Last year I attended an NEH Summer Institute at the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis. That Institute focused on the New Negro Renaissance. Professor Gerald Early used the concept of *redefinition* to pull together the various strands—political, religious, literary, musical, and athletic—of African American achievement and aspiration during the years between the wars, 1919 to 1941.

This summer, as I pored over the reading assignments and listened to the various presenters, I gradually came to realize that this Institute’s period (1959-1975) is also about African American redefinition. All of the same strands we considered last summer can be used to shed light on these later years as well. In fact, I now plan to focus the entire second half of my African American literature course on this idea of redefinition, a concept which helps tie together such diverse figures as Jack Johnson, Father Divine, Zora Neale Hurston, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Abbey Lincoln, Amiri Baraka, John Coltrane, Berry Gordy, Chuck D, Oprah Winfrey, and Barack Obama.

*Redefinition* is a wonderfully clear concept, but it was not the stated focus of our Institute this summer. The focus, as stated by Professor Early at the opening reception, was a question: “What is music?”

This focus could be vexing. At times I got lost in the blizzard of material in which we immersed ourselves during the three-and-a-half week Institute. How was I to tie the Black Arts Movement together with the tortured inner life of Marvin Gaye? Or the evolution of doo-wop with the New Black Music? Or the corporate fortunes of Blue Note and Impulse with the artistic
and personal journey of Diana Ross? Or the improvisations of Keith Jarrett with the stark drama of *Nothing But a Man*? Instead of being able to return to a comforting, fixed concept like *redefinition*, I returned only to a question, and to more uncertainty.

Why, I wondered, was this Institute set up this way? Why did it have a question at its center instead of a more concrete or specific concept?

Only as the Institute neared its conclusion did I finally come up with an answer. What I realized was that, in the vast scheme of things, the years from 1959 to 1975 are actually quite recent, and the conflicts and controversies of that time are still playing themselves out. For example, Amiri Baraka is still threatening enough to provoke the New Jersey legislature into eliminating the state’s poet laureate position in order to keep him from holding it. Black Power still makes many white Americans uneasy. The cultural and political fissures that Marvin Gaye addressed in “What’s Going On?” are still with us today, and in some ways are even wider than they were in the early 1970s. The violence of Martin Luther King’s assassination and the uprisings that followed it are, arguably, wounds that have never properly healed in America. Jazz and Motown, as case studies, have lots of intriguing implications for music today.

To use a question as the foundation of a course, I realized, is a liberating choice. It allows students to explore and find their own answers, make their own meaning from the cultural details they are studying. It also frees the instructor from having to have all the answers—which, especially when one is studying recent or current events, are often impossible to ascertain.

For instance, I hoped to bring away from the Institute some ideas for teaching hip-hop in my high school class. One of my fears about teaching hip-hop was that my students would know much more about it than I would. This is not the case, of course, when I’m teaching a novel like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* or an essay by W. E. B. Du Bois. I also feared that, ultimately, I would
not know exactly what to teach about hip-hop. I do not have the answers to the questions surrounding hip-hop. What I learned from the Institute was that hip-hop can be studied from a perspective of uncertainty. In fact, it probably should be studied from a perspective of uncertainty. After all, who is to say at this point what the ultimate meaning of this music is? People are still arguing about jazz and Motown.

What is hip-hop? What is music? These questions can help guide students to formulate their own answers and think more critically.

I don’t mean to suggest, however, that I have come away with a blithe disregard for any teacherly authority on such matters. Indeed, I have learned about certain recurring themes and questions that help shed light on music in America in general and on black music in particular. We considered many of these questions as they related to jazz, Motown, R&B, and soul, but they can also be related quite easily to hip-hop as well:

- What is authenticity?
- What is Black music? What is White music?
- How does the necessity of making money affect a music’s development?
- How does the history of minstrelsy still haunt American music?
- How are music and politics connected?
- How can music participate in racial uplift, or not?
- What is required for music to cross over the color line?
- What role does technology play in music?
- What does the lens of gender reveal in a musical genre?
- What taste communities exist in music today?
- How does race inflect music criticism?
It's a murky subject matter, the popular culture of the recent past and of the present, but one of the most important things I've learned in this Institute is that popular culture matters. It matters because the taste communities that develop around it play a key part in people’s identities and the ways they define themselves. Responses to popular culture reveal important and complicated realities about the divisions and connections between people in our nation and our world. Because of the ambiguities and intensity of emotions surrounding current popular culture, however, it can often be hard to talk about in a classroom setting. Approaching popular culture in an anti-foundational way, using questions and richly suggestive themes, allows us to study the confusing present in a coherent, focused, and illuminating way.

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