SOUTHERN SOUL, SOUTHERN SLAM: THE JAMBALAYA SOUL SLAM AND BULL CITY SLAM TEAM

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ABSTRACT

Jackson Hall: Southern Soul, Southern Slam: The Jambalaya Soul Slam and Bull City Slam Team
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This thesis is an ethnography of the Jambalaya Soul Slam and Bull City Slam Team based in Durham, North Carolina. Specifically, incorporating elements of thick description and documentary photography, this ethnography investigates how the poets of the Jambalaya Soul Slam community and the Bull City Slam Team engage with the politics of southernness and Blackness in the ways they write, perform, discuss aesthetics, and hold space during local slams, regional competitions, and national competitions. Discourses of communitas and subjectivity are critical to poetry slam scholarship: How do poetry slams channel individual performances and crowd participation to become zones of communitas? How do poets, particularly the Black southern poets of the Jambalaya community, adapt the generative potential of communitas to re-write the scripts that white hegemony has imposed on their identities and their work? For the poets of the Jambalaya and the Bull City Slam Team, southernness becomes a means through which poets define how they engender communitas in the rooms they enter and how they discover alternate possibilities for what southern spoken aesthetics and identities, especially as the intersection of Blackness, can represent. Ultimately, the fact that the poets do not coalesce at a singular conception of what southernness means to their art and ethics is the point. For them, southernness is a much about coming together at a common table as it is about charting new paths of possibility—in how they write, how they perform, and how they hold community.
To Dasan, Ayanna, iShine, Milli, LB, El’Ja, and Wendy.
Your words inspired me to write a few of my own.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: BU-BU-BU-BULL CITY ................................................................. 1

CHAPTER 1: THE JAMBALAYA SOUL SLAM ......................................................... 22

CHAPTER 2: SOUTHERN AESTHETICS AND THE BULL CITY WAY ..................... 47

CHAPTER 3: THE BULL CITY SLAM TEAM, SOUTHERN FRIED, AND THE NATIONAL POETRY SLAM .................................................. 85

CONCLUSION: “I COULD WRITE ABOUT ANYTHING I WANTED” ......................... 114

REFERENCES .................................................................................................... 122
2017 Bull City Slam Team
Ashley “Milli” Lumpkin
Ayanna Albertson
Eric “LB” Thompson
Christopher “Dasan Ahanu” Massenburg
INTRODUCTION: BU-BU-BU-BULL CITY

We stand together in circle, all six of us cramped inside the stairwell. It is the first night of preliminary rounds at the Southern Fried Poetry Slam hosted in Louisville, Kentucky—about a 500 hundred-mile car ride from Durham, North Carolina. A heavy metal door shuts us in. Pre-bout chatter bleeds into the space, muffled, echoing dully throughout the shaft. Filling the hallways and anterooms of the palatial Kentucky Center for the Arts, the swirl of poets' voices condenses into a tinny background hum as the Bull City Slam Team—iShine, Milli, LB, Ayanna, and Dasan Ahanu—gather themselves. The circle tightens. Thumbs up, the fists of each person connect with those beside them, forming the links. A day of running through poems, making adjustments to cadence and gesture, and ensuring every word inhabits your body at the ready, suddenly slows down. It’s as if the world dims, as if the pulse of each poet can be heard calming in unison, each individual grounded by the presence of being together. Then Dasan, hunching his 6'4" frame, speaks—just above a whisper.

This is it, y'all. You've done the work. You've been here before—

Outside the stairwell and around the corner, three other poetry slam teams and a small throng of fellow poets, visiting poetry fans, and event staff pack inside a mid-sized conference room equipped with glass walls, tungsten lighting, beige-and-yellow lined wallpaper, and a bar decked out with gold trim but not a single bottle of alcohol. Space diminishes quickly. Some claim row after row of red velvet chairs. Others opt to stand and claim their corner of the room.
Fire codes are interpreted loosely. Branches of the Southern Fried family have booked budget
plane flights from as far as Hollywood, California; driven rental vans from as far as Richmond,
Virginia; and passed the collection plate enough times to afford hotels and AirBnB just close
enough to the host venue. People have put in the work and miles to be here, to hug the necks of
close friends and adopted family for the first time in perhaps a year, perhaps longer. People have
spent hours writing pieces, saving money, and spitting poems at each open mic and slam to be
here—with one another as fellow southern poets—and to be loud—with low drawls and high
twangs—in front of the mic and among the crowd.

You've seen how small the room is. Start off strong, but remember: intensity over volume.

When poetry slam spaces are imagined, spoken of, or written about, some version of the
frenetic whir filling the room around the corner becomes the stand-in example. A poet marches
to the center of a stage while a wave of applause crests and descends. Twisting the mic into
position, the poet takes a moment to collect themselves, hands wiping over their faces, voices
from the crowd shouting "don't be nice!" and "you better get your blessings!" Then, as if a switch
flips on, as if the poem possesses the limbs and throat, the poet lurches into the performance,
flooding the room with their stories of identity and resistance and love, testing the dynamic range
of the amp set-up, teetering on distortion, surfing the ruckus of snaps and stomps that pulse at
one line and then another. Until, stop. The poet steps away. After having to restrain their love for
nearly three minutes, after having to limit themselves to the friction of their thumb and middle
fingers striking together like a match, the crowd erupts.

To those who look from the outside-in, this is slam. Cacophony and catharsis. Mic stands
and poetic fanatics. Voice and body channeling verse and being brought to edge.

And they would be right. Slam is that. But it is not just that.
It's the first night. As long we do what we need to do, we'll get where we need to be. So, get up there and get free.

Dasan finishes. He turns his head to the right toward iShine, and nods. We all bow our heads and close our eyes, and then iShine begins the prayer.

*God please put your super on our natural so that we may touch a mind and change a heart.*

All is quiet, all is dark. Each word propels of the rhythm and sound of the other.

*Bless our mouths so that our words may glorify you.*

It is this blessing, this gift, that has brought every Bull City poet from Durham to here. It is the sharing of this blessing, this gift, that has brought them together.

*Bring back to remembrance every word we practiced so that we may perform with excellence and integrity.*

The quiet of this moment, bound within the walls of the stairwell and the hushed concentration of our prayer, is also slam. It is slam as the Bull City poets make it, as the Bull City poets carve it in order to create a space for themselves. The clamor of the bar room and the calm of the prayer circle are slam one in the same, each converging toward the end of creating community through the placing of one's body, one's words, and one's identity in the midst of others.

*Amen.*

iShine pauses a moment and looks up. Our eyes open. We're ready.

*Bu-bu-bu-*

Each stutter-syllable rattles off iShine's lips, shots fired into the sky, and all together we shout—
—lifting our fists until, all above us, a ring of Bull Durham horns thrown hang in their, fists clenched and thumbs out.

***

Competitive performance poetry, or spoken word, is nothing new. Grecian wordsmiths rhapsodized against one another, Black folks verbally sparred during "The Dozens," and poetic boxing matches were held as late as the 1970s (Hoffman 2011). When poetry slam was founded in the mid-1980s at the Green Mill Cocktail Lounge, enfranchising cocktail-sipping and beer-swishing audiences on a Thursday to score poems on a scale from 0.0 to 10.0, it was another case of old traditions of poetic excellence-in-competition and community verbal arts taking on a new form.¹ The amphitheater gave way to the stage and mic-stand.

Nearly thirty years since the first slam was held at the Green Mill, poetry slam has expanded from barrooms to concert halls, from the Northside of Chicago to all across the United States and beyond. Entering its 27th year, the National Poetry Slam (NPS) attracts over 400 poets and 80 teams to earn bragging rights, cash prizes, and a gold statue of an Excalibur-esque sword driven through a stack of books. Other regional poetry slam festivals, the largest of which is the 25-year-old Southern Fried Poetry Slam, gather similar-sized crowds in celebration of poetry and community. The "Minnesota-based organization dedicated to developing a coherent and effective system of production, distribution, promotion and fundraising for performance

¹ Before every slam, MCs mention that poetry slam was created by construction worker Marc Smith. While Marc Smith did create the concept for slam, because of his problematic personal and business behavior, which came to a head when he was booed off stage at the College Union Poetry Slam Invitational, some community members and MCs have either discredited his name or problematize his contributions when they discuss the history of slam at events. Here, I make the intentional decision of decentralizing his presence in slam by cosigning him to a footnote.
poetry," Button Poetry boasts 830,000 YouTube subscribers, over 170,000,000 video views, and a catalog of best-selling books and authors, including Danez Smith, whose Graywolf Press-published Don't Call Us Dead was shortlisted for the 2017 National Book Award in Poetry. From critical to popular acclaim, from the audiences it attracts to the stellar talent it produces, poetry slam has shaped what poetry sounds like, looks like, and feels like in 21st century United States.

Academic scholarship on poetry slam, however, has been sparse, taken up primarily by performance studies-inflected scholars and spoken word poets themselves. Poet-scholar Susan B. A. Somers-Willett's The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry, published in 2009, for years was the only critical monograph on slam. The book focused on the politics of performance, identity, and reception in slam competition, investigating how the audience's perception of a performer’s (racial) authenticity in performance correlated with the scores given. The next major monograph in the nascent world of poetry slam studies was, again, written by a veteran of multiple NPS-winning teams. And, it was published in 2017. Javon Johnson's Killing Poetry is both a critique and extension of Somers-Willett's book. Johnson acknowledges her as "a trailblazer" but problematizes her reducing black (male) slam success to authenticity rather than talent, centering working-class whiteness at the exclusion of voices of color in the history of slam's origins, and "flatten[ing] the complexities in the various performances of blackness." Instead of audience reception, Johnson focuses on the poets themselves—the Black poets of intersecting identities who negotiate as communities to imagine new possibilities of performing their identities (Johnson 2017, 22-23).

Missing in both texts, however, is attention paid to the local and regional dimensions of poetry slams. While Poetry Slam may have developed into a pop cultural phenomenon, every
poetry slam is built into and upon regional cultures and local communities. Poetry slam is not a monolith but a manifestation of numerous cities and towns hosting their own slams, organizing their own teams, and sewing their own communities. Slam New Orleans, SlamCharlotte, Bull City Slam Team—each team represents a collective of poets, organizers, and fans who commune monthly, perhaps weekly, together to share and hear poems. Each slam is tethered to a place—its histories, its politics, its traditions. Bull City and the Jambalaya Soul Slam emerge from the Hayti Heritage Center, which preserves and celebrates the history of Durham's historical Black communities. Whenever Bull City poets throw up the horns or talk about the Bull City Way, they call back to the Jambalaya, to Durham, to North Carolina, and to the Hayti. They express who they are by telling others where they are from. This dimension of place is not unique to Bull City. Slam New Orleans represents New Orleans. SlamCharlotte celebrates Charlotte. Yet, like any team, Bull City's expression of place is unique and, therefore, deserving of attention. Long-term attention.

For this thesis, I conducted a ethnography about the Jambalaya Soul Slam, as a venue, and the Bull City Slam Team, as a poetry slam team. While Johnson provides a model for writing long-term about Da Poetry Lounge team and venue in Los Angeles, my ethnography will diverge in critical ways. First, this is a decidedly southern slam team from a deeply southern city. Whereas Johnson focuses on the emergent politics of Black performance and radical community-building in slam, I will also be taking into account the particular context of southernness as it intersects with Blackness. Second, taking inspiration from John L. Jackson's *Harlemworld* (2001), I will be adopting a peripatetic, multi-sited approach to thinking and writing about Bull City and Jambalaya's relationship to the American South. Like Harlem in Jackson's book, Durham is a synecdoche for Blackness in the American South, and within regional and national
poetry slam scenes, southern spoken word possesses deep ties with Black spoken word. How the American South is talked about, written about, and read about reflects on how Black poets from the American South are talked about, written about, and read about. To describe the discourse circulating around Harlem, Jackson offers the term Harlemworld: “the presumptions of place we use to explain social difference and distance, the Harlem on our minds and in our minds” (2001, 14). Harlemworld is to Harlem as Bull City is to Durham, but I also argue that the Bull City Slam Team shoulder presumptions of place that impress about the American South. Travelling, performing, and competing, the poets produce a discursive world that is complex and dense in the ways it engages with presumptions of southernness and Blackness. Finally, I will be incorporating a decidedly folkloristic viewpoint by exploring how the team's traditions intersect with how they perform spoken word and hold poetry slam spaces. The compilation of those traditions is the Bull City Way. Both an ethos and performance aesthetic passed down from team to team, the Bull City Way reflects the ways in which the team conceptualizes southernness and, consequently, manifests southernness in action. I analyze how throwing up the horns, praying before and after bouts, and other Bull City Way rituals intersect and illuminate the poets' performances on stage. I ask how the coalescence of these performances off-stage and on-stage invoke the place of Bull City and the space of the Jambalaya Soul Slam to change the slam-spaces that the team enters in regional and national competitions.

The core of my methodology is ethnography, both visual and written, consisting of extended (approximately a year and a half) observation, collaboration, and co-performative witnessing with the Bull City Slam Team and the Jambalaya Soul Slam in Durham. Before delving into the specifics of my methodology, I find it important to clarify exactly what the Bull City Slam Team and Jambalaya are.
Founded in 2002 by slammaster and Raleigh-native Dasan Ahanu, the Jambalaya Soul Slam is a poetry slam held every third Saturday of the month. In 2005, the slam moved to the Hayti Heritage Center—the former, historic St. Joseph's African Methodist Episcopal Church built in 1891—where the event is held in the sanctuary. Dasan envisioned the Jambalaya Soul Slam as one part of an extended, community-based arts network that would include music, art, theatre, and more. Each medium would jumble together like the ingredients of a spicy bowl of Jambalaya, their aesthetic flavor-notes blending into a concoction uniquely and unabashedly southern. And, if there is one thing distinct about the Jambalaya, it is "a part of a southern tradition" (Ahanu 2017b).

Taking its name from Durham's nickname, the Bull City Slam Team emerges out of the Jambalaya. Every season beginning in August, poets compete at the Jambalaya for a chance to be on the Bull City Slam Team. By either earning cumulative points or winning a monthly slam, poets qualify to compete at the Grand Slam Finals in April. The poets who place in the top four of the Grand Slam become that year's team. In 2017, the team consisted of Brandon "iShine" Evans, Eric "LB" Thompson, Ashley "Milli" Lumpkin, Ayanna Albertson, and Dasan Ahanu, who has a permanent team position as a competitor and coach. Over the summer the Bull City Slam Team write new individual and group pieces, workshop and rehearse old poems, learn and practice performance techniques particular to spoken word and slam competition, and then travel to and compete in the Southern Fried Poetry Slam in June and National Poetry Slam in August. Over the years the team has done more than well, winning Southern Fried twice and reaching the NPS final stage.

Connecting Jambalaya the slam and Bull City the team demands immersion with both. That immersion begins with simply being there. Since August 2016 I have attended and
photographed most of the Jambalaya's monthly slams, compiling my edited black-and-white images into freely accessible and downloadable Flickr albums that I publish on social media, deliver to poets, and send to Dasan for posting on the Jambalaya and Hayti websites. Likewise, from May to August, I followed and photographed the Bull City Slam Team as they trained for, travelled to, and competed in Southern Fried at Louisville and NPS at Denver.

"Followed" implies a dimension of, at times voyeuristic, distance. It is as if I were gazing at a group of extraordinary beings doing extraordinary things, as if I were trailing alongside the poets like an enthralled paparazzo. Granted, the team's work is extraordinary, and I did take a ton of photos. However, the team consists of ordinary people who do poems but also work 9-to-5, hang out with family, and pay bills every month. When I say I "followed" the team, I mean to say I did some deep hanging out (Conquergood 2013) with folks who became my friends and with whom I split cab fair, ate Dominoes thin-crust pizza, shared AirBnB's, and laughed at dumb jokes. I lived my life, but I lived it through an ethnographic agenda (Jackson 2001) with camera and notepad always in tow.

In addition to recording copious notes in a couple moleskin notebooks, why photograph so extensively? The camera can be taken for granted as just another tool for taking field notes. Like a phrase or sentence jotted down on a page, a photo acts as a slip of visual stimuli to jolt the memory. Photos as field notes intend to make anecdotal, not artful, images. While I often use my images as memory-sparkers to sharpen the scene when my written field notes recall only a haze of impressions, my use of photography is not just that. It is intentional, critical, and performative.

Like any ethnographer, I am entering the worlds of my collaborators by virtue of their good graces—good specifically because I enter not as a passive observer but an agent whose positionality alters the dynamic of the room. Acknowledging this agency underwrites the
ultimate goal of co-performative witnessing, of new knowledge emerging as cultures, identities, and people cross boundaries and create together. Photographing individual and team portraits, providing images for graphic design and websites, compiling albums, and organizing an exhibit at the Hayti in April 2018 encompass some of the ways in which I attempt to be a co-performative witness in the practical sense.

Moreover, in the critical sense, the camera marks and accentuates the influence of my gaze as an ethnographic outsider, endeavoring to make my positionality and framing as explicit to myself as it ought to be to my collaborators. Composing a photo is far from an objective act. Composition is the artful grounding of the photographer's perspective relative to the image's subjects. It is making order—both a creative, critical, and positional act—of a scene, a moment, and a world.

I enter Bull City's world with the intent of representing it. The poets have no trouble representing themselves. Their work pulls from their intersecting identities as Black people working to survive in worlds that consider their work and lives marginal, to reckon with tribulations of their past and present, and to celebrate their lives and loved ones. However, I will be representing their lives to audiences who may never see a slam and before whom the poets may never perform. My whiteness complicates this act of representation. The presence of my body and camera cites histories of white male ethnographers entering the worlds of Black and Brown people, leaving to write a book and earn a faculty position, and never returning to bring something back. The tools of representation become the tools of marginalization, exoticism, and ethnocentrism. By centering photography as an integral dimension of my co-performative witnessing, however, I hope to highlight the moments in which I am explicitly framing Bull City's world via my own positionality, which encompasses both the literal vantage point of my
position in the space and the figurative vantage point of my intersecting identities as a white man, a born-and-bred southerner, and a graduate student at a renowned public university.

In addition, and more critically, I hope to center the agency of the Bull City community in their decision to invite me into their company. Despite best intentions, a strain of liberal white academic guilt can cause me to formulate ethnographic responsibility in a passive voice rather than an active voice: “I was invited into the Bull City Community” instead of “Bull City invited me into their community.” In only one of these sentences is the phrase “Bull City” critical to the meaning of the sentence, and it is certainly not the one in which I am the subject. The Bull City community are the subjects, the actors, the agents of this paper, and the team made a decision to invite me into their community as a photographer, as a documentarian, as a poet, and as a friend. If I am to elaborate on the ways in which the Bull City poets actively implement the Bull City Way to transform the spaces they hold, then I find it essential to discuss their positionality as collaborators in an active voice.

