



# AJOTE

African Journal of Teacher Education

## WHAT TO DO WHEN TEENS SAY “AMKA UKATIKE”: AN EXPLORATION OF AGENCY IN TEEN ORAL LITERACY PERFORMED THROUGH KENYAN HIP HOP

David B. Wandera  
Ohio State University, USA

### Abstract

*This paper considers a Kenyan hip hop song; Amka Ukatike (C'zar, 2007), as an example of teen oral forms of expression and tracks how this particular song choreographs the meeting point between the canon and teen “ways with words” (Heath, 1983). Amka Ukatike translated in standard Swahili means, “get up and get cut up into pieces,” but in the teenage variant form of speaking called Sheng, it means “limber up and dance till you become flexible as if your body were made up of rhythmic bits and pieces, rather than one rigid whole.” Through discourse analysis of text and performance media, the paper discusses how this choreography is a metaphor of the intersection between “teenagerese” and standard school culture while demonstrating tensions in this tenuous intersection. Hip hop exemplifies teen oral literacy which is underprivileged in the formal classroom space; particularly since Kenyan hip hop is performed in Sheng, a stigmatized teenage vernacular. Ultimately, this article joins the body of knowledge that suggests the formulation of a third space as an amalgam that alleviates tensions caused by discrepancies between youth forms of oral literacy and standard school literacy (Bhabha, 1990; Soja, 1996). It is not uncommon to see the stigmatization of oral forms of literacy in schools which in this regard, have become a unique site where tensions simmer due to the clash between unacceptable teen literacies and canonical forms of literacy. Does this disconnect necessarily engender a literacy crisis? How can democracy be upheld through pedagogy that is tolerant to and inclusive of embodied and performed forms of teen oral text? This paper explores how Amka Ukatike (C'Zar 2007) teaches educators to collaborate with teenagers in creating a rich space that nurtures teenagerese while enriching the canon.*

Keywords: Hip Hop Pedagogy, Collaboration, Teenage Literacy, Sheng

### Introduction

The autonomous model vs. ideological model contestation is one of the oldest debates in the development of the history literacy. Proponents of the autonomous model (Goody, 1986; Goody and Watt, 1963; Ong, 1982; Olson, 1977, 1994) have asserted that alphabetic and hence written literacy stands apart from orality. They have claimed that “alphabetic literacy is a unique agent of cognitive and social reorganization” arguing for the neutrality and apolitical nature of literacy while privileging the written over the oral. Their detractors who prefer the ideological model (Gee, 1990; Street, 1984, 1993) have contested “the heavy causation ascribed to literacy” (Brandt and Clinton, 2002, p. 340). Instead they propose that literacy practices need to be understood within their cultural contexts. The result of this great divide debate was a paradigm shift “from text to context and the unification of orality and literacy” (Brandt and Clinton, 2002, p. 343). Our understanding of the nature of literacy has been enriched by further observations about agency, not just through literacy, but the agency exerted by literacy itself (Brandt and Clinton, 2002; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007).

However, going back to the original debate, where orality is pitted against the written form, it is still not uncommon to see the stigmatization of oral forms of literacy and schools have become a unique site where tension between unacceptable oral literacies and canonical forms of literacy get played out. This occurrence of societal ideologies in schools is not surprising since “schools are located in the wider society and reflect its multiplicity of values” (Barton, 2007, p. 175). What exacerbates these tensions further is the tendency by teenagers to formulate their informal ways of speaking which contrast even more starkly with canonical expectations thereby plunging the school domain into strife between upholders of the canon and perpetrators of teenage forms of speaking. Does this disconnect necessarily engender a literacy crisis? How can democracy be upheld through pedagogy that is tolerant to, and inclusive of, embodied and performed forms of teen oral text? To what extent are canonical expectations pursuant of wider societal needs at the expense of individual teen needs?

This paper explores how the school can rise to the task of achieving its goals through recognizing and cooperating with teenage oral “ways with words” (Heath, 1983). The youth themselves do not constitute a homogeneous body of young people participating in a harmonized youth culture as they differ in many ways, including having variant approaches to life, not to mention variant tastes in music. This present discussion focuses on Kenyan hip hop in full awareness that youth musical tastes vary, manifesting diverse preferences such as country music, rock n roll, Tanzanian *Bongo Flava*, operatic songs, west African *Benga*, Indian *Bhangra*, to mention a limited few. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the influence of other forms of youth literacy such as gaming, texting, facebooking, twittering and graffiti.

