

Word! The African American Oral Tradition and its Rhetorical Impact on American Popular Culture

By Janice D. Hamlet

Popular culture consists of the everyday culture that comprises virtually every aspect of our existence. Its forms of expression include music, dance, literature, drama, film, poetry, language use, newspapers, radio and television, fashion, sports, and leisure activities.¹ Its major components are objects, persons, and events, but it is through the use of verbal and nonverbal symbols that popular culture is constructed and has the potential to persuade, influence, motivate, and inspire. We are surrounded every day by these constructs of popular culture.

For many years, African Americans were simply objects within popular culture whose representation tended to be quite stereotypical and problematic. So wrote Todd Boyd in his three-volume work *African Americans and Popular Culture*.² However, at a certain point, notes Boyd, African Americans attempted to harness the means of production and create their own representations instead of being represented by others.³ As a result, the African American influence on American popular culture has been among the most sweeping and influential rhetorical impacts this nation has ever seen. African American cultural expressions have been a way of resisting racial oppression by articulating experiences of resistance and struggle and articulating oppositional identities in highly creative and dynamic ways, beginning with the oral tradition from which all other cultural forms originated.⁴ Because of this dynamic, an understanding of the African and African American oral traditions is highly important for K-12 students to learn.

The oral tradition refers to stories, old sayings, songs, proverbs, and other cultural products that have not been written down or recorded. The forms of oral tradition cultures are kept alive by being passed on by word of mouth from one generation to the next. These diverse forms reveal the values and beliefs of African Americans, the things they hold to be true, and lessons about life and how to live it.⁵ In African American culture, the oral tradition has served as a fundamental vehicle for cultural expression and survival. This oral tradition also preserved the cultural heritage and reflected the collective spirit of the race. It has a powerful history, beginning with Africans' preslavery existence.

Prior to enslavement in America, Africans lived in societies developed around a worldview that was predicated on highly sophisticated religious systems and an impressive oral communication style. The Africans believed in *Nommo*, which means the generative power of the spoken word. *Nommo* was believed necessary to actualize life and give man mastery over things. "All activities of men and all the movements in nature rest on the word on the productive power of the word, which is water and heat and seed and *Nommo* that is, life force itself ... The force, responsibility, and commitment of the word and the awareness that the word alone alters the world." In traditional African culture, newborn children are mere things until their fathers give them names and speak them. No medicine, potion, or magic of any sort is considered effective without accompanying words. So strong is the African belief in the power and absolute necessity of *Nommo* that all craftsmanship must be accompanied by speech. *Nommo* was not restricted to the spoken word in a public forum, but encompassed all communication situations.⁶

Culture was transmitted through this oral tradition. The people's cultural mores, values, histories and religions were transmitted from generation to generation by elderly individuals known as *griots* who were known to be excellent storytellers. These storytellers gave to their listeners narratives that contained elements of realism and magic in situations and characters with whom they were familiar.⁷ They infused their storytelling with dramatic power that appealed to the emotions: it satisfied inner cravings, cloaked unrest, evoked laughter, provided solace, and fostered a temporary release from the misery of chaotic experiences.⁸

During the Africans' transportation to America, their language, primarily their dialect, was one of the first overt African cultural traits slave traders tried to suppress. On the slave ships, members of the same community were deliberately separated from each other in order to restrict their oral communication. However, even though the Africans came from divergent backgrounds, the specific vocabularies that could have separated them from each other were overcome by the similarity in the basic structures of their different languages and cultures. Because they were unable to use their indigenous languages to talk freely among themselves, the enslaved developed a different form of communication that was part African, part American.⁹ The oral tradition is, in fact, one of the cultural vestiges Africans transported to America.

This orality was a communication style that was rich in allusion, metaphor, and imagery and prolific in the use of body gestures and nonverbal nuances. Also, the communication patterns of the enslaved stemmed from their creativity and will to survive. Language became not only a means of communication but also a desire for personal presentation, verbal artistry, and commentary on life's circumstances.¹⁰

From this rich legacy, the belief in and application of *Nommo* continues to permeate all aspects of African American life and culture. The musical expressions of African Americans and the Black church have been the most significant forces in maintaining and nurturing the surviving African/African American language and cultural traditions. Over the centuries, the church has stood as a rich reservoir of cultural terms and expressions communicated through the sermons of the African American preacher as well as the feedback the preachers received from their audiences.¹¹ Known as call-and-response, this verbal exchange is based on the idea that constant exchange between speaker and listener is necessary in order for any real communication to take place between speaker and listener. Call-and-response is a spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which the speaker's statements are punctuated by responses from the listener(s).¹² Although the practice has been ritualized in traditional Black churches, it can also be observed outside of the church, from the academic classroom to comedy, rap, and rhythm and blues concerts. The only wrong response one can give in a conversation between African Americans is to not respond at all. The hip-hop expressions *word*, *word up*, *word to the mother*, and similar phrases all stem from the value placed on speech and verbal artistry.

