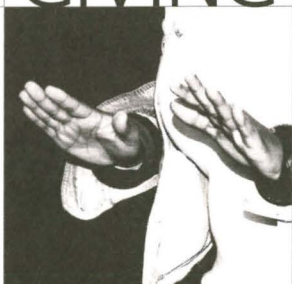


# GIVING Voice



THE POWER OF WORDS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE

by James Alexander Robinson  
with contributions from John W. Davis II  
and Jacquelyn Days Serwer

(Above) Gestures accentuate the power of words.  
Photo by Michelle J. Chin

(Right) Women and children gather on a front porch  
in Memphis, Tennessee, 1968. Photo by Diana Davies





■ ■ *Don't tell me words don't matter!*  
*"I Have a Dream" – just words?*  
*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that*  
*all men are created equal" – just words?*  
*"We have nothing to fear, but fear itself" – just words?*  
—Sen. Barack Obama, February 16, 2008

Bernice Johnson Reagon's eloquence and verbal artistry have shaped her career as a civil rights activist, singer, song leader, and scholar.  
Photo by Diana Davies

The 2009 Smithsonian Folklife Festival program *Giving Voice: The Power of Words in African American Culture*, presented by the National Museum of African American History and Culture, showcases the many oral traditions and verbal arts that hold a special place in African American folk culture. *Giving Voice* focuses on the word power and word play that shape, define, and transform human experience. These cultural expressions represent a living legacy for Black Americans and ultimately for all Americans. Through the deep, rich strains of African American oral traditions, this Festival program explores and displays the vital connections between the power of words in African American folklife and the attributes of American culture itself.



*The complex signifying, verbal devices, oratorical talents and rhetorical mastery [are] taken for granted in the Black church.*—Michael Eric Dyson

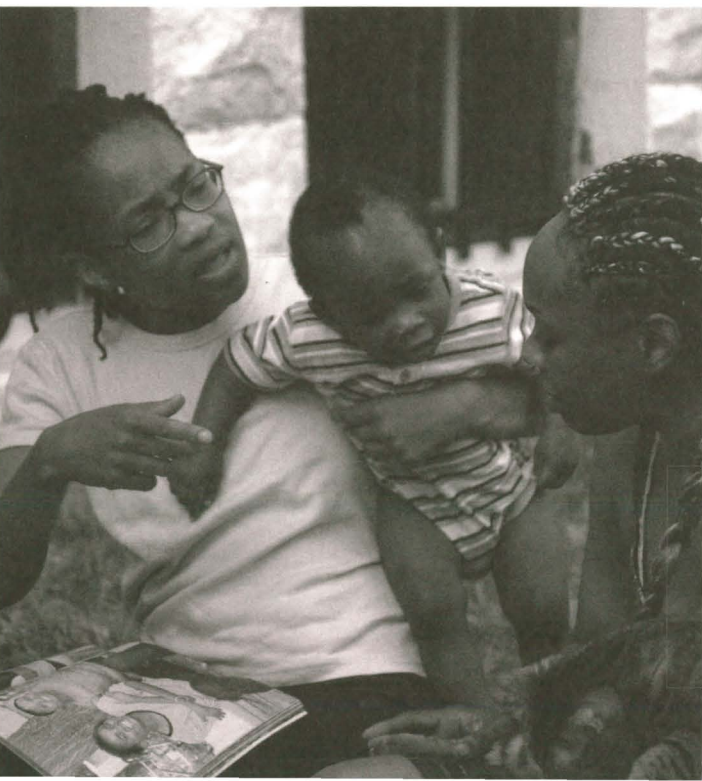
The subjugation of African Americans over three centuries created a conspicuously separate Black world within the larger American community. Consequently, a uniquely African American sphere of public expression emerged at historically significant times, originating norms and practices that have become part of contemporary American life. The Festival visitor who listens closely will hear many compelling stories about the history, struggles, and creativity of a people—stories that will be told, sung, spoken, poeticized, debated, and verbalized through the craft of words expressed orally.

American popular culture relies largely on the visual. “Seeing is believing” and “Out of sight, out of mind” are common sayings. Television, movies, and the Internet, with its access to an infinite spectrum of images, are dominant media forms. But beneath the waves of broadcasts and cybercasts, America is also an oral community of diverse cultures. And in a society that privileges high visibility,

African Americans have often felt invisible—save for their oral culture.

Many folklorists and academics—such as John W. Roberts, the dean of Black folklorists, and Michael Eric Dyson, the author and historian—are scholars and advocates of oral culture. According to Roberts, “[T]he African-American tradition of vernacular creativity and performance remains vital.” Dyson, trained as a minister as well as an academic, focuses on the special qualities of Black religious speech that he summarizes as “[t]he complex signifying, verbal devices, oratorical talents and rhetorical mastery taken for granted in the Black church.” The everyday lives of African Americans—in churches as well as kitchens, homes, beauty parlors, barbershops, fellowship lodges, and playgrounds, on stoops and street corners, on front and back porches, at workplaces and in leisure—provide the settings that nurture Black vocal culture.

The study of oral culture as orature is a relatively new development in African American scholarship, but draws from the older disciplines of ethnology, ethnomusicology, folklore, linguistics, oral history, and poetics. Orature, coined as a term by Ugandan scholar Pio Zirimu, recognizes an entire oral repertory that serves to define a culture. Included here are the vocal and verbal traditions of Black storytelling, poetry, spoken word, vocal music, religious speech, debate, and community radio. These expressions, grounded in the complexities of the Black experience, form the basis for the *Giving Voice* program.



Settings such as front yards and porch stoops, restaurants and home kitchens, churches and meeting halls, playgrounds and street corners, provide a living context for demonstrating the power of words to shape the daily experiences of African Americans. Photo by Lisa Fanning



## ARABBERS

A visitor's first encounter with the sounds of Black folklife at the Festival may come via the arabbers of Baltimore. As documented by folklorist and photographer Roland Freeman, these men and women are African American tradition-bearers in their own right. The term "arabbers," derived from a nineteenth-century English word for homeless children, was used in the early twentieth century to describe Black Baltimore horse cart vendors selling foodstuffs. Since 1972, these arabbers have sold fruits at the Folklife Festival. Again this year, you'll hear them cry, holler, or yodel:

*Red to the rind, come lady!*

*I got 'em red to the rind today!*

*Big, ripe, red, juicy watermelon whole!*

*I got 'em red watermelon whole!*

*I got 'em, you want 'em, come get 'em!*

*I got 'em red to the rind today!*

OR

*Give 'em a song, give 'em a holler,*

*Always load good produce.*

*Stay clean, honest,*

*And you'll make a dollar.*

OR

*Got nice white rind*

*Got coal-back seed*

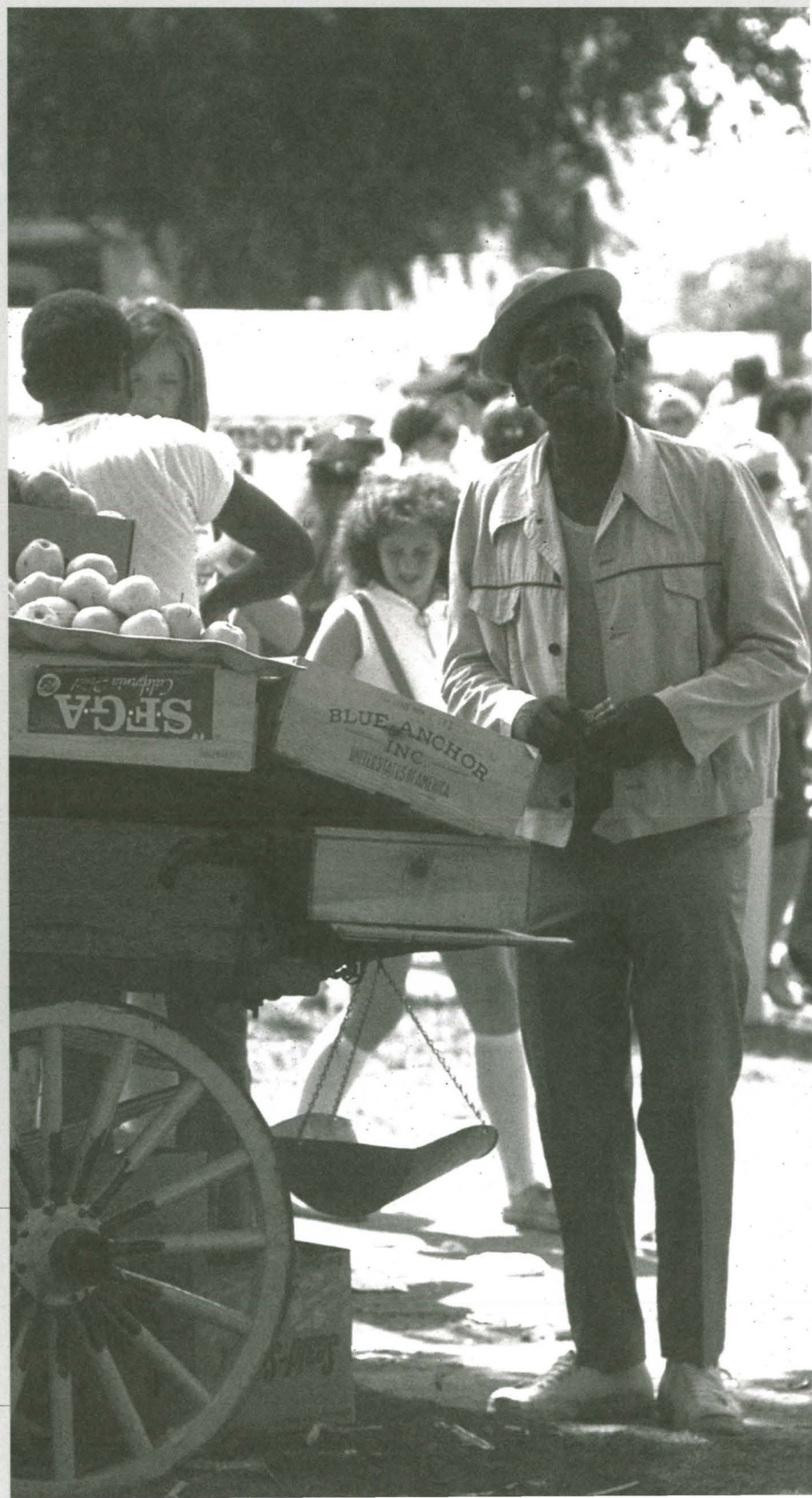
*Got big red heart*

*Just can't be beat*

*Got red watermelon lady*

*All red.*

Arabbers from Baltimore sell fresh fruit during a summer afternoon on the National Mall.  
Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution





### THE VOICE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF EXPRESSIVE POWER

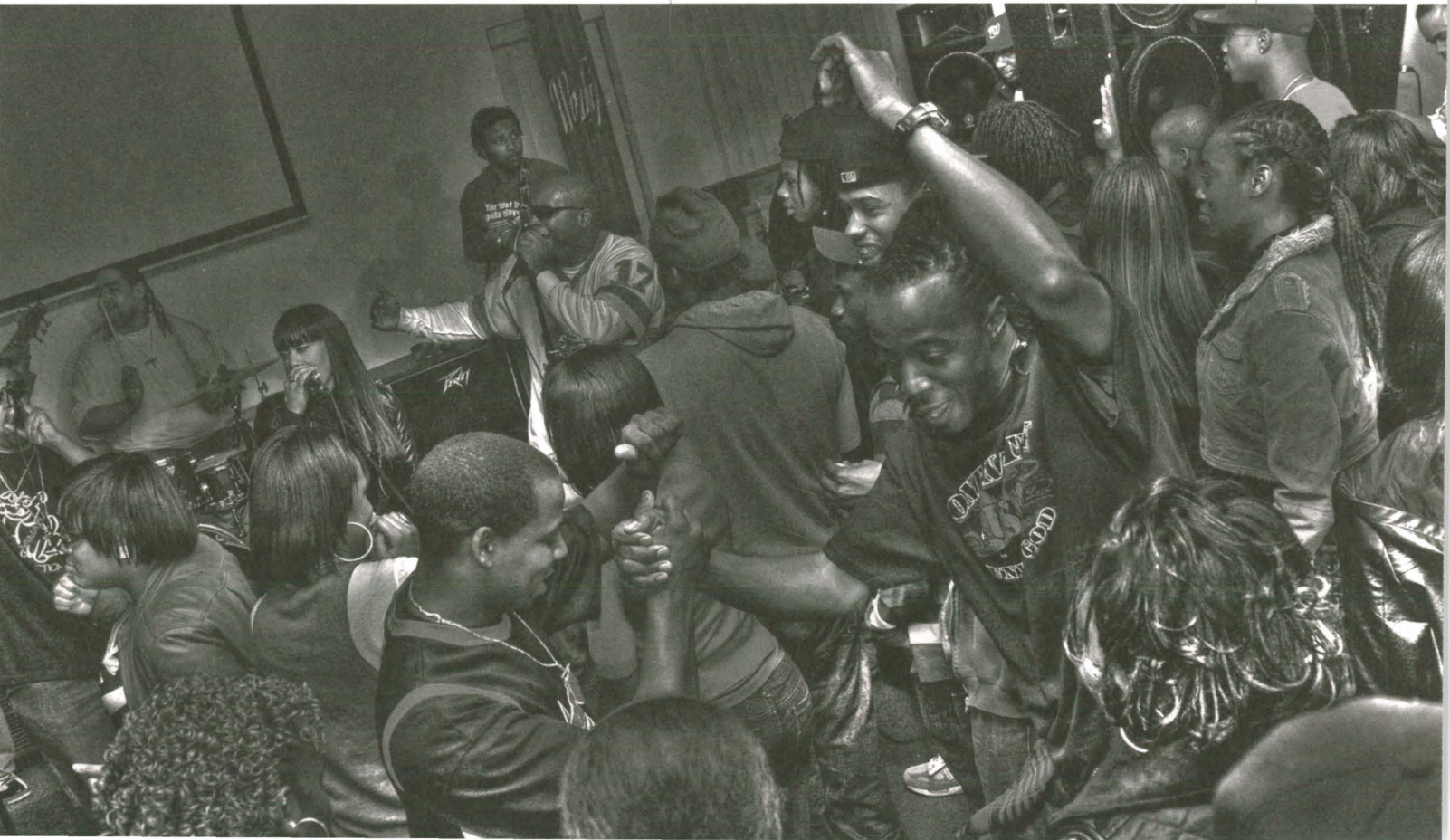
Oral expression—whatever its form—may be the primary mark of human culture itself. Black artisans of folk language utilize an array of oral skills and techniques in crafting their words. The oral arts also have a physiological dimension. Beginning with the transformation of the breath into sound, the vocal cords then translate the sound into morphemes and phonemes, syllables, and words. The brain's centers for speech and language string the words into phrases, lyrics, and sentences, all governed by the codes of oral culture. Verbal artists weave sounds and words together that become lore, tale, story, poem, rap, song, narrative, discourse, argument, and history.