This paper considers a Kenyan hip hop song as an example of teen oral form of expression and tracks how this particular song choreographs the meeting point between the canon and teenage forms of out-of-school literacy practices, or teen “ways with words” (Heath, 1983). Through discourse analysis of text and media, the paper discusses how the choreography of the song *Amka Ukatike* (C’zar, 2007) is a metaphor of the intersection between “teenagerese” (teen culture) and standard school literacy culture, featuring tensions in this tenuous intersection. Hip hop exemplifies teen oral literacy which is underprivileged in the formal classroom space. This paper joins the body of knowledge that suggests the formulation of a third space as an

amalgam that alleviates tensions caused by discrepancies between youth culture and Standard schooling expectations (Bhabha, 1990; Soja, 1996).

Such studies include: Mahiri (2004) who springboards from the hip hop album, *The Mis-Education of Lauryn Hill* and argues that students who are driven to absenteeism by intolerance towards teenagerese amount to a silenced group which is not able to negotiate the schooling process using teen cultural apparatus (such as, teen language variation or even teen performance styles) at their disposal. The hip hop medium is an example of a teen performance style which enacts teen perspectives making them come into being (Smitherman, 1994) hence enacting a teen worldview. Also, teenage language choice taps from the culture of this world view which is irresistibly packaged for the youth and commoditized for youth consumption through hip hop (Dyson, 1993). Morrel and Duncan-Andrade (2002) have noted how hip hop's appeal transcends race lines as seen in the demographic following and geographic spread of hip hop consumerism. In his article, whose title "The Rose that Grew from the Concrete" is taken from a song by Tu Pac Shakur (1999), Kirkland (2008) highlights how emergent texts speak to the lives of students. He suggests that teachers re-imagine the role of hip hop and teen culture in order to "realize the limitless beauty...from the vastness of the moment..." and recognize "the opulent diversity" (p. 70) as they reconstruct classroom pedagogy.

Rather than prescribe how the teacher of English will include hip hop in their classroom Kirkland (2008) pushes for the expansion of classroom practices to incorporate further possibilities and proposes an intersection between canonical and student-centered approaches. Such an intersection found in "the third space" (Bhabha, 1990, 1994; Soja, 1996) is inevitable and teenagers themselves even suggest it, as seen in the highly nuanced allusions and dramatization of *Amka Ukatike*. Through humor and hyperbole, the dramaturgical rendering of this song conveys a strained dialogue between teenagerese and standard schooling culture. When teens are able to connect with elements in the canonical class which resonate for them, they find it easier to locate themselves as legitimate members in the classroom and to contribute to it. This need for relevance is captured through the question "is this class gonna, like, be real?" (Hill, 2009, p. 31), which a student called Josh asks Hill regarding the newly launched Hip Hop pedagogy class. Being real for teens like the ones in *Amka Ukatike* (C'Zar, 2007) cannot be taken for granted, since such relevance is the launch pad to forming that crucial connection between the school/class and teens' perceptions of life. In other words, being real describes the kind of third space which recognizes the oral literacies that the students bring to class. In teenagerese, this quest for what is real is conveyed succinctly through "I put my hand on my heart, it mean that I feel ya real, recognize real..." (Jay-Z, 2002) thus reiterating the importance of relevance to teen worldviews.

The privileging of written literacy over oral literacy is unsustainable if teenagers who come to class with their oral forms of literacy are to find a place in school. It will require effort and engagement on the part of teachers to tap into these peripheralized oral forms of knowledge. Hill (2009) for instance, discusses the construction of an inclusive curriculum which draws from the teacher as well as the students, in the form of a learner-centered classroom configuration broken down into formal lessons, group work, project work, and individual contributions. Hill (2009) recounts how he allows teens to lead the class discussions, as seen through the teen group that called itself "The Heads" sought to tailor discussions in his class. To illustrate this learner-centered approach further, consider Morrel and Duncan-Andrade (2002) who have written on

promoting literacy among urban youth through engaging with hip hop culture. Increasing diversity in schools calls for commensurate effort in reaching across multiple lines of difference, even if it means meeting student culture that comes from different worlds (Morrel and Duncan-Andrade, 2002, p. 88).

