Front and Center: Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Poetry in Academic Libraries

Del Williams and Mark Stover

abstract: This feature describes the efforts of the Oviatt Library at California State University, Northridge to offer programming featuring hip-hop and spoken word poetry. These events, begun in 2016, offer genres relevant to the university’s diverse and global enrollment. Though not traditional library presentations, they recognize the wide appeal of hip-hop and the importance of oral traditions to some cultures while providing a platform for the participants to express their diverse views and experiences.

In seeking to engage library users, we must ask ourselves if traditional library programming continues to be appealing and relevant to them.

In the past, special events in academic libraries have generally taken the form of guest author lectures, poetry readings, and speaker panels. If music is performed, it is generally a “kinder, gentler” genre of “library-appropriate” music, such as a cappella
groups, jazz trios, string quartets, or other kinds of chamber music. There is nothing wrong with any of this programming, but do these types of events fit the current interests of most students? Will these traditional library presentations engage students and bring them into the library? One way to begin to answer these questions is to analyze campus demographics. At California State University, Northridge (CSUN), a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution, 73 percent of the enrollment identify as people of color. In addition to this clear indicator of diversity, CSUN has a large constituency of international students, 7 percent of the enrollment, who bring a range of interests and tastes to the campus.

While demographic data are important when planning library events, another way to assess the relevance of programming is observation and anecdotal evidence. Surveying well-attended events on campus and examining the clubs and organizations that are popular among students can help to inform programming decisions in the library. Over the past few years, two in-demand classes at CSUN have been the Politics of Hip Hop in the Department of Africana Studies and the History of Hip Hop in the Music Department. CSUN also hosts a Slam Poetry Club, a Hip Hop Culture Club, and a Hip Hop Think Tank, which has held daylong symposiums on campus. Associated Students, a group that represents the student body and advocates for their needs, puts on a major concert each year dubbed the Big Show. This event features popular hip-hop artists and DJs who play almost exclusively hip-hop music.

Hip-hop is not just about music. It is a lifestyle, a culture, a political movement, and a way of speaking, acting, and being in the world. Hip-hop has also become an extremely popular genre of music among young people from all cultural backgrounds, transcending race, national origin, and ethnicity. Hip-hop, though uniquely American in its roots, appeals well beyond the borders of the United States and has gained in popularity all over the world. Many hip-hop artists from the Caribbean and Central and South America can be heard across campuses in the United States. This style of music is referred to as Reggaeton, which originated in Puerto Rico and is a fusion of hip-hop and Caribbean and Latin American music.

There are many subgenres of hip-hop. Hiplife is a fusion of Ghanaian traditional musical styles and culture with hip-hop. Desi hip-hop combines traditional South Asian music with hip-hop influences; the word desi comes from Sanskrit and refers to the people of the Indian subcontinent who have left their homeland. The indigenous peoples of North America have also adopted hip-hop and combined it with traditional Native American music, culture, and languages to produce Rez Rap. In the last year, Russian hip-hop artists made headlines. On December 18, 2018, CNN’s cover story centered on Russian hip-hop artists and their troubles with the Russian president and local law enforcement. All these international artists combine traditional music styles, elements from their culture, and American hip-hop to create their own art forms. Most perform predominantly in their primary language, although a few also speak in English. Hip-hop on college campuses can even contribute to student success. One researcher discovered that
when there were more hip-hop spaces on campus, some students were more likely to show this part of themselves and not keep it hidden. This is a critical point. Showing who you are is an important ingredient to a healthy learning environment, so the onus is on faculty and staff to create an environment that give students opportunities to do this. Fragmented identities create fragmented education.

Over several semesters, a group of students at CSUN repeatedly occupied the first floor of a campus building, where they played music, shared poetry, created rhymes, and drew a crowd. After a few minutes, they would typically be told to leave because the noise was deemed too disruptive. Despite the often negative response from campus administration, these nontraditional events were apparently what the CSUN student population wanted.