In the African American context, a listener may recognize particular cadences and inflections, as well as common preferences for a distinctive pronunciation of certain words, all of which characterize what the comedian Chris Rock refers to as “sounding Black.” This casual mode of communication in the Black community may be the

norm for some. For others it may be a self-conscious mode of expression suited to a particular circumstance. Common also is the tendency to reverse meanings in the use of common words, such as “bad” to mean good, and “phat” to mean attractive.

Given the myriad of voices and sounds shaping the Folklife Festival experience, visitors may revel in their role as auditors by listening intently to the language delivered. Its purpose is not only to offer content, but also to resonate in the thinking ear. Festival visitors may look with their two eyes and listen with their two ears, but they may remember best if they also listen with their intuitive “third ear” to the words and stories that have the power to inspire and reverberate within the mind and imagination.

Verbal artists, whether singers, preachers, comedians, or hip-hop artists, can move people to tears, prayer, laughter, and dance. Photo by Lionel Miller





*...we polished our new words, caressed them, gave them new shape and color, a new order and tempo, until, though they were the words of the Lords of the Lands, they became our words, our language.*—Richard Wright

### THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

In *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941), the novelist Richard Wright describes the history and circumstances surrounding the emergence of the Black vernacular language:

We stole words from the grudging lips of the Lords of the Land, who did not want us to know too many of them or their meaning. And we charged this meager horde of stolen sounds with all the emotions and longings we had; we proceeded to build our language in inflections of voice, through tonal variety, by hurried speech, in honeyed drawls, by rolling our eyes, by flourishing our hands, by assigning to common, simple words new meanings, meanings which enabled us to speak of revolt in the actual presence of the Lords of the Land without their being aware! Our secret language extended our understanding of what slavery meant and gave us the freedom to speak to our brothers in captivity; we polished our new words, caressed them, gave them new shape and color, a new order and tempo, until, though they were the words of the Lords of the Land, they became *our* words, *our* language.

As Wright indicates, through creativity and necessity Blacks originated distinctive modes of verbal communication that contributed to the formation of a common medium for cultural dialogue and exchange. The words of this language—whether uttered by the orators and great debaters of antebellum America, by the dialect poets and new Black arts poets, the singers of Negro spirituals and gospel, the jazz and blues vocalists of the twentieth century, or by the rappers and hip-hop artists of the twenty-first century—have given a new voice to the American condition.

To perfect their verbal arts, Black folk have used the languages at their disposal as intellectual tools, drawing upon a variety of linguistic sources. Among these are African languages from four main linguistic groups; Anglo-European tongues such as English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish; Native American languages; and American vernacular expressions. From this mix has emerged a



Orators, activists, song leaders, and others took part in the Poor People's Campaign of 1968 to promote civil rights and economic justice. Participants lobbied Congress for several weeks and created a tight-knit community in Washington, D.C.  
Photo by Diana Davies

distinctive African American mode of speech—a polyglot of words, tones, and voices that serves as the wellspring and mainspring for the spoken word of the Black folk spirit.

The Africans transported to America came from many different ethnic backgrounds and, therefore, shared no common language. As a consequence, their first challenge, as Smithsonian folklorist Diana Baird N'Diaye has noted, was “inventing ways of speaking to one another and creating community.” Many of those enslaved souls were skilled in their own oral traditions, but were punished—even violently muzzled or mutilated—if they attempted to speak in their native tongues. The language of English likewise involved problems. Because slaves were deprived of the opportunity to read or write by custom or law (at least in the South), Blacks adapted and transformed English to suit their circumstances. They employed it to communicate with one another, to conceal verbal interactions from their oppressors, and to convey their yearnings and creativity.





Performers of mime evoke praise through body motion. Photo by Danita Delaney

As the American language of Africans evolved, it gave shape to the thoughts, dreams, and hopes of a people caught between slavery and freedom. In every tone there was a testimony. The power of words helped articulate a new perspective on American liberty, equality, justice, and humanity—one that justified its extension to people of color. As a group denied by various means and methods the right to a mother tongue, Black Americans relied on the inventive use of an oral culture derived from hybrid sources to express and define themselves.