### **Sheng and Hip Hop as Teen Oral Literacy**

Kenyan hip hop is performed in a teen linguistic variant form called Sheng which has been defined as slang, pidgin, Creole (Githiora, 2002) or some form of dialect, or even as an instance of informal code-switching (Mazrui, 1995). Sheng is a “highly pidginized colloquial form of peer language” (Abdulaziz and Osinde, 1997, p. 44) which is frowned upon by proponents of Standard Swahili (the national language in Kenya) and Standard Kenyan English. Critics of Sheng cite its instability and its penchant for vulgarity as its Achilles heel. For instance, Sheng words which function as approbations such as “*poa*” for “cool” and “*diambo*” or “*diambest*” have a very short life span as newer forms take over. The perceived vulgarity is evident in the choice of stage names such as “gangster” or its teen-variant “gangsta” and the word *kubaff* which evokes the Standard Swahili word *kumbafu* meaning foolish. These aberrant choices exemplify how teens push the envelope through reclamation of names and terms as they subvert hitherto established semantics. The Kenyan hip hop musical *Soundscape* is replete with lyrics that some consider obscene and sexualized such as “if you do me I do you...touch me I touch you...” (P Square, 2007) or the lyrics “Manyake, all sizes, juala, ndiyo wahitaji” (Circute & Joel, 2007) which is Sheng for “all sizes of flesh, what you need is a condom.” Sheng employs code mixing as seen here in the use of “all sizes” and the coinage of *manyake*. In its original use in Sheng, this latter word initially meant “edible meats” such as beef, goat or mutton, but the term eventually acquired sexual connotations, to mean “alluring fleshy sexual body parts.” Also, *juala* is a Sheng word borrowed from the Luo ethnic community and in its original sense this word meant a “polythene grocery bag”, but its more nuanced teen variant as used in Circute and Joel’s song means a “condom”.

Language fashioned by the youth for the youth is unique since in some cases, the youth exercise agency to counter the hegemony of standard schooling and by extension societal structures which exert expectations, constraints, and challenges upon them. Noguera (in Mahiri, 2004) has called youth writing styles which depart from the norm, “street scripts,” and argued that youth voices are powerful indications of a refusal to be defined by canonical scripts which dismiss teens and teen culture as being inadequate or improper. Instead, youth voices speak from scripts that affirm their place and express their constructed selves (Goffman, 1959). Such language is found in performed oral teen literacy such as *Amka Ukatike* (C’Zar, 2007) among many others sites of youth consciousness.

At the epicenter of this paper lies the question of the stigmatization of Sheng and hip hop, and the delegitimation of teen oral literacy; a situation which yields intolerant language ideologies, whose consequence is the criminalization of oral teen variations. The title of the song *Amka Ukatike* is actually Sheng for “get up and dance.” The treatment of *Amka Ukatike* (C’Zar, 2007) in this paper as a clarion call for educators to get up and metaphorically dance, takes seriously teen culture by drawing lessons from their marginalized worldview on one hand, while destabilizing the status quo that values canonical literacy over and above grassroots literacies on the other (Blomaert, 2008). These literacies are constituted in multiethnic youth spaces (Paris,

2010), which appropriately describes the Nairobi cosmopolitan, urban, multicultural setting where *Amka Ukatike* (C'Zar, 2007) is so popular.

The discourse analysis in this paper is modeled after Mahiri (2004) who starts off his study by examining the hip hop album, *The Mis-Education of Lauryn Hill* (Hill, 1993) which has an introductory audio of an ordinary classroom scene; the teacher takes some kind of attendance roll call as students respond by saying “here” to signify their presence in class. When he calls Lauryn Hill’s name, there is silence which indicates absence. After repeated echoes of the teacher’s calling “Lauryn Hill!” the audio fades out as the teacher moves on, calling the next student on the roll. Notably, the next song on this album is entitled “Lost Ones” and its refrain is “you might win some but you just lost one” (Hill, 1993, in Mahiri, 2004, p. 1) which sharply draws attention to the students who are absent from school for whatever reason. The title “Lost Ones” is an effective metaphor that captures how some students are misplaced by an intolerant cannon, and it is those students, who Mahiri (2004) subsequently labels as being “the lost ones.” The need to commence a conversation with “the lost ones” (Mahiri, 2004, p. 1) is imperative since, if we collaborate with them “to construct educational contexts that respond to their particular circumstances,” (Hill, 2009) we shall create a dialogic interaction that includes them in vital schooling processes, thus redressing the problem of losing them. In this regard, Gere (in Cushman et al (eds), 2001, p. 86) has advised educators to “listen to signals that come through the walls of our classes from the outside world.”

