

The New Oral Tradition: Spoken Word Poetry as a Platform for Civic Engagement in the Digital Era

Grace Yoon

Choate Rosemary Hall, Wallingford, USA, gyoon26@choate.edu

ABSTRACT: With the advent of social media and the digital landscape, mainstream activism is a distinguishing feature of young Americans today, referred to as millennials and Generation Z, i.e., those born between 1980 and 2012. However, this perspective overlooks the depth and authenticity of social involvement among these younger individuals, particularly through their embrace of literature and art—particularly spoken word poetry. Spoken word, rooted in oral tradition and championed by previous generations for its social impact, is finding renewed vigor among youth as a genuine means of articulating their societal concerns. This paper will examine the usage of spoken word poetry by contemporary Americans as a means of civic and political engagement. This exploration is contextualized through a modern lens, where digital platforms are amplifying voices traditionally marginalized in mainstream narratives, allowing spoken word poetry to evolve beyond its historical confines into a dynamic form of expression. This study extends the discussion to contemporary poets such as Amanda Gorman, Danez Smith, and Donald Glover who have harnessed the art form to address society's most pressing issues. This analysis underscores the genre's burgeoning role within popular culture, evidenced by its integration into the music and public personas of artists who have traditionally not been associated with spoken word, thereby marking its reentry into the popular consciousness. At its core, the revival of spoken word among the youth, fueled by social media and digital platforms, represents a recent renovation to an old art form at different levels of pop culture. It is a testament to the enduring power of the spoken word to inspire, challenge, and mobilize. By embracing this tradition, today's generation is not merely participating in an act of revival but is actively redefining civic engagement and artistic expression.

KEYWORDS: spoken word, poetry, activism, social justice, Amanda Gorman, Danez Smith, Donald Glover

Introduction

The normalization of social media has ushered in a new era of mainstream activism, particularly among millennials and Generation Z. Platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram have become arenas for the amplification of social movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and Stop Asian Hate. These movements have not only highlighted the capacity of social media to act as a catalyst for raising awareness and fostering performative activism but have also opened gateways to more profound forms of social and political involvement. Amidst the digital uproar for justice and equality, the contribution of literature and art—primarily spoken word poetry—to these activism landscapes has been markedly overlooked. While traditional perceptions have, at times, marginalized poetry and similar art forms as elitist relics of the upper class, the intersection of social media and these expressive mediums has fostered a unique space for activism. This juxtaposition of perceived obsolescence and modern digital activism presents an interesting dichotomy where both elements synergize to form a more potent force for social change.

In contrast to the more visible spectacles of activism on social media, the role of literature and art, mainly spoken word poetry, in facilitating social involvement merits closer examination. Despite prevailing notions that regard poetry as an archaic art form, the reality is that it has found new life and relevance through social media, acting as a bridge between personal expression and collective action. This dynamic interplay between the old and new and the traditional and the contemporary suggests that literature and art continue to hold significant power in shaping public discourse and fostering community engagement.

This paper explores the usage of spoken word poetry as a vehicle for civic and political engagement among contemporary American youth. By delving into the ways in which young poets leverage this expressive form to address societal issues, advocate for change, and build community, we seek to uncover the nuanced roles that spoken word poetry plays in the broader landscape of social activism. Through this exploration, the paper will highlight the transformative potential of poetry as a tool for political and civic engagement—particularly among youth.

Historical Context of Spoken Word Poetry

Spoken word is an oral poetic performance art that focuses on the aesthetics of recitation and word play and is a “catchall” term that encompasses any poetry that is recited out loud. Unlike its written counterpart, the spoken word values phonaesthetics, or the aesthetics of sound, over its visual aesthetics on the page. The art form's roots stretch back to The Prehistoric Period when cultures relied on oral traditions for the dissemination of information, self-expression, and communication. Spoken word, distinct from ordinary speech, utilized the unique sound structures of language to create aural patterns, making it easier to memorize and recite and, thus, more accessible (Finnegan, 2012).

The tradition of conveying stories and knowledge orally, rather than in written form, was a hallmark of several predominantly oral cultures. For example, in pre-colonial Africa, performance poetry played a prominent role in theatrical ceremonies, which functioned as sources of entertainment, education, spiritual enrichment, and political commentaries (Finnegan 2012). Polska Roma, one of the largest and oldest ethnolinguistic subgroups of Romani people living in Poland, predominantly did not read or write for the majority of their history but engaged in strong oral folk traditions (Ficowski). In ancient Greece, spoken word was revered as the primary vessel for preserving cultural wisdom, with society valuing those capable of memorizing and eloquently delivering these oral treasures (Bahn and Bahn 1970, 10).

