

*Potlikker Narratives for Teaching Freedom:*  
Towards an Afrocentric & Emancipatory Black Vernacular Arts Pedagogy

By

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*Sankofa*

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## Abstract

This thesis presents and examines ways in which Black vernacular arts traditions can be applied as part of an Afrocentric, anti-racist, and emancipatory pedagogy in both primary and secondary school settings. Full of stories of resistance, these performative arts traditions have the capacity to serve as “counter stories,” or counter narratives—those stories that push back against the “master scripts” that perpetuate dominant White ideologies about race and racism in America. As a metaphorical, theoretical, and educational framework for my thesis, the term “potlikker” serves as a literary designation for both spoken and musical Black vernacular arts traditions that have the narrative capacity to remember, tell, teach, and nourish.

The Black vernacular arts traditions I present in this pedagogical framework include the antebellum ring shout and ring play traditions, Trickster tales, and spirituals, and later 20<sup>th</sup> century forms including toast ballads, the dozens, blues, jazz, rap, and spoken word. Taken together, these expressions bring into focus a constellation of educational goals and perspectives, at once historical, political, cultural, artistic, and aesthetic. They contain narratives about African heritage, about the hard history of the Black Holocaust, about African American freedoms fought for and gained, and about the rich, diverse legacy of Black musical and spoken vernacular arts traditions in America. In the broadest theoretical terms, this thesis is a transdisciplinary narrative arts project, methodologically and philosophically aligned with African heritage knowledge (King & Swartz, 2018), Folkarts in Education (FAIE), and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Within these intersecting educational theories, I present data that include stories, raps, blues lyrics, spoken word pieces, and visual art works created by students, family members, and guest artists during lessons and projects I implemented in elementary and middle schools in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin, between the years 2011–2020. Each of these community participants contributed, in no small way, to my understanding of how Black vernacular arts traditions reflect and communicate a Black aesthetic that I am calling freedom.

*This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Dr. Anthony Vincent Fraioli and Natelle Benson Fraioli*



***Sankofa***  
*(Return and Get It)*

*Africans fought back, even in the early years. Africans in America, and I posit Africans universally, kept a hidden glimmer of their agency passed from generation to generation...This is the story that must be remembered and told, often.*

(Browne-Marshall 2020, 37)

## Chapter One

### Context, Content & Methodologies

#### Part I: Context and Content

##### *Introduction*

As a music and integrated arts educator of some thirty years, I have long known that Black American vernacular arts traditions contain stories of freedom—those freedoms fought for and gained by African Americans, and those denied to them. Since the antebellum era, Black vernacular arts in a variety of forms have been utilized as artistic tools of resistance. The vernacular expressions I present in this study are therefore prime for inclusion in a school curriculum that teaches the harder facts of our collective American history, from enslavement, through Reconstruction and Jim Crow, to the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter movements. In addition, my ethnomusicological research (MA, UW-Madison) has provided me with a vantage point from which to locate those performative elements in West African oral arts traditions that have been retained in Black American cultural expressions. As I will discuss throughout this thesis, one of the most vital of these retentions is the art of Signifying, which infuses Black vernaculars with narratives of social commentary, criticism, protest, cultural resilience, and agency.

I have taught a variety of African American vernacular arts traditions throughout my teaching career. In doing so, I have gathered my teaching materials and repertoire from a variety of sources, including standard music curriculum textbooks (e.g., McMillan and Silver Burdett series), and my own collections of African American ring play games and songs for children, Trickster tales, poetry, spirituals, ballads, civil rights protest and freedom songs, blues, jazz, and rap. Examples of Black vernacular traditions I have used in my teaching are cited throughout this thesis. Where applicable, I explain the extent of my prior knowledge of the social and political significance of these traditions and the extent to which my understanding of their historical contexts has deepened during my research

and writing. As a result of my research, I am even more resolved to continue seeking those narratives in Black American vernacular traditions that reveal accurate stories about African American history and freedom.

In addition to Black vernacular repertoire gathered from secondhand sources, I present student, family, and guest artist narratives collected from lessons and projects I carried out in elementary and middle schools in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin between the years 2011–2020. A portion of these narratives were created within two school-wide collaborative story-arts projects that I spearheaded at Orchard Ridge Elementary School in Madison: the 2016 “Telling Stories” project and the 2020 “Jazz & Freedom” project. The stories generated in these programs provide evidence of the learning that can take place in an Afro-centric narrative arts curriculum designed for both students and adult family members. These projects are discussed in more detail in this chapter’s “Literature Review” and in chapters Five through Seven.

Contrary to current objections over the inclusion of critical race theory in education, we teachers have the obligation to teach all students the accurate history of systemic racism in America. Today’s diverse school populations represent the ethnic and cultural diversity of the United States citizenry: First Nations peoples who suffered tragic human, cultural, and homeland loss under White colonialism; African Americans, whose ancestors were brought here under the yoke of enslavement; descendants of immigrants who came to the United States generations ago; and those more recently arrived immigrants, including the “undocumented” waiting to become citizens. My own classrooms reflected this diversity. In Milwaukee, I taught in predominantly Black neighborhoods, while my Madison schools reflected a more heterogeneous population.<sup>1</sup> My pedagogy of potlikker is therefore not just for the benefit of African American students. All students should know that the promise of liberty in the United States has always been, and still is, restricted by White supremacist ideologies. Black history is

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<sup>1</sup> During the years of the “Telling Stories” and “Jazz & Freedom projects,” Orchard Ridge’s population was roughly 35% White, 29.4% Black, 20.0% Hispanic/Latino, 11% Two or more races, and 4.7% Asian or Pacific Islander. <https://www.greatschools.org/wisconsin/madison/875-Orchard-Ridge-Elementary-School/#Students>

*America's* history, and Black America's struggles for equality and justice reflect a nation's struggles against itself, and against its own ideals that proclaim freedom and justice for all.

What emerges from my pedagogy of potlikker are lessons from the past that reflect upon the present. Antebellum ring play songs and stories of Brer Rabbit and High John the Conquerer are not merely curriculum content to entertain children. Many of these songs and stories contain narratives that are chilling reminders that White supremacy has always been with us and is undergoing a resurgence in the United States. We are now, in 2022, at a cusp in history. We can either move forward or we can allow the darkest periods in our country's history to be repeated. The enactment of Juneteenth as a federal holiday on June 17, 2021 reminded us of the promises of the Emancipation Proclamation that for many African Americans are yet to be fully realized. As the West African proverb *Sankofa* translates, we need to "go back and retrieve it." One of the most important historical truths revealed in the Black vernacular traditions I present in this pedagogy of potlikker is that African Americans have never been passive victims of oppression. Rather, they have been freedom fighters all along. We can all learn to be better citizens from these stories of freedom. There is no better time than now to tell them.

#### *Potlikker, Africinity, Survival & Freedom*

My examination of Black vernacular arts as part of an Afrocentric and emancipatory curriculum is guided by the following five lines of inquiry: (1) What elements of homeland oral arts practices and cultural belief systems survived the Middle Passage and reemerged in the sacred ring shouts, spirituals, corn husking work songs, and Trickster tales that were woven into 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century plantation life? (2) What aesthetic elements and principles seeded in these early Black cultural productions were later remixed in the dozens, toast ballads, blues, jazz, rap, and spoken word? (3) How, in turn, do the African traits in these arts contribute to a Black aesthetic that I am calling freedom? (4) Why should these cultural productions be included in an Afrocentric and emancipatory curriculum? And (5) what *does* potlikker have to do with it?



While potlikker and its history are the focus in the “Interlude” portion of this chapter, a preview is in order here. In its original usage, the term “potlikker”<sup>2</sup> refers to the nutritious broth that sustained enslaved Africans throughout the antebellum period in the southern United States, during what is referred to as the “*Ma’afa*,” or the “Holocaust of Enslavement.”<sup>3</sup> In this context, potlikker is a survival food. The term “potlikker” is also associated with Black story traditions, mainly, but not exclusively, with the Trickster “folk hero” tales created by African plantation hands during this same period.<sup>4</sup> Like potlikker the food, these stories provided nourishment and sustenance for enslaved Africans. Not only were the stories sources of entertainment and relief from toil, but they also connected Africans to their ancestral roots, providing them with a means of cultural and spiritual survival.