### **Stopping the Nonsense in “Amka Ukatike”**

The first scene in this hip hop rap song is choreographed in a cardinal formal event; the Kenya National Drama Festivals; a nationwide annual theatre arts event which is the culmination of countrywide theatrical competitions performed through song, dance, poetry, recitations, and drama. As the name suggests, the Kenyan National Drama Festivals (KNDF) was initially oriented towards drama, but the artistic content evolved rapidly to incorporate song, dance, poetry in English, *mashairi* (Swahili poems), and mimes, among other performances. Over time, the KNDF has expanded its role from being exclusive to primary and secondary schools, to include participation by public colleges and public universities. This enhanced jurisdiction has led to a wider participant and audience base, making the KNDF, a significant site for the celebration of Kenyan traditional art-forms. On its official website, the KNDF describes itself as “an annual co-curricular activity, run by the Ministry of Education” (see website), whose cardinal aim is “to tap and nurture creative talent among the Kenyan youth” (see website).

Historically, the KNDF has offered a national forum for the celebration of traditional ethnic artistic and performance cultures in Kenya. It is common to find students (participants at these events) adorned in traditional regalia identifiable with particular ethnic communities, (e.g. red ochre-painted hair, limbs, torso, face, neck, and wrists, ankle beads, bright red body wrapping, cowhide sandals, clubs and spears, commonly used by the Maasai community). It is also common to hear a number of indigenous ethnic languages, from among the 42 ethnic communities in Kenya, enacting the celebration of important ceremonies for various communities, such as planting season, harvest time, initiation etc., rendered through traditional song and dance. Eligible institutions from collegiate to primary school level, participate in tiered competitions at district, then provincial and then at the week-long national level. Those who are

considered by the KNDF adjudicators to be the best of the best, perform in front of the president, at a highly coveted gala night event.

C’Zar’s song did not actually occur at the KNDF, but it choreographs a make-believe incident which takes place at such an event. The video set opens with an oppressively quiet room where a student, Moha Abdul Karim, stands in front of adjudicators and fellow teens to recite a Swahili *shairi* (poem) called *Mgeni* or *The Visitor*. Formal Swahili *shairi* have a fixed mode of presentation with emphasis on a very specific enunciation, pacing, syllabic placement and gesturing. Also, right at the start of C’Zar’s song, the words “this year” float across the screen with no specified year, which perhaps suggests that the message from this song supersedes temporal limitations; the message is applicable and relevant to any year. As soon as Moha begins reciting the *shairi* in Standard Swahili, the camera is directed to three adjudicators who begin to write vigorously on their comment-pads. This very early documentation by the judges dramatizes the stifling nature of the canon especially since all that Moha has said up to this point is just his name and the title of the poem, yet the judges are capturing material to evaluate. As Moha struggles to align with Standard Swahili expectations for recitation, what follows is a lifeless exhumation of an enervating stage performance which proceeds in zombie-like fashion. His irate teacher fervently gestures at him from the wings, indicating errors and suggesting on-the-spot improvements. The camera sweeps further about the room at many deflated students literally dozing off, ludicrously juxtaposed with keen-eared adjudicators whose pens are flourishing with copious assessment comments.

Moha recites the entire first stanza of this poem in this manner but tension mounts when he stops reciting, and declares in Sheng “*Aish manze. Siifeel yani*” (Hey guys. I don’t feel this) then he adds “*hi kitu haibambi*” (this thing is not booming). *Bamba* is an onomatopoeic Sheng concoction which mirrors the booming music which teens love. The adjudicators are aghast as if the canon has been scandalized! Moha says “let me do my thing” and he commences to sing and dance to, the hip hop song *Amka Ukatike* (C-Zar, 2007). The other teens, who have been woken up by excitement from the Sheng hip hop song, take on the role of dancers, and they join him vociferously on the floor, vivified by the same rhythm, all of them doing their “thing” (C-Zar, 2007). Consternation builds when perturbed teachers gesture at one another demanding an explanation, a cessation, a chastisement, rebuke, all of which are typical reactions to unwanted teen oral forms in many schools and classrooms. A young teacher at first nods in synchrony with Moha’s music and then joins him on what has now become the dance-floor, thereby exacerbating tension.

