Mic Check. Can You Hear Me? Suheir Hammad and the Politics of Spoken Word Poetry
Politics of Spoken Word Poetry

Theri Alyce Pickens

Abstract

“Mic check? One-two. One-two. Can you hear me?” asks spoken-word artist and poet Suheir Hammad onstage (Lathan, 2007). Make no mistake about this question; it is not part of the sound check, nor is it part of a rehearsal. This is her poem. The audience can obviously hear her, but the question is not as straightforward as it appears. Here, Hammad blends the art of emcee-ing (one of the four main elements of hip-hop culture), with the typical language of a sound check and her experience of being racially profiled in, presumably, an American airport. In this vein, “mic” is not only short for microphone, but also the name of the United States’ Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officer, named “Mike”, who searches her bags. The question, “Can you hear me?”, is directed not only at the audience, but also at “Mike”. Hammad’s double speak continues throughout the poem, “Mic Check”, where she mobilizes the language of hip-hop to promulgate a stringent critique of the links between the United States’ historical relationship to imperialism and racial profiling targeted toward Arabs and those who supposedly appear Arab.

Keywords

Poetry; hip-hop culture; Suheir Hammad

References


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KEYWORDS

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Women's rights
Women's role
women
Her words were zapped to computers across the country — landing on several Web sites and in one very influential box: That of casting scouts for HBO’s “Def Poetry Jam.” The Brooklyn-reared Palestinian American writer was asked to read “First Writing Since” in the 2001 television premiere of the slam poetry showcase hosted by Mos Def, rapper-turned-Broadway-actor. I grew up believing the Koran was poetry … so I always felt there was power in being able to use language.” Since that night, Hammad and eight other poets spent the summer touring the country in a live version of the television program, directed by Stan Lathan. Today “Drops” is very hard to find and the book of poetry, “Born Palestinian, Born Black,” is out of print. When spoken word is done in excellence, it has an immediacy about it that almost forces the listener to engage with the points being made by the artist. Blair: In the past several years there has clearly been an increase in the popularity of spoken word. Part of the reason I think so many are attracted to spoken word is that people are drawn in by the good storytelling as well as rhythm, rhyme, and the performance element so common in the genre. Blair: Although spoken word originally has its roots in traditional storytelling in a number of cultures, in America it was popularized as a genre during the 1960s civil rights movement. Here we see poets like Gil Scott-Heron with The Last Poets and Amiri Baraka who created political, racially polarizing poetry. I really enjoyed listening to Suheir perform her poetry on the disc included with the book. What I didn't hear I imagined as I read her work that was so raw and powerful at moments and then quiet and unassuming in others, but still powerful. There was an especially poignant verse from the end of “first writing since” that I am excited to create an art piece for. Many of her poems are about Palestine, as she is a Palestinian-American. The book even comes with a CD so you can hear her perform---she's absolutely brilliant. flag Like · see review. Dec 11, 2012 Eboni Sade rated it it was amazing.