Through oral transmission, Africans retained and maintained many elements of their ancestral performative arts practices while transforming them into new expressive forms on North American soil. In this long view of Black history, my pedagogy of potlikker spans the history of African peoples’ presence in North America, and to the place of their departure on the African continent. As such, I include West African Trickster tales and songs, as well as those Black arts traditions that were born in and continue to flourish in the United States—from antebellum corn husking songs and ring shouts to spirituals and the blues, to the dozens, toasts, jazz, rap, and spoken word.

In locating Africanisms in these cultural expressions, I join those educators, historians, cultural folklorists, anthropologists, and Black music and literary arts critics who assert that Black American vernacular arts traditions, both historical and contemporary, retain performative cultural elements rooted in African oral traditions and the epistemological world views and beliefs systems from which

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<sup>2</sup> Authors presented in this thesis use various spellings for “potlikker” (e.g., pot liquor, or pot likker) as evidence in quoted material. The spelling, “potlikker” was the first that I came across in print, and it is favored by my advisor, UW-Madison Professor Carl Grant.

<sup>3</sup> The Swahili term, “Maafa,” or “Great Disaster” was introduced by Marima Ani, in her book, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (from “Maafa,” Wikipedia). Referencing Zora Neale Hurston, Tolagbe Ogunleye writes, “In her essay titled ‘Folklore and Music,’ Hurston (1995) also argued that by studying the folklore of African Americans, we can learn a significant amount of information about the “undreamed geniuses” who lived and died during the Ma’afa, the Holocaust of Enslavement” (Ogunleye 1997: 436).

<sup>4</sup> Ologboni (2016); Coleman & Coleman (2001); Bordelon (1999) and Torrence (1994).

they emerge. Ancestral beliefs and practices were not only not forgotten but may indeed have been the very means by which Africans endured and overcame American enslavement, holding on to ancestral memory and maintaining core elements of their cultural heritage. Cultural anthropologist Lawrence Levine (1977, 5) underscores this point, asserting that Africans did not “inexorably sever all associations with the Old World,” and that “aspects of the traditional cultures and world view they came with may have continued to exist not as mere vestiges but as dynamic, living, creative parts of group life in the United States.” Culture itself is never a “fixed condition” but is, rather, about transformations.

[It is] a process: the product of interaction between the past and present. It’s toughness and resiliency are determined not by a culture’s ability to withstand change, which indeed may be a sign of stagnation not life, but by its ability to react creatively and responsively to the realities of a new situation (Levine 1977, 5).

Black language and cultural historian Geneva Smitherman similarly draws attention to the retention of Africanisms in Black American vernaculars, seeing their translation in both spoken and musical forms. While Africans were not able to “practice or manifest the traditional African worldview in its totality” (2000, 201), they used oral transmission to retain patterns of culture from the African continent and express them in new forms in the New World:

Through song, story, folk sayings, and rich verbal interplay among everyday people, lessons and precepts about life and survival are handed down generation to generation...But word of mouth is more than sufficient because the structural underpinnings of the oral tradition remain basically intact even as each new generation makes verbal adaptations within the tradition. Indeed, the core strength of this tradition lies in its capacity to accommodate new situations and changing realities (2000, 199).

While undergoing transformations, oral arts expressions functioned for plantation hands in the southern United States in much the same way as they did in their African homelands—as creative outlets for religious expression, as an accompaniment to work, for entertainment, as processes of traditional education, and finally, as vehicles for communicating everyday life experiences and observations, often in the form of social commentary and criticism (see Levine 1977, 5–19; Fraioli

2006, 65–93). In short, the continuance of oral arts practices from their homelands helped African peoples cope with enslavement. As such, the stories and narratives I present in this thesis are, to use the Black linguistic colloquialism, about “gettin ovuh.” Smitherman (2000, 199) puts it this way:

Both in the old-time black Gospel song and in black street vernacular, “getting ovuh” has to do with surviving. While the religious use of the phrase speaks to spiritual survival in a sinister world of sin, its secular usage speaks to material in a white world of oppression... In Black America, the oral tradition has served as a vehicle for gittin ovuh. That tradition preserves the Afro-American heritage and reflects the collective spirit of the race.

### *Folklore vs Vernacular*

Many of the references to stories, songs and other Black arts expressions contained in this thesis, particularly antebellum song forms and Trickster tales, toast ballads, and even early forms of the blues, are typically considered under the headings “folktales,” “folksongs,” or “folklore.” I will continue to use these terms when referencing folklore sources and practitioners in the field of folklore studies, and its educational wing, Folkarts in Education (FAIE). In the Afrocentric and liberatory context in which I am writing, however, the use of “folklore” as a categorical description needs further explanation.

In *Africanisms in American Culture*, Robinson (1990, 212) breaks down the etymology of “folklore” as the “folk,” meaning people, and “lore,” meaning “knowledge,” regardless of previous class connotations associated with the term. Knowledge of the “folk culture of Black Americans” includes Africanisms, or the “traditions and characteristics originating in Africa” (212).

Thus, it is the knowledge of the people – not just any knowledge but a particular knowledge that has proved to be valuable within a community because it has passed the test of time, a lore that people have found to contain important representations of themselves as a group. The folklore of specific groups of people, moreover, helps explain how people came into unity; again, it is a way of looking at their community. In examining African-American folklore one finds that the expressive knowledge based in the traditions of African-Americans discloses their sense of community and heritage (Robinson 1990, 212).

Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) may, indeed, have been the first to use the idea of “potlikker” relationally to Black folkloric studies. As an ethnographer, story collector, and novelist, Hurston’s academic background in anthropology gave her a broad perspective on the meaning of “folklore,”

which for her included “folk tunes, tales, and characters...story and song makers.” In this vein, she wrote, “Folklore is the boiled-down juice, of human living...it is the art of the people before they find out that there is any such thing as art, and they make it out of whatever they find at hand” (Bordelon, 1999, 69–70).<sup>5</sup>

If we go back to the one of the earliest forays into legitimizing African American “folk expressions” as uniquely Black and linked to African heritage, we will find Hurston’s work predated by several decades. In his foreword to *The Annotated African American Folktales* (2018, xxv), Henry Louis Gates Jr. brings to light two “remarkable, indeed historic” speeches delivered by the “pioneering black feminist” Anna Julia Cooper under the auspices of the Hampton Folklore Society at the Hampton Normal School (now Hampton University) in 1894 (Gates 2018, xvii).<sup>6</sup> These speeches revealed that “even at the formation of the first black folklore society, some African Americans understood that folklore could provide a positive interpretation of their African heritage or a scientific basis to identify and preserve their distinctive culture” (Gates 2018, xxvii quoting Baker 2010, 33–34).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This quote appears in Hurston’s essay “Go Gator and Muddy the Water” (Bordeleon, 69) as part of fieldwork she conducted for the Federal Writers Project between the years 1938–1939. In, “The Potlikker of Human Living,” folklorist Stetson Kennedy quoted Hurston as writing, “Folklore is the boiled-down juice, or potlikker, of human living.” The source of this quote is not provided. (see, *Old Time Party, An archive of mostly southern American vernacular music*,” at: <https://oldtimeparty.wordpress.com/2015/04/20/the-potlikker-of-human-living>). Elsewhere, the reference to folklore as defined by Hurston is cited as “the juice of human living” (Bordelon 1999, 69).

<sup>6</sup> These speeches were published two years prior to Cooper’s public address in *The Southern Workman*, a monthly magazine founded in 1872 by Gen. Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a mentor of Booker T. Washington (Gates 2018, xxv). In November, 1893, the first “Negro folklore society” was formed at Hampton Normal School by its “far-seeing white administrator,” Alice M. Bacon (Gates 2018, xxvi). See, “A Paper by Miss Anna Julia Cooper,” *Southern Workman* 22, no. 7 (Cooper, July 1894), 133. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hngblm&view=1up&seq=537&skin=2021>. Accessed: 7/12/21

<sup>7</sup> For more on Anna Julia Cooper and the Hampton Folklore Society, see: Moody, S.C. 2008. “Anna Julia Cooper, Charles Chesnutt, and The Hampton Folklore Society—Constructing a Black Folk Aesthetic through Folklore and Memory,” In *New Essays on the African American Novel*, edited by King L., Selzer L.F., 200. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Two prominent White folklorists, Alice Mabel Bacon (1858–1918), and William Wells Newell (founder of the American Folklore Society; 1839–1907), were concerned with the preservation of Black customs, songs, and tales, with an eye on African heritage. In 1839, Bacon, one of the founders of the Hampton Folklore Society, wrote, “If within the next few years care is not taken to collect and preserve all traditions and customs peculiar to the Negroes there will be little to reward the search of the future historian who would trace the history of the African continent through the years of slavery to the position they will hold a few generations hence” (Gates 2018, xxiii).