This joining in, of the young teacher, who dances with the teens, is symbolic of the meeting point between *teenagerese* and Standard school culture with a clear suggestion that in spite of perceptions of age-gap as impediments, sometimes teachers should take the teenager’s lead while navigating the world of teen culture. Since the choreography of C’Zar’s song employs hyperbole for purposes of offering entertainment, we should not imagine that the solution of tensions in the school will be obtained through teachers literally dancing with students. This extended metaphor of dancing together, suggests how teachers of whatever age, could collaborate with teenagers in looking for teachable moments to infuse a combination of the vigor and excitement brought into the classroom by youth culture on one hand, and the body of knowledge that educators know the youth should cover on the other hand.

This collaboration is actually more complex than merely adding vigor to content, and it calls for a re-imagining of the classroom, as suggested by the manner in which C'Zar's song is pushing the boundaries of performances that are admissible at the KNDF. This teacher-student collaboration which is signified by the mutual dancing, prefigures the joy obtained from mutual cooperation, and will be discussed more specifically in the concluding section of this paper. When the chief adjudicator gets up and bangs the table to halt the dancing, we hear the sound of shattering as if glass has been broken. This shattering is indicative of the growing chasm between oral youth literacies and canonical literacies. After banging on the table and disrupting the song and dance, he immediately shouts "Stop this nonsense!" and glowers around adding, "We are here on serious matters!" He then shouts animatedly and repeatedly, "Finished!" meaning that by his authority he had just put an end to the "nonsense".

However "the students represent themselves as a constituency" that unites against this oppression (Shuman, 1993, p. 265). Hip hop is the voice of the youth since it was created by and for them (Rose 1991, Powell 1991). It is no wonder that the stance taken in *Amka Ukatike* (C'Zar, 2007) instantiates youth agency which borders on what some, such as this chief adjudicator, may term as rebellion or anarchy. In teenage oral semiotic systems such as *Amka Ukatike* (C'Zar, 2007), language signifies and responds to exigencies of primacy in contexts appreciable by the youth. The critical listener of *Amka Ukatike* notices the irreconcilable definitions of the atmosphere at the drama festival; it is a somber event, perhaps devoid of exultation, as far as the chief adjudicator is concerned, but to the young teacher and the youth, it is a happy celebration of performance through song and spontaneous dance. The phrase, "serious matters" as used by the chief adjudicator encapsulates what every traditional teacher wants teenagers to learn while at the same time it dismisses youth oral literacy as being a big joke. Ironically, the official website of the KNDF states that one important objective of this festival is to "appreciate, develop, preserve and promote Kenya's diverse culture...develop the participants' eloquence in expressing their ideas and feelings so as to enable them communicate effectively and convincingly in their daily lives" (see website). This official position is irreconcilable with this chief adjudicator's derision of teen culture.

The lyrics of C'Zar's song and their suggestions are significant too; Moha's refrain is an invitation; "*amka ukatike*" (get up and dance). The word *katika* in Standard Swahili literally means "get cut up" but in Sheng this word means to dance in such a way that your body is limber as if it has been cut up and is both flexible and relaxed. An artistic mural of a large scissors is mounted on the wall behind Moha throughout the song; while the artist may have intended that this image of a pair of scissors echoes his stage name: C'Zar, I wish to propose another metaphor which it presents, given that it is an instrument used in cutting. One nuance here is the connotations of cutting through the rigidness and perhaps severing off unwanted parts of the intolerant cannon. Another nuanced reading could be the meeting of scissor-blades as a metaphor of how two equally uncompromising forces meet resulting in the cutting of whatever lies between them. Of the young teacher who dances with the youth, her movements are supple, her body limber, her pose alluring and superior. Should traditional formal education lose its rigidity/intolerance, and assume a suppleness that can allow it to grove with the youth? It is fascinating that C'Zar ends the song when everyone has cleared out of the room and the chief adjudicator and one other teacher belatedly get on the dance floor, fascinated but confused by

what has just happened, and mimic the just-concluded student-dance. But at that time, it is too late to build the connection with the youth.

