

## **Hip Hop and Oral History: Turning Students into "Griots For a New Age"**

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One of the biggest challenges for any educator today is to give the young people they work with a sense of history. Because so many of our youngsters come from fractured families and have moved many times in the course of their short lives, they are not immersed in the kind of neighborhood and family traditions that people brought up in more stable conditions often have. Because the economic pressures are so great on many working class families, parents and even grandparents - who in many households are the major caretakers-- rarely have the time to talk to young people about their own childhood experiences. In an era of cell phones, ipods, and computers, the Oral Traditions and Story Telling Skills once prized among community elders in rural areas and city neighborhoods are in danger of dying out once and for all, leaving young people without an organic connection to the lives of people that came before them. Many of the young people we work with have little ability to connect Past with Present because little in their day to day experience exposes them to a discourse about "the olden days.". This not only inhibits their ability to think historically, it also makes them feel much more alone in facing the inevitable struggles of life.

Oral History Programs are one of the best antidotes to the sense of historical amnesia among the young people we work with. When we tell our students to interview parents, grandparents and neighbors about things that happens in the past, we not only stimulate a dialogue between children and adults that takes place all too rare in today's society, we honor community story telling traditions that are in danger of dying out. In our immigrant and working class neighborhoods, there are tens of thousands, if not millions of elderly people who were brought up among great story tellers but who have not had a chance to share their wisdom and experience before an appreciative audience. Having young people sit down and record their stories not only gives the people interviewed an enhanced sense of purpose, it unleashes a creative power that can be a force in its own right. It can give young people doing the interviews a new respect for people they took for granted, and give the entire school community exposure to stories that have the power to uplift, amuse, excite and inspire everyone who hears them

The schools I have worked with that have incorporated Oral History into their pedagogy have done amazing thing with the information they have acquired through this Method. They have created wall exhibits and video documentaries, food festivals and dance exhibitions, put the best stories in journals and newspapers and in one instance, put together an "Old School Museum" which is now a permanent part of the school. Without exception, the programs have increased parental involvement in the schools and gotten children excited about communicating with members of their own families

But these programs, for the most part, have taken place in elementary schools. How do we get more jaded, cynical, and often more angry youngsters in middle schools and high schools to participate in a program that involves interviewing parents, teachers and neighborhood elders when they often see themselves as "at war" with these same individuals?

Here, educators may find inspiration from a surprising source- Hip Hop! During the last few years, several Hip Hop artists have actually incorporated Oral History interviews into their music in ways that our older students might not only find compelling, but worthy of imitation. In the pages that follow, I am going to look at two extremely powerful songs which use oral history to enhance their story telling power- Jay-Z's "December 4," and Fort Minor's "Kenji" In each case, the artist juxtaposes quotes from a parent, relative, or community member with original verses which talk about important events in the artists life, historical events which affected the artists family, or musical traditions which the artist has built on in his own work. Each, or all of these models, can be used by our students in telling their own stories, in poetry, in song, or in video or documentary film.

Jay-Z's "December 4" a song from his award winning "Black Album" actually begins with a quote from his mother in her voice

[Jay-Z's Mom:]

Sean Carter was born December 4th  
Weighing in at 10 pounds 8 ounces  
He was the last of my 4 children  
The only one who didn't give me any pain when i gave birth to him  
And that's how i knew that he was a special child

Jay-Z then enters with his voice, recounting his personal struggles after his father left and his family fell into poverty.

i feel worthless cause my shirts wasn't matchin my gear  
Now i'm just scratchin the surface cause what's burried under there  
Was a kid torn apart once his pop disappeared  
I went to school got good grades could behave when i wanted  
But i had demons deep inside that would raise when confronted

The next portion of the song continues to juxtapose JZ's voice with that of his mother, showing two different perspectives on this very talented, angry youngster's growing disaffection from school and immersion in the street economy

Jay-Z's Mom:]

Shawn was a very shy child growing up  
He was into sports  
And a funny story is  
At 4 he taught himself how to ride a bike  
A two wheeler at that  
Isn't that special?  
But, i noticed a chance in him when me and my husband brokeup

[Jay-Z Verse 2]

Now all the teachers couldn't reach me  
And my momma couldn't beat me  
Hard enough to match the pain of my pops not seeing me, SO  
With that disdain in my membrane  
Got on my pimp game

. . . .