But what of the actual path that will take us through the world of Bull City, the path whose carving is my most explicit act of framing? Though I experienced and recorded this ethnography with the intention of taking a chronological approach, I find that opting for a more site-based approach would offer more condense answers to the tortuous questions I am asking. A linear chronology, in fact, would run counter to the non-linear time that poets experience and prefer. Poets often will curse linear time whenever a poem exceeds the three-minute time limit and earns a 0.5-point deduction, frustrated with the punishment their rhapsody receives for not conforming to the arbitrary boundaries set by the competition. The Bull City poets—who seldom mince words about slam being, first and foremost, a competition—may roll their eyes at such protests against temporality. Yet, like the poems they write, they, too, buck a conventionally
straight-forward experience of time’s passage. Personal and historical scenes enfold and collapse into and between stanzas, and the personal and communal histories of the poets and Bull City are frequently referenced and folded into the present. Whether it’s iShine's recollection of mentor Tavis Brunson, Milli's account of first attending at Jambalaya Slam, or Dasan's memory of a National Underground Poetry Individual Champion (NUPIC) that emblematized the national slam scene’s antagonism toward southern poets, stories get told again and again, indexing and charging the ways in which the Bull City poets commune and perform in spaces to which they are insiders, outsiders, or some liminal form in between. Likewise, while the content of these chapters may have been gathered during distinct periods of time between August 2016 and August 2017, they are indexed and charged by stories that happened both long before and long after. I focus on how these stories index and charge the manifestation of the Bull City Way at three sites: the space of Jambalaya Soul Slam, the moment of performance, and the spaces of Southern Fried and NPS.

Chapter 1 inhabits the world of the Jambalaya Soul Slam, framed through the analytical lens of Victor Turner's (1974) notion of *communitas* and Somers-Willett’s (2014) application of counterpublics. Specifically, I incorporate Turner's *spontaneous* and *ideological communitas* to represent, respectively, the “inter-subjective illumination” created by the Jambalaya’s atmosphere and the slam’s attempt to “concretize [that inter-subject illumination] in a utopian model” of a slam community (1974, 79-80). In addition, extending from Turner's *ideological communitas*, I then examine how the Jambalaya Soul Slam utilizes southernness as a catalyst for producing a subaltern counterpublic (Somers-Willett 2014) that helps poets enter a state of “flow” during performance. The chapter begins with a very concise background on the history of the Hayti District, once one of the most successful self-sufficient Black communities in the American
South. Condensing the Hayti District's late 19th century origins and mid-20th century devastation at the hands of "urban renewal" programs that literally built a highway on top of a stretch of Black businesses, residences, and community centers, this history endeavors to highlight how that charged past flows into the St. Joseph's AME Church, Hayti Heritage Center, and ultimately the Jambalaya Soul Slam. Buttressed by that past, held in the sanctuary in whose very design that past is embodied, the Jambalaya's history and culture is then recalled, particularly its emphasis as a southern poetry slam. Articulated through rituals, traditions, and performance all held up by the poets who attend the slam regularly, Jambalaya explicitly and implicitly frames southernness as an agent for *communitas*, as means to making everyone feel like a member of a poetry family in this poetic counterpublic.

Chapter 2 moves from the site of the Jambalaya to the site of performance—or, more exactly, the poem—elaborating the ways in which the poets of Bull City Slam Team interrogate discourses of southernness and Blackness when they discuss the aesthetics of southern spoken word poetry. Moreover, I speak to how the Bull City Way developed relative to discourses of southern aesthetics and identity. To observe the relationship between how the Bull City poets talk about southernness and southern spoken word hand-in-hand, I do not exactly focus on moments when the poets are spitting on stage. Rather I focus on moments when they are commenting on how they define standards of what makes a poem good. This is because, more often than not, southernness manifests not in the imagery, style, or presentation of the Bull City poets’ work, but in the context in which the poets create their work and receive the work of other poets.

Between the end of April and beginning of August, the five team members participate in weekly practices, writing sessions, and even mock competitions with other friendly teams.
Described as the summer workshop by Dasan Ahanu, this time period highlights how every poet double as teacher and student, critic and pupil. Lessons are shared, critiques are given, and lines are edited in a communal, co-performative conversation. Incorporating performance studies-influenced work from Richard Bauman (1977), Patricia Sawin (2002), Fred Moten (2003), and Aimee Cox (2015) that interrogate ideas of subjectivity, objectification, and identity in performance, this chapter attempts to reveal how some of the poets theorize, complicate, and shapeshift (Cox 2015) outside of scripts grafted onto what is southern spoken word. When the poets upset those scripts, the Bull City poets chart paths that reveal how southernness—a mess of intersecting identities and aesthetics—can be source of possibility and dynamism rather than limitation and stereotypes.

Chapter 3 moves from the site of performance to the site(s) around performance in which the Bull City Way manifests itself, focusing on the combination of rituals, ethics, and other actions that underwrite how the Bull City poets dictate the way they engage with poetry slam spaces, particularly at Southern Fried and NPS. Routinely, Bull City team members pray together prior to and after competing in a bout. Before and after the bout, the poets engage with, compliment, and wish good luck to their competitors, whom the Bull City team will still then cheer and clap for regardless of how the competition is going. Encompassing such actions as virtues, the Bull City Way becomes a lens through which the team sees itself—past, present, and future—and, just as importantly, through which other spoken word poets in and outside the American South see the team. As it acts as a double-lens of defining the culture of the team and the culture of the Jambalaya, and as it is interpreted flexibly by each poet, the Bull City Way can provide insight into how both the team and the slam code their performative actions on-stage and off-stage with an invocation of place (i.e., Bull City or the Hayti) and region (i.e., the American
South) to transform the spaces they enter, even when those spaces, especially at NPS, retain histories of Southern and Black exclusion.

The ambition of this thesis is not to present a definitive perspective on the ways in which the poets of the Jambalaya Soul Slam and Bull City Slam Team manipulate, interrogate, implement, embrace, and transform southernness and all of its intersections with identity, space, and aesthetics. Rather, the ambition of this thesis is to highlight the polyvocal, simultaneous perspectives of the poets, identifying sites of divergence as sites of generative possibility. Southernness is malleable and multifarious, and the Bull City Way is a grip with which the poets attempt to get a handle on what southernness means. The meaning of the Bull City Way changes from poet to poet, team to team, generation to generation, accumulating layers. For iShine, a Bull City veteran, the Bull City Way is a code. It says the quality of his poetry and the quality of his character emerge from and speak to the place that he calls home. For Ayanna, a Bull City rookie, her interpretation of the Bull City Way is only beginning to coalesce, finding its form as she finds her footing on the team. Whether it is a Saturday night Jambalaya Slam or a Friday night NPS bout, the poets act as agents. They choose to influence the tenor of the spaces they enter. In doing so, the poets activate poetry slam’s power to reimagine radical possibilities of community, identity, ethics, and aesthetics, and utilize that power to reimagine what southernness can mean in relation to spoken word and slam spaces.
CHAPTER 1: THE JAMBALAYA SOUL SLAM

The only redeeming qualities of daylight savings are the moments when the stained glass windows of churches shine more fiercely than anything I have ever seen. The Golden Hour lingering well past seven o' clock, as if the sun is trying not to slide off the earth's edge—the reds, blues, and golds glow as if fire burned in the glass. When dusk floods through the windows of the St. Joseph's sanctuary in the Hayti Heritage Center, the crimson of Christ's robes smolders, and the halo encircling His head flashes. Flanked by two windows on either side, the stage also takes on some of the luster. Its wood shimmers. The archway curving overhead and the blue-black curtains draping backstage seem to pull all the weight of the light toward the center of the stage, the heart of the sanctuary.

During these moments, when the stage is empty all but for a microphone stand, I can sense the gravity of this space. Though I know little of the history of the St. Joseph's AME congregations that filled this room throughout the decades before it was converted to a performance hall, the weight of that history impresses itself upon me—and maybe others—as I pull my camera out of my backpack and wait for Wendy Jones, co-coordinator of the Jambalaya Soul Slam, to bring the sign-up sheet. I am early, though. So I wait.

***

"Up next is iShine. Jackson, you are on deck. But making her way to the stage, give it up for Ayanna!"
As Dasan Ahanu releases the mic and makes his way to the bout manager’s table backstage, applause rings out for Ayanna Albertson as she walks toward center stage. The Golden Hour has passed. Around 50 people now fill the formerly empty pews. Though the audience’s adulation roars and echoes off the ceiling, it is routine. Every poet is celebrated for the brave act of simply walking toward the mic, a poem to share. Like every poet, Ayanna walks across the stage as if un-phased, as if a barrier cuts between the world that she occupies and the world that the crowd occupies. She stops. She takes a moment to lower the mic—significantly. Dasan towers at 6'4". Ayanna stands around 5'1". Adjustment is necessary. She twists the lock, stage light streaming over her, braids falling just below her shoulders. The crowd falls quiet. She steps away, slipping her hands into back pocket, bowing her head. The quiet of the crowd lingers, stretches. The tension mounts, cements. A solemnity permeates the few seconds that feel like a few lifetimes, the poem humming in the poet's heart and waiting to . . .

"Alright, Cranapple."

What?

"She got the juice, she's got the juice!"

I swivel my head around. I see audience members sitting in the pews swivel their heads around as if to say, "Who the hell said that? And why? Can you not see that there is clearly a poet on the stage having a poet moment before bearing her soul in front of a room full of strangers? What are you. . ."

Then, Ayanna, singing:

*Oh One day when the glory comes*
*It'll be ours*
*It'll be ours*
*One day when the glory comes*
It'll be ours yeah
It'll be ours

The invocation of John Legend's "Glory," sung with a tenor and resonance and soulfulness reserved for Sunday mornings, transfixes the space. Everyone falls silent—me, the poets, the audience members. The stage lights falling on Ayanna, her eyes closed, enforce the feeling that she could be, and is, the only person in the room for that brief moment of song.

Until:

For Black people,
  morning still come even when the sun ain't rise
  even when the sun decides it ain't going show up today.
  Guess it's tired of pretending everything's okay, too.²

The tenor of the song flows into the tone of the poem. The melismatic runs of the song deepens the elongated vowels and accented southernness of Ayanna's words. Arms waving, curling, and unfolding in gestures too fluid to feel calculated but too precise to feel improvised, she directs every word and action to the audience, lamenting every way in which systemic violence forces Black folks to treat every morning as a time of mourning for both loved ones and strangers. She is not speaking of Black pain, but with the Black folks in the audience about the pain they share. Though I am one of the few white folks in the audience on this night, or perhaps I am one of the few white folks this present this night, my soul feels compelled to witness as Ayanna rhapsodies the ways in which Black folks have remade the sorrow dealt upon them by white folks like me into joy, indomitable Black joy.

Don't we stay finding ways to turn lemons into lemonade?
Chitlin and ox tail out of master's scraps?

² Throughout my thesis, when quoting from performances, I elect to lineate based on how I hear and experience the poem rather than based on the authors’ original texts, all of which I did not access. I make this decision to emphasize how spoken word performances hinge significantly on not just on the poet’s intentions but also on the audience’s interpretation of the poet’s work. Though the poets author their poems, the performances are co-authored with the audience.
Create Ebonics from your forced English language?
Turn funerals into homegoing celebrations,
a declaration that not even death can steal our joy. (2017b)

When Ayanna wings her arms out, slaps them together, and beats her chest, when death realizes it can not steal her joy and the joy of those like her, I realize something. As Ayanna has filled the room with her words, so too has it been filled with adulation, with calls of response reminiscent of the voices reciprocating between a congregation and a preacher during a Sunday sermon.

Fingers snapping.
Feet stomping.

Voices shouting "Let's go!" and "Yes" and "Come on!" and "Go in, poet!"

The noise ushering from Ayanna and the noise ushering from the audience feed into one another. The verve of one energizes and propels the other further. Yet, I notice that the quickest snaps, hardest stomps, and loudest voices originate not from the people who are sitting in the pews, but from the same people who moments earlier were heckling and joking as Ayanna prepared herself at the mic. And they are not just any people. They are the poets competing alongside Ayanna, gathered in a dark corner behind the pews near the sanctuary entrance.

But why? Why the shift from waggish distraction before the poem to unadulterated support during the poem? While the contrast between Ayanna being called "Cranapple" before the poem to being called "poet" during the poem may jar the uninitiated, a relationship exists between them that is essential to how the space of the Jambalaya Soul Slam operates to disperse the pressure of slam competition, transform the solemnity of the church environment, and generate the possibilities of communitas through a shared interpretation of southernness.

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When I asked Bull City veteran and Fayetteville-based spoken word poet El'Ja Bowens
about his first impressions of the Jambalaya Soul Slam, he responded to my question with a question: "Why are they holding a poetry slam in a church?" (2017). Laughing at the thought of a crew of poets cursing up a storm in God's house, El'Ja referred to the paradoxical mix of the sanctuary's sacredness and the slam's profaneness. Built for Sunday mornings, this space hosts an event made for Saturday nights.

His impression resonated with my mine during my first night attending the Jambalaya as an undergraduate in 2014. On that particular night, with stain glassed windows and a gold chandelier glittering above, I photographed a featured poet as he invited a woman on stage and, midway through an erotic piece about seducing another man's wife, sucked whipped cream off her finger. It was a memorable sight. Yet, it would be superficial to dwell on the contrast of high and low between where the Jambalaya happens and what happens during the Jambalaya. Beyond the spectacle of folks cursing loudly and talking about un-churchly things in God’s house, the Jambalaya brings in a chorus of voices that sing of resistance, of lost faith, of social consciousness, and more. One does not need to witness a feature poet’s creative use of whipped cream to acknowledge the subtler, and more compelling, ways in which the poets both harness and transform the sanctuary’s dimensions of coming-together, healing, and testifying.

I still think El'ja's question is a valid one. I would just rephrase it as, "Why are they holding a poetry slam in this church?"

This is the historic St. Joseph's AME Church. Beginning as a "brush arbor" founded in 1868 by Edian Markham, a formerly enslaved man who arrived in Durham to establish a church, St. Joseph's obtained a brick-and-mortar structure in 1891 after congregation members and white philanthropists raised money to fund construction. With its vibrantly red bricks, impressive steeple, and lancet strain glass windows facing the street, St. Josephs sat at the intersection of
Fayetteville St. and Lakeview Ave. near the heart of Durham's Hayti District. The Hayti District became of the most significant self-sufficient African American communities in the post-Civil War American South. The community developed its own schools, library, community centers, hospital, and combination of small and large businesses. One of the core community-gathering spaces for this Black middle-class were churches like St. Joseph's AME, whose congregation spearheaded the organization of Hayti's resources.

"Urban renewal" plans during the middle of the 20th-century, however, interfered and destabilized the Hayti community. Stretches of commercial and residential property in the Hayti district were demolished to make way for Highway 147, displacing the population of working class, middle class, and professional Black Durhamites. By the 1970s, Hayti became one of several urban Black communities disrupted because government could not be bothered to build a freeway somewhere other than on top of Black homes and businesses.

After the highway was built, the church of St. Joseph's remained. By that time, however, church leaders had planned on moving the congregation to a new location. In 1975, one year before the last sermon would be offered in the old church, the St. Joseph's Historic Foundation (SJHF) incorporated. The foundation decided to transform the old St. Joseph's church into a center that would celebrate and record the history of the Hayti District and Durham's African American community. Renamed the Hayti Heritage Cultural Center upon the congregation’s move to the new location, the building provides a space for concerts, exhibits, classes, lectures, plays, and more. More than that, the Hayti provides a physical landmark celebrating the history and significance of the southern Black community from which it takes its name. The highway may have tried to push them away, but their legacy remains.

Extending from the decades-long tradition of the Hayti Center providing a space for
everything from punk bands to playwrights, the Jambalaya Soul Slam shared the Center's ambition of tapping into the local arts community. But the slam did not begin at the Center.

In 2002, Raleigh-based spoken word artist and community organizer Dasan Ahanu, born Chris Massenburg, had discovered poetry slam through his friend and fellow poet, Terry Creech. Dasan had been performing music and poetry for years up to that point, but slam was a different beast. Terry and Dasan both competed for a spot on Winston-Salem's team, and though Dasan had enjoyed the "looser slams" he had competed in before, the atmosphere of a qualifying slam left him totally unprepared:

This had to have been 2002. That year he made the Winston-Salem team. I did bad. . . . I was a little salty, but I still liked slamming. So I started a slam in Raleigh called the Jambalaya. It was originally at the Fruit of Labor World Cultural Center, which I knew about because I worked as a community organizer and because the center hosted Black Workers for Justice, for which some of my mentors are members. (2017a)

Inspired by the southern Creole dish known for its spicy mish-mash of ingredients, the Jambalaya developed from Dasan's beginnings in event-planning and his ambition to unite a medley of music, arts, and performance events under one banner. The slam ultimately stuck where others did not. The Jambalaya Slam, though, did not stick at the Fruit of Labor World Cultural Center. In 2004, Dasan collaborated with the Hayti to organize a Hip Hop and spoken word festival. "I was telling the Hayti folks about Slam Charlotte, regional, and national slams," recalls Dasan, "and they said they would like to do that. I thought cool, down the road, but they were like, if we can send a team, we'd love to send a team" (2017a).

"It was shocking," he remembers. "I'm young, so I'm thinking eventually, and I'm going back to [Slam] Charlotte and trying to make the team again. But [the Hayti] wanted to know what it would take to do it this coming summer" (2017a). Though Dasan emphasizes that the critical factors in both moving the Jambalaya to the Hayti and organizing a team were differing
guidelines for qualifying for the National Poetry Slam and the Southern Fried Regional Poetry Slam, I should note other complicating factors. Coordinating a slam every other month to put on a show differs significantly from coordinating a slam every single month to build a team. Recording scores, keeping in touch with potential team candidates throughout the year, working out travel logistics, raising funds, registering with tournaments—the labor hidden behind sending a team to compete regionally and nationally is large and daunting. This does not even account for the fact that Dasan, with only a couple years of slamming under his belt, would transition from competing to both coaching and competing. Mentoring young poets, selecting poems for a set list, developing strategies, offering feedback and edits, orchestrating multi-person group pieces, calling poems during competition, and also writing and performing himself—Dasan bringing the Jambalaya to the Hayti meant shouldering a tremendous amount of new responsibilities.

Nevertheless, in February 2005, the Jambalaya Soul Slam was first held at the Hayti Heritage Center. That slam not only initiated a residency that has lasted over a decade, but signified the merging of the Jambalaya and the Hayti’s enterprises. The Hayti Center emerged to preserve, celebrate, and continue a legacy of local arts and culture in a predominantly southern, Black community. The Jambalaya emerged from an attempt to carve a space for multiple artists from what Dasan calls a "southern tradition" that included the local spoken word scene in the Triangle, other North Carolina teams like SlamCharlotte and Winston-Salem, and the Southern Fried Regional Poetry Slam. These two legacies weave together on a Saturday night, signifying the potent southernness of the space that the Jambalaya tries to channel, and inviting poets to contribute their own unique spice to the mix, their own identities to an expanding umbrella of southernness.

Southernness is so crucial to understanding how the space operates because the
Jambalaya—specifically Dasan and the rest of the poets—incorporate southernness into their framework of generating and sustaining what scholars call *communitas* and counterpublics. Like festivals or carnivals, slams are explicit occasions that frame a time and a place for throngs of people to come together and create community. And, like festivals or carnivals, slams contain politically radical potential energy. The conventional rules of identity, society, and poetry experience inversion—some times severe, some times partial. Out of this inversion, the communities that form and participate in poetry slam, even for a moment, produce an alternate vision of what their worlds can be like. Those moments can be referred to as *communitas*, and those worlds can be referred to as counterpublics.