### Conclusion

Teenagers will always have a different perception and worldview from the adult educators who are in charge of policy formulation and curriculum implementation in schools. Why then bother trying to bridge the two? What revisions/improvements can be made to alleviate age-gap tensions in the classroom? There is need for educators to expand considerations to accommodate teenage worldviews. Consider the setting of C’Zar’s song, the KNDF. Only the best performances will proceed from the district level, to the provincial level, to the national level, and ultimately, to perform in front of the president. The implicit suggestion that emanates from the presentation of *Amka Ukatike* is that the performance of *Mgeni* by Moha must have been the best at provincial level; hence it is now being performed at national level. However, as soon as Moha begins to recite this *shairi*, his peers are fatigued by boredom. On the contrary, the adjudication table is robust and active, listening, assessing, determining. We should wonder about the quality of some of the other performances which never made it to the KNDF; given the nature of the conflict in C’Zar’s song, it is possible that some of these performances which did not make it, might have been similar to *Amka Ukatike*, which Moha presents in place of *Mgeni*, much to the chagrin of the chief adjudicator. The KNDF website identifies tapping and nurturing “creative talent among the Kenyan youth” (see website) as the key aim of this national event. The tensions in C’Zar’s song call for a revision of what is considered acceptable “creative talent,” in order to bridge the gulf of perceptions between what the KNDF considers as acceptable on one hand, and what teenagers consider as creative talent on the other hand.

In the choreography of C’Zar’s song, the belated dancing by the older teachers after the jubilant teenagers have swept out of the room is a humorous delayed attempt by these educators, to embrace the more vivified teenage performance; a belated step in the right direction. Borrowing from Lauryn Hill’s refrain, in Mahiri (2004), we could now ask, what can educators do, while our students are still with us, before we lose some? Old and young educators alike need to collaborate with their students through an approach best described by Paris’ (2012) notion of “culturally sustaining pedagogy.” This strategy, is a humanizing endeavor to not only be sensitive to, and responsive to, marginalized teenage worldviews (Freire, 1970), but it requires that educators “support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). bell hooks (1994) encourages educators to adopt this collaborative stance, by being open-minded, and to engage with learners, even if they (educators) feel that such a pursuit is unduly time consuming. She explains that “some version of engaged pedagogy is really the only type of teaching that truly generates excitement in the classroom” (hooks, 1994, p. 204).

Being open-minded in this way requires self-reflexivity and the admission that the ways we traditionally think about teaching and learning are not the only possible ways (Kumashiro, 2004). It is therefore possible to re-imagine what we do in the classroom, with regard to incorporating teenage or popular culture. Rodesiler (2009) for instance, has exemplified how teachers can adopt a scaffolding process where learning is supported by the popular video genre to teach literary terms, examine social commentary, and promote student writing, for the simple reason that music is enjoyable and the youth are listening to it in increasing numbers. Morrel and



Duncan-Andrade (2002) have asserted that hip hop texts are literary texts and can be used to scaffold the learning of literary terms and concepts in ways teens can grasp with immediacy, ways that are relevant to their worldviews. Paris (2010, 2011) proposes pluralist classrooms which celebrate and actualize pluralism through pedagogies that take cognizance of pluralism, for instance the inclusion of teen culture in classroom engagements. The time is ripe to face head on, the intolerant literacy ideologies which promote “the serious and shameful inequities... within our culture” (Selfe, 1999, p. xix) by asking critical questions which disrupt the stigmatization of teen oral literacy within high-stake spaces, such as the school: “What is lost as well as gained? Who profits? Who is left behind and for what reasons? What is privileged in terms of literacy and learning and cultural capital?” (Selber, 2004, p. 81). The overarching question which should unhinge educators from pursuing traditional well-worn ways stems from taking cognizance of our changing times; this is, “what is the purpose of schooling in a pluralist society?” (Paris, 2010, p. 163)

Due to these changing times and the resistance by some traditional educators to adopt new pedagogical strategies, teenagers find themselves embroiled in a battle field where they are confronted with anti-popular-literacy discourse, to which they respond by fashioning their own oral instruments such as Sheng. This teen friendly alternative which has been ostracized from school originates and thrives in the streets (Alim, 2006) and is the teen instrument of resistance in urban spaces in Kenya. To be successful in this battle, teenagers employ several devices, such as personalizing the content of hip hop to convey their concerns (Bennet, 1999), as seen in C’Zar’s song. In multilingual settings, language crossing, switching and sharing (Paris, 2011) allows for linguistically enriched “ways with words” (Heath 1983) leading to teen discourse systems (Scollon and Scollon, 2001) such as Sheng, that present and represent the teenage worldview. Summarily dismissing these worldviews puts the canon on a collision course with teenagers, an eventuality that can be abetted through engagement.

