

Defining Popular Culture Interventions

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I have been given the task of providing an overview of what we intend to convey in the title of this forum: *Domestic Violence Across the Lifespan of African Americans: Traditional Strategies and Contemporary Practices—Exploring the Possibilities of Popular Culture Interventions*. The title made me want to be a poet, or a singer, or a dancer, or even a storyteller. I wanted to find a way to express, in less cumbersome language, in a rhythm, in a movement, or in images what this complex string of words actually means—what it means to us as the Institute and what we hope it will mean to you. I wanted to find a way to capture how deeply we, as scholars and practitioners, feel about the importance of this work to end violence in the African American Community. I wanted to try to convey a message of urgency, passion, and seriousness. And I wanted to communicate in ways that resonate strongly with a broad audience.

Trying to explain the forum title illuminates why we need to focus on popular culture interventions. Despite evaluated interventions, systems change work, educational programs, and new data we have examined, we believe there are new approaches to intervention to be explored. While the domestic violence movement—including efforts to end child abuse, anti-rape and sexual assault programs, youth community violence intervention efforts, and a focus on ending elderly abuse—is more than 20 years old, there is still an overwhelming need to identify new and innovative ways to communicate a strong, responsible, just message about violence in African American communities.

The methods of communication we explored at this forum—dance, music, video, and poetry—may themselves not be new. However, including messages about violence prevention and reduction is new. That is why this forum focused on traditional strategies, those things we have been doing, and contemporary practices, bringing popular culture into our work. We need to take new steps and take a stand in different places. We must move in different ways to the parts of our community where our anti-violence message has not been heard—places where many of our people really live their lives, like detention centers and prisons, theaters, in their cars listening to the radio, or walking on the streets of their neighborhoods. We need to shift our focus away from academic and professional groups to the public and reconfigure our messages to fit African American audiences everywhere.

The notion of designing popular culture interventions incorporates a number of ideas. It means shifting messages to be more accessible and to have a familiar cadence. In addition, it means using images that various African American communities recognize and can relate to and putting the reality of the pain and destruction of violence in real terms. It requires that we represent the issue to all parts of the African American community—all levels of socioeconomic status; the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities; all age groups; and all levels of literacy.

The concept of Black popular culture includes various art forms, like music, dance and performing arts, media, and literature. It is important that we recognize and value Black popular culture and control it by using linguistic patterns, like call and response, and gestures that we as African American people understand and find familiar. Black popular culture relies on the “Black” things that have common meaning in African American communities.

Black popular culture responds to people as both consumers and co-producers of culture, where messages about age, gender, Blackness, risk, violence, tension and conflict, and community problems are embedded in the art form. Attention is called to the realness of life through artistic or cultural expression. While the reality reflected is often a message of struggle, Black popular culture is also about history, pride, survival, joy, celebration, and the beauty of African American

people. We must not misunderstand Black popular culture or assume that it is simplistic, unscientific, or basic. Indeed, it is potentially much more complex than the traditional anti-violence strategies we have focused on up to this point. Intervention has to be culturally complex because African Americans live in complex ways and in difficult places, responding to competing demands and loyalties. Life is complex if you are young and Black; life is complex if you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered and Black; and life is complex if you are a Black woman battered or raped by a Black man. Indeed, life is complex if you are vulnerable and oppressed and yet, still surviving.

Using Black popular culture interventions enables us to be complex, or deep, in an accessible way. It allows us to unleash the power of a message that has been housed in traditional interventions and whose meaning sometimes gets lost in forum titles like this one. It compels us to take that power to the streets, homes, and hearts of African Americans. Black popular culture is a way to engage in another sphere and to reach other audiences in ways that have meaning.

This forum is about doing things differently and authentically, using different kinds of voices or not speaking at all. The intent is to show the potential that culture—art, music, film, dance, and the like—has to change the consciousness in the African American community about the importance of violence. It gives us a way to interrupt abusive behavior in homes and on the streets using common language and to point out the risk and vulnerability of some men and women. It gives us ideas about how to teach children and adults and how to shift patterns of inequality in the African American community. In so doing, we hope to figure out ways to build community support; prevent further trauma, collective and individual; organize the African American community; and, ultimately, create hope and joy in a peaceful, authentically Black way.