At their best, slam communities work to create and institute counterpublics in order to hold livable spaces in which their most marginalized members can thrive. To build those counterpublics, poetry slams catalyze moments of *communitas*, which anthropologist Victor Turner describes as less of an exact moment and more of an atmosphere in which the structures governing everyday life are subverted. As Turner explains, "in the workshop, village, office, lecture-room, theater, almost anywhere, people can be subverted from their duties and rights into an atmosphere of *communitas*" (1974, 76). Individuals experience *communitas* during extreme moments, during liminal moments. The feverous fray of a music festival or the rapturous ruckus of a poetry slam instigate "in between" or "altered" states that profoundly change how one engages with another and how one engages with a space. For instance, though the sanctuary in the Historic Hayti Center is a place of worship, many a sacrilegious utterance has been shouted at the top of someone's lungs during a Jambalaya Soul Slam. While this may cause some to worry that a divine bolt of lightning may crash down upon them, the acceptance of profanity in the sanctuary reveals how the structure that normalizes one's engagement with the space has been
altered. It should be noted that Turner insists *communitas* is not the absence of structure, but the inversion of structure. Whether it’s the pious silence of a sanctuary or the structural oppression of hegemony, poetry slam "symbolizes the abrogation, negation, or inversion of the normative structure in which its participants are quotidianly involved" (Turner 1974, 78).

Turner distinguishes the kinds of *communitas* that can occur. There are three, but the ones pertinent to my concerns are spontaneous and ideological *communitas*. Spontaneous *communitas* describes the "flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that all problems (not just their problems), whether emotional or cognitive, could be resolved, if only the group which is felt (in the first person) as ‘essentially us’ could sustain its inter-subjective illumination" (Turner 1974, 79). Ephemeral and ecstatic, this spontaneous variant of *communitas* flashes whenever someone snaps, claps, or talks back to the poet on stage. This can be analogized to the spark that starts the fire, providing a light for how the world could be.

Ideological *communitas* describes the attempts made to then bring that light—to bring that world—into being. It describes the attempts to systematize revelations experienced during spontaneous *communitas* and "concretiz[e them] in a 'utopian' model of society, in which all human activities would be carried out on the level of spontaneous *communitas*" (Turner 1974, 80). Countless moments occur during slams when a community acquires a glimpse of how their world could be if hegemonies of race, gender, or class were replaced. Those glimpses emerge often when poets most affected by those hegemonies speak in defiance of them. A poetry slam community will then endeavor to learn from those moments and adopt practices that make their space more livable, safe, and free for their members who encounter marginalization.

What name, however, do we have for slam communities as they approach or when they achieve a state in which those hierarchies are disposed? Poetry slam veteran and literary scholar
Susan B. A. Somers-Willett utilizes the term counterpublic to illustrate many slams' intentions to create public spaces that are counter-hegemonic. Because of the intersubjective collapse between poet and audience that happens during a performance, a "discursive space" opens up that encourages "critical engagement with [counter-hegemonic or subaltern] narratives through applause, boos, rowdy behavior, and the practice of scoring" (Somers-Willett 2014, 3). Through this critical engagement during slams, the subaltern can replace the hegemonic. At one level, poetry slams undo the hegemony of the academy as the principal realm for poetry. Slams embrace an "open door policy" that welcomes poets and audiences of all backgrounds and styles to share public space. Poetry slam's "democratization of verse," as Somers-Willett quotes Nuyorican Poets Café co-founder Miguel Algarín, upsets the private text-o-centrism promulgated by universities and uplifts a public, bodily poetics. Consequently, because of this democratization of verse, a democratization of bodies occurs. Somers-Willett observes that "[m]any slam poets seem deeply invested in speaking from and about marginalized social positions—those of women, queers, the underclass, people of color, or otherwise oppressed groups—and slam audiences seem deeply invested in supporting such expression" (2014, 6).

While slam communities may consist varyingly of marginalized members, their support of marginalized bodies, articulated through discursive performances, positions slam events like the Jambalaya and venues like the Hayti as distinct, potential subaltern counterpublics.

While not all slam communities achieve the status of subaltern counterpublics, it is beneficial to apply counterpublics as an analytical frame to understand the radical political energy possessed in these communities and events. Quoting Sharon Holland, who argues "the dead acknowledge no borders," poet and performance studies scholar Javon Johnson equates the death that poetry slam has brought upon to conventional academic poetry with poetry slam
communities' disrespect to borders of possibility and consequent "desire for that which is always beyond" (2017, 23). The radical vision of the counterpublic is the "that which is always beyond," and a solid analysis of a poetry slam community must identify the ways in which they reach for, long for, and occasionally miss that "beyond." Though the American South and, consequently, southernness is defined by borders, the Jambalaya Slam and the poets who attend it invoke southernness in order to destroy the borders that determine who is and is not welcome in a southern space, and to nurture a loving, southern community that is always beyond but always is coming a little closer.

One of the most critical moments of community-nurturing occurs when, as poets like Ayanna stand at the microphone during the quiet moments before they begin spitting their poem, the Poets' Corner heckle whoever is on stage. The name “Poets’ Corner” is an informal one that Dasan gives to the group of poets—both competing and non-competing—who gather at the back-left corner of the sanctuary near the entrance. Under the cover of shadows, the only source of light beaming from the Hayti lobby, poets dap, hug, and cut up with each other. For some, including myself who became a Poets' Corner "member" when I finally decided to slam after restraining myself for more than a year, this is first time they have seen these familiar faces in a month. If the Jambalaya embodies the spirit of a family reunion, then the Poets' Corner is the spot where you hug the necks of your favorite kinfolk, catch up on their highs and lows, and make fun of their new haircuts.

The jovialness of the Poet's Corner naturally pours out and affects the rest of the slam space, and it is a space that both needs it and does not need it. As Dasan will joke when he worries that a divine thunderbolt will strike him down on stage because of his bad language, the room is a church. Raised in a predominantly white Methodist church, I proceed with caution...
when attempting to speak too generally about what kind of atmosphere is considered "typical" or "normal" for a church environment, but the shape of and associations connected with a space influence the way bodies conduct themselves in that space. I have witnessed how the solemnity and grandeur of the Hayti Center has influenced the way both poets and audience members have conducted themselves. Sometimes a jazz and RnB playlist will be humming from the speakers at a volume low enough to not prohibit chit-chat between folks, but more often than not, no music will be playing. Entering the sanctuary, people will look for a seat among the rows of pews radiating away from the stage, sometimes talking with the person with whom they came but seldom at the volume at which folks in the Poets' Corner will speak. When audience members make it to their seats, I notice how the stiffness of the pew's hardwood will slip into the stiffness of their posture. I notice how they either scroll through their smartphones or look up and around, and I think of how hanging above them is a turquoise tin ceiling accented with gold and a pair of Art Nouveau glass chandeliers, and I struggle to imagine how this is an environment in which one could immediately "loosen up."

However, like one’s relationship with God, one’s response to the sanctuary space is personal. For Ayanna, who first slammed for the first time in her life at the Jambalaya during the Women of the World Poetry Slam qualifier, which she won, the sanctuary is “inviting” and “warm” because it conjures up the spiritual catharsis she experiences and associates with church.

I like the idea of being kind of a spiritual release, if that makes sense. It's, like, really, um—it kind of gets you that sense of laying. You know how people in church talk about laying your burdens on the altar? It's kind of like releasing everything, knowing kind of just letting it go. It's a cool space. It's one of the best venues I've been to. It's still a stage, but you know, the pews. Everything just makes it—and I've always gone to church my whole life. So, I said I used to sing all the time, so it's kind of one of those things where singing in front of church, performing in front of church. You know, this is in church. And it kind of gives me that comfort. (2017a)
For Ayanna, in a sense, the sanctuary and Jambalaya deliver the best parts of church. Therefore, when the Jambalaya fosters a sense of *communitas*, the slam both represents a partial inversion and continuity of a church’s affective dimensions. Ayanna specifies this feeling with the Jambalaya and Hayti in particular. Whereas she has performed in other spaces that have full seating but an “empty feeling,” she describes the sanctuary as “a rich room even with just you and me being in here. It still feels like [*breathes deep*] refreshing” (2017a).

Ayanna’s experience is one of many, and for some other poets, their backgrounds growing up in church spaces makes it more difficult to reconcile the optics of a slam in a church. One such poet is Ashley “Milli” Lumpkin. Milli grew up in the Pentecostal Church, became ordained, and continues to preach occasionally at her church. Consequently, her embeddedness in church informed her initial visceral reaction to attending and competing in the Jambalaya. “It was really weird in the beginning for me because it's very much a church,” she remembers.

I was always raised to believe there are things you do and don't do inside of a church. Things you can and can not say in a church. So for me the experience, especially the first time, like, hearing some of those poems in a space where you got stained glass windows with Jesus is like, “All y'all are going straight to hell. You can not go to heaven like this.” (2017b)

Whereas the church-ness of the space recalled the possibilities of church for Ayanna, the space recalled the limitations of church for Milli. Though these reactions diverge, they both indicate how the Hayti sanctuary triggers an affective response to it that is almost intersubjective. It acts upon the poets who enter, but as Milli attests, the poets can act upon the sanctuary, channeling those connotations of church through the perspective of poetry slam.

But then I think now it's become. I slam at Hayti. That's my home venue, that's my space. When I think about how church is supposed to be a space of healing, and for many people that's what poetry creates for them, so in that sense to get this feeling of “Oh, this is a church, and we are talking about the things that hurt
The whole feel of performing at the Hayti is powerful and enriching and almost spiritual. The first time I have ever cried on stage doing a poem was at the Hayti, and not necessarily that the poem itself is sad, ‘cause it's not a sad poem, but being in a space with these people telling this story is like, “Woahhh!” I don't have a word for it.

(2017b)

As Milli attests, the tenor of spaces change, and often people catalyze that change. For her, the connotations of church are not lost by the inversion created by the slam, and especially by the heckling Poets’ Corner; instead, they are transformed through the slam to bring about the best of what church can be. Milli cried because of a combination of the space and the people, not because of a tension between what the space connotes and the people inside it.

I highlight Milli’s allusion to the people and their stories altering the space of the sanctuary in order to trigger the catharsis associated with the experience of church, because I know from experience how vital that human element is to preparing a poet for the high-pressure situation of performing in this heavily connoted space, before an audience of strangers, during a competition.

The aesthetics of the sanctuary, while brilliant, confer the sacredness and gravity of the space. The consequent tension then amplifies once you walk onto the stage. For me, walking from the backstage curtains to center stage constitutes a moment of delicate liminality, a state between Jackson-the-person and Jackson-the-performer. The stage lights, hanging from the mezzanine, shine in your face. Yet, because of their angle, the lights do not quite obscure the audience members who sit, just about four feet away, in the front rows below you. Though you see the people in the front row looking at you, you feel the eyes of all the people in the room looking at you the same way you feel the heat of the stage lights warming your skin. As the focus of the room falls upon you, and as you fiddle with the microphone stand to make sure the mic is just below your chin, you remember that any engaging the audience starts the time limit. That
means that any wave or nod that acknowledges the crowd or any word caught by the mic triggers the three-minute countdown and ten-second grace period in which you must spit your poem or suffer a penalty.

And the penalty is a devastating half-point (0.5 out of a possible 30) deduction for every ten seconds over the grace period—more than enough to make the difference between winning and losing.

The affect of the space, the awareness of being looked upon, and the necessity of composing oneself contribute to a sense of tension that can undermine a poet's ability to both lose oneself in the poem and thrive in the slam space. The Poets' Corner's job is to then break that tension. When the Poets’ Corner starts to heckle, they invert the tenor of the moment and the affect of the space. The solemnity and respectability of the church are disregarded, and the solemnity and intensity of the pre-performance are satirized. When the Poets' Corner asks El'Ja if his biceps are cold under his double layered long-sleeve and shirt-sleeved t-shirts, when they shout "Small shirts, big dreams!" at me for my tight-fitting fashion choices, or when they call Ayanna "Cranapple" (referencing an inside joke from when the Bull City Slam Team traveled over the summer), a surge of communitas occurs.

Communitas arrives at the hit of a punchline. The tension and pressure of performing in front of a crowd then breaks. When that pressure breaks, the conditions for flow come into play, allowing the poet to be not in their head but in the moment. Turner contends that communitas has "a 'flow' quality," but he insists that flow and communitas describe similar yet ultimately separate phenomena. Communitas is pre-structural. Turner states that it arises "spontaneously and unanticipated—it does not need rules to trigger it off" (1974, 89). In other words, communitas subverts the rules like how a crowd of football fans subvert the law when storming
the streets after a championship win. Flow is structural. Quoting Mihali Csikszentmihalyi, Turner states that it "contains explicit rules 'which make action and the evaluation of action unproblematic'" (1974, 89). In other words, flow needs rules and limitations like how a football game needs hash marks and a goal line. Moreover, Turner concludes that "flow" is experienced within an individual, whereas communitas at its inception is evidently between or among individuals" (1974, 89).

In the case of spoken word, when Ayanna slips into "Mourning People" and achieves a flow-like state in which she is not so much performing a poem as being a vessel for it, Turner's conception of flow is accurate, at least to the extent that Ayanna experiences flow individually. Yet, Ayanna does not achieve flow individually. Discussing the Poets’ Corner and audience call-in-response in general, Jambalaya poets articulate an intimate relationship between flow and communitas. Referencing the heckling that happens before performance, Bull City veteran Brandon "iShine" Evans explains that "the jokes always help me focus cause [the heckling] calms me down. Also [it] let’s me know that people are there who care about what I'm about to do" (2018b). iShine identifies how the heckling signifies and creates a shared sense of community between the poet on stage and the poets in the corner. A shared sense of community then begets a shared sense of investment in the poet's quality of work and ability to perform. Emerging from iShine's recognition that "people are there who care about [he's] about to do," that “focus” reflects the flow that he and poets like him gain because of the communitas engendered by the actions of the Poets' Corner.

This relationship between the communitas of slam environment and the flow of the poet is critical. Friendly heckling before the performance and responses during the performance provide energy to the poet who, in turn, provides their energy and story to the audience. This is
why Dasan and other hosts tell the audience bout the courage it takes to step on stage and then explain how the audience can support the poet. Audience members can snap their fingers at a line they like. They can rub their hands together to create heat and energy to send to the poet when it appears the poet is faltering.

During performance, poets sometimes need to "push" to get through the poem. At times, "push" refers to when a poet accelerates their pace in order to finish the poem under time limit. At other times, "push" references when a poet struggles to find the reserves of energy, emotion, and intensity to perform the poem artfully and convincingly. The latter can describe moments when the poet does not get the energy they are used to receiving from an audience. If the communitas between poet and audience diminishes, the poet pushes. So, if the poet is pushing, then the poet is not experiencing flow.

Milli conveys how not receiving the crowd response one expects during a performance can affect one's ability to complete it:

Milli: You can always tell in some of your Midwestern towns the audience's are generally quiet, and so it can be difficult if you are from a venue where the audiences are typically loud.

Jackson: So, the South?

Milli: [laughing and nodding her head] It can be difficult to push through and keep performing. Because you do this poem, this is your famous poem, you get to this line, and there's always a cheer. But when you're in St. Paul, and you get to this line, and people are just looking at you. It doesn't mean they don't enjoy it. It's just just that they're a quiet venue. (2017a)

In addition to distinguishing between an audience liking a performance and vocalizing their liking of a performance, Milli correlates how an audience behaves with where the audience is located. For her, a midwestern audience is typically a taciturn audience. A southern audience, on the other, is a more participatory, vocal audience.
Context is key here. Invoking Milli words, I do not intend to generalize that every Midwestern venue is quiet and every southern venue is rowdy. For instance, Milli tests out new work at SlamCharlotte poetry slams precisely because their audiences are as quiet as the midwestern audiences she's performed in front of during the National Poetry Slam. The critical takeaway, however, is that she associates the place from which she originates (i.e., the South) with a participatory audience. Audience participation—snaps, claps, stomps, and hollers—contribute to the groundswell of communitas that facilitates a poet's sense of flow. Communitas and participation are not distinctly southern phenomenon, but southernness speaks to something distinctly communitas-like and participatory.

Like the medley of spices and ingredients that comprise the dish, the Jambalaya Soul Slam melds the southernness of its space with the forces of communitas and flow that it endeavors to stimulate. Dasan emphasizes the very intentional southernness of the Jambalaya space: "I mention it from microphones, when I talk to folks. Knowing that they’re transplants here, knowing there are people who are a part of the Durham community that are from the North, I still want you to know you are in the South and this is a southern space." From the participatory behavior of the Poets' Corner to the histories of southern Blackness that are synonymous with the venue in which it is held, the Jambalaya invokes and signifies southernness to the ends of allowing poets to feel as if the space is theirs, as if the stage is theirs.
"[T]here are some nuances," Dasan once told me, "that a Bull City alum displays when they walk up to the microphone—a certain way they approach the microphone, a certain level of performance" (2017a). When he told me this, we were sitting in his office at Battle Hall on UNC's campus where he teaches courses on Hip Hop history, Black influences on popular culture, and rap music production (a class covers everything from writing rhymes to designing record label art to putting together a song piece by piece). Of all the things that Dasan is, he is a foremost teacher. Before responding to a question, he pauses, hands lingering near his chin as if he is measuring every word, context, and possibility. He delivers a response, and the speed of the sentence mirrors the speed of a lesson. The first part unfolds slowly, as if he's trying to pull in your attention. The latter part picks up the pace, as if he's telling you to keep up, his gestures quickening, voice heightening.

Today I actually watch Dasan teach. Or, to be more exact, coach. We are all back at the sanctuary in the Hayti. By we, I mean Dasan, Wendy, the rest of the 2017 Bull City Slam Team, and myself. It's June. The first tournament of the summer, Southern Fried, is about a week away. This is the first practice I have attended—of any slam team. My camera bag at my side while I sit in the third row from the center, I watch the evening light beam from the stained glass and fill the room with that familiar golden glow, luminous on the lacquered wood of the stage and pews. I watch the light, think of how many times I have been in this sanctuary with a camera strung
around my neck like a medallion, and then feel different. Scholars would call this a liminal feeling. It's a liminal time. It's the time between the qualifying phase of the Jambalaya Slam Season and the beginning of the tournament season. It's the time between driving every month to a church in Durham for a slam featuring eight poets and road-tripping to two cities on opposite sides of the country for a slam tournament featuring around five hundred poets.

“Dasan,” says iShine once everyone has collected themselves for practice to begin, “would you mind explaining the random white man in the room?” I laugh. I have gotten to know iShine a bit better in the past couple months, and I have gotten used to being the random white man in the room. Dasan goes on to explain that I am a documentarian, that I am writing my thesis about the team and the slam, and that I am going to be asking the team questions individually. On one hand, it feels odd to be introduced to a group of people most of whom I have, for the most part, already met; but on the other hand, I am entering the world of the poets in a new way. Anyone can see them slam. Few see them practice.

For the first time, sitting just a row behind where all the poets are gathered and working, I am seeing things I’ve heard referenced, alluded to, and hinted at. It’s like being let in on an inside joke. Dasan imitating how iShine performs (arms pushed out, clench fists like claws, and then clutch them back). Eric “LB” Thompson alluding to the infamous "Milli Couplet" while Milli stands on stage trying to remember what edit she made to her poems. Actually meeting Ayanna.