Despite the dominant culture's concerted efforts to suppress newly arrived Africans' use of a mother tongue, certain African words were retained or adapted that best expressed the enslaved's view of their new reality. For example, some common words associated with the Black vernacular may have their origins in Wolof, a West African language. The word *hip* may derive from the Wolof verbs *hepi* or *hipi*, which mean "to be aware," "to see," or "to open one's eyes." The word *dig* may come from *dega* meaning "to understand." And the roots of the term *jive* may be traced to *jev* meaning "to disparage or talk falsely." Alternatively, the entertainer Cab Calloway, known for his inventive use

of scat singing that relied on made-up phrases like "hi-de-ho," put the word "jive" into a more contemporary linguistic context. He listed it in his *Hepsters Dictionary* simply as "Harlemese." In any case, the culture created by the "New Negro" in America was reflected in their evolving verbal expression. As generations have passed, the vocabulary, usage and grammar employed by African Americans have not only played a role in shaping and preserving Black culture, they also have influenced the speech and verbal usage of the majority population. The vocabulary coined by Black jazz musicians—such words as cool, groovy, gig, riff, boogie, funky, and beat—have helped change the ways Americans communicate.

Black speech—what is often called non-standard Black English—has its own origins and logic, and like all languages it has evolved over time. Historically it reflected a view of reality as well as the cosmos, as can be seen clearly in the words of John Jasper's famous 1867 folk sermon, "De Sun Do Move." Despite its basis in folk science, Jasper's oral analysis of natural phenomena based on Biblical text is filled with pronunciations and cadences that elevate it to the status of poetry.



### AN EXCERPT FROM "DE SUN DO MOVE"

An example of Black folk orature is found in the art of the Negro folk sermon. One such famous sermon was "De Sun Do Move" by the Reverend John Jasper (1812-1901). The sermon expresses the belief using Biblical evidence that in fact the sun is in motion in relation to the earth rather than the reverse. Jasper delivered this sermon more than 250 times in the United States and also in London and Paris. At a time when there were no tape recorders, the best versions of the text of this sermon were those recorded by the sensitive human ear. One problem was that the writing down of the sermon may have depended upon the skill and objectivity of the auditor.

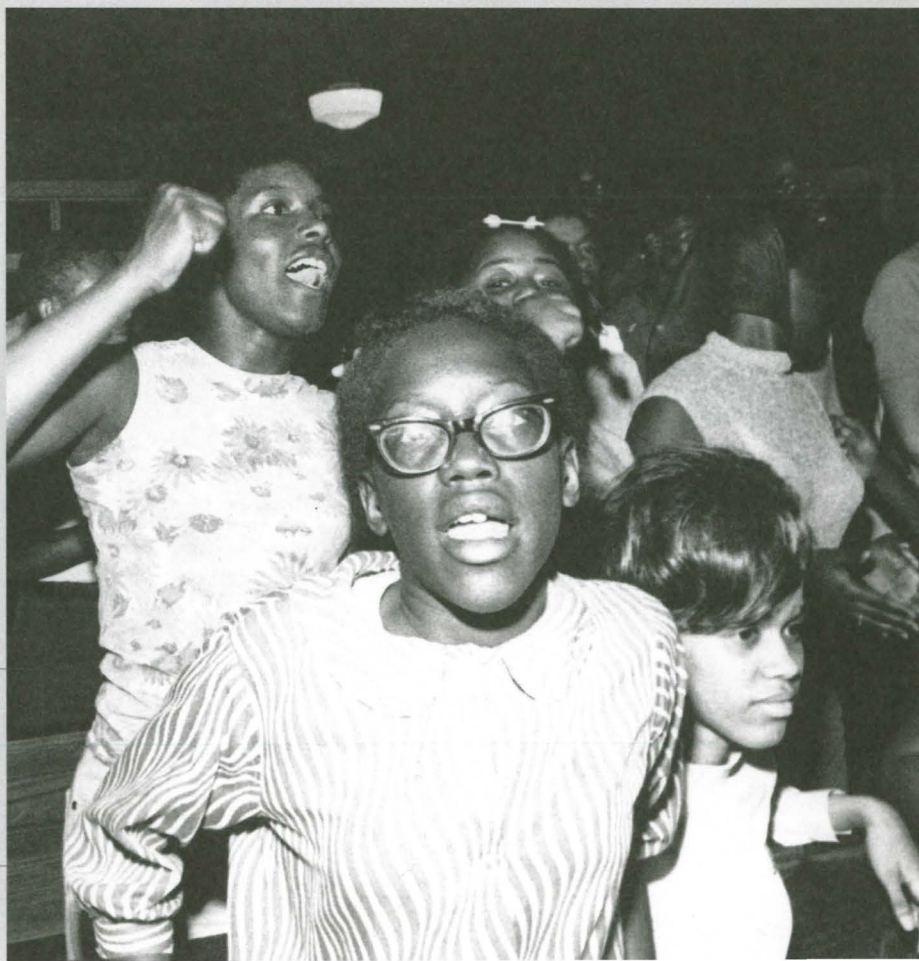
This version is William E. Hatcher's 1908 rendering of the sermon:

'Low me,  
my frens,  
ter put myself squar  
'bout dis movement uv de sun.  
It ain't no bizness uv mine  
wedder de sun move or stan' still,  
or wedder it stop or go back  
or rise or set.  
All dat is out er my han's 'tirely,  
an' I got nuthin' ter say.  
I got no the-o-ry on de subjik.  
All I ax  
is dat we will take  
wat de Lord say 'bout it  
an' let His will be dun  
'bout ev'rything.  
Wat dat will is  
I karn't know  
'cept He whisper inter my soul  
or write it in a book.  
Here's de Book.  
Dis is 'nough fer me,  
and wid it ter pilot me,  
I karn't git fur erstray.

The rendering in dialect of Jasper's speech pattern is the subject of some scholarly controversy. The dialect may be extremely exaggerated, to the point that it distorts the speaker's voice, becomes unreadable, and reinforces racial prejudices. The following is a transcription in standard English, based on Hatcher's version of the sermon (left):

Allow me, my friends, to put myself square about this movement of the sun. It's no business of mine whether the sun moves or stands still, or whether it stops or goes back or rises or sets. All that is out of my hands entirely; and I have nothing to say. I have no theory on the subject. All I ask is that we will take what the Lord says about it and let His will be done about everything. What that will is I can't know except (what) He whispers into my soul or writes it in a book. Here's the Book. This is enough for me, and with it to pilot me, I can't get far astray.

Eloquent voices enthrall listeners inside the Eudora African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Marks, Mississippi, May 1968. Photo by Diana Davies







Musicians entertain young visitors during D.C. Heritage Day in the Brookland neighborhood. Photo by Bonita Bing

As with religion, the group experience of hard labor provided another context for the evolution and practice of language. Forced to work, African American slaves were organized into gangs or crews. They produced work songs and “field hollers” to lighten their toil and to express their connection to one another. Work gangs endured long days of hard labor—clearing fields, digging ditches, breaking rocks—to the repetitious, syncopated rhythms of these folk sounds. Although the content and circumstances might have seemed straightforward, the real meaning of these songs often escaped outsiders, as the nineteenth-century Black orator Frederick Douglass pointed out in his remarks on this form of expression. He noted the contrast between the way the oppressors viewed work songs and their significance to the slaves themselves.