Many CSUN students come from cultures rooted in oral traditions, where community values, events, and history are shared through storytelling. The genre of spoken word poetry is an extension of these storytelling traditions. Hip-hop and spoken word have similarities:

In a cultural context, both use powerful language to articulate the experiences and marginality that African American and Latino working-class people experience. Rap music and spoken word give voice to these communities and other groups protesting the oppressive conditions experienced in the neighborhood, workplace, and institutions of learning.

At CSUN, the Slam Poetry Club, the Hip Hop Think Tank, and the student group who occupied the first floor of a campus building were often called “disruptive.” Their performances more often than not focused on the current political climate and echoed the trials of struggling students. Many hip-hop artists across the globe share these experiences of marginality. The Russian hip-hop artist Husky, whose real name is Dmitry Kuznetsov, spent four days in jail in 2018 because he often raps about poverty, corruption, and police brutality. This is reminiscent of the early days of hip-hop in the United States, when a long list of rappers, including DMX, Lil’ Kim, Snoop Dogg, Tupac Shakur, and Vanilla Ice, spent time in prison. Yet in the 2000s, such hip-hop artists as Chance the Rapper, Common, and Nicki Minaj have been invited to the White House to perform or meet with the president.

In 2013, the first floor of CSUN’s Oviatt Library was remodeled, resulting in the Learning Commons, a student-friendly space that aimed to be flexible, open, and welcoming. The Learning Commons had comfortable furniture, charging stations, a coffeehouse, and a collaborative area where students could study and work together. The Learning Commons seemed like the perfect place for hip-hop and spoken word performances. In 2015, one of the authors of this editorial, Del Williams, began advocating for this type of event, to be held in conjunction with the library’s Black History Month celebration in February 2016. The other author, Mark Stover, the library dean, needed to be convinced that a spoken word presentation in the Learning Commons was a good idea and not a disruptive, noisy event certain to draw large numbers of complaints. Williams advocated for library programming that aligned with student interests as demonstrated by the activities around campus. This type of presentation would give the Oviatt Library an opportunity to showcase its new space and services. The proposed event would also
align with the cultural themes of Black History Month. The library had a noise policy, and the first floor had been labeled the social area, a “noise-friendly” space where talking and group interaction were allowed and indeed encouraged. Williams proposed to bring in the student group mentioned earlier that had repeatedly taken over the first floor of a campus building.

Administrators typically respond in a conservative fashion to “radical” proposals, and Stover was no exception. His initial objections were rooted in three areas: the mission of the library; disruptive noise issues; and complaints about content due to the profane lyrics that sometimes accompany hip-hop and spoken word poetry performances. As Stover and Williams discussed these objections, it became clear that none of the potential problems were insurmountable. For example, the mission statement of the Oviatt Library states that the library “provides . . . innovative physical and virtual spaces, user-focused services, and diverse educational and cultural programming in support of student success . . . and the greater CSUN community.” In addition, the Oviatt Library’s values in its strategic vision include “diversity and inclusion” and “innovation and discovery.” Concerns about content can be addressed by the Library Bill of Rights, which prohibits censorship and allows for free expression of ideas. Potentially disruptive noise issues can easily be mitigated through proactive communication, including signage and leaflets, about upcoming events in the Learning Commons; distribution of earplugs; and adjusting the amplifiers to fit the acoustics of the space.

Another argument in favor of supporting culturally diverse programming in academic libraries, and especially in CSUN’s Oviatt Library, is related to the history of racial conflicts on college campuses and CSUN in particular dating back to the 1960s. Many universities had a record of discrimination toward people of color, and CSUN does not escape blame in this regard. In 1968, more than 20 students, most of them African American, were arrested at the university, then known as San Fernando Valley State College, after a campus protest. Several were ultimately convicted of felonies and sent to prison. Some observers asserted at the time and continue to believe that these arrests and convictions were unjust and resulted from racial discrimination and unequal treatment of students of color. Bringing to campus a genre of artistic expression rooted in the African American community could be one way to attempt to remedy the racial offenses of the past. The authors believe that there is a social justice component to sponsoring hip-hop and spoken word poetry in the Oviatt Library in light of historical events on campus.