These ought to be mundane things to notice. The camaraderie of the team on this day recollects all the joking around and commiserating I have see in the Poets’ Corner during every Jambalaya. LB's lumberjack facial hair still gets joked on, though iShine is the only member of the "Fear the Beard" chorus today.
Yet, this camaraderie is different, deeper, more familiar. This is the same sanctuary but
different. For the first time, unzipping my camera bag while iShine steps up to the stage, I feel as
though I am peering in on something private. I pull out my moleskin notebook and pen. I leave
my camera in the bag. I don't take it out for the rest of the evening.

As iShine walks to the middle of the stage, I am looking for those nuances to which
Dasan referred. Dressed in a white t-shirt and gray sweatpants, hair flattened by his Yankees cap,
iShine appears more laidback. There are no stage lights. There are no strangers filling the pews.
There is no spry white boy crouching beside the stage and snapping photos. There is no
microphone.

Yet, it is as if there is one. iShine pantomimes twisting the mic stand and bringing it right
beneath his chin. He steps back, bowing his head, shutting his eyes. He brings his palms to his
face, chest rising and falling as air fills and leaves his lungs, and then drags them down—less
poet and more vessel for the poem.

Hey!
Hey,
Black boy!

Yeah, yeah, you sitting the back there
sitting in the back, yeah,

Hey, why you not using your voice more?

He bobs side to side, folded hands resting in front of his belt, taking on the voice of a teacher
scanning the back of a class room.

Don't you know so many died for you
to be able to speak?

Why the only voices we see valuable
the dead ones?
His tone heightens, the age of his voice becoming younger. His hands fall to his side, akimbo. In the beat he pauses between the intro to the poem and the following section, I wonder how practiced his—or any poet’s—gestures are. How intentional is the slide of this hand or the dip of this shoulder?

*The scene:*

*a southern African American studies class.*
*White hands rise like crosses*

*beckoning the Black bodies to come rest in their embrace.*

*A white girl sits at the front of class and she is a messiah*

*we did not ask to die for us. Fed up,*

*a black boy stands. He walks to the front, and he opens his mouth.*

His hand rises, fingers curling to imitate the white hands rising like crosses. Images of crosses, martyrs, fallen saviors, and Biblical figures appear in iShine’s most affecting poems. I wonder why faith intersects with his work so frequently. Where does it come from? He’s told me he grew up country in Rocky Mount. He’s told me he grew up in the church.

*Another shift, another voice in the poem.*

*White girl, I do not hate you. I hate how your voice is only valuable*

*when mine allows it to be, how people of color don’t know freedom*

*unless it is given, and you know freedom as an unalienable right, how all men*

*were created equal, but some don’t know the definition of equivalence.*
He stops. Or Dasan, after putting down his notebook filled with references to scores, dates, and venues, signals for him to stop. During moments like these—for all the poets practicing on stage—the rest of the team engages in a back-and-forth of critiques. Dasan says that iShine should “go off” at this line. LB points out iShine’s pitch gets a little too high when his intensity picks up. Milli tells him to be aware of how he enunciates. Ayanna, the rookie becoming more comfortable in the group dynamic, gives a suggestion about hand gestures. In my book, I write “poem by committee.” I scratch it out. No, “poem by conversation.”

You say you don’t see color.
Well, police officers sure do.

The ignoring of my hue has never made
a traffic stop feel less like protocol

and more like probable cause.
We are taught this country is a melting pot,

but the boiling of Black and brown bodies
has never left a sweet taste in their mouth

Barreling through the second or third run-through, iShine turns it from a “5” to a “8” at Dasan’s request. Dasan uses numbers to refer to levels of intensity. Gears to shift based on the “temperature” of the crowd.

What is God but all that Blackness
that makes the stars have meaning.

White girl!
I’m sorry.

His tone dips. The speed of his hands slow.

I need to catch myself.
I’m reminded I am on a college campus,

at a PWI,
the only place I can yell
at a white girl
and come out alive.

So go ahead.
Ask another question.

I guess for you
I can waste another breath. (2017b)

A pause. I look around, waiting for someone to say something, to break the quiet of the church.

“Alright,” says Dasan. “Milli, you’re up.”

Then it starts over again.

***

Every year since 2005, four poets compete to join Dasan as part of the Bull City Slam Team, the official representative of Jambalaya Soul Slam and the de facto representative of Durham. Throughout the years, names reappear on the roster like familiar faces of a sports dynasty. For a few years, the San Francisco 49ers had Joe Montana and Jerry Rice. They won a few championships. Then Montana leaves, and Steve Young comes aboard. The 49ers get another ring. Likewise, for a few years, Bull City had G. Yamazawa, Kane Smego, Elliot Axiom, CJ Suit, and Will McInerney. They won a championship. They left, and now iShine, Milli, and LB have formed the current Bull City "dynasty" or "chapter," with Ayanna rounding out the group as the hot shot rookie. Like every year, these four poets fought for their place on the team after a long season of monthly slams. Like every year, these four poets learn that making the team is only the beginning.

Between qualifying for the team and competing at the Southern Fried Poetry Slam and National Poetry Slam (NPS) is participating in what Dasan describes as the summer workshop. Though not invoked explicitly by name, this is the period during which poets become inculcated
in the Bull City Way, the aesthetic and ethical ethos of the Bull City Slam Team. During this time, poets do not exactly learn how to write or perform, but how to bring their writing and performance to another level through the guidance of both Dasan and their fellow poets. New poems are written. Old poems are workshopped. Performance techniques are learned—how to draw in a crowd, when to pause when the audience responds to a line, how to modulate one's volume based on the acoustics of the room. Slam strategies are developed—categorizing poems as "smash," "pace," "shift," or "money"; developing grids for which poem to play based on the round and situation; considering what kinds of content and delivery resonate with which kinds of audiences. Rituals are learned—adjusting the mic, stepping a pace back, and taking a breath to center oneself.

Based on the conversations I have had with the poets and the practices I have been able to sit on, I feel that one core lesson defined the summer workshop, but I never heard it spoken about explicitly: What makes a good poem? What makes a good performance? What is the optimal synthesis of the two? Naturally, poets got some opinions about this. The Bull City poets got some strong opinions about this. Spoken word may be characterized with a "Come as You Are" attitude in comparison to the more rigid foil of "academic" poetry, but having spent years of my life both in academic creative writing workshops and in the company of spoken word poets, I dispel any illusion that spoken word poets can be any less than opinionated about what poetry is good and what poetry is bad.

Yet, this chapter's driving question is not to determine what the Bull City poets consider good or bad poetry per se, but rather to see how the aesthetics and ethics of Bull City Way becomes a lens through which the poets shape their definitions—at times conflicting, at times cohering—of what "good" poetry is. Moreover, this chapter attempts to highlight moments
where the poets' commentaries on aesthetics intersect with their commentaries on the politics of southern identity. As part of the Southern Fried family, Bull City poets do focus on southernness as both an aesthetic and a politic related to poetry, but I want to also emphasize how southernness intersects with other political and aesthetic conversations related to poetry. These intersections evidence that, for the Bull City poets, a poem is not just an orchestration of pretty words. A poem is an articulation of what is at stake in the life of the person writing it.

Poetry in general but spoken word in particular can be characterized as confessional or, at the very least, identity-driven. A trip through the YouTube channel of Button Poetry, arguably the preeminent multimedia organization for spoken word, uncovers video after video of poets spitting pieces that emerge from and address their intersecting identities. Queer Black poets perform pieces about being queer and Black. Latinx men perform pieces about being Latinx men. Spoken word's emphasis on identity, whether marginalized or not, at times garners derision from outsiders. Speaking from personal experience, I have had conversations with scholars and strangers who dismissed poetry slams as competitions of victimization or as forms of “Oppression Olympics.” While poetry slam community members reflexively consider whether certain poems and performances tokenize identity, replicate images of victimization, or capitalize on trauma, outsider critiques miss the point. Identity lies at the heart of spoken word because it lies at the heart of art, of poetry, of community, of performance. The more pressing question is how does identity get expressed, negotiated, and contested in spoken word and verbal arts performance between performer and audience. The crux of this chapter explores how southernness—an identity whose slipperiness intersects race, class, and gender—is similarly expressed, negotiated, and contested by Bull City poets in relation to discussions of aesthetics.
Analyzing expressions and negotiations of identity in performance has been a salient endeavor in folklore for decades. In *Verbal Art as Performance*, Richard Bauman explains how the mechanics of a successful performance can provide a lens into the mechanics of identity communication (1977). In other words, what makes a good performance communicates something about the identities of the performer and audience. As Bauman elaborates, performers and audiences encounter one another during the framed moment of performance, fluent in signals and standards that signify when the performance begins and how to evaluate it. Those signals and standard are called keys, and they be found in everything from toasts to jokes to stand-up to spoken word. The aesthetics expressed by these keys, in turn, articulate the ethics of the cultural group. A toast, joke, or spoken word piece is not just a moment for the intrinsic enjoyment of craft, but also a moment to articulate, reinforce, or even possibly upset the social values and hierarchies that maintain relationships within the community and outside it. When verbal arts are performed, culture is performed.

For instance, during her performances, whether intentionally or not, Milli signals through her themes and delivery the cultural keys, or standards, that she has become fluent in based on the poets with whom she has worked, the spaces in which she has performed, and the community with which she identifies. Southernness represents the milieu from which many of those keys have developed—being raised in the Deep South, performing with teams like Piedmont and Bull City that are from the South, and associating with the Southern Fried poetry community. The significance of those keys become apparent when they are not recognized during performance. Those keys go unrecognized when midwestern crowds don’t offer her the verbal affirmation that she is used to experiencing with southern crowds, causing her to “push,” or force, through her poem. For example, when the crowd does not shout or talk back to Milli after a critical line in
her poem (e.g., “say jihad enough/ and people forget words like inquisition or crusade” from the poem “At Home and Abroad”), Milli can at times hesitate just enough before proceeding the following line as if she was expecting the crowd’s cheers to feed her momentum. She has gotten so accustomed to crowds snapping and shouting at a particular line that the absence of snapping and shouting can trigger a moment of self-awareness in her and other poets who thrive in co-participatory environments.

Milli needing to “push” through her poem when she is out of her southern element during a performance in front of a midwestern crowd, moreover, brings up a conversation about the relationship between the performer and the audience. Specifically, when performer and audience meet during performance, who is the subject and who is the object? In other words, who has power during performance? Is the performer the subject, seizing the power yielded by the stage to tell their story to the audience? Or is the audience the subject, imposing the power and cultural preconceptions of their gaze onto the performer, an object that either lives up to and fails to meet the expectations of the audience?

Part of sussing out the question of who is subject versus who is object in performance demands complicating identity’s role in the framing the moment. In folklore, critiques regarding the dynamic between performer and audience—in particular, which group is the subject and which group is the object—help develop a more complex way of imaging what folk practitioners, spoken word artists, and other performers experience during the moment of performance. For example, Patricia Sawin's critique of Bauman's theory of performance, which she determines is "incongruent" with feminist epistemology, can be particularly instructive (2002). According to Sawin, when Bauman imagines a moment of performance, the performer is essentially presumed to be a man. This presumption is evident by the way in which Bauman's
definition of performance "obscures the problematics of gender as they operate in small group esthetic communication" (2002, 29) and, in addition, perpetuates a "regressive illusion" that true art is defined by the performer's "self-forgetful devotion to the formal excellence of [his] performance" (2002, 37). As Sawin makes clear, when women obtain the opportunity to perform and consequently bring attention to themselves, they rarely possess the leisure to forget themselves, conscious both in and outside the framed performance that they are being observed and measured by a male gaze. Adapting Laura Mulvey's contributions to cinema studies, Sawin expresses that "performance makes the performer [both male and female] available to the audience as an object of desire," (2002, 43) not necessarily a subject of virtuosity, as Bauman's theory implies.

How does Sawin's critique of Bauman's theory then inform issues of subjectivity and identity in performance? In short, the moment of performance is not an even playing field. It is inaccessible to some and often dangerous to those who enter it. Sawin focuses on the dimension of gender, which she strives not to flatten with essentialisms. But, for the dimensions of race, sexuality, and other identities targeted as sites of marginalization as well, performance can render performers as objects—not empowered subjects—onto which audiences can impose their own hegemonic gaze. Instead of a moment in which the performer articulates and redefines the dimensions of their identity, performance can become a moment in which their identity is contested and defined for them. Not all spaces are safe, and not all performances are free. The problematics of race, gender, and other sites of identity-marginalization must compel us, as Sawin begins to do, to consider how performers reckon with the positions of subjectivity and objectification in which they enter and are placed.
Because the space and community with which I work as an ethnographer are defined prominently—I'll venture cautiously to say both by themselves and by those outside them—via race, Blackness is a primary concern for me. One needs only to stumble upon W. E. B. Du Bois's formulation of double-consciousness to grasp that living (and performing) for Black people consists of viewing oneself through one's own eyes and also through the eyes of white folks (1903). This doubling of consciousness reflects a splitting of subjectivity and objectification, and it attests to how Blackness in American society, in particular, is positioned as object, even as Black people position themselves through framed performance and everyday acts of resistance as subjects. In the case of framed performance, such as when a Black poet takes the stage and then becomes an "object of desire," one must consider how Black performance becomes a juncture for working oneself out of discourses of objectification. Naturally, the make-up of identities in the audience influences the degree to which these discourses of objectification impress upon a Black poet on stage. When the audience consists of either mostly or entirely white folks, the sense of gaze upon the poet becomes pronounced. However, when the audience consists of mostly PoC, entirely PoC, mostly Black, or entirely Black folks, what discourses of objectification is a Black poet engaging? They vary. A majority-PoC crowd can still impose an anti-Black gaze upon a Black poet like iShine, Milli, or anyone else from the 2017 Bull City Slam Team. Nonetheless, I invoke Du Bois to illustrate that, as performers on a stage, Black poets often navigate spaces in which they are both subject and object.

Poet and performance studies scholar Fred Moten (2003) addresses the issues of Black people/performers as objects by focusing on a key word: resistance.

The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Blackness—the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line—is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity. While subjectivity is defined by the
subject's possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses. . . . I’m interested in the convergence of blackness and the irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance at the scene of objection. (2003, 1)

Moten’s articulation of how objects resist captures how Black people and performers buck the racial essentialisms and objectified value grafted onto their bodies and beings, upending how objects are expected to behave within imbalanced power dynamics. But, as it remains, Moten spends little time on the methods by which Black people reclaim, redefine, and reassert their subjectivity strategically. Yes, the history of Blackness proves that those positioned as objects resist, but it also proves that Black artists, people, and communities position themselves as subjects in charge of defining and representing who they are.

I highlight Dubois’s and Moten’s discussions of Blackness, subjectivity, and resisting objects because they not only reflect the ways in which the Bull City poets have to navigate their racial identities in relation to their art, but also because the discourse of Blackness and subjectivity interweaves with the discourse of southernness and aesthetics in which the Bull City poets participate. As Dasan and iShine will attest, being a poet from the South, particularly poets of color from the South, comes with baggage. There is a deep history of the national poetry slam scene dismissing, generalizing, and ostracizing southern poets. That history precedes Bull City. That history is also deeply intertwined with the dismissing, generalizing, and ostracizing of poets of color. These histories are intertwined for a myriad of reasons. Like southern culture in general, southern spoken word is a creolized form that heavily draws upon Black vernacular performance and verbal art. Many teams from the American South preeminently feature Black poets. While attending Southern Fried, I heard it described as “Black Nationals.” I say this not to generalize the South as solely Black, and especially not to generalize Blackness as solely southern.
However, I do say that one cannot begin a discussion of southernness in spoken word without also discussing Blackness, especially how strategies of reclaiming Black subjectivity parallel strategies of reclaiming Southern subjectivity. Scripts about what it means to be a Black and to be southern are imposed upon poets by hegemonies of race, class, and region, and the Bull City poets reclaim their subjectivity—re-write those scripts—through how they write poetry, talk about poetry, and hold poetry spaces.

The anthropologist Aimee Cox can provide a language for understanding how the Bull City poets reclaim their subjectivity. In particular, Cox explores how young Black women rewrite the scripts given to them by hegemonies of race and gender. Her ethnographic collaboration with a women's homeless shelter in Detroit, especially the analytical frameworks she places to contextualize her work, illustrates cases in which Black performance veers off the social tropes and scripts of behavior placed upon them by hegemony. Working as a director for the shelter, Cox identifies and elaborates on how the young Black women (ages 15 to 22) with whom she works engage in what Cox terms choreography and shapeshifting. Pulled from Cox's background as dancer trained in modern and ballet styles, choreography refers to the scripted social behaviors of citizenship, authenticity, and respectability by which Black women are expected to regulate their bodies. They must follow the steps to complete the dance that white hegemony expects them to accomplish. However, choreography also describes the strategies and visions of living that Black women develop. (Cox 2015, 28-30). Originating from Cox's readings in Black feminist science-fiction, shapeshifting describes the deft and dynamic way Black women performatively reshape who they are, how they act, and what they say given the social space (2015, 26-28). However, Cox moves shapeshifting beyond a discourse of social camouflage to a possibility of world-building. When the girls shapeshift, they are shaping what
Black womanhood means to them and shifting the scripts and choreography of how to perform Black womanhood, generating emergent definitions of self-care, love, and wellness.

Spoken word, in fact, is a performatve vehicle of shapeshifting adopted by some of the women with whom Cox works. In her ethnography, she talks about The Move Experiment, a mix between a workshop and performance collective that Cox organized it as a space for young women—primarily though not entirely of color— to create art and consequently create themselves. The Experiment hosted a showcase in which the young women performed dances whose choreography was intended to capture the bodily ways they reimagine who they are.

After months of rehearsal and preparation, the night of the show arrives, and one of the pivotal moments occurs when Rachel dances to a recording of herself reading her own poem “Beautiful Women,” which “talks about the beauty in diverse bodies and ways of being and the life-affirming practice of learning how to become comfortable with who you are” (Cox 2015, 215). Rachel describes herself as “a fairly pretty, heavyset African American female” (Cox 2015, 197), and her poem confronts her experiences with body image and health. Like the Bull City poets, Rachel has a moment of shapeshifting on stage. The creation of her poem mirrors the creation of her new self, performed before an audience receiving her story and, thus, her subjectivity. She authorizes an emergent vision of womanhood, of Blackness, of selfhood, of body image, upending essentialist and prescriptive notions of identity and then supplying her own. Her poem rewrites the script, and her performance speaks that script into her being.

The opportunity to claim subjectivity, to seize a generative moment of self-definition, can suggest why people decide to enter framed moments of performance, but it is imperative to decode the circumstances surrounding that movement into performance, especially the performer's identity. The way one moves through the world as a woman, as a person or color, as
a queer individual, or even as a poet from the South manifests also in the way one moves through performance.

When a performer enters the stage, whether a figurative or literal one, what scripts are one compelled to adhere to with their speech, presence, or body? What decisions must a performer make in response to those scripts—submission, resistance, improvisational reimagining—and why? For the Bull City poets, responding to the script of southernness does happen during the framed moments in which they perform, but also during the moments when they define their aesthetics, when they talk about why a poem is good, and when they talk about why a poem is not good.