I have often been utterly astonished . . . to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.

This musical tradition continued to evolve, becoming part of the foundation as well as an inspiration for the blues, an enduring example of a distinctive cultural expression.

## MATERIAL CULTURE

The oral arts and traditions belong to the intangible culture of African Americans. In contrast, material culture refers to those tangible elements that include physical objects, structures, and other hand-made things. These objects are often incorporated into the speech of Black folk. For instance, the banjo comes out of African material culture. Similarly, traditional Black folk crafts, folk medicines, folk costume, foodways, vernacular architecture, and landscape design all yielded tangible and highly expressive artifacts whose continuity and survival depended upon Black verbal expression. Words such as bongo, gumbo, juke, okra, and voodoo offer some examples.



## EXCERPT FROM FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S ORATION, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"

Rochester, N.Y., 1852

What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the years, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.

### THE POWER OF ORATORY

The power of words in African American culture is the power to affect the heart and head, ideas and ideals, to disclose the truth, to change lives. This phrase also refers to the power to influence others, either for good or evil, through language. The impact of strong oratory on American history is well documented. Some examples that come readily to mind include George Washington's Farewell Address, Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?," Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, or Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony before the Credentials Committee at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. The recent presidential campaign represents only the most recent illustration of the way words and oratory can sway hearts and minds.

Because of the early limitations on their communication with one another, the concept of freedom of speech holds a special meaning for Americans of African descent. These Americans place a high value on effective speaking and rhetoric. Traditionally, the most eloquent speakers garner influence, respect, and admiration. Some, such as activist-comedian Dick Gregory and educator-comedian Bill Cosby, rely primarily on wit and economical verbal devices; others, among them museum director Johnnetta Betsch Cole and the late U.S. Representative Barbara Jordan, look to elevated diction and elaborate grammar. Whether speakers employ a less formal or a more structured approach, they often find inspiration or source material in oral expressions from the past, including spirituals, gospel, blues, and work songs.

Some of the first African American voices to gain the attention of Whites were orators who could speak powerfully of the experience of being enslaved, such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. Others included abolitionist figures such as Henry Highland Garnet, who in his famous 1843 "Address to the Slaves of America," exhorted enslaved Blacks to strike for their own freedom. "Rather die free men than live to be slaves," he pronounced. Several generations later, in response to the post-World War I race riots of 1919, the poet Claude McKay expressed a similar view in his poem, "If We Must Die": "Like men we'll face the murderous cowardly pack, pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!" Although the poem appeared in written form, its rhythm and rhyming beg for recitation aloud. During World War II,

Winston Churchill uttered these now famous lines over the radio airwaves to rally the British during the blitzkrieg. These eloquent calls for resistance represent the often-expressed sentiments of Blacks throughout their long struggle against repression and discrimination.

The 1920s and '30s brought a new, more literary voice to the desires, needs, and aspirations of Black folk. The Harlem Renaissance flourished at that time, bringing to prominence African American intellectuals and writers with a keen ear for the voice of the folk, such as Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston. In addition to the work of such distinguished literary figures, poetry in the form of the blues, gospel, ballads, and sermons revealed characteristics of Black expression. Also in the 1930s, other common folk had their say when the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Federal Writers' Project recorded the oral testimonies of ex-slaves. These personal stories provided firsthand accounts of the experience of slavery and valuable examples of vernacular Black expression.

In every epoch of American history, Black voices not only have called for resistance, but also have spoken constructively to reaffirm the nation's principles and to hold America accountable for the fulfillment of its core democratic values of freedom and equality. The calls for deliverance from the bonds of slavery later became the language used to demand civil, labor, women's, gay, and disability rights, as well as political, social, and cultural change. During the height of the modern civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr., in his 1963 speech, "I Have a Dream," gave eloquent expression to the idea of equal rights for all Americans:

When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"

"We Shall Overcome," the anthem of the movement led by King, became and remains the mantra for numerous social justice causes that have followed.





(Left) Informal conversations on many significant social and political issues take place in public settings such as barbershops. Photo by Roland L. Freeman

(Below) Cornrows are a style of hair grooming that originated in Africa, and the tradition of cornrow braiding was continued by African Americans. Because they take a long time to create, the braiding of cornrows helps cement bonds of friendship and family. Photo by Gloria C. Kirk

#### VOICES AND PLACES

*Giving Voice* creates a learning experience that will provide audiences with a better understanding of the everyday language and expression inherent in African American folklife. For instance, Festival visitors will notice the presence of simulated social sites and gathering places where African Americans traditionally have felt free to talk to one another beyond the gaze and financial control, or below the radar, of racial others. Settings such as restaurants and home kitchens, churches and meeting halls, playgrounds and street corners, barbershops and beauty parlors, community radio stations and the “soapbox” provide a living context for demonstrating the power of words to shape the daily experiences of African Americans.

The barbershop and beauty parlor in particular offer an opportunity to display the rich social and political content of African American expressive culture. Political scientist Melissa Harris-Lacewell has commented upon the connections between Black hair culture and language:

Black hair has its own vocabulary and rituals that are integral to everyday black talk. Second, black hair rituals contribute to the notion of a common African American experience. This notion of commonality allows barbershops and beauty shops to function as racialized public spaces with the potential to contribute to the development of black politics.

Not surprisingly, journalists tracking the African American response to Barack Obama’s candidacy went straight to the local hair salons and barbershops to get an authentic reading of the political climate.





## STORYTELLING

Rex Ellis, of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, is a great storyteller himself and a member of the National Association of Black Storytellers. He likes to emphasize the storyteller's particular power to communicate and provide common ground:

[It is] the stock in trade of the spoken word . . . and the tellers who bring the words to life . . . who understand the essence and meaning of the words that have the power to inform, interpret, represent, transform, and empower the listener. Storytelling is a universal art that teaches norms, customs, and perspectives about a community and its culture.

The oral tale, as contrasted with a written text, is usually improvisational and to some degree communal—performed interactively, in dialogue with an audience. While storytelling is distinctive, it shares similarities with the art of oral poetry. At the Festival, visitors will have an opportunity to compare the various genres. Master storytellers will be juxtaposed with rappers, singers, and comedians, each with stories to tell.

In recent years, storytelling has found new forms of expression in music videos and in the many interactive platforms of the Internet, including MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr. At these online sites the doors are open to shared stories and experiences. A private incident or local performance can become a touchstone for millions.