In her first speech, Cooper advocated for the preservation of Black folklore in terms of its originality and its links to the past (Gates 2018, xxv). Given that most Hampton graduates did not conceal their desire to ascend to a “civilized state” and “even more perhaps loathed any association with Africa,” Cooper’s second speech at the Hampton Folklore Conference can be interpreted as a critique of “the aspirations of the culturally ‘respectable’” (Gates 2018, xxvii quoting Baker 2010, 33–34).<sup>8</sup> As such, Cooper’s speech is pre-eminently political, summing up the hegemonic grip of White America on Black America:

And as the Queen of Sheba sunk under the stupendousness of Solomon’s greatness, the children of Africa in America are in danger of paralysis before the splendor of Anglo Saxon achievements. Anglo Saxon ideas, Anglo Saxon standards, Anglo Saxon art, Anglo Saxon literature, Anglo Saxon music – surely this must be to him the measure of perfection. The whispered little longings of his own soul for utterance must be all a mistake...the croonings that rocked his own cradle must be forgotten and outgrown and only the lullabies after the approved style affected. Nothing else is grammatical, nothing else is orthodox. To write as a white man, to sing as a white man, to swagger as a white man, to bully as a white man – this is achievement, this is success (Cooper, via Gates 2018, xxvii).<sup>9</sup>

As I apply it, the term “vernacular” contemporizes Cooper’s Afrocentric and politicized framework for Black folkloric traditions and Hurston’s concept of folklore as ever changing and dynamic. While the term “folklore” is customarily used to describe antebellum Trickster tales, work songs and spirituals, or early blues and toast ballads (such as the “Signifying Monkey” and “The Titanic”), it is not readily associated with more contemporary and popular forms of blues, jazz, rap, and spoken word. Another potential problem with the nomenclature “folklore” is the tendency for people to view oral arts expressions—accurately or not—as something from the past and not part of an ongoing, living, and dynamic tradition. Hurston’s own interpretation of “folk” and “folklore” addresses this concern. Reflecting on Hurston’s contribution to the field, David Krazner (2008, 83) writes

Although her use of the term “folk” was part of a widespread effort to build a distinctive American “folk” expression during the period between the two World Wars,

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<sup>8</sup> In this assessment of Cooper’s critique, Gates draws from anthropologist Lee D. Baker’s observations in *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture* (2010, 33–34).

<sup>9</sup> See: Cooper, Julia Anna, “A Paper by Miss Anna Julia Cooper,” in *Southern Workman* 22, no. 7 (July 1984), 133. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hngblm&view=1up&seq=537>, accessed 7/14/21).

Hurston had a specific meaning in mind. For her, through folklore the African and African American oral traditions are carried through slavery and into the modern age, forming a continuity and basic structural integrity while encouraging creative modifications. The Negro folklore is not, according to Hurston, “a thing of the past,” but rather in the making, an ongoing transaction among individuals and their environment within a circumscribed social space.

In its most common usage, the term “vernacular” is applied to spoken language. According to the Webster Dictionary, “vernacular” is defined as “of, relating to, or being a nonstandard language or dialect of a place, region, or country.” The term is also associated with non-linguistic domains, most usually in reference to local architectural styles, as in “of, relating to, or characteristic of a period, place, or group *especially*: of, relating to, or being the common building style of a period or place vernacular architecture.”<sup>10</sup> In *The Norton Anthology African American Literature* (Gates & Smith 2014, 6), Robert O’Meally offers a contemporary definition of the term as it relates to expressive arts culture in America: “In the context of American art, the vernacular may be defined as expression that springs from the creative interactions between the received or learned traditions and that which is locally invented, “made in America.” O’Meally both poses the question and offers an answer (2014, 6):

What, then is the African American vernacular? It consists of forms sacred—songs, prayers, and sermons—secular—work songs, secular rhymes and songs, blues, jazz, and stories of many kinds. It also consists of dances, wordless musical performances, stages shows and visual art forms of many sorts.”

My use of the term “Black vernacular arts traditions,” as applied to my pedagogy of potlikker, contains a wide range of musical and spoken creative expressions, past and present. It has been noted that the term “vernacular” itself has meaning and implications for the defining of an “in-group and, at times, defensive, secretive and aggressive character” that is not, by and large, intended for non-African American groups (Omeally, 2014, 3–6). Mindful of this implication, I use the designation “Black vernacular arts tradition” to locate a Black aesthetic within a more politically conscious framework,

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vernacular>

bringing Black oral and musical arts expressions closer to the original intent of early Black folklorists such as Cooper and Hurston.

“Vernacular” also implies an Afrocentric perspective, one which views Black American vernaculars as part of a distinct cultural legacy in which Africanisms are still evident and thriving. LaMonda Horton-Stallings, for example, defines Black vernaculars such as “black English...oral epics, folktales, the dozens, Signifying, call and response, improvisational practices, sermons, line dances, ring shouts, cyphers, and music genres such as spirituals, gospel, blues, jazz, rap, hip-hop, and more” as being “foundationally held together by Africanisms that have shifted and changed through geographical particularities in America and Europe” (2018, 1). Furthermore, Africanisms capture “the modernity and post-modernity movements of black art, culture, identity, and politics” (1). They are, simply, a “form of resistance ensuring the survival and evolution of cultures and people meant to be displaced and erased by slavery, imperialism, apartheid, and capitalism” (1).

In equally politicized terms, O’Meally (2014, 9–10) writes that the vernacular “resists being captured on a page or in a historical frame: by definition, it is about gradual, group creation; it is about change...no forms are more quick or overflowing with black power and black meaning.” O’Meally views Black vernaculars as forms of “resistance, self-awareness, and endurance,” which do not “wholly subscribe to the white American ethos and world view” (3), and links Black American vernacular forms to their ancestral roots (5). Africanisms such as polyrhythmic percussive expressions, call and response formations, and “group creations,” are expressed not only in African American music, but in “the rhythm of a line, tale, or rhyme” (7). It is not surprising then, that “improvisation is a highly prized aspect of vernacular performance;” these culturally inherited performative traits are not a body of “quaint or folksy items,” nor are they “far away or fading” (O’Meally 2014, 4 & 7). To revisit my central point, this dynamic, living aspect of Black oral arts traditions is what makes them so valuable in school curriculum, not just for learning *about* Black history, but for learning how these traditions are part of living history *in the making*.

I will close this section with the words of historian Tolagbe Ogunleye (1997, 436), whose insights into Black folklore align with interpretations of a politicized, Afro-centered Black vernacular tradition. Ogunleye’s perspective also has implications for Black folklore as a critical multicultural and emancipatory pedagogy:

Folklore represents a line to a vast, interconnected network of meanings, values, and cognitions. Folklore contains seeds of wisdom, problem solving, and prophecy through tales of rebellion, triumph, reasoning, moralizing, and satire. All that African American can people value, including the agony enslaved and freed Africans were forced to endure, as well as strategies they used to resist servitude and flee their captors, is discernible in this folk literature. African American folklore is also an historical thread that ties the cultural heritage of Africans in the diaspora and those living on the continent of Africa. The ultimate strength of folklore resides in its power to communicate the social and cultural identities of the eras. *This makes folklore a highly effective medium for teaching African American children about their legacy, as well as the most effective and earnest means of weaving, even thriving, through life's adversities* [italics, mine].

### *The Art of Signifying*

As a foundational, aesthetic criteria in Black oral arts traditions – one that was not thrown overboard on the cross-Atlantic voyage – I locate the verbal art of Signifying within the processes of culture change, or what Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) calls “the changing same” (1968, 205–241).<sup>11</sup> Effectively, Baraka’s “changing same,” describes the process of tradition and change in Black America: how ancestral oral arts traditions survived the Middle Passage and were transformed into new expressions on American soil. As a rhetorical device, Signifying survived the Middle Passage and continued to infuse Black American cultural expressions with wit and humor, double entendre, veiled (and not so veiled) poetic insult, boasting, toasting, indirection, and out-besting, as Smitherman would say, from “the giddyup.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Tatar (2018, lxxix) explains that “...Signifying, spelled with a capital S,” marks the “distinction with the ordinary use of the term.”

<sup>12</sup> Smitherman uses the term “giddy-up” throughout her published volumes. She defines the term in *Black Talk* (1994, 184) as a synonym for “jumpstreet,” meaning “The start, the beginning point of something.”