For Dasan, when he is instructing and offering critiques to Milli, LB, iShine, Ayanna, or any other Bull City poet past and present, when he is teaching the poets how to write their work and in a way write themselves, he is in part responding to the script of southernness that has influenced the development, performance, and reception of spoken word poetry from the South. There is the founding of the Southern Fried Poetry Slam because the national poetry slam scene ostracized poets, in particular Black poets, from the South for the styles and content of their poems. There is the intersection between Blackness and southernness in performance. But, for Dasan, his personal realization of "what it means to be southern and a poet and a slam poet outside of the South" can be traced to a critical moment that was the all the more "crazy because [Dasan and Bull City] were in the South" (2017b).

It was 2009. West Palm Beach, Florida at one of National Poetry Slam's side events: the National Underground Poetry Invitational Championship, or NUPIC. NUPIC flits between the line of an un-official and an "official" NPS event. NPS is a team-based slam competition, but an individual tournament was held alongside it until 2008. In its place, poets developed NUPIC.
The competition is still individual, but its stakes and mechanics distinguish it from individual slam. Participants add $100 each to a pot that is awarded to the night's champion. Participants duel it out one-on-one each round. At the end of the round, the participants stand together, and the crowd determines the winner not by numeral score but by volume of applause. If the audience does not consist of only poets, then it consists mostly of poets.

The ins-and-outs of NUPIC are germane to Dasan's story because NUPIC is functionally a private, insular event for poets and by poets. Some poets dismiss NUPIC as a glorified popularity contest where the winner more often than not brings their own designated cheering section. Regardless, NUPIC creates a space in which the poets signify their bonds with one another and their opinions of one another. In other words, with the non-poet public nowhere in sight, spaces like NUPIC allow poets to show their true colors. For Dasan, what happened at that particular NUPIC showed how some parts of the national poetry slam scene really felt about southern poets:

I'll never forget. It wasn't even at the slam. It was side event where it hit me, but I saw reactions that clearly felt—and even more so than race. Cause, in that moment, I could have just as easily read that racially—like, the moment that I had while I was standing there watching this event. I could have read the reactions, and the event was primarily poets, so it wasn't particular to the space. We were in the South. . . . I could have read it racially, but I didn't. My first reaction, and I walked over to another friend of mine, and I was like, “Yo, is this—is this—am I tripping—or is this? This feels really particular. There's a particular reaction to the South.”

And he was like, “Yep.”

And I was like, “Okay.” (2017b)

During the event, as Dasan recounts it, he remembers that southern poets participating NUPIC received cold responses compare to their non-Southern counterparts, even if the quality of the Southern poet's work outmatched their competitor's. I want to underscore the fact that he
"could have read [the scene] racially" but did not. Dasan's read (or, not-read) alludes to an overlap between Blackness and southernness in spoken word performance. Many spoken word poets from the American South are Black, and many signifiers of southernness in spoken word performance (e.g., vernacular speech, singing, call-and-response) also possess roots in African American performance traditions (e.g., rapping, storytelling, preaching). Southern culture is a creolized culture, and one of the cornerstones of that creolization is African American culture. This is not to say that all southern culture is African American, and this is not to say that all African American culture is southern. I want to avoid such generalizations. However, in the context of Dasan's story, which occurred a year after Slam Charlotte won back-to-back National Poetry Slam championships with teams featuring predominantly Black men, the ties between southernness and Blackness were difficult to untangle. Dasan wrestled with the racial overtones of the scene before coming down on it being a "southern thing":

Even recounting that, that's the first time I said I could have read it racially because I very much could. Because that was going on, too. But what really stood out was that southern thing. The racial thing was whatever. Whenever there's, like, competition. That felt to me more—that felt less—it just didn't feel the same. In this moment, I feel like the—the Black poets. There are so many intersect—the Black poets, the Black male poets. There's a particular perception and reception to, but I've really felt in that moment the next day that could all go away. That could have been challenged or called out, or the next time we're in the same space, the same reaction isn't going to happen. I really felt that was more a reflection of battling identities and which identity was going to be centered in that moment. So it's like Black. Black male. No, queer. No, white and queer. No, female. No, female and queer. . . . [B]ut I felt like, okay, there is a problem with the south. Tomorrow there is going to be a problem with the south. I don't feel a problem with the Midwest, I don't feel a problem with the West Coast. But I do feel there is a problem with the South, and that's less reconcilable. . . .

In that moment any of my concerns I was able to reconcile or give a little bit more space to before I settled on a read. Except for that. Because as I'm watching the night play out, I was able to come up with points on either side for every thing else. Ultimately it was being able to settle on the idea of battling identities. That was one—I had an answer for contextualizing some of the things that were going on. I didn't have an answer for that and I still don't. (2017b)
The politics of identity are complicated. At poetry slams, to incorporate Dasan’s phrasing, politics of identity literally compete. The heart of many spoken word poems tell stories of marginalization. Like the telling of a story, the performing of a poem is an attempt for the marginalized to come to the center (stage). When stories of marginalization—racial, class, gender, sexual—are being scored and set against each other in competition, as Dasan points out, poets with different identities can compete to see which one shall be centered. This "competition" between identities, however, ought not to replicate and reinforce the ways in which those identities are marginalized. To their credit, poets can be quick to call out other poets for speaking or behaving problematically. Southernness, however, is more slippery. "Southern" is an identity, yes. Race, gender, sexuality, and class are also slippery and exist relative to spectrums and intersections. Yet, precedents and language exist for calling out actions that ostracize race, gender, sexuality, and class. Fewer precedents exist for calling out actions that ostracize southernness, and the few precedents that do exist can be plagued with their own faults. For every André 3000 defiantly standing for the legitimacy of southern rap artists at the Source Awards and declaring that "The South got something to say," there are many other cases of Confederate apologists defending their rebel flags and monuments as "southern heritage." Moreover, individuals can cloak their racism, sexism, and classism by framing them as critiques or jokes about Southern people. Caricatures of southern rappers, hicks, hillbillies, inbred families—southern stereotypes gather from a stockpile of racist, sexist, and classist imagery, yet the slipperiness of geography frustrates attempts to develop short-hand call outs. This slipperiness in part explains why Dasan believed there was and would be a "problem with the South."
What could Dasan do with this problem, though? Even if Team Slam New Orleans (SNO) could win two national championships with pieces that possessed incredible stage presence, incorporated performative techniques like song and choreography, and spoke to deeply southern themes (specifically, New Orleans themes) with southern vernacular, stereotypes still persist that southern poets compensate lackluster writing with flashy performance. They can rock the mic, but not the pen.

Dasan's solution? Make sure every Bull City poet could rock the mic and the pen.

The summer workshop, if anything, is about "maintaining craft" while maintaining a connection with the crowd. The foundation is the words of the poem itself, and Dasan is constantly "pushing [his poets] to not take short cuts. Don’t put things in your poem you know are crowd-grabbers because it gives you a false sense of that connection... Like clichés. Popular idioms. Things people are going to laugh and giggle at. Wordplay that is obvious or clever" (2017a) The emphasis on avoiding "crowd-grabbers" relates to the frustration that poets experience when lines that are supposed to "hit"3 but don't. When certain lines don't hit and the crowd does not offer the poet the wave of praise at that particular juncture of the performance, often the poet will need to "push," their performative flow upset. Dasan compares a performance needing a line to hit to being "trapped," and when delivering critiques on paper, he works to help a poet avoid putting themselves in a position to be "trapped" by their own work: "What does that do to you and the performance? I don’t want to be led by that. I want every performance to feel like it’s unique and I’m going to get a different response every time. That weight is not on me as the performer because you did not respond" (2017a).

3 “Hit” refers to when the crowd snaps, stomps, or gives an audible response to a particular line in a poet’s performance.
"The weight" boils down to a practical view. The audience's reaction to the work is as variable as water, so make the work as solid as a rock. "If I know the poem is good enough to start at 8," he says, "then I think of what it takes to get that person of 8 to 9.8. I recognize it’s not the poem at that point. It seems hard for people to grasp that concept, but that’s what I’ve always tried to instill in poets who slam at the Jambalaya. Your work should be solid, and if it’s solid, then fuck the score" (2017a). The performance—the execution—gets the poem from an 8.0 to a 9.8. That execution involves three things: performing the poem at a consistent level of excellence, adjusting based on what the audience is responding to during the slam, and picking the right poems for the environment. After all that, what happens, happens.

It should be said that the advice upon which Dasan bases the Bull City Way of teaching can be seen as no-brainer. Poems should be written well and performed well. It should be said that Dasan's teaching ethos is about writing and performing well, but his emphasis on doing both highlights the motivation behind his ethos. That is the critical part. By demanding that his poets avoid clichés, idioms, and "crowd-grabbers," Dasan is working to anticipate and counter-act the criticisms that dismiss southern poets. Like Sawin (2002), Dasan does not subscribe to the “regressive illusion” that his poets can perform at the national stage with a blissful, virtuosic lack of self-awareness. The gaze of a national audience is informed by a load of dismissive scripts about what southern spoken word is, and those scripts work against the poets. The critical part is not that Dasan demands excellent writing and performance because any imbalance of quality between the two will be chalked to a Bull City poet being another southern poet who can rock the mic, but not the pen. During the chapter (2009-10) of Bull City that prominently featured G. Yamazawa, Kane Smego, Will McInerney, C. J. Sutt, and Elliot Axiom, Dasan remembers
really pushing them. . . . You want to put your writing against anything nationally, but you want to be able to touch that stage and carry all, all, all of everything that you have learned from Southern Fried with you. That’s the marriage of what we want to represent as Bull City. And that’s what we’ve tried to build. . . . “Oh they can rock, oh they can spit, but they can write.” Because I wanted to build something that from the gate counteracted any other jabs. Like, ‘Their stage presence is amazing. Their voices. The way they’re synced, the way they move, the way they look.” Any of those things, I wanted to counteract that from the gate. . . . When we [made] final stage, we’re southern, but it didn't feel so southern. (2017b)

To be southern but not feel southern on the final stage at NPS did not mean hiding the team's southernness but redefining what southernness in spoken word could look like. After all, being the same but feeling different is the one of the first signs of a re-definition and of a re-written script. Though Dasan wants the national championship that has eluded Bull City, this re-definition appears to be his end game. "If in your time here you can push back on that idea of what it means to be southern and a poet," he says, "then thank you" (2017b).

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The first time I saw iShine perform in 2014 when I first started photographing poetry slams, I would not call what he did necessarily “performing.” Rather, standing alongside his Bull City teammate Micah Romans during their performance of "Good Hair," a piece castigating all the stereotypes and microaggressions targeted toward Black people's hair, iShine publically wrestled with having too much energy and not enough hand gestures to dispense it. Head shaking, eyes popping, arms flying, voice exploding at the question "What the fuck is good hair?!”—iShine spat with a frenetic sense of abandon. At the time, I was working with a ten-year-old Canon DSLR that peaked at a 1600 ISO—meaning, the low light of the room demanded I put my shutter speed on low. So, of the one hundred stills I took of that three-minute performance, only a handful did not feature his arms blurred in a whirl of motion. While that
frenetic energy was awesome to witness and capture, it belied a sense of practiced control behind both his words and his movements.

Sitting down to talk with iShine either at his home or his place of work, I notice that same pace of balanced freneticism and control. Even taxed after a day working with kids at a Boys and Girls Club, he perks up from his slouch, pausing a second to consider my question, and reels off his answer. It's a generosity of spirit both on stage and in person. When he bounces from analogy to analogy, memory to memory, he shares what he has to say with a sense of conviction that it must be heard. As the one member of Bull City most likely to self-proclaim his southernness, he speaks with the same intention and defiance as an André 3000, whose famous quote from the 1995 Source Awards hangs in iShine's apartment: "The South got something to say."

Some of the most accessible and popular spoken word media displays images of poets spitting at national competitions like the Individual World Poetry Slam, the College Union Poetry Slam Invitational, and NPS. When poets list the number of times they have either won or reached the finals of these competitions, iShine situates the poetic legacy he hopes to leave within a specialized context of place. "At the end of it," he says, "I just want to be known as a southern legend. . . . I want to be, like, forty or fifty years old, walk into a slam, and [people be] like, 'Yo, iShine’s here. Ohhhhhhh, shit! Tighten up. He’s ready to kill all y’all! Tighten up, motherfuckers!'" (2017a).

iShine's emphasis of being a "southern legend" captures the way he tethers who is as a poet to where is from as a person. Tapping into, signifying, and discussing his southernness, he consequently prioritizes a value of authenticity that comes across not only in what writes but also in how he carries himself:
I think it’s important not to say just a poetry but a southern great. I wear that badge of being from the south well because I think it’s a very distinct background and history of living in the South and being Black in the South, and knowing that we always haven’t be respected in a lot of art forms. . . .

It’s everything, you know? We have a dialect. How I speak, especially in poems. In slam culture, in poetry culture in general, they say “speak your truth.” Don’t try to co-opt or take somebody else’s and tell somebody’s story. Tell your story. . . . I’m from Rocky Mount [in North Carolina], very country town from the South. Everything about me is hella country. One of my dreams in life is when I’m well enough in life I want to be driving in a really nice car in New York, and I want to be playing Big K.R.I.T’s "Country Shit" loudly. . . . "Country shit, / country, country shit." Cause that’s what I am. (2017a)

iShine's aesthetics and ethics draw on the maxim of "speak your truth." One of his signature pieces criticizes a poet who skims the headlights for stories of Black folks being murdered, jams the dead's name into their poem, uses the shock value to score higher at a slam, but never puts in the activist work necessary to mitigate the violence they fetishize. In other words, iShine loves performance poetry, but despises performative politics.

I focus on iShine's point about authenticity because, in the context of his defining his aesthetics as southern, it relates to a theme of defiance that echoes Dasan's comments on southern exclusion in poetry slam. Like Dasan, iShine knows the history of southern spoken word, and recalling the origins of Southern Fried and the story of Team SNO winning NPS back-to-back, he reinforces the bridge linking southernness, authenticity, and defiance.

[Southern Fried is] the biggest regional poetry slam in the country, and it started because poets that were in Asheville and the South felt like they weren’t getting represented in the national scene. They felt they were getting disrespected. For a lot, that stigma still does stick a little bit. . . .

There’s the doo-wop rule in slam. . . . Big part of that rule is team SNO . . . [b]ecause Slam New Orleans came to nationals in Charlotte and fucked people up. They won it back-to-back years. . . . All respectability politics out the window, a lot of these white kids were like “What the fuck? Nahhhh! I had this deep introspective poem about culture and everything, but they get up there and they’re singing!”
Yeah, nobody said they couldn’t. This is a slam. It’s a performance poetry competition. . . . [SNO] were such revolutionaries. Not one of the first, but one of the biggest to be like, “Yo! The South got something to say. The south is good at this.” And [they] were very southern. They were very New Orleans in their speech and what they talk about, and they made sure if people were going to use New Orleans metaphors in their poems, they better come correct. “This is where we’re from. We went through Katrina.” That’s why I always loved them. Their team put on for the South and wore it proudly. (2017a)

In iShine's recollection of Team SNO, he hints at the multiple dimensions of his southern ethics and aesthetics: authenticity, defiance, and most significantly (to me) a responsibility to place. For iShine, Team SNO's success represents what is possible when a poet claims and embraces their ties to a place. Team SNO's grand five-person group pieces wove together elements of southern Black vernacular music, dialect, and imagery so expertly that NPS instituted a "doo-wop rule" mandating poems could not include over a certain percentage of singing. From the racial overtones of doo-wop being a historically Black musical genre to white poets forming the majority of the backlash to Team SNO's "performative" style, iShine again testifies to the simultaneity of Blackness and southernness, and reinforces that one cannot talk about anti-southernness in the national poetry scene without mentioning anti-Blackness. Yet, in the mess of it all, the responsibility to place exhibited by Team SNO serves as a model for iShine in defining his responsibility to the South in general and to North Carolina in particular. "It's everything to me," he says, "to be a southern poet and be from North Carolina. . . . Our credo is. . . 'To Be Rather Than to Seem’" (2017a).

But what does it mean for spoken word poetry "to be rather than to seem" southern aesthetically. The Bull City Way is in part founded upon allowing its members to postulate and re-define what southernness does or does not mean to their craft and their identity. Yet, if I try to imagine Bull City poems removed from the context in which I know their authors were born and raised in the American South, I often struggle to identify a line, image, or other stylistic trait that
irrefutably signifies southernness. Yes, Dasan has his poem "Southern Manifesto." Yes, Milli, LB, Ayanna, and iShine investigate Christian themes, but I hesitate to label Biblical imagery as quintessentially southern. Of course, southern or otherwise, a poet possesses the right and agency to decide whether they are defined by or whether they write about where they are from.

This circumstance compels me to then emphasize not where southernness manifest in the words and performance, but where it manifests in the discourse surrounding the poems that Bull City poets perform and hear. Henry Glassie describes folklore through three processes of creation, communication, and consumption (1999). For spoken word, these processes reflect the writing of the poem, the performing of the poem, and the receiving of the poem. In fact, he bodily imagery invoked by "consumption" is critical. Pulitzer Prize-winner Mark Strand titled one of his most famous poems "Eating Poetry," and when iShine goes on to describe what great southern spoken word is, imagery of eating and consumption are vivid and prominent:

But sometimes [in southern spoken word] there is a directness, and you might think of it as [southern poets] not being creatively thinking on a higher plane. But no, there’s some dopeness to it. It’s we take that simplicity. You can have a dish that’s got 3000 ingredients to it, or whatever, and it’s this real long name, and you taste it. Eh, I taste a couple of them or whatever for somebody’s palate. But particularly for slam, if I made macaroni and cheese, put some heavy cream in it, butter—you know what I’m saying. And we’re boiling the noodles right, putting a whole bunch of different cheeses, and it’s real. That’s that southern comfort food. Got you something that’s really good for your soul. Is that not just as equal as something that had a million ingredients and beautifully crafted or whatever? We were soul food, and people can sometimes take soul food as something that’s not good for, its not healthy, or whatever. It’s something that’s going to deteriorate you. No, that’s something that’s going stay with you for longer than what you leave. . . . Sometimes people think because you’re a great writer you do all of these amazing flowery metaphorical things. Like, no, this is slam. This not the best writer competition. This is the best slam poet competition. Yes, you want to say you want to be a great writer. But can you make five judges feel something everybody else didn’t. (2017a)

Like André 3000, Dasan, and the initial organizers of Southern Fried, iShine takes a criticism against southern spoken word—in this case, its "simplicity"—and flips it on its head,
shapeshifting out of the script imposed on southern spoken word and creating a new one. Southern spoken word as mac and cheese evokes the visceral richness of southern foodways while also illustrating the affective dimension of southern spoken word's emphasis on feeling. At times, you can't explain being southern, but you can feel it deeply like a heavy home-cooked meal after church. You can't explain why you prefer a hot bowl of mac and cheese over a Three-Star Michelin meal, but you can feel it deep in your gut. After having created, communicated, and consumed a ton of southern spoken word, iShine prioritizes this sense of feeling and taste because it taps immediately into the sensorial experience that southernness encompasses and that, as he so eloquently expresses, southern spoken word attempts to replicate.

