



Class 5, April 24, 2013
CULTURE AND LIBERATION IN THE U. S. SOUTH

ATLANTA CAMPUS

ATLANTA, HIP HOP, AND EVOLUTION TO PEOPLE'S LIBERATION

NIQUA DOUGLAS:

Who am I and what are we going to do tonight?

We'll be looking at my art, at Atlanta artists, and at the threats and opportunities for artists in Atlanta

I've been rapping since about eight years old. I joined the movement around 2008. It's home for me now. I've been recording since I was seventeen, about seven years. Organizing and my music are the most important things in my life right now; they give me energy.

Why do I do what I do?

How I feel affects what I do. I do art to express my feelings.

A long time ago, my brother did music and we would free-style together. When he became quadraplegic and then passed, he left me studio equipment to keep me out of the streets. It worked.

I want the people around me and the people who listen to my music; I want them to take something from it that will help them, that makes a lot of sense to them. My family's story is another reason. I'm the voice of my family, telling where I come from and where I'm going to go and who I am doing it with.

How do I do my art? What is my creative process?

My voice, my emotions, and the lyrics all are part of it. My voice is my instrument; the beat determines the frequency my voice should be. My voice is a drum in the beat. I play my voice according to the production.

How I'm feeling at a particular time affects what kind of performance I can do. If I'm feeling laid back, the song has to be like that. The result reveals how I was feeling.

I try to make the lyrics meaningful and relatable. For the most part, I want it to be timely and meaningful, for people to realize what they've experienced like that.

Are there any people involved in art here who want to explain why they do what they do?

I think of myself as a think tank. I use several different mediums. What drives me is when I'm frustrated, feeling in disarray, I think of providing for my family by using my brain. It's another drive.

I have been involved for seven years in certain activities because of the inequalities that exist that make me feel unhappy. I do my best to make the world a better place. I'm trying to leave a better place for my children. Musicians of all kinds of music have been important to the movement, as well as other kinds of artists.

I'm a singer: I did it first for self-esteem; then I started thinking about the impact on other people. I want to touch people and give them my own perspective. It's important to give that to others. My art is activism also. It's something that flows through me, that allows me to feel good. Doing it is part of who I am. As it flows through me, I have to catch up with it.

I come from an artistic family, especially singers. My grandmother made a living through gospel singing. Others were into spoken word. I grew up in a church where music was what we did. I'm not a singer though. I like to talk and communicate as part of my organizing. I love to talk and I love hip hop.

I think about my work as art. I used to think I might draw because of ideas I wanted to translate, but I haven't. Art has to be someone's truth.

When I was younger, I didn't realize I was artistic. In high school, I discovered I could paint. My great aunt is a painter and taught me a lot. I like to do abstract art. I also sing, did so in church for many years. I've been acting since first grade. I'm a crafter and a teacher. I love to do craft with the kids, shadow boxes. I also write poetry.

Teaching, at its best, is an art, requiring a teacher to be in touch with the same emotional and truth issues as other kinds of artists, able to trust their instincts once they have developed the basic techniques. Everyone needs to find their artist inside them.

I feel driven. A lot of my creative work is in writing. It relieves a lot of anxiety. It's a way to plant seeds, to provide company to someone else.

USA song by Niqua:

Some of the words: "It's safe to say we've got to pray for the USA. In my hood, nobody paved the way in the USA. So many lives they take away. Gentrification, they tear schools down...."

How do you think art is connected to liberation?

Activism as an art rather than a science.

People's brains reflect certain emotions. Art can help people go beyond propaganda. Songs of any era can be tied into what was going on at the time. People back in the day did not have time to practice; music was part of their daily lives.

Expressing opinions is part of art and liberation. Singing is an important part of protest activities. Hip hop should be something to listen to in order to know what is going on in a certain area (California or wherever).

Art helps me stop worrying about what other people are thinking. Art can be the voice of the people. It can portray people who are not portrayed otherwise. It shows the meaning of people's lives.

I like this question. Art and liberation are connected in various ways. Sometimes we are not aware of the acts that we play in developments. Artists have documented history (the Civil War, slavery), that enables liberation to be passed on. Apartheid in South Africa led to artists being exiled, but they kept performing and doing their art. Art is a reminder of our history. It raises questions for us. I'm reminded of singing in SNCC. Song was a weapon of self-defense when they were surrounded by the police. They knew they could be killed, but collective song gave them strength and set aside some of their fear. Music taps into something else. It's almost an altered state of consciousness. And there's some aspect of good mischievousness because art is about truth in the face of the lies of the state and those who are trying to control everyone.

In 2002 in a microeconomics class, some words came to me that gave me something to do with my anger, to put my thoughts together. That was my liberation.

When I think about liberation, I can't help but think of a different place than what exists now. Sun Ra and his space ship idea reflected this. Personally, when you engage in artistic expression, it's powerful and takes you somewhere else. We need that, especially where a lot of the control is the imposition of a reality that denies everything else. Art is critical, fundamental so we can see other possibilities..

Empowering art is important in the struggles in the Congo now. The artists will be the ones to envision a better Congo of the future. A brother was talking about his interest in alternative medicine, creating a healing space so people can recover. The healing will open up the way for the artist to come out and stand up.