Signifying infuses Black vernacular arts with potent messages of social commentary and protest, making these arts ripe for a pedagogy of potlikker that enlightens students about Africa America's long struggles for freedom and justice. In both African and Hanking, the Trickster figure is the master Signifier when outwitting his adversary; the antebellum song composer "disses" the "Massa," and the conscious rap artist Signifies when "dissin" on a prejudicial society. Signifying also infuses Black American spirituals, the blues, and even jazz with double meaning (Smitherman 1977, 48). As I discuss further in Chapter Six, the art of Signifying in Black English speech patterns has further relevance for teaching oral and written literacies, as evidenced in the implementation of rap and spoken word in school curriculum.

#### *Terms & Meanings of Signification*

Signifying is most often described as the art of double innuendo or, in Gate's terms "double voiced discourse" (1988, xxv; 50–51), and takes on different meanings in different performative and social contexts. Abrahams joins the standard English meaning of the term, "the ability of a word or act to carry deep meanings to the surface" — and its Black usage in which Signifying "becomes a stance towards life itself, in the which the significance of a reported action cannot be interpreted as meaning only one thing" (1985, 6). Smitherman's definition of Signifying reflects its use in various social settings in Black American culture: "Signification/signifyin is a style of verbal play that focuses humorous statements [or put-downs] of double meaning on an individual, event, situation, or even a government" (2006, 43; 69).<sup>13</sup>

Other interpretations of Signifying allude to its more aggressive form of rhetorical play and verbal insult: "[A]n ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, wheedle and lie...or make fun of a person or situation...Thus it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories..."

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<sup>13</sup> Smitherman (2000, 223–224) distinguishes between two types of "disses:" the dozens, which is usually directed at someone's mother, and Signifying, which is "aimed at a person or a thing, just for fun, or to criticize that person or thing." Today, however, "the two types of dissin are being conflated under a more general form of play, which we may refer to as 'snaps' (2000, 224). For more on these distinctions, see Chapter Six, this thesis, n173.

(Abrahams, 1970, 52), and “the art of ceremonial combativeness in which one person puts down, talks about, ‘signifies on’ someone or on something someone has said” (Smitherman, 2000, 255). Other colloquial terms associated with Signifying in North America are numerous and might include “talking shit,” “dissin,” and “mackin,” “shucking” (as is “shuckin and jivin”), “loud talking,” “specifying,” “testifying,” “calling out” (of one’s name), “sounding,” “woofing,” “rapping,” and “playing the dozens” (Lee, 1993, 11–12, 1984, 286; Abrahams, 1970, 47). Education and Afro-American language specialist Carol Lee’s definition of Signifying places an emphasis on rhetorical, double meaning: “a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection” (1993, 11). As a mode of indirection, Signifying can be expressed in music, gesture and dance, or other forms of dramatic display. Both verbal and non-verbal forms of Black vernaculars can take the form of satire, parody, mimicry, pastiche, repetition, and revision (troping).

As a central figures of Signifying, West African Tricksters were re-incarnated on American soil as Brer Rabbit and High John the Conqueror, as the master singer of ceremonies in corn-shucking celebrations, a bragging toast-teller, a player of the dozens and the blues, and a jazz, rap, and spoken word artist. In each of these incarnations, the Trickster has adjusted himself/herself according to new cultural, social, and political environments. Thus, these hybrid forms of artistic expression represent

...[a] product of a continuous process of creative cultural production. This examination must attempt to identify both previous manifestations of the tradition as well as the factors that influenced its transformation over time in the United States (Roberts 2009, 113).

Recalling the earlier colloquialism, oral arts traditions practiced in the United States are not just about “getting ovuh,” but are also about getting *back*. Africans gained strength and sustenance through the very telling and singing of narratives that defied, resisted, and countered enslavement. As we get to know them, Signifying Tricksters Brer Rabbit and High John de Conquer will show how they (almost) always outwit their more powerful adversaries. Plantation hands “dissed” their enslavers with songs and dances replete with Signifying rhetoric, and spirituals hold double coded messages that affirm for singers—then and now—salvation in both the sacred and secular worlds.

Signifying also finds form in the freedom songs that narrate the struggles of the civil rights movement, and in the aesthetic, musical formulations of indirection in the blues and competitive “cutting,” and “toasting” in jazz music. Contemporary and socially conscious rappers like Mos Def, with his post-Katrina protest rap, “Dollar Day” (True Magic, 2006; Geffin Records), and soul/hip hop artists Common and John Legend, with their hit “Glory” (“Selma” soundtrack, 2014; Columbia Records) Signify on a racist society. These songs can help young students connect to broader social issues surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement, and the ongoing struggles for freedom in America.

*Dollar Day*

*So there's a story about the lady in Louisiana  
She's a flood survivor and the rescue teams  
They come through, and they,*

*I guess tryna recover people  
And they see this woman she's wadin through  
the streets  
I guess it'd been some time after the storm  
And I guess they were shocked that you know  
she was alive*

*And rescue worker said, "So, oh my God  
h-how did you survive  
How did you do it? Where've you been?"  
And she said, "Where I been? Where you  
been?"  
Hah, Where you been? You understand?  
That's about the size of it.  
This is for the streets, the streets everywhere  
The streets affected by the storm called...  
America*

*Glory*

*Now the war is not over, victory isn't won  
And we'll fight on to the finish, then when it's all done  
We'll cry glory, oh glory<sup>14</sup>*

In reference to Black song traditions in particular, Levine (1977, 239–240) acknowledges that while it would be a mistake to equate all Black musical production with political protest because African Americans “have not spent all their time reacting to whites and their songs are filled with comments on

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<sup>14</sup> “Glory” (2014), by Common (Ronnie Lashid Lynn), John Legend & Rhymefest, (Che Smith)

all aspects of life” – it would equally be wrong to assume that African American musical traditions are not a “rich repository” of the reactions to treatment accorded them by White society:

To state that black song constituted a form of black protest and resistance does not mean that it led to or even called for any tangible and specific actions, but rather that it served as a mechanism by which Negroes could be relatively candid in a society that rarely accorded them that privilege, could communicate this candor to others whom they would in no other way be able to reach, and, in the face of the sanctions of the white majority, could assert their own individuality, aspirations, and sense of being. Certainly, if nothing else, black song makes it difficult to believe that Negroes internalized their situation so completely, accepted the values of the larger society so totally, or manifested so pervasive an apathy as we have been led to believe (240).

The association with a wide range of Black vernacular art forms and freedom is likewise noted by O’Meally (2014, 55) who writes that newly arrived Africans to North America brought with them

...a storehouse of stories – along with other such expressive forms as songs, dances, styles of worship, games, patterns of adornment, and the like that helped them maintain on the new continent at least the outlines of their original worldview. These forms were what blacks had instead of freedom. They had “rites and not rights,” as Ralph Ellison once put it; “rhythmic freedom if not political freedom.”

Within a pedagogy of potlikker, teaching Black vernaculars as expressions of protest and resistance underscores for students that Africans in North America were not just passive victims of enslavement but used their ancestral inheritance (i.e., “tools at hand”) to resist enslavement. Black song and other creative expressions turned New World plantations, and even the “slaving ships” into sites of resistance. The Black aesthetic art of Signifying in particular, demonstrates the ways in which verbal and musical arts traditions are still an important means of communicating Black America’s struggles and triumphs in the fights towards social justice, racial equity, and freedom. When Amiri Baraka asked jazz pianist Thelonius Monk (1917–1982) to comment on the Black aesthetic in jazz, he replied, “*It’s about freedom – more than that is complicated*” (Baraka 1991, 109).

#### *Anti-racism, Whiteness & Teaching Freedom*

In the context of purposeful, critical multicultural education, teaching Black arts traditions within an anti-racist pedagogy benefits all students. In *Pedagogy and the Practice of Hope*, Giroux (1997, 236) asserts that the most crucial issues surrounding multiculturalism are about race and identity, and

summons novelist and political activist James Baldwin who put it this way "...while having African Americans learn about their "real" contributions to American culture, "you would also be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history" (Giroux 1997, 235, 8). Giroux's own remarks about multicultural education reinforces the need for teaching all students about race in America:

...multiculturalism is about making whiteness visible as a racial category; that is, it points to the necessity of providing white students with the cultural memories that enable them to recognize the historically- and socially-constructed nature of their own identities" (Giroux, 1997, 250).