Months after this conversation, the image of mac and cheese stuck with me because of how succinctly it captured my own joy talking about southernness in my poetry and witnessing poets spit their work with a little bit of southern spice. Yet, after replaying the audio of this conversation over and over again, one word stuck in my craw because of how it conflicted with so much I witnessed during my year-old journey with Bull City: "simplicity." Its flavor vexed me. I did not spit it out, but I could not quite digest it. Little of Bull City's poetry felt "simple." Dasan's work laces a gossamer of historical and pop cultural allusions. iShine's work dissects the mythos of figures like Jonah and the Whale, Dr. Martin Luther King, and Billie Holiday and recasts them as flawed characters whose strife and sorrow mirror his own. Ayanna's work packs an astounding amount of puns, sonic devices, and tongue-twisters that create an intricate rhythm that could break at any second. Milli's work gazes unflinchingly at issues of addiction, violence, and mental illness in her family and personal life without reducing the characters in her poems to caricatures of simply good or simply bad. LB's work consists of high-concept pieces such personifying a quadriplegic Christopher Reeve, taking on the persona of a southern white
supremacist, or imagining a cottage industry of police officers receiving donations after killing unarmed Black folks. The entire Bull City Way of writing is avoiding the cliché, the crowd-grabbers, the simple.

Ruminating on the complexity of what simplicity means to iShine’s definition of southern spoken aesthetics, I recall this moment during which my understanding of southernness, aesthetics, and ethics—at least for iShine—ruptured.

It was Friday August 11th on the second floor of the McNichols Civic Center Building, where a semi-final bout for NPS 2017 was being held. After a summer of working hard, writing hard, practicing hard, after two days of leaving it all on the stage during the prelims held in the very same building, Bull City were not competing. Under the stark shadows and harsh lighting streaking from the industrial ceiling complete with pipes snaking from wall to wall, iShine, Milli, and I sat at the back left row of chairs. I did not bring my camera, only a notebook where I scribbled half-thoughts half-heartedly. Even though NPS policy on photography prohibited me from taking photos of other teams, I told myself I wouldn’t take photos of any poet on stage unless they were Bull City. Though it seemed yesterday's frustration had ceded into good-ish spirits—most of the team were debating their picks to win in each semi-final bout—I didn't want to stick my camera in their faces.

While the MC and the event staff were adjusting the sound, the drone of a hot mic's feedback muffled with a sock, I sat in the back with the team, listening to the poets debate while thinking which team in this bout—Nuyorican, House Slam, Dallas, SNO, or Busboys—I thought would win (i.e., House Slam) and which team I wanted to win (i.e., SNO). As stacked as the bout was, discussion shifted to another semi-final bout that was happening at another venue in the city. Specifically, discussion shifted to a southern team—whom I will call “Down Home” for the
sake of anonymity—whose style had frequently become a matter of contention in the past couple months I had been spending with Bull City. For instance, when Down Home performed well at Southern Fried, iShine and a couple other Bull City poets would roll their eyes and dismiss Down Home’s poems as clichéd rehashes of the same topics over and over again. Generally, when Down Home did well, I sensed Bull City received the news more often than not with a groaning combination of disbelief and befuddlement.

While he was chatting, iShine caught my attention. "You know what [Down Home] are like," he said snapping his fingers, "soul food. They aren't going to give you filet mignon, but they are going to make you the best peanut butter and jelly you've ever had. Granted, I've had filet mignon once, and that shit was amazing."

Only a few times have I ever done a double-take as hard as I had at that moment. This was the same man who valorized southern spoken word as soul food, as "something that’s going stay with you for longer than what you leave." The same man called another southern team—Down Home—soul food, flipping a badge of honor into a backhanded compliment. While the team were not the best writers, in his opinion, he conceded they had found their niche in being theatrical.

The paradox of this bubbled in my brain for months like macaroni noodles boiling in a pan. I had previously seen members of Down Home perform both in video and in person, and while I understand why their style could be considered theatrical and better on stage than on the page, the culinary imagery of peanut butter and jelly, mac and cheese, and soul food that iShine invoked to frame why that team was successful in spite of their lackluster writing—it seemed to echo the same criticisms that were used to dismiss Slam Charlotte, Team SNO, and other southern poets.
Months passed. NPS was in August 2017, and now it was January 2018. I had gotten back into slamming and competed in a couple Jambalaya Slams. I had also gotten into a car accident with a drunk driver, tearing me out of the thick of writing and interviewing. When I arrived at iShine's new place of work for our first recorded conversation in what felt like forever, giving him a hug and a dap, all the time and distance could have stretched and thinned and withered out the one question I needed to ask him. But it didn't. All the time and distance only deepened it, thickened it, cooked it.

Jackson: I remember at nationals during the semi-final round, when you heard [Down Home] was going to finals, you described their poetry like mac and cheese.

iShine: Did I say that?

Jackson: Yes.

iShine: Okay. Because—[laughs] Jackson going to get me in trouble. Fuck it... Because yes, I think great southern spoken word is like well-made mac and cheese, and they are like mac and cheese. Mac and cheese is a staple dish for a lot of things, especially southerners. A lot of cook outs, a lot of holidays, thanksgivings, all of that. And so, uh, what [Down Home] have done... and this is no shade to them. They are an amazing. They made semi's. They are an amazing troupe. At the same time, some mac and cheese you make ain't got hella ingredients in it. Like some of y'all aunties, they're putting in the same things. The same kind of [frequently] used troupes to make it, but that shit taste good. And it's amazing. And some times, it makes you feel good, makes you feel warm inside, and later on, you're like, damn, that shit's heavy. I feel sleepy, and maybe it had lard in it. It was made with lard, or maybe the calories are killing. You know what I'm saying? Like something that's not helping you build...

I love all of them, but sometimes it’s not necessarily a push on the writing, but the feeling in poetry. And that's definitely important, the feeling you can invoke in your writing and in your performance. It's definitely something I've taken from them. Um, I've stolen. Cause great writers steal... They do certain things very well as far as creating that atmosphere like I'm going to put on a show. I think a lot southern poets in contrast...forget that... Matter of fact, I went somewhere, and there was some macaroni and cheese, and they tried to put like garlic or some crazy shit in there, and that shit was disgusting. I hated it so much. So it's like the same kind of metaphor. Some people try to be so technical in their writing that it's not presentable. It's not digestible. It's not something I want to eat [for] leftovers for...
tomorrow... Sometimes it's too much in that moment. Sometimes you just want to eat that macaroni and cheese...

There's a deeper meaning to it, but the intricacy and the writing isn't going to blow you away, but like the idea and the feeling [they] bring around, it's A-1. You can put that up with any poetry that's in the country, especially this past year. Say what you want about the team. But they figured out that, hey, we're not going to blow people away with our writing, with the actual technical ability of the metaphors that we're going to be saying [and] stuff. But we are going to make a theater production in every group piece... It's going to make you laugh, and it's going to be hella Black and hella southern. And you're going to be like, "Oh hell yeah, I can relate to that."... [Some poets] want to give [the audience] a five-course meal, and I wanted to give them a hot dog fresh off the grill and some mac and cheese and cole slaw on a styrofoam plate. Which one resonates with them more? (2018a)

It doesn't take a sharp eye to see the ostensible contradictions in iShine's explanation, especially if one attempts to reconcile iShine's viewpoint with Dasan's intention of pushing his poets to avoid crowd-grabbers, or crass attempts to manipulate the crowd's emotions, in their writing. iShine seems to both reinforce and deny the script of southern poetry being theatrical rather than writerly when trying to explain the southern team’s success. Rethinking iShine’s metaphor of soul food, I acknowledge that he may have been speaking more to the quality of affect rather than technical ability in southern spoken word. After all, the difference between a cliché poem and a simple poem is that, while both are technically basic, the latter is affectively complex. But, to complicate iShine’s metaphor, is there not technical craft in a simple dish like mac and cheese? Even if one needs a few ingredients to make a pot of mac and cheese, one needs a tremendous amount of technical ability to make mac and cheese that is good for the soul.

Nevertheless, as vexing as iShine's explanation may seem, as it still is to me, I believe iShine's words should not be taken as contradictory but simultaneous. In other words, when we examine iShine's, Dasan's, or other Bull City poets' discourse on aesthetics not as an "either/or" but a "both/and" argument, then we have a better understanding of some of the problems
southern poets have had with how southern poetry has been talked about, and of the ways the Bull City Way as a flexible ethos encourages Bull City poets to respond.

I typically advocate for effects over intentions, but in this case, I argue that intentions and context are invaluable in comprehending how iShine in particular subverts rather than enforce scripts of southernness. For instance, when non-southern poets at NPS criticized Slam Charlotte, Team SNO, and other teams from the south, the intentions behind those criticisms were to dismiss not just what those southern poets wrote but also who those southern poets were. This dismissiveness invoked an image of southernness and southern poetry as simple, theatrical, superficial, and performative, and then reinforced a script that simple, theatrical, superficial, and performative was all that southernness and southern poetry was. The intention is to deny the complexity of the southern poets' craft, place it into a box of stereotypes, proffer that box as fact, and summon it to excuse one's inability to outdo teams like Slam Charlotte and Team SNO in competition.

On the other hand, yes, iShine criticizes the technical writing of the southern team, but he does not advance that criticism to dismiss what the team does or excuse why the team was successful at NPS 2017. He does not advance a critique of the writing into a critique of the artists. Perhaps he did not intend to use the metaphor of soul food to this end on that night at NPS 2017, but iShine's invocation of soul food and cookouts portrays southern spoken word as not a box but a table where all are welcome. The simplicity, theatricality, and performativity of the southern team's work can exist in the same realm of aesthetics as Bull City's work exists. The script of southernness is not "either/or" but "both/and."

When Dasan said he wants his poets to "push back on that idea of what it means to be southern and a poet," I don't know whether he was talking simply about writing. However,
examining iShine's discussion about the southern team at NPS 2017, southern spoken word, and soul food illustrates how a Bull City poet pushes back on the script of "what it means to be southern and a poet" by simply reframing how southernness and spoken word poetry are talked about. Now, iShine's perspective may or may not conflict with Dasan's, and there are plenty of Bull City poets' perspectives not present in this chapter that may or may not conflict with one another. Poets argue about what makes good poetry as often as they write poetry, and Dasan has previously butted heads with former Bull City poets about aesthetics. Conflicts and contradictions between coaches and poets are common. Yet, these conflicts and their contradictions, even among the poets who have studied under the Bull City Way, are productive because they don't settle on a singular script of what it means to be southern and a poet. They shapeshift. They un-settle the script. They un-settle the stereotypes that have been embedded into the script. And then they re-write it.
CHAPTER 3: THE BULL CITY SLAM TEAM, SOUTHERN FRIED, AND THE NATIONAL POETRY SLAM

Bu-bu-bu-Bull City!

The circle—the circle the team forms before every performance, the circle that begins with Dasan's words of wisdom and iShine's plea for God to put His super on the team's natural—breaks apart. The flurry of secret handshakes, fist bumps, and general hyped-ness that follows brings back memories of the few minutes before a big game. Obviously, because they are secret, I can not describe the way in which each of iShine, Milli, LB, Ayanna, and Dasan's hands flutter, snap, bounce, and snap together in motions so fluid that my lack of hand-eye coordination could not be more pronounced, but their grace re-affirms the affection and trust each Bull City poet has in one another. Each handshake is different, and there is a unique handshake for each combination of poet. While Milli's handshake with iShine hits quick and straight to the point, her version with Ayanna stacks layer after layer of steps. When we all step out of the cramped stairwell and into the corridor next to the room where the team will be competing, everyone makes way and steps to the side. For a moment, I have no idea what's about to happen. In the next moment, I realize exactly what's about to happen. From opposite sides of the corridor, iShine and LB ramp up, sprint, leap, and shoulder-bump, hanging in the air as they thud. The last time I unironically shoulder-bumped someone, I played center on my middle school football team, the smallest player on the offensive line, a walking rattle of pads. I see how the ritual—like
so many that emerge from the tradition of sports and athletics that most of the team shares—can smack of machismo and showboating, ridiculous as LB's and iShine's feet thud on the floor, maybe causing a staffer to worry what an unruly carnival of poets are doing in this very nice arts center. Yes, part of it is machismo and showboating, but it's something more endearing and self-aware. As the team makes their way into the bout room, I sense the same balance of seriousness and silliness toward the competition of slam that permeates the Jambalaya and Hayti back home in Durham. Make no mistakes—from LB and iShine's excited bounce to Milli, Ayanna, and Dasan's cool stroll—Bull City wants to walk up to the stage and take the trophy like it’s theirs. But, to echo a phrase I heard multiple times in both Louisville and Denver over the summer, “everyone is here just to do poems, man.”

These poems, though, aren't just poems. When the Bull City poets walk into a massive lecture hall at the Kentucky Center for the Arts in Louisville or the cavernous, industrial gallery spaces of the McNichols Civic Center Building in Denver, a sense of levity and focus evident in their stride, I think of the weight of these poems sitting upon their shoulders. The catalog of content in Bull City's playlist runs something like this: suicide, alcoholism, depression, police brutality, sexual assault, sexism, the prison industrial complex, and more. Of course, other pieces take on more uplifting riffs, such as satirizing ageism targeted toward women, overused stencils and techniques used by other spoken word poets, and gross dudes who ask "What That Mouth Do." The gravity of the poems' subjects should not dominate the picture, but I can't help but acknowledge the will and vulnerability it takes to bring these subjects into rooms far away from the places one calls home or shelter, even if some of the Bull City poets admit that having performed these pieces over and over again has partially muted the self-triggering capacity of these stories.
Milli, for instance, seems to have mastered twisting the heaviest material into the hardest-hitting, eloquently written pieces. This mastery ostensibly goes hand-in-hand with the frank, and at times darkly humorous, way she talks about trauma in spoken word. During our conversations she would intersperse comments about her father's drug addiction and family's history of mental illness with quips of "blah, blah, quack, quack." Not to treat those topics aloofly, but to use her friendship with iShine as an example, she explains that "the fact he knows my dad used to beat the shit out of my mom? Psssh. Whatever. Who doesn't know that? [laughs] That's on a YouTube video. It's out there. Knowing that he can cook, that's intimate. [Having your trauma out there in your poetry] makes you reprioritize what's important, what's sacred, what matters" (2017a) When I watch Milli walk up to a microphone and perform the hell out a piece about domestic violence in her family, a rumble in her voice amplified for three minutes, I hear the times she has laughed about the same topic in the context of our interviews, a bubble in her voice recorded for as long as these .WAV files will last. The distance between these two tones tells me a lot. A lot I may not fully understand and more I do not want to presume. But, it does tell me something about what Milli has made sacred.

Still, when the bout MC asks Bull City who they will be sending up, and Dasan and company shout "Milli!", and the crowd erupts into the routine of applause that welcomes every poet approaching the microphone, and Milli walks past row after row of chairs with the same tied-back locks and dark cardigan that I have photographed countless times at slams both home and abroad, the first words I hear are Milli's words. They just aren't from the poem she is performing: people call slam a safe space. It's not. Anyone can hear your trauma, take it, and do whatever they want with it.

*When the next of us is found pistol-first
painted red by the brush of his own insides,*
I don't cry.

Oh God, it's this poem. It's "Inheritance." It's going to get heavy.

We go too fast, too young, but not unexpected, so common we don't need to talk about it. It is just what we do.

The first time my aunt attempted suicide she wrote us a three-page letter detailing her grief, what it meant to get gone after years of not being here. When she woke up, we reminded her that we pray to a savior that does not give more than we can handle, call her decision a failure of faith while refusing to believe she'd try again. The next letter just said: take two.

"Come on!" I hear iShine. "Okay, Milli!" I hear LB. Their chorus of intermittent voices lifts at certain lines, but never too high, never loud enough to bring attention to themselves. They have not heard every time Milli has performed this poem, but they've heard it enough to know which moments their voices are needed.

By then, we had lost an uncle, a few cousins, even our grandmother's suicide runs in this family.

I am convinced that it is our inheritance, a tombstone stamp on this DNA. We so sad, we smile everyday, keep an outfit pressed for the funeral, another one set aside to become the burial clothes. We already know what the epitaph will be. Here lies another who believed in God so much, they did not trust the men that He had made.
Here my memory of this poem splits in two. Here the black curtains draped from the towering walls of the Kentucky Center swarms the background. In every photograph I take, three microphones stand side-by-side, and Milli stands to the one at my right, black hoodie unzipped to show the silver paisley tie that falls from the collar of dark blue shirt, locks tied in a messy bun, beaded bracelet around the left wrist. When her right hand touches her heart and her left hand reaches out, I hear the Southern Fried audience as boisterous. They clap their hands and talk back to Milli, her voice rising to meet the crowd's crest of noise so that her words don't drown in the wave.

We do not seek help in this family.
Do not call this sorrow a sickness.
We fall on the wrong side of every statistic describing Black folks with mental illness.
We cry, then pray, then bury our dead, then shrug, then pray again. First time

I tried attempting suicide, my mother talked to God all night. Told Him she would give anything to keep her baby girl here

while at the same time telling my doctor who did not need his suggestion for counselors.
Even Jesus survived a 72-hour hold

when he threw it all in at Calvary, and what are we if not made in his image?
Made to carry our crosses in silence

and hope one day there will be resurrection.
Sometimes I look at my baby brother and wonder the crucifix inside his head,

hoping my still-being-here does not mean he will be next, found teeth to tile then brushed aside like some kind of failure of faith. When I told my mother

I was finally getting help with the burden that comes with this bloodline,
she asked how it was so easy

to turn my back on God. Told her, "Mom,
the Apostle Luke was by trade a physician.
Even Christ had a doctor at his disposal.

Here the curtains disintegrate, and in their place emerges a white industrial gallery wall, a row of windows running along its side, blue hazes of light bleeding from the glass. Here we are no longer in Louisville for Southern Fried, but in Denver for the National Poetry Slam. There are still three mics still planted on the floor, no elevation to distinguish between the stage and the audience. In the photographs I take, I sit a couple rows farther back, so Milli appears farther away. She seems the same as she was at Southern Fried until I take note of the differences. Her locks fall over her shoulders. A poet pass attached to a lanyard replaces the tie. No bracelet circles her wrist this time. This time, though Milli delivers the poem with the same steadfast and deliberate pace that punches every word, I don't hear the same "come on's" and "go in, poet's." They are there, but fainter. No one rises from their seat, claps their hands, stomps their feet. The same poem is taken in, but the word is received differently.

"Who am I to turn aside the kind of assistance my savior was able to send for. Aren't you tired of going to funerals? Do you know your kids have already planned theirs? We want to go of old age. That doesn't run in this family." (2017c)

The final words arrive, and applause follow them, ringing off the iron and steel out of which this cramped gallery is built. Milli marches toward the corner where the rest of the team sit, and twisting around, my camera strap tight around my wrist, I snap of shot of LB—all big arms, wide shoulders, and thick beard—hugging her tight. When I look at the picture, though the details are different, the scene brings back memories of the Hayti, of the Jambalaya, of the Poets'
Corner waiting from Milli to descend from the stage so that they can bring her in. Slam is not a safe space. People can receive your trauma, take it, and do whatever they want with it. The Bull City poets take it, too. But what I like to imagine they do with it is make something a little like sanctuary.