Notable also is the way in which storytelling has evolved within the African American deaf community. Their signs, gestures, and body language represent art as well as communication. One need only experience the signer who performs with Sweet Honey in the Rock to recognize this distinctive mode of Black expression. Like other Black communities, deaf African Americans were segregated for decades from the larger deaf population and evolved independently. As a result, Black sign-language users developed their own distinctive gestures, and a general preference for using more two-handed signs than is common amongst the broader group.



Baba Jamal Koram brings the art of storytelling to communities across the United States. Photo by Samuel Brown

## POETRY

Young poets during the second half of the twentieth century were inspired and nourished by earlier generations of Black poets, including such renowned figures as Phillis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes. But these later artists felt the need for a new genre of poetry that would suit their activist approach to the world. They developed a more assertive, confrontational style of writing and delivery that allowed figures such as Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, E. Ethelbert Miller, and Sonia Sanchez to play an important role in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Through performers such as Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets, this new Black poetry influenced early street rap poetry and rap music, which in turn nurtured the hip-hop and spoken word movements among a younger wave of artists.

Building on the past, the new Black poetry functions on a sacred-secular continuum. It favors a pronounced rhythmic pattern and uses the Black idiom—including rap, call-and-response, and signification.



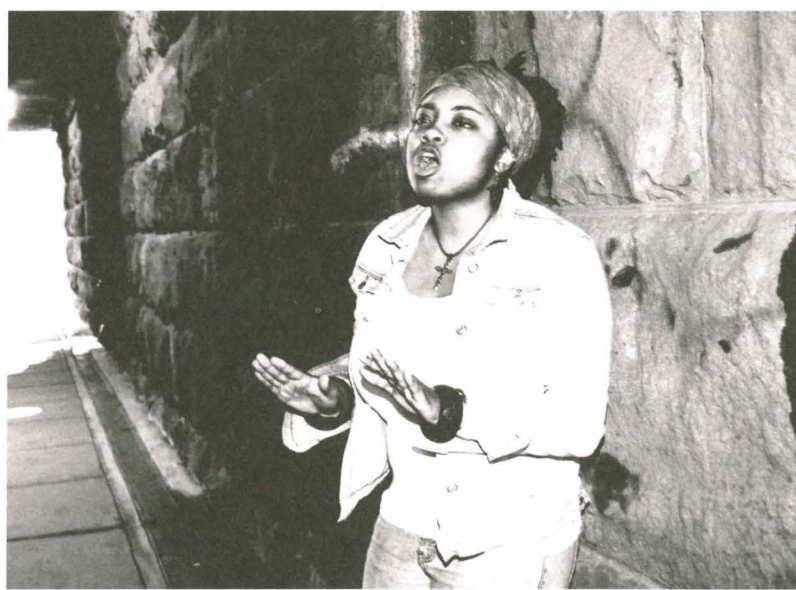
## SPOKEN WORD

Classified sometimes as poetry and sometimes as hip-hop, spoken word is a literary art form in which the lyrics or words are spoken, not sung. Spoken-word events are presented occasionally as performance poetry set against a musical background with a percussive beat. In African American spoken word, those artists whose backgrounds include more formal literary training (and who generally are older and defined as poets) are distinct from the younger, more contemporary practitioners who may come from an educated background or the subcultures of hip-hop, rap, or the street. As a result, the realm of spoken word

has seen an evolution of the form and an expanded range of practitioners across several generations.

Since the mid-1980s, one popular venue for observing spoken word in action is the "poetry slam," a competitive art form that combines poetry and performance. Events sanctioned by Poetry Slam, Inc., and those organized by Russell Simmons's Def Poetry Jam, take place across the United States. Tonya Matthews, an active spoken-word artist based in Cincinnati, suggests that in such venues spoken word can be evaluated by the way in which the words are rhymed to a rhythm, by the back beat, by its musical accompaniment, and by whether it is an oral or written composition.

Spoken-word artists create performance poetry, speaking lyrics or poems over a beat or alone. Images of the spoken-word artist in this series pay homage to a modern-day Sojourner Truth. Photos by Michelle J. Chin







(Left) Rhyming chants—such as “Cinderella, dressed in yella, went upstairs to kiss her fella”—often accompany the Double Dutch jump rope games played in many African American communities. Photo by Danita Delaney

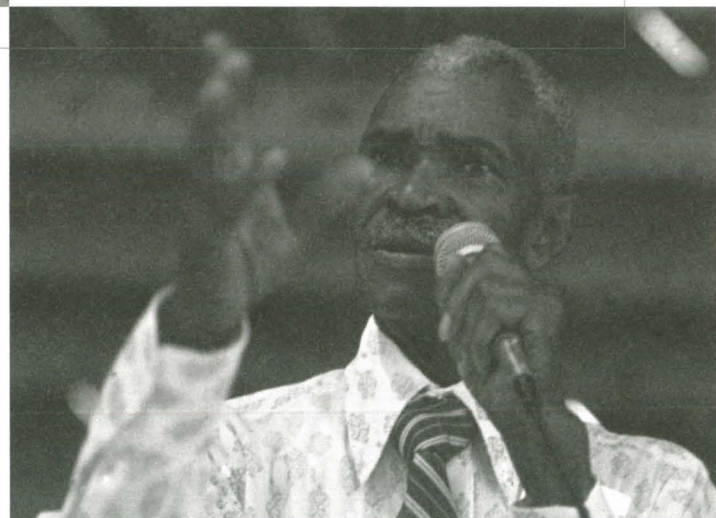
(Below) The African Diaspora program at the 1975 Smithsonian Folklife Festival featured oral traditions such as storytelling, street singing and vending, gospel, and sacred harp singing. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution

### VOCAL MUSIC

African American folklife features many significant vocal music traditions. Such forms as gospel, blues, and hip-hop (including funk and rap) may be the most suggestive of the vocal tradition in African American musical culture. Hip-hop is especially relevant to the *Giving Voice* program since its activities embrace not only spoken-word poetry and storytelling, but also a stylized rhythmic beat and dance music. Moreover, hip-hop carries an appeal beyond music because of its associations with graffiti art and a distinctive style of dress—vernacular forms created primarily by Black urban youth. As a subculture in a capitalist civilization, the words and style of hip-hop highlight the negatives of the dominant society; this puts it in cultural, if not also political, opposition to that society. As hip-hop culture has moved more into the mainstream, it has spread across the United States and around the world, inspiring local performers from South Africa to Russia and Japan.

### RELIGIOUS SPEECH

Black folk sermons and prayers create a sacred system for interpreting, explaining, and understanding the invisible forces of the cosmos. Because religious practices for enslaved African Americans often were forbidden, worship took place in what historian Albert Raboteau has termed “the invisible institution.” Worshippers prayed outdoors in make-shift spaces called “hush harbors” or “brush arbors.” Religious leaders communicated with their faithful through a call-and-response interaction.