Giroux's call for teachers to pay more attention to their "constructed nature of identities" echoes similar strains within a critical multicultural education discourse, particularly within the pedagogical theory of narrative inquiry in education. Given that most teachers teaching African American students in public school settings are White (Zeichner 2003, from Au 2005, 216), narrative inquiry has become a reflexive project in which teachers are trained to reflect on their own histories, their own cultural, familial, and social experiences (Bresler 2006, 25; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 12; Sleeter & Grant, 2009, 212). In this way, White teachers' stories have the potential to "expose White supremacy from the inside, revealing the codes through which privilege and advantage operate" (Bell, Desai, & Irani 2013, 7).

As a White teacher teaching African American students, I have often been troubled by the fact of my own relatively undeserved, privileged access to education and life experiences granted to me because of my Euro-American immigrant ancestry – in short, my White privilege. My Italian and Anglo-Irish ancestors, while of modest means, did not come here in chains under the oppressive yoke of slavery and were granted admission into America's White "race." With that acceptance, came access to economic and educational advantages and advancement that were passed on to me.

And so, on what grounds do I have the authority or even the right to teach African American students—or Euro-American students, for that matter—about African American culture and history as part of an anti-racist pedagogy? Is it enough that I have an acute awareness of racial injustices and inequities in the United States? Does it matter that I am compelled by a sense of moral imperative, and

yes, responsibility to engage all my students in learning about the history of the Black Holocaust, Jim Crow, Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter struggles? I find encouragement in the questions posed by Charles M. Payne in his introduction to *Teaching Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition* (2008, 8):

Race remains an issue for many of those concerned with liberatory education, and it could hardly be otherwise. Can White people “teach freedom?” Given the history through which we have come, does not the mere assumption of the authoritative role of teacher by Whites replicate the traditional White-Black hierarchy? Or, are there ways White people can teach with awareness and respect for African American traditions and sensibilities? Thinking critically about social issues is a path, and once students start down it, it may not matter much exactly how they got started.

Payne’s call for teachers to think critically means that all teachers, regardless of ethnicity or racial affiliation, can no longer ignore or gloss over the socio-political realities and history of race and oppression in America and, by extension, in our classrooms. Forty-five years ago, Paulo Freire called for a pedagogy that “must be forged with, not for, the oppressed” (Freire 1971, 33). Noting that we are not simply working as *allies* with our students, but working “alongside” them, hip hop educator Brian Mooney echoes Freire’s concerns:

The term ‘ally’ while well intentioned, implies that the fight for justice belongs exclusively to someone else, the other, and that outsider may simply align themselves with the others’ cause through affiliation, but don’t possess any real stake in the struggle for freedom. This perspective is shortsighted because it doesn’t consider the notion that the oppressor is also harmed by all forms of oppression carried out in his name, against his brothers and sisters and countrymen and countrywomen. Oppression harms the oppressor and the oppressed. If white folks have benefited from our privileges at the expense of others (and we have), then consequently our freedom, dignity, and spiritual wholeness are compromised. I cannot be fully free in a country that awards me privileges at the expense of others (Mooney 2016, 5–6).

In Mooney’s testimony, I hear echoes of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s words: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” I also hear echoes of the “no justice, no peace” rally cry shouted by protesters across the globe wherever and whenever injustice occurs. In other words, if we (teachers, citizens) are not part of the solution, then we are part of the problem. While I am officially “retired” from my day-to-day teaching responsibilities, I continue to

reflect upon and write about how I, as an arts-integrationist educator, have worked, and will continue to work toward fostering empathy in students so that they may become aware and critical of racial and social injustices in whatever forms they take.

In his article “Multiculturalism, Race, and the Public Interest: Hanging on to Great-Great-Grand-daddy’s Legacy,” leading multicultural educator and author Carl Grant writes about what he sees as the central issue surrounding the state of multiculturalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Grant asserts, it is the lingering and persistent problem of race and racism, and the fact that the “struggle between the democratic ideals of the country and the United States Constitution and the affirmation of those ideals” is still not reconciled (Grant, 2006, 159).

Writing post-Hurricane Katrina and the devastation left in its wake, Grant describes how race was on display in New Orleans, “floating and wading in the water and standing on the rooftops.” Recalling the slow response to African American flood victims and the following silence and/or “superficial” public discussion about it, Grant looked to the future and asked, “[D]o you want to bet that we won’t be having this conversation?” Now, in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, amidst numerous killings of unarmed African American men and women at the hands of White police, the Trump administration’s overt attempts to disenfranchise thousands of voters in communities of color in the 2020 presidential election, *and* the violent and treasonous takeover of the U.S. capitol by a mob of White supremacists, the need for this conversation is all the more imperative.<sup>15</sup> As Grant warns, “[N]ot having conversations about race and racism will work in opposition to the public interest of *All Americans*” (160). And so, as a way forward, or a way to “get started,” this thesis presents and examines ways in which Black vernacular arts traditions can be utilized as tools for teaching freedom to *all students*.

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<sup>15</sup> For more on how Trump’s post-election attempts to discount thousands of votes disproportionately impacted large districts with high Black populations (including Dane and Milwaukee counties in Wisconsin), see NPR report: <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/24/938187233/trump-push-to-invalidate-votes-in-heavily-black-cities-alarms-civil-rights-group>. Also, see Atlantic Monthly for how “racially biased election laws” such as voter id laws, disproportionately impact communities of color: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/07/poll-pri-voter-suppression/565355/>. See Time Magazine: <https://time.com/5902729/black-voter-suppression-2020/>. For how the 2013 Supreme Court decision to overturn key provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and other Republican legislation has been aimed at suppressing the Black vote.

*Hard History & Resistance Stories*

In this section, I highlight some of the issues that arise when teaching the “hard history” of American enslavement and ongoing manifestations of racism in America. What follows are excerpts from a podcast conversation that Hasan Kwame Jeffries (2019) had with a group of teachers participating in an online *Teaching Tolerance* workshop called “Teaching Hard History in the Elementary Classroom: American Slavery.”<sup>16</sup> As part of their conversation, participants identified important issues and challenges framed in terms of the “pushback” they receive from either parents or administrators when teaching this “hard history.” To retain the power of their words, I am quoting these educators at length, thereby bringing their stories front and center. Jeffries initiated the discussion with this opening statement:

Talking with students about slavery can be emotional and complex... Teaching about slavery is challenging, especially in elementary school classrooms. Children encounter slavery in one form or another as soon as they begin school. It can be tempting to focus only on heroes and avoid explaining oppression. Our omissions speak as loudly as what we choose to include. What children learn in the early grades has broad consequences for the rest of their education. (Jeffries 2019).

Bria Wright, a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, addressed the frequently heard assumption that “we live in a post-racial society.” When confronted with this statement, Wright stated that she keeps an open mind and a willingness to have a dialogue:

I’ve had pushback sometimes where people are like, “Well, we are post-racial society.” I’m like, “Unfortunately, that’s not true. I can tell you specifically as a black woman, that’s 100 percent not true.” Those obstacles are hard but I always like to overcome them by helping parents or whoever understand we’re doing this to help students move forward (Wright, from Jeffries 2019).

In countering another complaint that students are too young, or not ready to grapple with the subject of American slavery, Wright asserts, “They’re ready for it. They’re experiencing these microaggressions, macro-aggressions... They’re experiencing racism, they’re seeing these things.” In addressing parents’ concerns, Wright states that she always “remains open” to dialogue about those

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.tolerance.org/podcasts/teaching-hard-history/american-slavery/in-the-elementary-classroom>.



concerns. A fellow podcast participant, 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher Marianne Dingle, also advocates for keeping lines of communication open, and inviting parents to the table:

There's a lot of different ways to get this done. I think what we absolutely shouldn't do is continue to be silent. We've got to at least try. I know it's cliché, but as they say, the children are the future. If we aspire to a better world, we've got to be able to trust the children with the truth (Dingle, from Jeffries, 2019).

Another issue for Wright is the concern from parents or administrators who want to make sure that teachers, in the process of teaching this history, are not “attacking anybody’s identity.” Wright affirms that the use of terms like “White,” and “Black” in the classroom is not racist and, moreover, that it’s not an issue about challenging anyone’s specific identities, but rather how these issues about race have “played out over time” (Wright from Jeffries 2019).

Dingle also raises the issue of the potential shame that some Black students might feel when discussing enslavement. Having experienced this feeling herself as a young girl, Dingle says that many Black children “have internalized shame around slavery,” which is “not their fault.” On this point, Dingle refers to “Essential Knowledge Lessons #14” and #15” from the Teaching Tolerance course: “Enslavers adopted and spread false beliefs about racial inferiority, including many that still impact us today,” and “In every place and time, enslaved people sought freedom.”

