They have developed a network of educators and youth from all over the country and the world. We send teachers to Massachusetts every summer to tap into that network, and we are starting to bring youth into that exchange, too. The opportunity to look at yourself from a distance, through the eyes of others whose experiences mirror and contrast with your own, is a large part of understanding where you are in the world, who you are. These exchanges, which are immersed in writing and witnessing alongside one another, are to me richer than big gathering grounds of festivals and conferences because there is an emphasis on sitting still in circles with one another. It prioritizes a pedagogy of kindred listening over the empty currency of visibility and posturing, which can too easily turn good-faith efforts to speak and be witnessed into spectacle.

Vincent: The Alton Sterling shooting and Black Lives Matter protests were the most memorable and internationally publicised of many race and prejudice-related events in the recent history of the city. How do places like the Triple S convenience store (site of shooting and memorial mural) function as sites of trauma and coping?

Anna: Coping feels like too generous a word for what has happened in Baton Rouge. In 2016, Alton Sterling's killing by police in front of the Triple S Food Mart thrust us onto the map of a national reckoning with policing and its hitherto openly invisible violence, throughout Black American spaces and life.

Baton Rouge is a majority Black city, but one where Black life is consistently rendered invisible through the grammar of White supremacy. These grammars are geographic, institutionally sanctioned, and relentlessly rationalized. Spatially, we are a city of subdivisions ending in cul-de-sacs that cut off the flow from one territory to another, resulting in a configuration more like a series of plantations than an interconnected polis. In fact, many of those subdivisions exist on the land where plantations once stood, memorializing slaveholders in their names. Here, as in other cities throughout the South, housing patterns during Jim Crow were characterized by 'checkerboard segregation', meaning that Black and White communities were developed in proximity to one another so that Black domestic labourers could more easily serve White employers. This is crucial to understanding how race and space function in the South, where people are adept at sharing space while also maintaining a rigid, and again, unspeakable, power structure.

I live in a quiet, lower-middle-class neighbourhood just to one side of Baton Rouge's starkest racial dividing line, Florida Boulevard, which bisects the city into North and South. From my home, it is a 4-minute drive to the Triple S Food Mart, literally one right turn off my street, and you are there; and yet, the proximity ends there. My niece, who also lives on my street, asked me once why she rarely left the neighbourhood and turned right. How to explain the facts that hide in plain sight: that nearly all of the cultural, economic, civic, and social institutions that shape her life exist in the city's South?

The uprisings that took place in Baton Rouge after Alton Sterling's killing were a fever dream in the intense heat of July, in which we saw the outrage pour out over the veneer of our green lawns as police zip-tied peaceful protesters on their knees in a swift, militarized response. Black leaders who broke from the status quo to speak out about what was happening were met by fierce backlash from the city's power structure. Seven years later, in 2023, the BRAVE (Baton Rouge Area Violence Elimination) police task force was revealed

to have run an unmarked warehouse for years, where people suspected of criminal activity were held and tortured. In this repressive environment, being critical of the police is equated to criminality.

Poet and educator Donney Rose, my friend and former colleague, was vocal about the state of Black life in Baton Rouge through online platforms both before and after Alton Sterling's death. In 2017, the city contracted Forward Arts, which had been the home of youth poetry in Baton Rouge since 2005, to run a series of youth workshops. In July of that year, city council member and police union liaison John Delgado went online to complain that the city's resources were going to pay Rose for teaching 'a poetry course to young gangbangers'. This deeply racist characterization only begins to reveal the troubling logic of those who would, at every turn, deny that the need to memorialize, to process, indeed, to cope through language and community, be extended to those whom Delgado and the worldview he represents deem sub-human.

Eventually, the accumulation of lost contracts led to Forward Arts folding into Humanities Amped, where we too faced various forms of censorship and mischaracterization, a foreshadowing to the theatre of the absurd that continues to play out all over the country over how history can be taught, what 'feelings' are allowed to be felt in schools, and who indeed can show up in public existing in their body.

The mural on the Triple S of a warm, smiling Alton Sterling, haloed by a yellow glow, feels like a family snapshot, reflecting the uncomplicated love for an uncle or father who has, nevertheless, been swallowed into a night that is as hard as history to explain. Like the small gold pendants that many of the boys in my classes wear, carrying on their chests the smiling portrait of a dead brother, uncle, or friend, the mural is a way to remember that life has a way of mattering in the face of all odds, even death.

Vincent: The theme of this issue is 'Poetics of Place', a play on the Bachelard title, which encouraged dwelling in psychic spaces. Can you share any images or insights about the psychic spaces inhabited by youth today related to the architecture of the city?

Anna: A couple of years ago, I took a handful of my students to testify to the Louisiana House Education Committee. I'll skip the details of what brought us there, but summarise by saying that it was depressing, so when we left the dark committee meeting room, I read the dejection on my students' faces and suggested, to lighten the mood, that we take the ride up the tiny elevator to the top of the State Capital building, which happens to be the tallest in the country.

Once at the top, we walked outside and felt the wind

sweeping across our bodies. To one side, the light churns softly on the surface of the Mississippi River, where casinos, levees, and barges are brought down to scale against the river's ancient cadence. To the left, looking past downtown's meagre skyrisers, is a thick tree canopy, a chorus of oaks, pecans, crepe myrtles, magnolias, cypress, and pines, swaying softly over black rooftops in the humidity. Further downriver stands Tiger Stadium, cartoonishly large, a commercial of itself, sworn to bleed its proverbial purple and gold football blood into the already soaked soil of the former plantation it sits on. If you walk to the backside of the observation deck, as we did, you would see the tiny Capitol Lake, buttressed by the Governor's mansion and the state's Department of Education. Beyond that, the Gotham sprawl of Exxon Mobil offers plumes of white gas to the sky. (The wind pattern has been proven to blow these emissions into the predominantly Black, North section of Baton Rouge). This panorama is a jarring visual: multi-story structures of pipes and scaffolding built out over an immense concrete landscape; it is just one of hundreds of refineries and chemical plants that make up 'Cancer Alley' between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. For this 85-mile stretch, it is widely known that air pollution exceeds hazardous risk levels.

When I was a child and we drove past the plants at nighttime, I believed they were New York City, as seen from a distance, due to the glittering lights and towers whose smokestacks reached the clouds. That city had a structure and name in my consciousness. But this place, where my father and my classmates' fathers disappeared to work each day, was nevertheless a cipher to me, an inexplicable rupture in the landscape. On this day, I watched my students wonder too, looking out at the refinery, inscrutable and menacing as the faces of the men in the basement we'd just stood before. It has always seemed apt to me that this is the view from the backside of the State Capitol building. The relationship between an extractive, powerful industry and the seat of law is just here in the backyard. If one is polite enough—as we are known to be here—one might not even draw a connection.

It would be hard for me to say how youth today see the city, but I do know how I was trained to see the city as a youth, as a series of dissonances that do not add up to anything coherent, even when the story is right in front of your face. And I saw that on my students' faces that day too: truths almost too crushing to speak into the polluted air, waiting for them.