I'm a hustler now  
My gear is in and i'm in the in crowd

The final section of the song, still juxtaposing the two voices, is about Jay-Z's rap career and how it allowed him to escape from a life that not only put him in grave physical danger, but gave his mother great pain. This section gives a chilling portrait of the dangers of life on the streets, asks forgiveness for those Jay-Z hurt and affirms the power his mother's love, and her faith in him, as a motivating force. I think many of our students will be incredibly moved, and inspired, by how this song ends:

[Jay-Z's Mom:]

Shawn use to be in the kitchen  
Beating on the table and rapping  
And um, until the wee hours of the morning  
And then i bought him a boom box  
And his sisters and brothers said he would drive them nuts

But that was my way to keep him close to me and out of trouble

[Jay-Z Verse 3]

Good-bye to the game all the spoils, the adrenaline rush  
Your blood boils you in a spot knowing cops could rush  
And you in a drop your so easy to touch  
No two days are alike  
Except the first and fifteenth pretty much  
And "trust" is a word you seldom hear from us  
Hustlers we don't sleep we rest one eye up

. . . ,

And this was the stress i live with til i decided  
To try this rap s. .t for a livin  
I Pray i'm forgiven  
For every bad decision i made  
Every sister i played  
Cause i'm still paranoid to this day  
And it's nobody fault i made the decisions i made  
This is the life i chose or rather the life that chose me

Many youngsters living in similar circumstances to Jay-Z may find inspiration in what he does in this song. Can they create similar narratives of their own lives, with multiple voices, after interviewing members of their own families? I think many students will be excited by the challenge of linking the gathering of historical information to creating a work of art that speaks to their deepest anxieties, fears and longings, and draws upon talents in poetry, beat making, or performance art that are rarely recognized in a school setting.

The next song that I propose as a model for our students is Fort Minor's "Kenji" a song that uses oral history to illuminate that internment of Japanese American's during World War II. Mike Shinoda, Fort Minor's MC, comes from a family which endured this terrible experience, and he uses the live voices of Japanese Americans as backdrop to a story about a prototypical Japanese American family which found itself sent to a concentration camp in a moment of national hysteria. I am going to large section of the song in the section that follows, with quotation marks surrounding the quotes from elderly Japanese Americans who actually were in the camps, to show how hip hop has the power to make real to young people today one of the most tragic events in our nation's recent history. The song has an accompanying video which is equally powerful

"My father came from Japan in 1905  
He was 15 when he immigrated from Japan  
He, he... he worked until he was able to buy this patch  
And build a store"

Let me tell you the story in the form of a dream,  
I don't know why I have to tell it but I know what it means,  
Close your eyes, just picture the scene,  
As I paint it for you, it was World War II,  
When this man named Kenji woke up,  
Ken was not a soldier,  
He was just a man with a family who owned a store in LA,  
That day, he crawled out of bed like he always did,  
Bacon and eggs with wife and kids,  
He lived on the second floor of a little store he ran,  
He moved to LA from Japan,  
They called him 'Immigrant,'  
In Japanese, he'd say he was called "Issei,"