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Maybe my Catholic disposition and my begrudging years of team sports impose themselves too strongly, but the way rituals transform a space, even if it’s for the few who participate in it, draw my attention. When Dasan called the entire team together for the first time to circle up, I felt both jarred and comforted, my fists fumbling to line up with those of the others, a flashback to the many times I was a curious potential convert fumbling during Mass. Once I figured out my place, bowing my head as iShine led the prayer, I felt in some small way the room in which the team would compete becoming sanctuary. Or, at least, the connection between the poets becoming sanctuary in the room.

A minister ordained in a Pentecostal tradition and a queer Black woman raised in the Deep South, Milli seemed like the one person in Bull City who could elaborate on why the team emphasized praying before bouts, especially since the venue the team calls home was originally a church. Yet, as I learned, prayer was not necessarily the point of the ritual, but rather a part of it. "I think the significance is not in that we pray," said Milli. "I think the significance is in having a centering ritual that we have together before the competition starts" (2018). Centering made sense. Repetition makes ritual, and ritual grounds oneself. Yet, as I wondered what "centering" meant in particular, Milli proceeded to discuss the idea of home court advantage, specifically the way in which the stage at the Hayti’s sanctuary influences her performance:

There's something about, like, I know the stage at Hayti. I know what those mics feel like. I know how close or how far away I need to stand from those mics.
When I look to my right, I know what the stained glass is going to look like. I know where the other poets are going to be hanging. These are things I know about this space, so no matter how uncomfortable the poem is, I still feel comfortable on stage. That makes it easier to perform. But that's not true any more in New York or Denver or Dallas. All other variables considered, we have a thing that we do that's like, “Yo, it doesn’t matter what house this is. In this moment we have made it Bull City's house, so we can do what we have to do.” (2018)

For Milli, while the rituals the team performs before every bout may not bring the affective and sensorial dimensions of the Hayti stage to New York or Denver or Dallas, just as the Hayti is Bull City's house, the rituals orientate the team to conduct themselves and live in their skins as if the Kentucky Center in Louisville or the McNichols Building in Denver was their house. The conditions of *communitas* at the Jambalaya are not perfectly replicated outside of Durham, but because that *communitas* is made equally by both the physical Hayti space and the poets who hold that space, the Bull City poets know how to help poetry slam spaces, fraught with the tensions of both competition and community, become more hospitable for themselves and, hopefully, for the poets on competing teams. The essence of the Bull City Way is this hospitality, this southern hospitality that works to make all poets—even the Bull City poets—feel welcome in spaces that are not their own.

Does it work perfectly? Does everyone in a slam space feel more welcome because the Bull City poets greet everyone, shake their hands, cheer for their on and off stage, and thank them for a great bout at the end? I can't necessarily say, even if I think Bull City provides one of the best models available for holding a slam space. I find it more imperative to ask how the way in which Bull City conducts rituals and maintains slam spaces during team competitions is informed by the model of southern *communitas* set forth by the Jambalaya Slam, by the politics of southern identity at Southern Fried and NPS, and by the different ways community and competition are connoted at Southern Fried and NPS.
When imagining how she would respond if Bull City did not pray or center themselves before a bout, Milli states it plainly: "The honest answer to that question is that I'd probably freak out." More so, she has "never been on one of those stages [at Southern Fried or NPS] without iShine giving [her] a hug" (2018). A hug, a prayer, a circle may seem like ornamentation, but like the Poets' Corner heckling her on stage at the Jambalaya, they play an essential role in preparing Milli to share personal work before audiences that, by their nature, can be impersonal. Though the *communitas* these rituals produce may not be as pronounced as the *communitas* that generates at the Jambalaya, participating in the circle and hugging iShine represent ways in which Bull City reminds Milli that she is not alone on stage, and because she is not alone, this moment and this house are hers, allowing her to flow, not freak out. If there is one thing that testifies to how critical the prayer circle is to transforming the space into one in which Milli and other poets feel comfortable performing, then it is how Milli "does not foresee" Bull City forgetting to gather before a bout. "iShine takes it seriously that he prays for the group," she emphasizes. "So, even if we are all out doing whatever, iShine makes a point of gathering us altogether to pray. I would probably freak out [if he didn't], but I don't think that would happen where we didn't do something to come together" (2018).

The certainty with which Milli believes that iShine or, at least, someone would rally the troops underwrites the significance of this ritual. Something about consistently gathering together and throwing up the horns settles one's nerves and heightens one's focus. Though I obviously did not compete for the team, they welcomed me into the circle, camera dangling around my neck. After I threw up the horns, I felt it. My nerves did settle. My focus did heighten. I held the lens more steadily and moved about the room more comfortably. Furthermore, during
Bull City's last bout at NPS, when I did not participate in the circle because time before the bout was running out and I was somewhere too far away from the team, I also felt the absence of that ritual. My nerves worsened. My focus splintered. I struggled finding decent angles and felt more self-aware about my body than ever before. I felt de-centered—which is exactly what being in a new place, a place that isn't yours, can do to you.

Beyond the significance and affect of the ritual, Milli's certainty that the team will circle up testifies to the ritual's longevity. Milli, iShine, and Dasan all recall a time when, before iShine always lead the prayer, former Bull City alum G. Yamazawa would lead the team in a Buddhist chant prior to bout. Though he prayed in a different form, G. set a precedent for iShine. Though he does not remember how he then became the one who always lead the prayer, iShine now always comes prepared to bow his head. He doesn't "think about what [he's] saying." Rather he thinks "about the feeling of being thankful for the gift of writing and the ability—the opportunity—to speak in front of people" (2018a).

Though iShine describes a "collective southern, church-going attitude that all of [Bull City's current generation] have a history with" (2018a), the prayer itself does not signify a particular faith the team upholds. When G. first suggested leading a chant, Dasan recalls everyone going with and embracing it, even the members of the team at the time who were Christian (2018). The prayer evokes the faith that the team have in each other while, at the same time, allowing the members who are religious to draw upon some part of their faith to guide them before stepping onto the stage. The prayer makes faith an explicit part of what the poets do, and when leading the prayer, iShine asks God "to put the super on our natural" and to bless the poets with the ability "to touch a mind and change a heart."
From G. conducting a Buddhist chant to iShine talking to the Christian God, the prayer highlights how in the circle, like other rituals the team maintains, certain members take up a specific role. That role descends to next generation, its execution altered by who conducts it. G. prayed, iShine prays, and someone will pray in iShine's place when he longer competes with Bull City. Dasan gives a pep talk to the team, and when he chooses to retire from coaching, a new coach will give that pep talk to future Bull City teams. It's "a part of what Bull City tradition has always dictated," to borrow iShine's words (2018a). The feeling that these rituals will persist, and that they will persist because new poets will actively take up the roles to continue the circle, not only reinforces the significance the circle holds in preparing the space for the poets to thrive, but also identifies the poets as agents with a responsibility and ability to affect the room in which they are entering. Like the Poets’ Corner at the Jambalaya, the Bull City poets influence the affective dimensions of the room. While iShine attributes Bull City tradition to "dictat[ing]" that everyone circles up before a bout, the poets choose to maintain the circle, to welcome non-Christian folks like G. to contribute changes to it, and to center themselves.

When the poets discuss these acts of centering, and when they discuss poetry slam at a national competitive level, athletic metaphors abound. The frequency of those metaphors, in part, derives from nearly every poet on the 2017 team having a background in competitive sports. For instance, Ayanna, Dasan, and iShine played basketball, and when LB discovered spoken word and poetry slam in college, poetry replaced the void left from playing high school football. This shared experience of both having scored goals, made baskets, and rocked mics feeds into how praying before a bout feels natural. "It's a normal thing that you pray," explains iShine, "before [the game starts]" (2018a). When LB and iShine sprint, leap, and bump shoulders, the scene recollects moments when football players crash their pads and crack their helmets together in
anticipation before kick-off. iShine and LB laugh off the shoulder-bumping as an ironic display of machismo. However, the praying, the handshakes, and the shoulder-bumping draw from the poets’ experiences of having grown in a part of the country—the South—where sports and religion go hand-in-hand. Like a playoff team's pre-game rituals, Bull City's pre-bout rituals transform the space and ready the poets so that, like athletes entering the zone before an audience of thousands, they can accomplish incredible feats of poetic athleticism.

Furthermore, the frequency of sport metaphors also draws from Bull City's understanding that slam is, in fact, an actual competition. "As much as people say the points aren't the point," says Milli, "they are" (2017a). It may start with hugs and fist bumps, but at the end of the week, someone is walking out with a trophy. Like a poetic John Wooden, Dasan keeps a hand-written record of every poem he has called, where he called that poem, when he called that poem, and how high that poem scored. During the run-up to NPS 2017, in one of the conference rooms at the Hayti, the team spent an hour and a half running through different combinations of poems for a bout, using a system Dasan developed that identifies and labels what kind of poems are needed in what kind of situations. Depending on how iShine reads the energy of the room or what number LB picks when drawing for the bout order, Dasan makes adjustments to his strategy. Poems are called plays. For Bull City and many, many other teams, poetry slam is an art. But it’s also a sport.

The fact that poetry slam is a competition, naturally, complicates things. Poets strive to form and foster community through the sharing of poetry and experiences via the event of a slam, but that competition can intervene with certain dynamics of community-formation, particularly the dimension of slams being spaces of healing, catharsis, and counter-publics. "It's just one of the things I'm concerned about is a lot of people come to poetry because they think it's
going to be this place of healing and this place of catharsis," comments Milli, "but we're living in this era of slam when people who coach [high school-aged] Brave New Voices teams that are encouraging these kids go mentally and emotionally to these awful places, knowing the poem is going to get scored well, but also without offering the necessary emotional support" (2017a).

While I can imagine skeptics balking at the idea that coaches would tokenize the trauma of poets, especially minors, in order to score higher, this is a real concern among the Bull City poets and other poets in the national and regional poetry slam scenes. Thus, it should be taken seriously, especially considering the very real stakes of winning and losing at a national poetry slam competition. Poets who have either won or finished in the top-ten of the Individual World Poetry Slam, National Poetry Slam, or College Union Poetry Slam Invitational have gone on to have videos of performances go viral on YouTube, obtain fellowships, garner awards and nominations in literature and beyond, develop literary presses and media organizations, and more. Success at national poetry slam competitions can be the difference between poetry being what you do on the side and what you do for a living. While community is a vital force in poetry slam, especially to the end of making marginalized folks feel welcome and heard in light of a hegemonic world, to downplay poetry slam's nature as a competition would be to entertain a fantasy.

Slam-as-competition and slam-as-community require a delicate balance, and it is one that the Jambalaya strives to maintain through how the poets hold space there. For a local slam that

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4 A deep ethnography of how trauma interacts with poetry slam spaces is necessary. Something can be said of how hearing or performing poems about trauma can trigger performers and audience members, and how triggering work can interfere with rather than contribute to better psychological well-being. At the same, something can be said of how the group-sharing of trauma stories can generate potent feelings of *communitas*. However, despite the significant role trauma plays in the discussions of ethics in spoken word and poetry slam among poets, I do not believe neither this chapter nor this thesis has to room to broach this subject with the amount of depth it deserves.
regularly sees a gathering of about eight poets a month, this balance can be a bit easier to maintain. Networks are tighter, and connections are closer, at least geographically. When the geography expands—from local to regional to national—the forces that maintain that balance become strained. The wider the rubber band stretches, the more tension and energy it contains. Before it pops. When Bull City attends Southern Fried and NPS, they participate in events that handle geography—and the tension and energy it contains—very differently. Consequently, when Bull City arrives at Southern Fried and NPS, they witness two events that handle the balance of competition and community very differently.

For the Bull City poets, Southern Fried and NPS often stand as a binary. LB, for instance, finds that "Southern Fried is always more of a family-feel event. It's more of 'let's have fun and enjoy the people.' The competition side of things is still steel sharpens steel. We're still going to dismantle and destroy each other as soon as the bout starts, but as soon as the bout is over it's all love. It's always support everybody. It's always [every] team claps for everybody" (2018). On the other hand, Milli identifies NPS with two things: competition and networking. "On a very basic level," she explains, "if you are on an NFL team, you want to go to the Super Bowl. It might be a trash game like it was last year, but you still want to go. That's part of how I feel about Nats." Other than winning the Super Bowl of poetry slam, "[o]n a business and branding level, you meet people at Nats you wouldn't meet organically otherwise. . . .It's one thing to send a poetry submission to [All Def Poetry]. It's another thing to send a poetry submission, go to Nats, see Shihan, chop it up with him, be able to have a conversation and a drink" (2017b.) At NPS, teams win a massive golden trophy that looks like Excalibur driven through a stack of books. At Southern Fried, teams win a bunch of R/C cola and moon pies to throw into the audience. In fact, according to an apocryphal story that influenced LB's understanding of Southern Fried, one year
"they didn't finish. They just stopped and had fun and ate . . . and just hung out for the rest of the night" (2018).

Though I caution against setting forth this binary as an essentialism, I find it valuable in exploring how the Bull City poets think through, process, and implement this binary between Southern Fried and NPS, because this binary speaks to how the team's southernness affects the ways in which they participate with each event. Embedded with the association of a family reunion, Southern Fried typifies the dimensions of a poetry slam festival that inspire sensations of *communitas*, of "we are all in this together." Several side-events and traditions at Southern Fried work to undermine the divisiveness of competition and to facilitate the Southern Fried family to come together. There is literally a cook-out—complete with barbeque, mac and cheese, drinks, and spades. The imagery of R/C colas and moon pies, which seem better suited to sparking a sugar high than crowning a champion, undermine the grandeur and ceremony connoted with a typical golden trophy. Honor and prestige still drapes around the shoulders of the poets who win Southern Fried, but the moon pies, R/C colas, and cook-outs reiterate the credo that everyone at the festival is just here to do poems. Moreover, from the moon pies to the word "fried" being in the name of the festival, the explicit southernness invites attendees to express and acknowledge in one another a confluence of experiences, scenes, feelings, voices, and sensations that reflect the many ways it means to be southern. Therefore, the *communitas* of Southern Fried works not only because of the steps taken to invert the centrality of competition, but also because of how those steps simultaneously signify a shared sense of southernness to every team present. You're here at the reunion. You're here with the family. Act like it. Now, be humble, be thankful, and pass the potato salad.
The perception of Southern Fried as an event where Bull City goes to experience feelings of *communitas* and shared-southernness contrasts with the perception of NPS as a conference where Bull City poets go to compete and, at times, to advance their careers as a poets. "Nationals is one of those competitions I've learned a lot of people spend their year fundraising," comments LB, "and they dream and hope and pray and wish to win the national title, so a lot of that competitiveness can bitter the true meaning of the competition in itself" (2018). When LB highlights the "true meaning of the competition," he underwrites the reality that both Southern Fried and NPS organize themselves around a competition, but because of the financial and emotional stakes invested in winning a national title, the atmosphere at NPS offsets the balance between competition and community, preventing some poets from experience feelings of *communitas*. To be fair, the governing body of NPS, Poetry Slam, Inc. does strive to foster inclusivity at NPS. It's mission statement includes "building a healthy community that welcomes and embraces the voices of people from all races, colors, genders, sexual orientations, lifestyles, classes, national origins, religions, ethnicities, ages, and abilities" (Poetry Slam Inc. 2015). NPS offers open-mics and other spaces dedicated to poets of varying ethnic, racial, religious, cultural, gender, able-bodied, and sexual identities. NPS also utilizes language of "slam family" and "the point is not the points" to describe some of its events. However, rhetoric and policies of inclusivity do not necessarily generate *communitas*, and a gap exists between how NPS strives to foster an environment defined by inclusivity and family and how southern poets like the Bull City Slam Team, in particular, experience it.

The experience of this gap can be attributed to both historical and still-lingering feelings of southern and Black exclusion from NPS. Part of the reason why southern identity has so much valence in terms of the communitas associated with Southern Fried is because the festival is "a
direct result of the battle" says Dasan, "[that] the South has had creatively with the rest of the country, that the folks in Asheville felt that they weren’t being considered in any significant—in [a] significant enough of a way that they wanted to create a space for them and the rest of the South” (2017b). NPS was first held in 1990, and significantly, it originated initially as a battle between Chicago and New York (Aptowicz 2007). Southern Fried followed in 1993. In other words, the need that Southern Fried sought to fill traces far back to the original years in which poetry slam as a competition and art form was expanding beyond bars and into a nation-wide phenomenon. Because of how far back this sense of southern exclusion at the national scene originates, with Southern Fried forming not only because southern poets wanted a regional festival, but also because they felt shunned at the national level, southern poets often speak of the national poetry slam scene with an adversarial tone and “Us vs. Y’all” mentality. That mentality emanates from genuine feelings and experiences of being discounted and unwelcomed, and when southern poets, especially Black southern poets, speak about exclusion at the national poetry slam scene, they speak with point-of-view whose authority and legitimacy should be recognized.

Explanations for exactly why this particularly regionalist exclusion exists, however, can vary. For Milli, it originates from slam reflecting the world at-large.

You have to go in knowing slam is just a small mirror of the rest of the world. People who are not from the South tend to view people that are from the South in a specific light. Because of that, some of our work—some of our poetry is inherently not accepted, and some [of] the ways in which we handle business aren't accepted. And so there are two ways to respond to that. You can either try to write a poem that works for Nats, or you can just decide "this is who I am, and this is what I am bringing to the table." Once you do the latter, you actually do better in the competition than in anything else. . . .

I think that there has been, on the part of the organizers of some of the national events, [a move] to exclude the voices of a Dasan, a Bluz, a Pages because, even though they are figureheads of the community, they are figureheads of the
southern community. But then when Bluz wins a Grammy when he's up against Shihan, who is respected out of Cali; when Dasan gets the fellowship at Harvard that other New York poet have applied for; when that happens, when there is a Legends Slam at Nats but no southern writer is invited to perform, and then when Dasan shows up and performs anyway—that was a thing—when he does a poem about how the South will not apologize for being southern, and we coming to the table, and we going eat whether we have to bring our own food or you have to give us a spot. Like you know? Because those things have started happening, I think there's a "Oh, this is the auntie that's been in jail for seven years, but she's still got to come to the family reunion" kind of vibe that we've gotten. (2017b)

That Milli uses an analogy of a formerly incarcerated auntie returning to a family reunion is salient, because the image problematizes the discourse of the slam family that NPS propagates. The tone of judgment, exclusion, and begrudging invitation subverts the feelings of inclusion and communitas that "slam family" hopes to engender. A plate and seat are saved for Auntie, but that plate and seat are contingent. Moreover, I want to highlight how the image of an auntie attending a family reunion, while neither Black nor southern in essentialist terms, evokes scenes of southern Black family reunions with which I imagine southern poets like those on Bull City are either familiar or aware. In this image, I find a bridge connecting the dimensions of southern exclusion and Black exclusion at NPS. Again, the South is not essentially Black, and Blackness is not essentially southern. However, evidenced by the fact that all the southern poets whom Milli cites are Black men, one cannot talk about southern spoken word without talking about Black spoken word. In other words, according to Milli,

It's not that Southern Fried is inherently Black. But because the South is largely Black, because the South is largely Black, we mirror the group of people we're taken out of, and because of the level of community and camaraderie is different at Southern Fried than it is at Nats, you need to make a choice between the two. I know many people who choose SoFried over Nats. And so if you have to make

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5 Emphasis mine.
6 “According to the 2010 Census, of all respondents who reported Black alone-or-in-combination, 55 percent lived in the South, 18 percent in the Midwest, 17 percent in the Northeast, and 10 percent in West. This pattern is similar for the Black alone population” (Rastogi, et. al 2011).
that choice, and the black people are inherently choosing to go to Southern Fried, then when you look at Nats, it's like "Oh! It's quite pale over here!" That just happened in the ways geography and class and race are intertwined, too, because . . . if I live in North Carolina, it's easier for me to spend a week in Decatur than it is to afford a week to spend in Denver. Or to afford to spend a week in Oakland. And so then who can afford, historically, to take a week-long region trip. (2017b)

Changes are happening. Milli goes on to acknowledge the ways in which Black southern luminaries, such as Inkera Oshun and Christopher Michael, have obtained positions on Poetry Slam Inc.’s executive council and, subsequently, taken strides to include more southern voices, such Michaels' action of inviting Texas-based YouTube channel Write About Now to document NPS. Yet, even with NPS working toward a politics of inclusivity to both Black and southern voices, Southern Fried still represents a place Milli feels "relaxed into [her] Blackness" (2017b), a place where I can overhear a Black poet calling a southern-based festival "Black Nationals."