For Dingle, the key to countering potential feelings of shame or anger among her students is to focus on the ways in which Africans resisted and fought against slavery “in every place and time.” One way that she teaches this history of resistance is through music:

Resistance can take many different forms and, on the face, it may not look like resistance at all. One of the ways I want to teach the story of resistance and resilience is through music. I remember my parents always teaching me that. There were a lot of codes and messages that were embedded in Negro spirituals. I remember one, in particular, that spoke to me because I think maybe I had seen it as a child. Maybe I was watching *Roots* or something. It’s “Wade in the Water.” (Dingle, from Jeffries 2019)

What Dingle remembers most about this song is what her parents taught her about its coded message,

[T]hat if you are fact, trying to escape, that moment you see water, you should always go through it. You should wade in the water. That’s your ticket to liberation. Because when you go through water, your scent can’t be tracked by dogs. That just still sends

goosebumps through me. It's little things like that. The resistance, the intellectual that the enslaved people had, those things aren't really brought to the forefront (Jeffries 2019).

The “story of resistance,” Dingle continues, is

the one that doesn't get told...that's the story that impacts our kids the most.” When kids start to see themselves in ways that are powerful and they see themselves as intelligent and capable of resisting and capable of thinking their way out of problems, they begin to see their world and their circumstances differently. They begin to see themselves differently (2019).

Summing up Dingle's call for resistance, Jeffries states that teachers need to be teaching resistance because

...resistance really lets students and young people, especially students of color and African American children, see not only enslaved people in a different light but also see themselves in a different light. That is one of the great advantages of teaching this history in a way that is accurate and truthful (2019).

“*Counterstorytelling*,” King & Swartz & “*Follow the Drinking Gourd*”

What I find most compelling in the *Teaching Hard History* conversation is the emphasis on telling Black stories of resistance. Here, I reframe these stories as “counter stories,” or “counter narratives,” those narratives that counter “stock stories,” or “master scripts.” Now common within critical multicultural education discourse, the terms “stock stories” and “master scripts” are used to refer to curricular texts and pedagogies that perpetuate and maintain a White hegemonic narrative about race and race relations in the United States (or anywhere). In one of its first applications, critical race theorist Richard Delgado defines the term “stock stories” as those based in a “prevailing *mindset* by means of which members of the dominant group justify the world as it is, that is, with whites on top and browns and blacks at the bottom.” The “cure” for this prevailing mindset is storytelling, or as Delgado calls it, “counterstorytelling” (Delgado 1989, 2413).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In *Culturally Relevant Arts Education for Social Justice*, Bell, Desai, and Irani (2013, 16) define stock stories and counter-narratives within multiculturalism at large and within education: “Stock stories are the normalizing or hegemonic stories that support things as they are, promoted by mainstream institutions and media that rationalize and reinforce the status quo...Such stories provide a skewed picture of how race operates in the United States. These stories can be challenged, however, with counter-stories that bring in contradicting information and experiences and expand our understanding of how race operates.”

For critical multicultural educator and author Ellen Swartz, the term “master scripts” include those curricular texts that are informed by majoritarian, white hegemonic perspectives about African American culture and history. The phrase “re-writing the master script,” described here by Swartz more than twenty-five years ago is still relevant to multiculturalism in education today (1992, 341):

The current debate in public schools over curricular knowledge pits the constructed supremacy of Western cultural knowledge against the inherent primacy of multiple and collective origins of knowledge. Fundamentally, this debate...is a debate over emancipatory versus hegemonic scholarship and the maintenance or disruption of the Eurocentrically bound “master script” that public schools currently impart to their students.

In more recent publications (2014, 2016, 2018), King & Swartz have focused on re-writing or “re-remembering” African American history texts and pedagogy, with an Afrocentric focus. Regarding American slavery, they take issue with the “normative belief structure of race” that has “shaped the current grand narrative[s] that ‘silently’ position[]s African people as non-cultural beings in order to justify enslavement as normative” (King & Swartz 2016, 71, quoting Mills 1997; Wynter, 2000). Swartz & King target the “grand narratives” within social studies curricula and textbooks as scripts that “subtly, and not so subtly, serve to promulgate the dominance of the White mainstream” (2014, 141). Part and parcel of this curricula are narratives that frame the Black Holocaust as a necessary evil for the economic growth of a developing nation, mitigating the inhumanity of enslavement with bromides such as “while some slaves were treated badly, others were treated well” (2016, 66), or that slavery was a debatable issue, as in “some people agreed with the enslavement of African peoples and others did not” (2014, 141). King & Swartz question the very intentions of these grand narratives in curriculum (2016, ix-x).

Is the agenda also, while including some bits of accuracy of historical events, to minimize the specific instances of cruelty and vicious indignities under which African Americans have suffered, and are suffering, and are sometimes paralyzed? It is this exact specificity that gives clarity and meaning to the horrific experiences that must be faced and revisited with their current residue. The effort to protect the historical oppressor and to obscure the identity of his progeny is an issue. It allows a soft and more palatable existence to those who benefited from the past and seek to disassociate themselves from its most blatant acts of inequity.

Swartz & King’s call for more specificity and accuracy in history-telling parallels the previous *Teaching Tolerance* podcast conversation about stories of Black resistance. One of the ways that school texts soften the harsher realities of American enslavement is the notion that, with few exceptions (Harriet Tubman perhaps being the most widely taught), abolitionists were White (King & Swartz 2014, 71). One example of this type of text from my own practice is the song, “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” and a picture book of the same title, written and illustrated by Jeanette Winter (1988). This popular song and book are widely used by educators as a source for teaching about the history of the Underground Railroad.<sup>18</sup>

Winter’s picture book *Follow the Drinking Gourd* and the song itself narrate the real history of the Underground Railroad, along with the premise that Africans escaping bondage used the North star (on the handle of the Little Dipper, or “drinking gourd”) to guide them on their way to northern free states. Both song and story feature a man named “Peg Leg Joe,” as the central, heroic character. As a hired plantation hand, Peg Leg Joe would travel from plantation to plantation, singing the song as a signal that the time was right for freedom travelers to set out on their journey:

*When the sun comes back and the first quail calls  
Follow the drinking gourd,  
For the old man is a waiting for to carry you to freedom,  
Follow the drinking gourd*

While the song relays a generalized story of emancipation via the Underground Railroad, Winter’s picture book is focused on one family and their challenging journey north. The family’s courage and determination are evident in both the written and pictorial text, illustrating how they fight off hunger, cold, wild animals, and bounty hunters and their hounds. The problematic issue that surfaces, however,

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<sup>18</sup> As per James B. Kelley (2008, 1), “Follow the Drinking Gourd” and its coded message “has widespread currency in American mass media and formal education today.” The song is described as a coded signal for enslaved people to escape bondage in a 1928 essay by H.B. Parks, cited in B.A. Botkin’s, *A Treasury of Southern Folklore: Stories, Ballads, Traditions, and Folkways of the People of the South* (1949, 470; 476–478). Kelley finds Park’s history on “Follow the Drinking Gourd” in Rall, Gloria D. “The Stars of Freedom.” *Sky & Television* 89.2 (February 1995, 36–38). Kelley is dubious of both Park’s and Rall’s interpretations of the song’s coded message and history, and advocates for a wider interpretation of the song’s meaning.

is that those who help along the way (Peg Leg Joe, a farm boy who brings the travelers a sack of food, and the Quaker family in the safe house), are all White.

In a critique of Winter's picture book, Horning (1989) describes what she sees as a "disempowering presentation of five fugitive slaves who escape slavery by passively following the plans of a white man." The phrase, "Joe had a plan," is repeated throughout the book, reinforcing the idea that the quest for Black freedom originated with Whites, "instead of with the people who were living the horror of slavery," and that Blacks relied upon "benevolent whites, rather than on their own thoughts, ideas, and decisions" (Horning 1989, 95). According to Tejumola Ologboni, a.k.a. "Teju the Storyteller" (whom I formally introduce in Chapter Two), the story makes it appear that Africans escaping slavery "didn't know which way was north." (Personal interview, Ologboni, 2016).