The church is still widely acknowledged as one of the most important social and political organizations among African Americans. It offers congregants a welcoming place to gather in support of the community. Traditionally, it also has provided a safe environment for discussing the complexities and rigors of life. In this way it has fostered the networks, skills, mobilization, and contact opportunities necessary to nurture political action, as was the case for both the abolitionist movement and the modern civil rights movement. Not surprisingly, many Black leaders, from Henry Highland Garnet to civil rights activist and politician John Lewis, were trained as ministers and are credited with delivering some of the greatest speeches—religious, civil, or political—in American history.





### COMMUNITY RADIO

For decades, Black radio has served as a key outlet for the dissemination of Black expressive culture. It shares news, bolsters a sense of community, and showcases Black music. The first Black music station in America was WDIA in Memphis, which began broadcasting in 1948, and is still on the air. The first Black-owned radio station followed soon afterwards in 1949—WERD in Atlanta. Fans still recall fondly such renowned 1960s radio hosts as New York's "Jocko," famous for his pre-rap ditties and exclamations such as "Great Googamooga," and D.C.'s deejay Petey Greene, who talked Black citizens through the 1968 riots. These stars, along with later personalities such as Dallas-based Tom Joyner and American Urban Radio Networks host Bev Smith, have fostered a sense of Black identity while engendering and perpetuating distinct patterns of speech and colloquialisms. According to Smith, the 2008 presidential campaign heightened the profile of Black radio and brought Black on-air personalities "an opportunity to be griots, the front person that people turn to and listen to just like Black radio was in the '60s."

### DEBATE

Debating holds a special place in African American history. Secret debating societies flourished among both enslaved and free African Americans in the United States during the nineteenth century. For example, Arthur Bowen, an eighteen-year-old house slave for the Thorntons, one of Washington's most distinguished families, befriended free Blacks and attended meetings of a debating society in the mid-1830s. Topics discussed at the meetings included slavery, the Constitution, and human rights.

Debate competitions among Historically Black Colleges and Universities—such as Atlanta University, Fisk University, Howard University, Lincoln University, Morehouse College, Shaw University, Talladega College, Virginia Union University, and Wilberforce University—began in 1908, but recent scholarship has revealed an even earlier beginning that dates to the 1880s. During this year's Inaugural Weekend, the National Museum of African American History and Culture hosted an all-day event featuring collegiate debaters arguing positions on such

(Above) Participants at a large gathering share a broadcast with the crowd. Radio can function to disseminate news, bolster a sense of community, and showcase Black music.

Photo by Sharon Farmer

(Right) Jimmy Collier leads a civil disobedience workshop in New York City, date unknown. Photo by Diana Davies

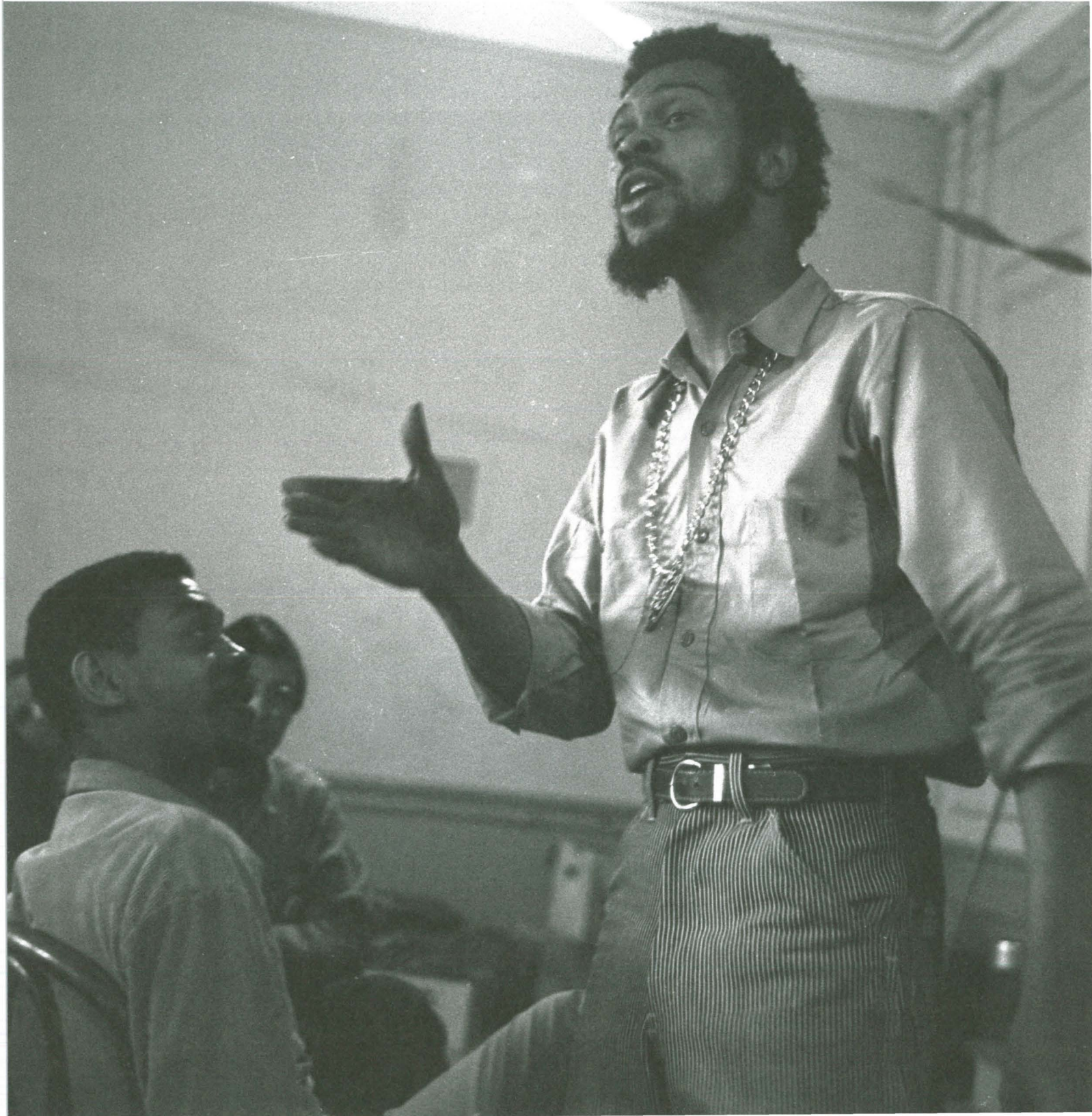
topics as climate change, health care, and foreign policy. Since the early years of on-campus debating, women have enjoyed a major role as debaters at historically Black institutions. At Howard University, the first known debating society for African American women was founded in 1919. Today students at these institutions continue this tradition by debating the most controversial issues of the day.