The Civil Rights Movement saw a resurgence of spoken word, with iconic speeches such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” and Sojourner Truth's “Ain't I a Woman?” blending oratory with poetry. This era of fervent activism and powerful oratory laid the groundwork for a burgeoning spoken word scene within the African American community. Building on this momentum, The Last Poets, a poetry and political music group, emerged in the 1960s as a direct offspring of the Civil Rights Movement. Their formation marked a pivotal moment in elevating the profile of spoken word within African American culture, and the movement gained further mainstream traction with the release of American jazz poet Gil Scott-Heron’s seminal spoken-word poem, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” on his album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* in 1970 (Poetry Foundation n.d., Gil Scott-Heron). This period underscored the evolving relationship between activism, oratory, and spoken word poetry, highlighting its increasing importance in American cultural discourse.

By the turn of the 21st century, however, poetry had increasingly come to be perceived as an art form in decline. This narrative was fueled by several factors, but particularly the rise of digital media: the vast array of digital content available to consumers made it increasingly difficult for poetry to capture and retain audience attention. Critics argued that the digital age, with its emphasis on speed, brevity, and visual media, was antithetical to the reflective, nuanced, and often complex nature of poetry.

Understanding the Appeal of Spoken Word Poetry to Youth

Why has spoken word poetry, in particular, garnered so much recent traction? Spoken word poetry has been gaining popularity in recent years for several reasons. For one, it provides a platform for underrepresented voices. Spoken word poetry has always been a space for marginalized communities to share their experiences and stories. It allows people to express

themselves in a way that they may not have been able to before, and it can be a powerful tool for social change. Spoken word poetry is also accessible. Unlike traditional poetry, which can sometimes feel intimidating or exclusive, spoken word poetry is open to everyone. It's a form of art that can be performed by anyone with a story to tell, and it can be enjoyed by anyone who is willing to listen.

In addition, spoken word poetry is a form of therapeutic self-expression for some. Many poets use their art to work through trauma, mental illness, or other personal struggles. It is within this rich tapestry of personal narratives and collective experiences that young poets such as Amanda Gorman, Danez Smith, and Donald Glover emerge, using their voices to weave together themes of justice, democracy, and unity.

Amanda Gorman

Californian poet Amanda Gorman's ascent to international acclaim began in 2021 following her recitation of "The Hill We Climb" at the 2021 Presidential Inauguration. Gorman, the youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history, employs her poetry to confront themes of justice, democracy, and unity, weaving a narrative that both acknowledges the nation's tumultuous history and envisions a more inclusive and equitable future. Her work exemplifies how spoken word can transcend mere artistic expression, serving as a powerful catalyst for social cohesion and public reflection on critical issues facing society.

Danez Smith

Danez Smith represents a critical and compelling voice in contemporary poetry, offering profound insights into the intersections of Blackness, queerness, and American identity. Hailing from St. Paul, Minnesota, Smith has carved a niche for themselves within the literary world through their candid exploration of themes such as race, sexuality, and systemic violence. Their work, known for its visceral emotionality and sharp critique, serves as a powerful testament to the struggles and triumphs of marginalized communities.

Smith's collections, including "Don't Call Us Dead" and "[insert] boy," not only confront the realities of anti-Blackness and the AIDS epidemic but also envision a realm of possibility where those deemed expendable by society are seen, celebrated, and mourned. Through performances that are both harrowing and healing, Smith leverages the spoken word to foster a space of reckoning and reflection, challenging audiences to engage with the painful truths of systemic oppression while holding onto hope for a more just future.

Donald Glover

Donald Glover, also known by his musical alias Childish Gambino, has established himself as a multifaceted artist whose work spans music, television, and film. Although not a poet in the traditional sense, Glover's incorporation of spoken word elements into his artistry enables him to weave complex narratives about the Black American experience, blending humor, tragedy, and critique in equal measure. His ground-breaking single "This is America" exemplifies this approach, employing a potent mix of rap, visual art, and spoken word to comment on systemic racism, gun violence, and the commodification of Black culture.