Through various processes, African Americans stake their claim to the English language and at the same time reflect distinct African American cultural values that are often at odds with Eurocentric standards. For example, "semantic inversion," the practice of taking words and turning them into their opposites, has become an art form for young African American artists. An example of this is the *word fat*. In hip-hop culture, it is spelled *phat* and refers to a person or thing that is excellent and desirable, reflecting the traditional cultural value that human body weight is a good thing and implicitly rejecting the Eurocentric thought which teaches that being skinny is more valued than being fat.¹³ Other aspects of the African American oral tradition (i.e., *testifyin'*, *signifyin'*, and *trash talkin'*) have found their way into mainstream American popular culture.¹⁴

Equally significant, musical expressions have



been an art form for African Americans that allowed, both historically and contemporaneously, creativity, thought, and imagination to be widely demonstrated. Music can be cathartic for both its makers and its listeners, as stories of adversity and struggle are often expressed. Much can be learned about the history of African Americans through the music of spirituals, blues, gospel, jazz, and hip-hop. In the music are emotional stories of the hardship, hope, and determination of a people who have been downtrodden and oppressed. The messages sent through music reflect the different social and cultural values of any given time period.¹⁵

Nommo can especially be observed today in hip-hop culture, particularly in rap music. According to Tricia Rose in her book *Black Noise*, the emergence of hip-hop culture came about as the result of cultural exchange and larger social and political conditions of black alienation and disillusionment. The African American, particularly the Black youth, sought identity and a way to stake a claim in his own culture. Hip-hop became that means, and a new system of values developed that allowed the African American an outlet for self-expression and creativity. Rap is an interesting venue because it is fundamentally linked to the social constructions of black culture.¹⁶ Hip-hop

culture has permeated mainstream popular culture in an unprecedented fashion. Although it was created by black youth operating on the periphery of mainstream American culture, hip-hop's influence has now become worldwide, dominating the advertising and marketing worlds as well as academia and corporate boardrooms. Its crossover appeal has become phenomenal across ethnic groups with the potential to unify diverse populations.

Notes

1. J. K. Adajaye, "Popular Culture and the Black Experience," in *Language, Rhythm and Sound: Black Popular Cultures Into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Joseph K. Adajaye and Adrienne R. Andrews (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 1-15.
2. Todd Boyd, *African Americans and Popular Culture* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2008), vii-xiii.
3. Ibid.
4. "Black Popular Culture," <http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/6008/Black-Popular-Culture.html>.
5. Geneva Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 29.
6. Arthur L. Smith, "Socio-Historical Perspectives of Black Oratory," in *Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America*, ed. Arthur L. Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 295-305.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Geneva Gay and Willie L. Baber, eds., *Expressively Black* (New York: Praeger, 1989).
10. Ibid.
11. Smitherman, *Black Talk*.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Allison Ashley, "Black Popular Culture and Its Messages," accessed March 20, 2011, http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/14713/black_popular_culture_and_its_messages.html?cat=33.
15. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994).
16. Ashley, "Black Popular Culture."



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Lesson Plan

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Connections to Secondary Students

Secondary school students are at an age where making connections between the present and the past is a necessary part of critical engagement and personal growth. Seeing how past practices are intimately tied to contemporary practices encourages students to look to the past for understanding and inspiration. In the case of this topic and lesson, helping students understand that the oral tradition is an indelible part of African American culture encourages a renegotiation of assumptions about African Americans.

Objectives

- To introduce students to the African American oral tradition, beginning with pre-slavery and continuing to contemporary life.
- To familiarize the students with various cultural products that originated from the African American oral tradition.

Goals

- Students will gain an understanding of the African American oral tradition.
- Students will demonstrate their knowledge through the creation of products that focus on cultural products that emanated from the oral tradition, such as rap songs, spirituals, dances, sermons from the African American church, folklore, etc.
- Students will demonstrate using new media to communicate ideas.
- Students will analyze the role of culture within their own lives and communities.

NCSS Standards

Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

- Help learners analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture in both historical and contemporary settings.

Culture and Cultural Diversity

- Enable learners to analyze and explain the ways groups, societies, and cultures address human needs and concerns;
- Guide learners as they predict how data and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference;
- Assist learners to apply an understanding of culture as an integrated whole that explains the functions and interactions of language, literature, the arts, traditions, beliefs and values, and behavior patterns.

Warm-Up/Anticipatory Set

- Begin by activating students' knowledge of African American history and culture as it relates to the African American oral tradition and its contemporary communication patterns.
- Assign each student to a group. The assignment will be to research and report on an area of African American communication and share with the class the report as well as examples of this type of communication. Topics might include the blues, gospel music, jazz, poetry, word artistry, rap, storytelling, or communicating nonverbally through dance. These should be introductory presentations, simply to provide all students a level of exposure to the breadth of ways in which the oral tradition can be seen historically and contemporarily.
- Students should be encouraged to demonstrate an example of the oral tradition that emanates from their topic.
- Each report should reveal the influence of the African/African American oral tradition in creating this form of communication.

Assessment:

- Assignment #1: Have students write an essay on the topic "African/African American Influence on Popular Culture and the Personal Life," reflecting on what they learned in class and from the group projects. Additionally, what they learned should also be connected to their own experiences.
- Assignment #2: Have students create a podcast that reflects on what they learned about African/African American culture, the oral tradition, and the influence of that oral tradition on their own lives. If students do not have access to the hardware and/or software necessary for such an activity, then ask students to simply tape-record their presentations and the teacher can transfer them to DVD.

Teacher Resources:

- Asante, Molefi. *Language, Communication and Rhetoric in Black America*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.
- Brown, Fahamisha P. *Performing the Word: African American Poetry as Vernacular Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999.
- Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1971.
- Fecho, Bob. "Is This English?" *Race, Language, and Culture in the Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003.
- Gay, Geneva, and Willie L. Baber, eds., *Expressively Black*. New York: Praeger, 1989.
- <http://radio.about.com/od/createyourownpodcast/ss/How-to-Create-Your-Own-Podcast-Make-Your-Own-Talk-Show-Music-Program-or-Audio-Stream.htm>