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Anthropology

Tentative Title of Dissertation:

Placemaking through Performance: Spoken Word Poetry and the Reclaiming of "Chocolate City"

Dissertation Abstract:

Predominantly situated in an area formerly known as Black Broadway, my research is based on long-term immersion in the District's network of Spoken Word poetry and poets. Specifically, I focus on two key sites that offer contrasting depictions of open mic culture: Busboys and Poets, a D.C.-based chain located in several well-known neighborhoods undergoing gentrification, and SpitDat D.C., a grassroots (and often displaced) movement known as the area's longest running open mic series. At these venues, many artists - especially native and long-term residents of the area - illustrate the Black experience along with a fascinating correlation between place, performer, and performance, specifically where place is being denied or redeveloped.

By utilizing a scalar analysis of "place," where I consider how the design, layout, and purpose of a venue; the geographical setting (e.g., region or neighborhood), or the mood | atmosphere are all salient influences on the performance event, this research showcases Spoken Word's affinity for the performative act of "placemaking" - an urban-planning studies concept borrowed to illuminate the reciprocal (and sometimes toxic) relationship between D.C.'s Black inhabitants and policymakers. In its original context, placemaking is an approach to redevelopment used to embolden citizens to design and/or revitalize a community for "maximized shared value" (Project for Public Spaces). However, this research employs thematic, discourse, and conversation analyses to create a thick description of Spoken Word poetry and highlight placemaking as an empowering linguistic social act by which local artists fight to own, (re)claim, and/or move about freely in spaces they belong.