Stover and Williams discussed and debated the concept of “Library as Place” as an argument in favor of bringing hip-hop and spoken word poetry into the library. Viewing the “Library as Place” considers it not just as a space to study or a building in which to discover information but also as a place to construct knowledge and to create art. In another context, the makerspace movement has adopted this perspective, and we believe that the concept of the library as an incubator for knowledge creation and artistic generation also applies to library programming of special events.

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While Stover slowly grew to appreciate the wisdom of allowing hip-hop and spoken word poetry in the library, he still was not convinced that the venue should be the Learning Commons. He asked Williams to consider other spaces, such as the Jack and Florence Ferman Presentation Room on the lower level, a large section of the library with closed doors in a corner away from the flow of student traffic. Williams's concern with this proposal was that the event would be hidden and students would not find it. In addition, Williams worried that an “out-of-the-way” space would not encourage the kinds of audience participation that spoken word presentations inspire, and students would not take part in the event as it was meant to be experienced:

The live energy of both the hip hop concert and the spoken word performance resurrect a sense of spontaneity in poetry. The simultaneously distinct and interconnected nature of these related forms challenges rigid traditional notions of form altogether. The melding of these two art forms in this manner is not only enriching for each art, it also allows audiences new ways to interpret and participate in each art. If hip hop and spoken word poetry have the liberatory potential to create such energetic, inspiring responses and encouraging audience participation that elicit social consciousness, we contend that each art form can easily be integrated into and practiced simultaneously in class.

Williams’s arguments were compelling, and the dean relented. Once Stover gave permission to hold the event in the Learning Commons, precautions had to be taken. Signage posted at the entrance and throughout the first floor notified library patrons that a live event would take place and that noise levels would be higher than usual. Notices were also placed on tables in the area, earplugs were made available to anyone who asked for them, and alternative spaces away from the performance area were offered. When the sound check began, librarians who taught classes in nearby labs and staff at adjacent service desks were asked if the noise interfered with their teaching or their work. No one had problems conducting business during the event.

Assessment forms passed out during the presentation asked the audience for their opinions. Overwhelmingly, they perceived the event as successful. Not only did students apparently enjoy the performance, but also many opted to take a turn at the microphone and share their own ad hoc poetry and music.

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Since its introduction to the Oviatt Library in February 2016, programming that integrates spoken word poetry and hip-hop music has been featured on several other occasions, including during Black History Month and National Poetry Month in April. Each time, efforts were made to mitigate noise concerns, and surveys indicated that students in the Learning Commons and in adjacent areas, including the coffeehouse, reacted favorably to the poetry and music, and felt engaged and affirmed.

Academic libraries have always included programmatic elements, but these presentations have traditionally been staid events that focus on academic lectures and white-centric poetry or author readings. However, changing demographics among students,
including the globalization of higher education and a much more diverse campus population, demand programmatic adjustments in libraries. While these changes can be challenging to staff whose ethnic backgrounds and artistic tastes do not match the majority of students, cultural ignorance or ethnocentric elitism are no excuse for denying librarians the chance to engage library users with relevant artistic formats and cutting-edge presentations. Integrating events featuring spoken word poetry and hip-hop music represents a radical, though logical, change from the traditional academic library of the past. Encouraging student engagement, advocating that the library play a role in students’ artistic creation of visual and auditory knowledge, and arguing that the library should give students a voice through narrative and art all lead to programming that is, at its essence, rooted in diverse (nonwhite) culture. While academic libraries must address such issues as noise and complaints around content, it is clear to the authors that in sponsoring such events, the library supports intellectual freedom, diversity, student engagement, and inclusion as well as the university’s curriculum. In addition, this type of activity becomes a constructive means for marginalized students to express dissenting political and social views, as well as a productive way for them to deal with fears and anxiety in an uncertain political climate.

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