Stigmatized as they are, teenage discourse systems such as Sheng and hip hop have a significant influence in teen lives, and in society at large. The power of these performed texts and their agency are well documented, for instance, in the manner in which the popular South African song *Umshini Wami* (my machine gun) became a notable enabler (Gunner, 2008) for South Africa President Jacob Zuma to ascend to power. Gunner (2008) traces this song from its inception up to the time it was used by Zuma as his campaign song, and argues that Zuma’s ascent to the presidency was made possible by various enablers, and *Umshini Wami* was significant among them. This song not only shaped the political process, through appealing to, and influencing popular vote, of which the youth were a significant constituency, the song was also shaped by the political process. For instance, in response to Zuma’s growing popularity, the artists of this song added lines such as *ungangibambezele* meaning “you must not delay me” (Gunner, 2008, p. 31). This addition contributed further to the metaphorical references in this song, which in turn effectively indexed popular sentiments in the political process. To illustrate this indexing, Gunner (2008) asserts that this song’s popularity stemmed from its ease in invoking lived historical suffering of the community, and the popular desire for redemption through heroism and mass action. In Kenya, the song *Unbwogable*, had a similar effect during the 2002 presidential elections; Nyairo and Ogude (2005) trace how the song was taken up by the youthful populace, owing to its references to social issues which were perceived as critical in the prevalent sociopolitical discourse in Kenya. Nyairo and Ogude (2005) argue that by exerting

monumental influence favorable to opposition politics in the Kenyan political process, through sloganeering, branding, and motivation, the hip hop song *Unbwogable* by Gidi Gidi Maji Maji “crossed the threshold of entertainment” (Nyairo and Ogude, 2005, p. 227) and morphed into the fuel for opposition bravado during the 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections.

Considering how pervasive and influential popular culture is, it is safe to argue that the school can hardly be thought about as being separate from the rest of the society. This interconnectedness is even more apparent since, “there are profound social, political and economic factors within and without the academy that impinge upon instructional spaces in a direct way” (Selber, 2004, p. 94). When “teaching becomes a sort of trap for teachers whose work serves ends they must ‘misrecognize’” (Branch, 2007, p. 10), then they should engage in “trickster consciousness” (p. 14) where they problematize their roles as they reach out to teenagers. In a bid to realize literacy which will empower teens to the highest level, educators should keep asking “why am I teaching this to students? What role will what I teach have to do in working towards a world in which we need to live?” (Branch, 2007, p. 12).

We can now make a case for the ideological and pedagogical push towards a literacy 3<sup>rd</sup> space with its tolerance of an array of literacies which therefore recognizes “the multiple meanings and varieties of literacy” (Scribner, 1984, p. 17), while it argues “for a diversity of educational approaches, informal and community-based as well as formal and school-based” (Scribner, 1984, p. 18). Why is all this important? Because our students speak “in ways we...teachers sometimes fail to value, respect, and acknowledge” (Kirkland, 2008, p. 69) and pursuing the literacy 3<sup>rd</sup> space will enable us, as educators, to take heed, and collaborate, the next time teenagers call out to us, saying *Amka Ukatike!*

## REFERENCES

- Abdulaziz, M. H. and Osinde, K. (1997). Sheng and English: Development of mixed codes among the urban youth in Kenya. *International Journal Society of Language*, 125, 43-63.
- Alim, S. H. (2006). *Roc the mic right: The language of hip hop culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Barton, D. (2007). *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Rutherford, J. (1990). The third space: Interview with Homi Bhabha. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (pp. 206 – 221). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bennet, A. (1999). Hip hop am main: The localization of rap music and hip hop culture. *Media*,

*Culture and Society*, 21, 77-91.

Blommaert, J. (2008). *Grassroots literacy: Writing, identity and voice in Central Africa*. New York: Routledge.

Branch, K. (2007). *Eyes on the Ought to Be: What we Teach About When we Teach About Literacy*. New York City, NY: Hampton Press Inc.

Brandt, D. & Clinton, K. (2002). Limits of the local: Expanding perspectives on literacy as a social practice. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 34, 337-357. DOI: 10.1207/s15548430jlr3403\_4.

Circute, and Joel, (2007). *Juala a.k.a. Manyake*. Clemo/Cailiff Records and Luche/Luch Production. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ziF-HAATRGU>.