This story of *Follow the Drinking Gourd* is but one example of how teaching the hard facts of African American history *is*, as Jeffries noted, *hard*. On one level, the story illustrates the real history that there were Whites, before and after the Civil War, who believed that the institution of slavery needed to be abolished. On another level, it reinforces what Swartz & King refer to as the "erasure" of the dominant, as opposed to subordinate, role that Black men and women played in the abolition movement (King & Swartz 2014, 71). If teachers implement *Follow the Drinking Gourd* without telling the stories of Black abolitionists, Harriet Tubman and others as well, students are left with the impression that Whites were the movement's orchestrators and conductors. Even among the Quakers who are typically thought to have been anti-slavery, abolitionists were the exception rather than the rule (K&S 2016, 211; see also Jordan 2004).

Other stories must be told. Early in my teaching career, the parent of one of my 3<sup>rd</sup> grade African American students gave me her well-worn copy of Winter's *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, and I began sharing it with all my classes. Through repeated readings, I became uncomfortable with the history that the story was leaving out, and so introduced the song "Harriet Tubman" to my students. Written by Walter Robinson in 1977, this song was brought to a wider audience in the 1980s by political and feminist singer song-writers Holly Near and Ronnie Gilbert. The ballad illustrates that Tubman was a

leader and conductor on the Underground Railroad and that the “train” was hers, not Peg Leg Joe’s.

Here’s the refrain, from the *Share the Music* curriculum 5<sup>th</sup> grade textbook, (Bond, Judy et al. 144):

*Singing come on up, I got a lifeline  
Come on up to this train of mine  
Come on up, I got a lifeline  
Come on up to this train of mine  
She said her name was Harriet Tubman  
And she drove for the underground railroad*

Over the years, I have shared stories about Harriet Tubman, William Still, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglas with my students. Through picture books, videos, and music they have learned a fuller story of the Underground Railroad from the perspective of these Black abolitionists. I have shared other versions of “Follow the Drinking Gourd” where Peg Leg Joe is a Black man, and there are no White folks waiting to carry anyone to freedom.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, I have been compelled to make students aware that there were White, Quaker abolitionists such as Levi Coffin (1778–1897) and others like him who fought along with their Black compatriots to provide freedom travelers with safe harbor on the Underground Railroad (Jordon, 2004). My students and I have read Henry’s *Freedom Box*, in which White and Black freedom fighters worked together to facilitate Henry Brown’s successful escape north in a shipping crate in the mid-1880s (Levine, E. 2007). Faith Ringgold’s *Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky* (1992) illustrates how White abolitionists assisted Harriet Tubman, and in the wordless story book *Unspoken* (Cole, 2012), a young White girl, without telling a soul, feeds a freedom traveler who has taken refuge in the barn on her family’s farm. These stories can provide hope for White students, too, and empower them to work with people and for causes that fight for social and racial justice.

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<sup>19</sup> An African American “Peg Leg Joe” appears briefly in the “Follow the Drinking Gourd” animation film, at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pw6N\\_eTZP2U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pw6N_eTZP2U). Virginia Hamilton’s “Carrying the Runaways” tells the real-life story of a former captive named Arnold Gragston that helped carry freedom seekers across the Ohio River (1993, 141–45). In the *Rabbit Ears Entertainment Inc.*, animated film “Follow the Drinking Gourd, a White “Peg Leg Joe,” works with Black freedom fighters to help a family escape enslavement. Morgan Freeman narrates, and Taj Mahals provides the musical accompaniment (voice and guitar).

## Part II: Methodological Inspirations, Alignments & Expansions

### *Anti-racist, Critical, and Emancipatory Education*

The Afrocentric, anti-racist focus for my pedagogy of potlikker aligns with several current critical educational frameworks and practices. While these methodologies are subsumed under different headings and disciplines, they share common and interrelated educational goals and concepts. I will outline them here, pointing to intersections where my subject finds resonance, and where I have found encouragement in developing an Afrocentric, anti-racist curriculum nestled in narratives and stories. Areas where my project either extends or can be applied to these theoretical paradigms will be highlighted, beginning here with an overview of critical multicultural theory and research within the domain of multicultural education.

Critical theory “began in Germany before WWII, connected a Marxist analysis of the social class structure with psychological theories of the unconscious to understand how oppressive class relations are produced and then reproduced” (Sleeter & Grant 2009, 201). Critical and emancipatory theories in multicultural education have been put into practice within a variety of rubrics and nomenclature, and across disciplines including, but not limited to, critical pedagogy (Freire, 1971), critical multicultural education (Banks, et al. 1996; May 1999; May & Sleeter 2010), critical emancipatory multiculturalism (McCarthy, 1994), multicultural social justice education (Sleeter & Grant 2009), critical race theory (CRT) (Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings 1994, 2009, 2017), Africana critical theory (Rabaka 2007, 2011), and critical folklore (Hamer 2000).

In his summary of multiculturalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, McCarthy (1994) offers a critical review of multicultural perspectives that contributed to promoting “racial tolerance and sensitivity toward the history and culture of culturally diverse groups composing the United States,” and that have worked toward a “solution to racial antagonism and minority underachievement in schooling” (1994, 81). Though variants of multicultural education discourse have differed in emphasis, it is “generally the

case that their proponents attach an enormous significance to the role of attitudes in the reproduction and transformation of racism” (McCarthy 1994, 86).

McCarthy identifies three common multiculturalist agendas. While he considers them laudable, he concludes that each fall short of the need for more critical approaches to curricular reform. These agendas include the “cultural understanding” approach (as in “we are different, but we’re all the same”), and the “cultural competence” approach which has led to adding bilingual and ethnic studies programs. This cultural competence approach is “based on pluralist values that would help to ‘build bridges’ between America’s different minority groups,” particularly Native Americans and Latinos. In such programs, all students can gain cultural competencies, which would ostensibly “contribute to reduced racial antagonism between majority and minority students” (McCarthy 1994, 86).

McCarthy describes the third multiculturalist agenda as “discourses of cultural empowerment.” He points to the many studies by multicultural education scholars who suggest that “knowledge about minority history and cultural achievements would reduce the dissonance and alienation from academic success that centrally characterize minority experiences in schooling” (1994, 86). McCarthy, somewhat tentatively, lauds this approach, noting that it “goes somewhat further than the previous two approaches in suggesting that a reformist multicultural curriculum can boost the school success and economic futures of minority youth” (86). His final word, though, is that in adding these programs to school curriculum, educators place too much faith in the “redemptive qualities of the educational system” (86).

McCarthy’s critique is not that these approaches are without merit but that they are “additive,” in so far as they add content to the dominant curriculum without “questioning or challenging the content that is already there” (1994, 87). Moreover, they do not go far enough in providing “adequate theories or solutions to the problem of racial inequality in schooling” (87). Drawing on the work of Connell (1987) and Freire (1971), McCarthy makes a case for a more critical approach to multiculturalism, what he calls “a second strategy,” a critical and emancipatory multiculturalism aimed at “reconstructing the dominant curriculum—which we now know legitimates the experiences and practices of the white middle class” (McCarthy 1994, 98):



A critical approach to multicultural reform must make salient connections between knowledge and power. Such an approach would bring the entire range of traditional and contemporary arrangements within schools, and between schools and communities, into focus for reexamination with a view toward transformation.

The call for a more critical pedagogy is made by other prominent scholars and leaders in multicultural education. In *Making Choices for Multicultural Education, Five Approaches to Race, Class, and Gender*, Sleeter & Grant (2009) chronicle both the successes and shortcomings of five multicultural methodologies that have been in practice since the late 60s and early 70s. In this seminal work, Sleeter & Grant offer numerous examples of how teachers and students can deepen their understanding of all forms of discrimination, including those based on race, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and disability, and counteract them. While their aim is for future educators to assess the pros and cons of the approaches, Sleeter & Grant present a “multicultural social justice education” orientation as a final, crucial phase within the trajectory for multicultural education (2009, 229). Education for social justice helps students examine the current racial and social issues that impact their lives, or that will impact them in the future, so that they can become active participants in social change (2009, 234).

In searching for a place to hang my own theoretical hat, I have found resonance with three interrelated, educational approaches germane to my specific goals in working toward a critical, Afrocentric, and emancipatory pedagogy of potlikker narratives. These approaches include African “heritage knowledge” (advanced by King & Swartz), Folk Arts in Education (FAIE), and critical race theory (CRT) in education. As an Afrocentric extension of CRT, I include Africana critical theory, as developed by Reiland Rabaka (2007, 2011). My pedagogy of potlikker finds common ground with these applications in that they are, fundamentally, about telling stories that have the capacity to speak truth to power. As burgeoning practices in the field of education, these domains point to new pathways for critical pedagogies in 21<sup>st</sup> century schooling.