Born in Edwards Air Force Base, California, and raised in Stone Mountain, Georgia, Glover's diverse body of work reflects a deep engagement with the nuances of identity and societal expectations. His music video "This is America" not only garnered widespread acclaim for its incisive social commentary but also demonstrated the power of combining various artistic mediums, including spoken word and rap, to amplify critical messages. Glover's success in capturing the public imagination and sparking dialogue underscores the

evolving nature of the intersection between spoken word and music as a tool for social and political commentary.

Tangible Political Change

As prolific speakers and poets such as Gorman, Smith, and Glover inspire a new generation of poets, the spoken word community builds a network of poets grounded in shared experiences, emotional connections, artistic affinity, and a dedication to positive social and political change. In so doing, poets construct an organizational framework characterized by a grassroots, “do-it-yourself” ethos, which is essential for ensuring the sustainability and longevity of both their art and activism. This framework includes self-organized workshops, open mic sessions, poetry slams, award ceremonies, and the self-production, publication, and distribution of poetry through “chapbooks.” Given the marginal position of spoken word within the broader artistic landscape, these initiatives are crucial for poets to refine their skills, disseminate their creations, and achieve professional validation for their work, thereby enhancing their capacity to foster awareness and community cohesion.

Moreover, these poets actively promote political involvement and mobilization, which includes encouraging participation in or financial support for social justice initiatives, inspiring individuals to reconsider their perspectives and actions, or pursuing personal growth and self-acceptance. Such efforts are predicated on the belief that transformative change is contingent upon individuals achieving a state of well-being and fulfillment facilitated by access to expressive and supportive environments. As New York Times best-selling author, activist, and spoken word artist Sonya Renee Taylor articulated, “Lasting, positive change can only be built on a foundation of love; you cannot sustain positive change in a body that you hate.” She posits that enduring, positive societal transformation is underpinned by self-love and acceptance; lasting change cannot thrive in an environment of self-rejection. In this regard, the poets' commitment to self-affirmation and shame-free living is seen not merely as an individual act of defiance but as integral to a broader political ethos where the well-being of the individual and the community are seen as essential foundations for sustained social change (Chepp 2016).

Conclusion

This study has examined the dynamic role of spoken word poetry in facilitating civic and political engagement among millennials and Generation Z. Contrary to the prevailing narratives that often misrepresent the activism of younger generations, our analysis reveals the profound and genuine engagement of these groups through spoken word poetry. This form of expression, while steeped in historical oral traditions, has been revitalized and imbued with new life by contemporary voices, underscoring its relevance and potency as a tool for social involvement in the digital age.

This examination has highlighted how digital platforms have democratized the stage for spoken word, enabling poets like Amanda Gorman, Danez Smith, and Donald Glover to amplify voices that have traditionally been marginalized. This resurgence of spoken word poetry, paralleling historical movements but distinct in its digital dissemination, underscores a unique blend of tradition and innovation. It reveals how contemporary poets have leveraged this art form not only to critique societal norms but also to envision a world reformed by justice, equality, and understanding.

Spoken word poetry stands at the forefront of a dynamic interplay between personal expression and collective activism, challenging societal norms and bringing marginalized narratives into the limelight. It reaffirms the art form's capacity to challenge the status quo, to bring marginalized narratives to the forefront, and to weave together the personal and political

into a powerful tapestry of activism. As we move forward, it is necessary for us, as a society, to continue amplifying these voices and to recognize the critical role that literature and art play in envisioning and enacting a more just and equitable world.

References

- Bahn, Eugene, and Margaret Bahn. 1970. *A History of Oral Performance*. Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company.
- Ballan, Danny. 2023. "The Rise of Spoken Word Poetry: A Powerful and Diverse Art Form." *English Plus Podcast*, 7 Apr. 2023, <https://englishpluspodcast.com/the-rise-of-spoken-word-poetry-a-powerful-and-diverse-art-form/>.
- Chepp, Valerie. 2016. "Activating Politics with Poetry and Spoken Word." *Contexts* 15(4): 42-47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504216685109>.
- Ficowski, Jerzy J. 1989. *The Gypsies in Poland: History and Customs*. Warsaw: Interpress Publishers.
- Finnegan, Ruth. 2012. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/31251.
- Poetry Foundation. n.d. "Gil Scott-Heron." www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gil-scott-heron.