That meant 'First Generation In The United States,'  
When everyone was afraid of the Germans, afraid of the Japs,  
But most of all afraid of a homeland attack,  
And that morning when Ken went out on the doormat,  
His world went black 'cause,  
Right there; front page news,  
Three weeks before 1942,  
"Pearl Harbour's Been Bombed And The Japs Are Comin',"  
Pictures of soldiers dyin' and runnin',  
Ken knew what it would lead to,  
Just like he guessed, the President said,  
"The evil Japanese in our home country will be locked away,"  
They gave Ken, a couple of days,  
To get his whole life packed in two bags,  
Just two bags, couldn't even pack his clothes,  
Some folks didn't even have a suitcase, to pack anything in,  
So two trash bags was all they gave them,  
When the kids asked mum "Where are we goin'?"  
Nobody even knew what to say to them,  
Ken didn't wanna lie, he said "The US is lookin' for spies,  
So we have to live in a place called Mandinard,  
Where a lot of Japanese people are,"  
Stop it don't look at the gunmen,  
You don't wanna get the soldiers wonderin',  
If you gonna run or not,  
'Cause if you run then you might get shot,  
Other than that try not to think about it,  
Try not to worry 'bout it; bein' so crowded,  
Someday we'll get out, someday, someday.

"As soon as war broke out  
The G.I came and they just come to the house and  
"You have to come"  
"All the Japanese have to go"  
They took Mr. Lee  
People didn't understand  
Why did they have to take him?  
Because he's an innocent labourer "

So now they're in a town with soldiers surroundin' them,  
Every day, every night look down at them,  
From watch towers up on the wall,  
Ken couldn't really hate them at all;  
They were just doin' their job and,  
He wasn't gonna make any problems,  
He had a little garden with vegetables and fruits that,  
He gave to the troops in a basket his wife made,  
But in the back of his mind, he wanted his families life saved,  
Prisoners of war in their own damn country,  
What for?  
Time passed in the prison town,  
He wanted them to live it down when they were free,  
The only way out was joinin' the army,  
And supposedly, some men went out for the army, signed on,  
And ended up flyin' to Japan with a bomb,  
That 15 kiloton blast, put an end to the war pretty fast,

Two cities were blown to bits; the end of the war came quick,  
Ken got out, big hopes of a normal life, with his kids and his wife,  
But, when they got back to their home,  
What they saw made them feel so alone,  
These people had trashed every room,  
Smashed in the windows and bashed in the doors,  
Written on the walls and the floor,  
"Japs not welcome anymore."  
And Kenji dropped both of his bags at his sides and just stood outside,  
He, looked at his wife without words to say,  
She looked back at him wiped the tears away,  
And, said "Someday we'll be okay, someday,"  
Now the names have been changed, but the story's true,  
My family was locked up back in '42,  
My family was there it was dark and damp,  
And they called it an internment camp

"When we first got back from camp... uhh  
It was... pretty... pretty bad"

"I, I remember my husband said  
"Are we gonna stay 'til last?"  
Then my husband died before they close the camp."

What "Kenji" does is give our students a model for communicating about powerful events in the lives of their own families. Many of our students are immigrants, or children of immigrants, and come from countries scarred by war, poverty and disease. They can use interviews with relatives to create songs which tell stories about the lands they left, their difficult, perilous journey to the US, or their struggle to find acceptance in this country. Some of our other students come from families who were victims of discrimination in the United States, or who experienced extreme poverty and displacement due to circumstances beyond their control. Students whose families came from the South can use oral histories to create songs about the ordeals of segregation. Those whose families lived in the South Bronx can do the something similar with the fires that swept through the borough in the 1970's. The "Kenji" model offers our youngsters a musical and poetic language to deal with events that many people are afraid to talk about, finding commonalities in our common experience of overcoming tragedy. The final product, be it a song, a poem, a story, a video or a documentary film, would allow our students to think about history as something both personal and communal, something which simultaneously draws upon their own individual creativity and connects them to other people

If we use Oral History creatively, we can not only rescue story telling traditions in danger of dying out, we can turn our students into "Griots for a New Age" who keep the wisdom of the past alive in new forms. Our best hip hop artists have shows us how to do this, if we give our students the tools, support and the opportunity, we may not only improve engagement and academic performance, we will transform schools into true centers of community life

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