Cushman, E., Eugene R. Kintgen, E.R., Kroll, B., and Rose, M. (Eds.). (2001). *Literacy: A critical sourcebook*. Bedford/St. Martins, New York.

C'zar, (2007). *Amka Ukatike*, Clemo/Cailiff Records and KJ, C. Luche/Luch Production. Retrieved from [http://www.voobys.com/video/search\\_video.php?q=c%27zar+amka+ukatike](http://www.voobys.com/video/search_video.php?q=c%27zar+amka+ukatike).

Kirkland, D. (2008). "The rose that grew from concrete": Postmodern blackness and new English education. *English Journal*, 97(5), 69-75.

Dyson, A. (1993). *Social worlds of children learning to write in an urban primary school*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Gee, J.P. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourse* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia: Falmer.

Gee, J.P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Falmer.

Githiora, C. (2002). Sheng: Peer language, Swahili dialect or emerging Creole? *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 15(2), 159-181.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group.

Goody, J. (1986). *The logic of writing and the organization of society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goody, J. & Watt, I. (1963). *The consequences of literacy: Comparative studies in society and history*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Gunner, L. (2008). Jacob Zuma, the social body and the unruly power of Song. *African Affairs*, 108(430), 27-48.
- Heath, S. (1983). *Ways with words: Language life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hill, L. (1993). *The mis-education of Lauren Hill*, Nashville TN: Sony/ATV Music Publishing.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jay-Z (2002). *All around the world featuring La Toya Williams, Roc-A-Fella*, Def Jam Label. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3IHV23ZAus>.
- Kumashiro, K. (2004). *Against common sense: Teaching and learning toward social justice*. New York, NY: Routledge Falmer.
- Lewis, C., Enciso, P., and Moje, B. (Eds.). (2007). *Reframing sociocultural research on literacy: Identity, agency, and power*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mahiri, J. (ed). (2004). *What they don't learn in school*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Hill, M. (2009). *Beats, rhymes and classroom life*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Mazrui, A. (1995). Slang and codeswitching: The case of Sheng in Kenya. *Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere*, 42, 168-179.
- Morrel, E. & Duncan-Andrade, J. (2002). Promoting academic literacy with urban youth through engaging hip hop culture. *English Journal*, 91(6), 88-94
- Nyairo, J. & Ogude, J. (2005). Popular music, popular politics: *Unbwogable* and the idioms of freedom in Kenyan popular music. *African Affairs*, 104(415), 225-249.
- Olson, D. (1977). From utterance to text: The bias of language in speech and writing. *Harvard Educational Review*, 47, 257–281.
- Olson, D. (1994). *The world on paper*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ong, W. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. London: Methuen Publishing.
- Paris, D. (2010). Texting identities: Lessons for classrooms from multiethnic youth space.

- English Education*, 42(3), 278-292.
- Paris, D. (2011). "A friend who understands fully": Notes on humanizing research in a multiethnic youth community. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 24(2) 137-149.
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Education Researcher*, 41, 93-97.
- Powell, C. (1991). Rap music: An education with a beat from the street. *Journal of Negro Education*, 60(3), 245-59.
- Rodesiler L. (2009). Turn it on and turn it up: Incorporating music videos in the ELA classroom. *English Journal*, 8(6), 45-48. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals>.
- Rose, T. (1991). Fear of a black planet: Rap music and black cultural politics in the 1990s. *Journal of Negro Education*, 60(3), p. 277-91.
- Scribner, S. (1984). Literacy in three metaphors. *American Journal of Education*, 93, 6-21.
- Selber, S. (2004). *Multi-literacies for a digital age*. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Selfe, C. (1999). *Technology and literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: The importance of paying attention*. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Shakur, Tupac. (1999). *The rose that grew from the concrete*. New York, NY: MTV Books Publication.
- Shuman, A. (1993). Collaborative writing: Appropriating power or reproducing authority? In B. Street (ed.), *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*, (pp. 247 – 271). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smitherman, G. (1994). *Black talk: Words and phrases from the hood to the amen corner*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Publication.
- Soja, E. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Oxford: Blackwell Publication.
- Square, P. (2007) Do Me. *Game over*. ALB Productions.
- Street, B.V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. V. (1993). *Introduction: The new literacies studies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge

University Press.

The Kenya National Drama Festivals, Official website. Retrieved from  
<http://www.kenyadramafestivals.com/>.