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Lisa R. Merriweather Hunn
Ball State University

Kevin Britton
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Orality and African American Adult Education: The Art of the Spoken Word and Hip Hop

Lisa R. Merriweather Hunn
Ball State University

Kevin Britton
Independent Writer and Columnist

Keywords: hip hop, spoken word, African American, informal learning

Abstract: Hip Hop and The Spoken Word are popular art forms within the younger generations of the African American community. Though the listeners of these art forms recognize their educational potential, adult educators have not. This paper highlights the value of Hip Hop and The Spoken Word for informal learning.

Orality has been a staple of the cultural capital economy of people of African descent since the beginning of their history. The use of story telling, proverbs, and other oral expressions were key mediums for transmitting history, current events, and life lessons. The emphasis and significance of orality within this community cannot be overlooked, especially within the younger generations. Orality, within this age group, finds expression in two popular mediums: The Spoken Word and Hip Hop. The Spoken Word is performance poetry punctuated by rhythms that originated with The Beats in the 1950s and was revived in the late 1980s by Marc Smith in Chicago. Hip Hop is characterized by rapping and manipulating the sound in the music. It is the essence of the relationship between sound and rhythm in oral expression that makes the art forms of the Spoken Word and Hip Hop ripe for development by adult educators, especially those who work with African Americans.

These two art forms share three essential elements that work in concert with one another. Two were previously referenced: sound and rhythm. But third, is the power of the word, which Brown (1999) referred to as the “legacy of nommo--the empowering, engendering word” (p. 25). It is through these elements that socially significant meaning is created in the communication acts of rapping in Hip Hop and speaking in the Spoken Word. It is through the power, sound, and rhythm of the word that culturally relevant currency is built.

From their origins, both Hip Hop, as differentiated from Gangsta Rap, and the Spoken Word, embraced the use of storytelling and word manipulations as a springboard for cultural and historical knowledge transmission, political activism, and a critical interpretation of current events. Consistent with andragogical principles, both rely on immediacy, direct participation, relevance, and experience as the means to facilitate learning.

Over the course of the last ten to fifteen years, Hip Hop’s immense popularity and marketability spawned a groundswell of intense, academic consideration. A similar but less pronounced phenomenon occurred with The Spoken Word revolution. Many Generation Xers came of age during the Golden Age of both art forms and recognized each as viable conduits of knowledge. During the late 1980s, Kevin actively sought out media that reaffirmed and reinforced his burgeoning interests in African and African-American history and culture. Hip Hop music from the late 80s and into the early 90s was heavily characterized by socio-political

commentary (Public Enemy); bohemian, beatnik-style influences (A Tribe Called Quest, De la Soul, and the Jungle Brothers); streetwise, gangsta-style posturing (Kool G Rap, Mobb Deep); and lighthearted, party rhymes (Slick Rick, Digital Underground).

However, it was the New York-based Hip Hop group X-Clan which was most directly responsible for furthering his pursuit of knowledge in the realm of African History. Known for their ingenious formula of combining arcane, Egyptian mysticism ("... weapons of Heru, the verbs of great Thoth") and political commentary ("I said free South Africa, ya went to Berlin ..."), the group's references to ancient spiritual traditions and cosmology fed his curiosity, his interests in Egyptology, and his eventual understanding of how Africans in America and the Diaspora are spiritually connected to the builders of civilization (Britton, 2005).

After hearing repeated references to such names as Isis, Osiris, and other ancient African deities within the group's lyrics, he began reading everything he could about African history and the various layers of hidden meaning behind the many symbols associated with the ancient Egyptian culture. He compared the lyrics with information he had captured from other books and discovered that these findings represented a genre of music that prompted the questioning of assumptions, challenged preconceptions, and nurtured the seeds of Africentric pride planted by his parents.

Atleo & James (2000), within the context of Native American adult education, spoke of the importance of the oral tradition for lifelong and transformative learning. They wrote, "...the living legacy of oral tradition, as a literacy ... has been "over looked" in the field of adult education research" (p.1). Likewise, as Kevin's story demonstrates, this potential for lifelong and transformative learning is evident in contemporary art forms such as the Spoken Word and Hip Hop.

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