When I bring the term "Black Nationals" to iShine, he notices how the term paralleled The Source Awards being called "The Black Grammys," and elaborates on the term:

For a very long time Nationals wasn't fucking with Black people. In particular, to that, they were not fucking with Black southern people. Southern Fried was created because we didn't feel represented at Nationals. They didn't want to hear about Black stories. They wanted to hear stories from Black people that did not have Blackness. It was like, "I'm Black, but I'm talking about why I like the trees in nature." . . . I can't separate my southernness and my Blackness from who I am. To an extent, Southern Fried is that. It's the Black Nationals. (2018a)

For iShine, beyond structural and logistical dimensions, Southern Fried represents a place where he has agency over how his Blackness relates to his aesthetics. Teams like Slam New Orleans, Slam Charlotte, and even NPS 2017 champion San Diego can feature explicitly Black voices and aesthetics, but that is in spite of how NPS can center whiteness. At Southern Fried, at "Black Nationals," there seems to be no "in spite of." To be clear, like Milli said, Southern Fried is not exclusively Black. Asian poets like Asia Samson and G. Yamazawa are pillars of the Southern Fried community. However, for iShine, Southern Fried represents an environment in
which Black poets do not have to minimize either their Blackness or their southernness. Because of this perception of Southern Fried, because of this feeling that poets can both "celebrate their southern richness" and their Blackness, an experience of *communitas* feels more possible and present, allowing poets like those on Bull City to experience the sense of flow when they perform in and move about the space.

However, ultimately, Bull City enters both spaces—Southern Fried, where the conditions make them feel invited, and NPS, where the conditions make them feel like outsiders. Consequently, at both Southern Fried and NPS, because poets themselves contribute significantly to how a space feels and operates, the Bull City Slam Team tap into their stockpile of traditions and actions in order to shift the energy of the room toward something that looks a little bit more like *communitas*.

After the prayer and circle help make whatever space they are in feel as if it is Bull City's house, the team maintains a set of behaviors that work to shift the balance from competition to community, that parallel the ways in which the Jambalaya Slam operates, and that draw upon a what the team perceives as a distinctly southern way of holding space. Whenever the team walks into a bout—whether in Louisville or Denver or some place else—Bull City greets every team with whom they're competing. Being the more extroverted members of the team, iShine or LB will step over chairs, walk up to a team huddled in a corner, stick out his hand, introduce himself and the rest of Bull City, and wish the opposing team the best of luck. Then, after a hard-fought bout when Bull City members will not hesitate to stand-up and applaud and cheer loudly for the opposing team during performances, after having won or lost, Bull City members will walk up to opposing team, shake their hands again, and congratulate them.
Yes, that process can feel awkward, especially as someone who personally oscillates between being socially warm and profoundly shy. Trying to follow the example set by the rest of the team, I walked up to one of the folks from the team that won the bout, shook their hand, and said, "Oh! Thunder grip." In the midst of this awkwardness, letting go of a stranger's hand and re-joining the team as they made their way to get dinner, I thought of how the whole rigmarole of cheering on the opposing the team, shaking their hands, and saying "good bout!" engaged ideas of what good sportsmanship means and what it matters. Derived from my experiences in competitive sports, good sportsmanship was limited to actions: shaking hands before and after a game, helping an opponent up after they fall, taking a knee when an opponent is injured, refraining from throwing a fit during a bad play or loss. While I understood that acts were intended to signify good sportsmanship, I also felt that they could be done half-heartedly and still be perceived as “good.” In other words, you shake your opponents not because you want to, but because you have to,

Yet, as I watched Dasan, after performing for his last time as a competitor on Bull City in a bout that his team lost despite all the hope his poets had for this year, walk up to each team and shake their hands, I realized how what I thought was basic-level sportsmanship reflected something much a deeper. Dasan’s actions demonstrated his definition of southern hospitality and illustrated what southern hospitality looks like in a non-southern space. More than that, his actions reflected a genuine commitment to his beliefs—about what it means to be a southerner, and what he believes poetry slam can be.

So, in that is southern hospitality. Even down to how we walk into spaces and greet the other teams. The things we do before we leave the space in terms of how we move and interact with other poets. All of that for me, all of it is southern. And I want make sure we carry that with us in whatever we do. . . .
Never be in this space and be so involved in the competition. You can be here and be about your strategy and still show love. It’s not one or the other. You can be about beating the person beside, bigging up their poems, and encouraging and laughing and giggling with them at the same time.

In fact, if I’m about my shit, I want you to be at your best, so if it’s my night, then I know it was my night because my shit was doper than you on that night. It resonated more on that night. I don’t want you to be lackluster. I don’t want you to pick the wrong poems. No, at Bull City we walk up to poets and be like, “Let’s put on a show. Let’s all do the dope shit, and it’ll be how it’ll be, but nobody is going be mad if we all do the dope shit. The audience just liked what they liked. Seems simple to me. Let’s all do the dope shit.” (2017a)

In an art form that hinges on a precarious balance between community and competition, between sharing one's story and pitting it against others for the sake of points, Dasan's example and the Bull City Way take inspiration from what he sees as southern hospitality to promote a sense of goodwill and *communitas* among the poets whom he coaches and poets against whom he competes. The praying, the applauding for every poet, and the shaking of hands with your competitors evidence the ways in which Dasan and the rest of the Bull City poets draw upon signifiers of southernness, as they conceive it, to influence how they write, how they perform, and how they hold spaces that are both theirs (e.g., the Jambalaya) and not theirs (e.g., NPS). Slam spaces may not be safe. They may not be places of healing. They may not be sanctuaries. But they can be. And while it may not fully transform every room and make every poet feel as if they are right at home, the ethos and rituals comprising the Bull City Way reveal how the team aspires to make every room, bout, and slam feel like a home, even if it’s just the ones the team know down South.

Or as iShine puts it.

There be teams from all over the country— from Cali, from New York, from Chicago—and they’re always just like, “Yo, Bull City.” And that’s something I’m always so proud of. We may not have always put in the work to do well in slam, maybe even come up short some times, but constantly people are coming up to our coach, Dasan, and really just North Carolina in general, being like, “Yo, y’all
are so close knit. Y’all are so tight together, and y’all do it the right way.” And the right way is uplifting the art while still wanting to be competitive. I should hear you do a good poem like, “Yo, that’s amazing. I want to—you raised my level, the bar up so I can obtain to that.” (2017a)

For iShine and the rest of the Bull City poets, being “close knit” and “rais[ing]. . .the bar” are one in the same. The poets can take the emotional and artistic risks to reach those new levels because they know their teammates, their fellow poets, their fellow southerners are waiting to catch them. Adapting their beliefs of what is means to be southern and hold space as a southerner, the Bull City poets place competition and community in a much more dynamic, much more generous, much more southerly hospitable relationship.
CONCLUSION: “I COULD WRITE ABOUT ANYTHING I WANTED”

A cool breeze whirs around us on this humid Louisville day, the gusts picking up from the wind tunnels created by the buildings cutting away from the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts. A few cars rove by on their way to somewhere. A few people stroll down the sidewalks across the Center on their way to wherever. It's a Friday, and I imagine what those people are doing around this time—late afternoon to early evening—the contrast between the light the sun throws and the shadows it casts, the most intense it has been all day. Walking the sunlit path, shading their eyes, some folks are probably huffing it to the bar to celebrate the end of another work week with friends. Puttering from traffic light to traffic light, the glare refracting across their windshield, some folks are probably driving back home to crash on the couch, their loved ones waiting for them to rest their heads on an understanding shoulder and then, at last, sigh while the stress of a 9-to-5 leaves their lungs. And I think they are happy or something like it. I think.

In the shadow of the Kentucky Center, where the team has just finished their latest round at the Southern Fried Poetry Slam, we stand at the bottom of the steps and circle up together like it is the end of any other bout. It feels like we are at the bottom of the steps. Bull City finished second in the bout. The team needed to finish first. We knew this. A car honks its horn, the burst of it ending as soon as it blows. We ignore it.
We circle up together in the same way we have gathered for the entire week, the ring of us, our fists linked knuckle-to-knuckle, thumbs up. It is the same way we have always gathered, yet it is not the same. I sense a weight on everyone. There is Wendy, the most familiar face I know besides Dasan's, the one who keeps the scores and keeps the time at every Jambalaya, the one who determines the order by having the poets pick from twelve butterfly-shaped cards with numbers sharpied on the back. She wipes her eye. There's Ayanna and Milli, shoulders slouched slightly. There's LB and iShine. One looks down, forehead furrowed. The other stares off, gaze a little too high to looking for something in the distance. No one's gaze seems to center on the circle. I wonder why, earnestly. I have seen and been a part of scenes like this—a couple inches too short of the end zone, a couple seconds too late of a buzzer-beater, a couple points too few of a win—when one's worn-out bones are denied the catharsis for which one has worked and bled and sweated so hard. Yet, I wonder why this scene feels different.

Then I notice the shirts worn by LB and Wendy.

The design for each: a Bat-Signal.

Oh. Then I understand—if only a little bit.

Dasan begins to speak.

*I know this is not how we hoped this week would go—*

His voice quavers.

I've never heard his voice quaver.

—*y'all all did the work. Sometimes, sometimes luck isn't on our side. And that was one hell of a bout, such a tough bout.*

He looks up. His gaze lingers there, then lowers.
I got to go. Y'all make plans for final stage and stick together. When we get home, it's back to work.

A pause.

Okay. Shine?

And like always, iShine starts the salvo.

Bu-bu-bu-

—And together—

Bull City!

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Folklore is performance and context. Part of the job of doing and studying folklore, especially tossed into a situation in which ever-familiar things appear in unfamiliar ways, is first identifying the performance. A poem, with microphone and stage, is a performance. Yet, so is a prayer. So is a t-shirt stamped with the Bat-Signal. So is a poetry slam, even a Southern Fried one. So are the Bull City horns, whether they are thrown up in a G. Yamazawa video or held up after a little team from Durham shouts their name as they stand in front an arts center five-hundred miles away from home. For each, you can listen for what is said, but without the context, without learning how to listen and look for it, you won't understand what is meant. You can see the horns, but you can't see home.

When the circle disbanded and our party began wandering around the frontage of the Center, Dasan taking time to talk with each poet individually, his arm slung around their shoulder, I thought about the regression of contexts spinning through this moment that I did not understand, would come to understand a little, and would never come close to apprehending or reconciling. In the photographs I took of Dasan, Milli, LB, iShine, and Ayanna in the rough half-
hour we spent in front of the Kentucky Center, everyone stands off in the distance, the sounds of their private conversations something at which the images can hardly even hint.

In one, Dasan and LB amble side-by-side, leaning on one another, the blur of a car in the background.

In one, Dasan and Milli stand on the steps—Milli one step up, Dasan one step below—the silver of handrail sloping downward.

In one, Dasan and iShine stand by an angled brick wall and a lamppost, Dasan's long arm slung over iShine's shoulder, both of them looking off at a beam of light that slices down the street and ignites the leaves of a tree.

In one I should have taken, but didn't, Dasan and Ayanna talk beside a marble wall, their reflections cast on its slick surface.

In one I should have taken, but didn't, Dasan and Wendy are hugging.

When I look at these photographs months removed, and when I look for the photographs I should have taken months ago, Milli's words tend the be ones I hear, filling the frames that are there and the ones that aren't.

That was also emotional because it was the first SoFried without Tavis [Brunson], and he used to rock hard with Bull City. [Da Poetry Lounge coach and Bull City friend] Cuban had just lost his mom. It was just a hell of an emotional year for everybody, and I don't think anyone on Bull City had entertained the possibility that we would not make final stage and so it is Friday night, and what are we even to do.

There is also a strange sense of urgency because we know that Dasan does not want to carry the team for much longer. This isn’t his last year. I feel next year definitely will be. Wendy was getting ready to move at the time. iShine might be moving. LB is getting married. Only God knows what I’m going to do with myself from week to week. We have been slamming together for a long time, and so there is this sense of urgency that, yo, we really want to give each other the win, and if we don't do that soon, then it's not a thing that's going to happen. Even if iShine keeps slamming, he might be in New York. He might be in DC. He might not be on the team. LB slams less and less just because of where he lives.
I'm not really interested in slamming with anybody else because I have been on a team where we weren't really close, and it's a special kind of Hell. . . . We missed what is an increasingly small window to do what we want to do. (2018)

During the summer that I toured with Bull City, recorder and camera in tow, two things seemed to linger in the background, impressing themselves on every moment, often unspoken but there. First, a chapter of Bull City was closing. For the past few years, iShine, LB, and Milli have competed together on the Bull City Slam Team. They got stories from the road. They reminisce about good times. Stumbling down main street one night in Louisville, I’ve heard iShine and Milli cackling about how "bad" their poems were when they first joined Bull City, almost wheezing. I’ve heard iShine and Milli rhapsodize about how LB's persona poems—from "Texas Franklin" to "Super Human"—devastated them the first time LB perform the pieces. I've heard all of them talk about how insanely talented and magnetic Ayanna is on stage, even as a slam rookie.

I've heard them all talk about how desperately they want to give Dasan a national title.

Second, as iShine, Milli, and LB sense their chapter of Bull City coming to a close, they felt the type weight that bears down one's shoulder when a loved one's book of a life has shut. Tavis Brunson passed away two days after Christmas 2016. I never met him, but I have met his spirit, generous and electric, as it moves through the people who loved him. He was a National Poetry Slam champion with Slam Charlotte. He was a follower of Christ, a minister to anyone drawn near a microphone. He had a laugh that folks talk about like legend. He had so many people who loved him, who love him still, who will always love him.⁷

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⁷ Tavis Brunson was a figure, a force, and a friend in the southern spoken word scene. My words can not do his memory justice, but I must recommend the eulogy written by his friend John “Survivor” Blake for The Big Smoke website. http://thebigsmoke.com/2016/12/28/the-star/
At the host hotel for Southern Fried, a memorial was held for Tavis. A throng of poets crammed inside a conference room, a seemingly unending procession shuffling into a distinctly finite space. The only light emanated from a projector casting a collage of photographs featuring Tavis. The heat of the bodies gathered together, breaking any semblance of a fire code, brought the summer out of the night and indoors. Chatter echoed all around. iShine, his partner Lauren, and I hung back near the entrance. Its door was swinging open and shut as folks walked in, walked out, and walked back into the room. Someone shouted for them to stop, to make up their minds whether they wanted to be here, for someone to not let anyone else in.

A Tampa poet named Wally B. emceed the memorial. Dressed in a tweed jacket, the glare of the projector bouncing off his glasses, he led us in prayer. As the room hushed and bowed their heads, I could not help but notice the way iShine held himself, his normally animated arms tucked by at his side, his head down. "Hey, man, are you good?" I asked. "Yeah, man, I'm straight," said iShine.

At Wally B.'s invitation, walk to the front and grab the microphone to share their stories of Tavis. Like Tavis' best poems, each story is punctuated with belly laughs and tears. Toward the end of the memorial, iShine stepped forward. "My favorite memory of Tavis was when he did a poem where he talked about God and his dick in the first line. He got a 9.7 and a 0.3. In that moment, I realized it didn't matter about the scores or the points, that I could write about anything I wanted."

"I could write about anything I wanted. . . ." iShine told me this story back at the Jambalaya in January 2017, but hearing him tell it again before a crowd of southern poets in a room sanctified by the memory of a poet with whom Southern Fried is synonymous, I thought of family, of Bull City, of southernness, of writing, of slamming. In both how they strive for
excellence in their craft and how they strive for excellence in their community, in both how they hope to give Dasan a championship and how they try to honor the lives of community leaders like Tavis, Bull City charts new and diverging paths of what it can mean to be southern and a poet. iShine's revelation—"I could write about anything I wanted"—reflects the euphoria of creative possibility, the joy of embracing who you are as a poet and a person, and the generosity of welcoming others as they are.

When members of the team talk about the precedent set forth by figures like Tavis or by previous chapters of the Bull City team, when they talk about the Bull City Way, they are not invoking a tradition just for its own sake. They are invoking a tradition to envision what Bull City will look like in the future, what the Jambalaya will look like in the future, who will be a part of the Bull City family in the future, even as chapters close and loved ones pass on.

Though Tavis was not a member of the Bull City Slam Team, his life and his memory reflected the values that the poets of the Jambalaya and Bull City uphold as southern poets. His robust laugh and quick-wit recalled the jovial, irreverent, yet hospitable spirit of communitas that the Poets’ Corner helps to maintain at the Jambalaya. Written for both sinners and saints, willing to talk about both the divine and the bodily in the same line, his poetry embodied vision for southern spoken word that was defined by generative aesthetic possibilities, by technical simplicity and affective complexity, and by a refusal to adhere to scripts of what it meant to be southern and a poet, inspiring poets like iShine and many more. Most of all, evidenced by the way he nurtured friendships with his fellow poets—both teammates and opponents, both southerners and non-southerners—Tavis typified how to personally affect the balance of competition and community in a regional and national poetry slam scene.
For Bull City and the Jambalaya, Tavis’ life is not just something to be remembered. His life is a star by which many of the poets guide themselves, honoring the path he took in his art as they chart new paths for their art—their own southern art.

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The wind dies down. The sun sits a bit lower, stretching its golden hour along the street. Cars still putter by. Pedestrians still walk around the corner here and there. Finished talking to the last team member of Bull City, Dasan walks over to me, leans, and gives me a hug. He's hugged me plenty times before. This feels different.

"You know you're a part of the family now?" he says. "You know you have to come to every Southern Fried for here on in?"

"Yes, sir."

He lets go, straightens up, and then pats my shoulder.

"Don't go disappearing on us. You better be around in October."

"I promise. I'll be around."
REFERENCES


_______. 2017b. “Mourning People.” Transcribed from a performance on August 9 at the Hayti Heritage Center in Durham, NC.


_______. 2017b. “AFS 201.” Transcribed from a performance on June 3 at the Hayti Heritage Center in Durham, NC.


2017c. “Inheritance.” Transcribed from two performances on June 9 at the Kentucky Center for the Arts in Louisville, K.Y., and on August 10 in the McNichols Civic Center Building in Denver, C.O.