The recent movie, *The Great Debaters* (2007), highlighted the role of debate and the power of words among African Americans. The pantheon of African American debaters includes lawyer, diplomat, and Nobel Prize-winner Ralph J. Bunche, minister and educator Benjamin E. Mays, theologian Howard Thurman, lawyer and educator James M. Nabrit Jr., civil rights activists Bayard Rustin and James Farmer, historian John Hope Franklin, U.S. Representative Barbara Jordan, diplomat Donald F. McHenry, media mogul Oprah Winfrey, and media personality and activist Tavis Smiley.

A final example is Malcolm X—a brilliant and eloquent debater, adept at dismantling the positions of his opponents, converting their arguments to his own advantage, and (most importantly) casting the issues of dispute in utter and compelling clarity. He effectively challenged assumptions regarding the goals and tactics of the struggle for civil rights, such as the focus on desegregation and the strategy of non-violence, both of which were established positions that had been taken for granted by many of his opponents and listeners. "Within a few years," wrote activist George Breitman, Malcolm X "was to become the most respected debater in the country, taking on one and all—politicians, college professors, journalists, anyone—black or white, bold enough to meet him."



*Within a few years [Malcolm X] was to become the most respected debater in the country, taking on one and all—politicians, college professors, journalists, anyone—black or white, bold enough to meet him.—George Breitman*





*My favorite amusement at that time, was to stand and listen to the soapbox orators at the street corners.*—Kwame Nkrumah

### THE “SOAP BOX” THEN AND NOW

In earlier times Black folk made good use of the “soapbox,” a method of face-to-face speaking in public places, and were regularly arrested for doing so. The Garveyites, followers of Marcus Garvey and his “Back to Africa” movement in the 1910s and ’20s, often addressed the Black public in this direct manner. During the 1960s and ’70s, representatives of the Nation of Islam also employed this communicative tool in large cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York.

While in the United States during the 1930s, a young African student, Kwame Nkrumah, who would later become the first president of an independent Ghana, discovered this practical model of oratory on the streets of Harlem. “My favorite amusement at that time,” he said, “was to stand and listen to the soapbox orators at the street corners. I was quite happy to spend my evenings there either quietly listening or, as was more often the case, provoking arguments with them.”

More recently, the Internet and other technology-based mass media have offered a virtual “soapbox.” Commentators once emphasized a “digital divide” between African Americans and others in the use of computers and online media. Now, however, the lively activity of the Black blogosphere and the ubiquity of Black music and audio material on Internet outlets provide evidence of a new level of engagement by the Black community.

### ORAL HISTORIES

Walt Whitman, one of America’s great poets, observed in 1855 that “the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executive or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors—but always most in the common people.” In the case of African Americans, oral sources—coming directly from “common people”—offer new, illuminating perspectives and insights to inform

American history. And in the case of the 1930s WPA recordings of former slaves, oral testimonies and personal narratives provide fertile material for cultural historians who seek not only the content of these testimonies, but also their manner of verbal expression. Similar benefits came from the narrative use of oral history in Alex Haley’s book, *Roots*, as well as the hundreds of interviews of African Americans collected recently through StoryCorps’ *Griot Project* done in collaboration with the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Oral histories may supply important information on a variety of practices—including agricultural methods and foodways, clothing styles and adornment, and tangible places such as one’s home, neighborhood, school, sanctuary, street, or street corner. At the Festival, exposure to such firsthand accounts can evoke personal memories and help others to recall their own favorite tales and stories.

### CONCLUSION

The presentation of *Giving Voice: The Power of Words in African American Culture* at the 2009 Smithsonian Folklife Festival initiates the long, hard task of documenting the voice of a people. It also takes the lead in directing visitors to the previously untold story of Black folk orature—oral traditions in many different forms that each merit investigation. While their origins are found in African American traditions, their influences permeate the broader culture of the United States.

With this Festival program, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture demonstrates its commitment to documenting and preserving the oral expressions of a people whose voices were muzzled, who were denied the opportunity to read and to write, and whose speeches and oratory often did not survive. A people’s culture is inexorably linked to its language, and by helping to raise public





Bessie Jones (pictured here with her grandchildren at the Brunswick, Georgia, railroad station in 1966) was a prominent member of the Georgia Sea Island Singers. She often led groups in call-and-response, rhythmic chants, and other forms of verbal artistry. Photo by Diana Davies

### ORATURE: A DEFINITIONAL NOTE

Orature means the creative expression of thought from mouth to ear, in contrast to *écriture* meaning the expression of thought from hand to paper, and literature meaning the expression of thought from the page to the eye.

Orature is characterized by several features: it is oral-aural communication, it is performance in a communal setting, it involves the performer-audience interrelationship, and it evokes responsive audience participation.

An example of orature is the pattern known as call-and-response (or "shout and refrain"). Call-and-response is a traditional art form in Black folk culture. It appears in the Black folk sermon as part of the art of the preacher and in the interplay between religious communicants and their choirs.

Orature reflects a worldview that the oral use of language expresses the principal mode of human communication upon which other modes build. Orature as an oral style exists in distinction to dominant ideas about one "official" language or one form of "good" literature. In the United States, Black folk orature implies that the language of the people, an American language, is the commonplace of everyday language.

Orature is seen in everyday life because it reflects a way of being, speaking, knowing, and thinking. Orature is displayed in traditional settings, such as gatherings around the kitchen table, on the front stoop, at church, on playgrounds, and at barbershops and beauty parlors. Whereas physical education is often viewed in a gymnasium, orature can also be observed in what might be called an oratorium, a space designed for ear-witnessing the verbal artistry of oral artisans at the 2009 Smithsonian Folklife Festival program *Giving Voice*.

awareness of African American linguistic creativity, the Museum highlights a major aspect of Black culture. In the process, the Museum moves closer to its goals of helping all Americans to learn more about African American history and culture, and to understand and appreciate how this history and culture provide a powerful lens for understanding what it truly means to be an American.

*James Alexander Robinson has spent much of the past twenty years investigating approaches to Black studies and conducting research in African American history and culture throughout the United States. He studied anthropology with Jim Spradley and Dave McCurdy, folklore with Alan Dundes, and history with some of the leading labor and African American historians. His unpublished thesis, "The Signifying Monkey: Tale, Formula, and a Negro American Folklore Text," provides a deeper understanding for the concept of orature.*



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