Art can be a secret weapon. Slaves used music and other arts to communicate and to form their communities. During the 1973 coup in Chile, when political singer Victor Jara was imprisoned with thousands of others in a soccer stadium, he kept playing his guitar and singing. They took his guitar and cut off his hands, but he kept on singing until he died.

The Toi Toi documentary was powerful.

Art is like a periscope. It fuels the fight for liberation. There are times when imagination plays a part for what is not already there.

What is important to know about Atlanta Hip Hop?

Three videos from three different periods show the unique ways in which Hip Hop has evolved here.

1. Outkast, "Hey Ya!" 2003
2. Lil John, "Snap Yo Fingers,"
3. Future, "Tony Montana," 2012

The first video by Outkast is worldly music; everybody can relate to it.

Lil John started the Crunk Movement. It had a big impact on my life.

Future ("Tony Montana") is one of the hottest artists in Atlanta now, with tramp club music..

These are three different genres. Nothing was by accident. The first was about being outside of

their element, being motivated, with women screaming for them. Lil John was a beginning phase of something different. Some people think the crunk phase ruined hip hop with dumbed-down, losing control, don't think dancing; bright colors; losing focus, as in using drugs. The last was about selling drugs. Right now, I'm not so young but still not old; I'm less impulsive than I used to be. A girl seeing this video without someone at home to tell her how to have self-respect might get another message. Songs can be a way to teach children/girls messages. There is a generational divide.

Each video was telling a story with an answer. In the first one, they went to London. The energy of doing that from Atlanta was the point. The second was straightforward, snapping fingers to create a movement with new ways to snap fingers more creatively; it brought dance back to hip hop (Crunk). The last one involved future reliving the moment when he became Tony Montana, living the danger of the original Tony Montana [the main character in Al Pacino's 1983 version of the movie "Scarface"].

The state of Atlanta Hip Hop now shows much change from earlier patterns. Some other key rap artists, groups, and producers in Atlanta have been Organized Noize, Rico Ray, and?

[?] found a label without taking corporate funds, which brought in many people in Atlanta and led to Outkast.

x shaped the platform for other artists to build on; then others (names I could not follow); some have their own label; one with his own label but then signed with Atlantic Records. T. I. is an independent person/artist.

Contracts for some would have to involve a lot of creative control, in spite of some standards; they want control over when, where, and how the music is released.

Rico Ray, from the second generation signed with two labels.

A lot of artists can have creative control and fight corporations because of what some before them have done.

Questions and Comments:

I wasn't looking at the dance in the second one because of how women were portrayed as sex-objects. The men were well-dressed and covered up, but the women in bikinis (put the men in bikinis also). The men being well covered up took away the women's dignity and pride. It seemed a form of violence. I felt somewhat offended. Pictures speak volumes, which is partly why music is so powerful. Songs stay in our minds for many years. The third video on drugs and the drug wars included the illusion that drugs allow someone to drive the best car, making it falsely glamorous. That's not what I would encourage a young artist to do. My son is into music and plays for WRFG. Why were they wearing heavy jewelry that looks like slave shackles?

The purpose was to describe the styles as they have changed in Atlanta.

I have issues with other aspects, especially about women. Our oppressors have made showing our body negative. Glorifying our body can be good; sexual expression can be good. It's fine for women to be in hip hop videos for the context here; it's going on up the street. It's wrong to assume that young people will be so affected by this music; this is an insult to young people. Young people are as varied as any group.

I don't think that of all young people, but my impression was something that would vary from that

of others. I have been working with young people for all my life because they are so important to our future.

The men chose to portray women a way that men were not. Why should we be naked when the men aren't? The women are not saying anything in the video; they do not seem to be anything but bodies.

Drugs and sex are not bad things. Protecting young people can miss their being able to express themselves. Don't assume young people are somehow lesser. The government is already telling them what to think.

I had two parents with two totally different styles of parenting. One of them listened to me. Young people are still bad and need to think about the moderation and responsibility that need to come with sex. The issue is how to love in spite of fear.

There are differences between the commercial and the underground hip hop scene.

What are the current threats against music building culture and liberation today?

In the song "I can make cocaine," the word was eventually left out. Corporate resources give one kind of freedom, but is it freedom if it fits what the power structure wants done?

Clear Channel Radio had some limits on what they allow. It's hard to fight if we don't know what we're up against. Capitalism is in the way.

The biggest threat is being unconscious and not saying anything.

We don't want to be ahistorical and need to learn how historical groups have been severed from cultural production. At one time songs and theater were important parts of how cultures reproduced themselves, for both honored elders and celebrated youth.

There is a threat of losing historical identity. How can we portray this through art?

FREE WRITE QUESTION: HOW DO WE BUILD PEOPLE'S POWER FOR CULTURE AND LIBERATION IN THE U. S. SOUTH TODAY? [from any/all of the classes]

At a Synthesis Assembly in May, we will look at the connections between what we learned in the different classes.

This summation of the main points made at this class of the Course on Culture and Liberation in the U. S. South on April 24, 2013 is selective, to some extent organized by topic rather than in the order in which they were stated, and often paraphrased. I encourage anyone who was present to suggest additions or corrections.