### *African Heritage Knowledge*

As mentioned, King & Swartz (2014, 2016, 2018) advocate for including African “heritage knowledge” as a form of counter narrative to the White hegemonic, stock stories about Black history, American enslavement, in particular. Counter narratives are needed because the “grand narrative of slavery provides no reference to how people retained African practices as well as how they created new cultural forms and continuities that have sustained them in the Americas” (2016, 71). Drawing upon African cultures including, but not limited to, the ancient Songhay civilization of West Africa, the Kemetic cultures of ancient Egypt (2014, 2018), and the seven principals of Kwanza (2014, 2016), King & Swartz have developed a pedagogy of “culturally informed curricular practice.” Within this practice, they identify key concepts such as “inclusion, representation, accurate scholarship, indigenous voice, critical thinking, and a collective humanity” (2014, 14). Heritage knowledge is valuable because “despite much damaging cultural loss...our lives continue to be shaped and informed by African epistemology, whether we are aware of the Africanness of these connections or not.” (King & Swartz 2018, 74).

Although King & Swartz focus on social studies and history lessons, African oral arts traditions are woven into their curricula, most specifically in the form of proverbs, Trickster tales, and the art of Signifying (2016, 50–53; 2018, 66–75). For example, in *Heritage Knowledge in the Curriculum* (2018, 72–73), King & Maiga create a lesson illustrating the correlations between the Songhay Trickster tale, “The Hyena, the Monkey, and the Rabbit,” and the African American toast ballad “The Signifying Monkey.” These stories allow students to “experience the epistemological lineage connecting African folktales to ‘African American street poetry’ as a bridge to hip hop” (72). Through these Signifying forms, students can begin to “think critically about challenges many of them are negotiating in their neighborhood and at school—in particular, fighting when they think someone has ‘dissed them’” (King & Maiga 2018, 74).

In framing traditional oral arts as educative tools, King & Swartz strike another chord that resonates with me, that being how on both Africa and North America, oral art forms aid in the educative process

of learning “what it means to be a human and a person” (2018, 74). On this point, I am reminded of Ghanaian educator and scholar E.Y. Egblewogbe’s (1975, 21) insights as to traditional, oral education among the Ewe of Ghana:

Traditionally, education constitutes the "making of a child to become what society accepts as a person, or human being." Thus, traditional educational goals among northern and southern Ewe in Ghana are reflected in the way that society assesses individual character. A well-behaved or properly socialized person is referred to as *ewo ame* or *enye ame*, meaning "he or she makes him/herself a person" or "he or she is a person," respectively. Conversely, one who behaves contrary to the rules of society is referred to as an animal: *edzo la* or *enye la* (he is an animal, i.e., a fool), or *dzimakple* (born but not bred, i.e., ill bred).

In King & Swartz, I find alignment, as well as encouragement, in developing an Africanist pedagogy that can teach toward freedom and social justice. My thesis expands upon these authors’ work by including a broader range of Black vernacular arts practices and framing each of them within their historical and socio-political contexts. King and Swartz draw significantly from East African and Songhay traditions to bring an awareness of African oral arts retentions in the US. In a similar vein, and drawing from my MA (2006) research, I point to corollary practices within ethnic groups that live along the Guinea coast of West Africa, including the Ewe and Akan of Ghana, as well as neighboring Yoruba and Fon peoples in Togo, Benin, and Nigeria.<sup>20</sup>

Looking to specific West African epistemes, I draw correlations between the sacred-secular origins of Tricksters and their American counterparts, most specifically High John de Conquer and Brer Rabbit. The sacred roots of these Signifying Tricksters have direct bearing on their functionality within traditional West African cosmological ontology in which the divine and secular realms of existence are not easily separated, and in which traditional forms of arts expressions are integral. My MA research on

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<sup>20</sup> Among these groups, the Ewe, Fon (Adja), and Yoruba show the closest linguistic and cultural ties (Akinjobin 1971, 305). Avorgbedor (2005, 197–98) points to ceremonial, religious and musical corollaries between the Ewe and Yoruba peoples. Scholars generally point to the ancient Oyo kingdom of present-day Nigeria, sometime between the 14th and 15th centuries as the point migration for Ewe, Adja, Fon, and Ga-Adangme cultural groups, beginning sometime in the 14th century (Amenumey 1986, 20, 13, 103; Fage 1966, 28–29; Amoaku 1976, 86–88; Verdon 1983, 23). For linguistic and other cultural ties between Ewe and Yoruba groups, see: Greene 2000, 87–101; Nukunya 1992, 61; Anyidoho 1983, 93; Gilbert 1982, 64; Akinjobin 1965, 311 & 1971, 305; and Murdock 1959, 245.

the Anlo Ewe song form known as *halo* (big song), and other verbal arts, such as proverbs, riddles, and “naming,” also bring to bear the role and function of Signifying on both continents.<sup>21</sup> My intention for this level of specificity is to avoid making overly generalized assumptions about the roots of Africanisms in Black American vernacular art forms. Along with examples of African retentions offered by King & Swartz, and others (e.g., Hurston 1990, Levine 1977; Stuckey 1987, 1993; Mintz & Price 1976 (1992, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition); and Gates 1988, 2015), my references to the Guinea Coast cultures provide additional support for the veracity of Africanist retention theories in Black vernacular arts and their applications in schools.

In my analysis of African retentions in Black oral arts traditions, I apply what cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, 6) refers to as a “thick description” of these art forms in their cultural contexts. Delving into the deep structures of Black oral traditions from these locales provides the necessary cultural contexts from which to locate my pedagogy of potlikker in its proper Afro-centered and emancipatory context. In doing so, I hope to encourage teachers to look beyond the color-blind, race-neutral mindset towards teaching students of color that, while emerging from a well-intentioned anti-racist agenda, ironically disengage teachers from attending to culture and cultural histories, both of their students and their own.

What I suggest is that by using a “thick,” contextual, and transdisciplinary lens, we teachers (all of us) can be in a better position to envision and value African American students and families as inheritors of a rich and ancient cultural heritage that was carried from the shores of Africa, nourished, and sustained by Africans under American enslavement, and is still thriving in African American life today. Priya Parmar’s (2007, 133) remarks on the need for well-informed educators in the context of hip

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<sup>21</sup> The use of verbal arts to insult, criticize, and make social commentary, is widespread throughout the African continent is noted by Levine (1977, 9–10): “Utilization of verbal art through this purpose was widespread throughout Africa and was not confined to these ceremonial occasions when one could directly state one’s feelings. Through innuendo, metaphor, and circumlocution the Ashanti, Dahomeans, Chopi, Ibo, Ewe, Yoruba, Jukun, Bashi, Tiv, Hausa, and other African peoples could utilize their songs as outlets for individual release without disturbing communal solidarity.”

hop curriculum applies equally well to all forms of Black orature, that “cultural workers must be knowledgeable, well-informed, and respectful of the history of these cultural and artistic forms for their inclusion in the classroom to be effective.”

Ultimately, I am in accordance with King & Swartz who see African heritage curriculum as the “restoration of the African mind” and a move toward “Pan-African humanness” (2018, 74). From their perspective, heritage knowledge “permits us to recover our historical and cultural consciousness,” which is “essential to mastery of self, an important function of education” (75). In his preface to the King & Swartz volume, “*Re-Remembering*” *History in Student and Teacher Learning* (2014), Molefi Kete Asante writes that while many educators will accept the authors’ African heritage curriculum as “something that is true on face value,” others may assess their contributions as nothing more than a “feel good story.” On this point, I agree with Asante (2014, xi), who writes that there is nothing wrong with making students “feel good” about themselves if

events, personalities, and communities that were locked out of the American narrative are now in place. What I have seen in education is that students are struck in a positive way by the magnetic force of culture, and they are repelled when something is negative about culture.

What I have seen in my classrooms are the many and varied ways that Black (and White) students respond positively to lessons that reflect African heritage and history. I have seen increased readiness for students to write and perform rap and blues lyrics, learn about jazz and improvisation, and in their willingness to give up recess to join the Ghanaian *Kpanlogo* dance and drumming club. I have witnessed typically reticent students join in singing freedom and protest songs, and then eagerly raise their voices in discussions about the civil rights movement and Jim Crow laws.

In 2020, one of my Kindergarten classes and I were singing “Sing About Martin” in honor of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., when we were joined by an African American 4<sup>th</sup> grader who had been listening in the hallway. Usually silent among his peers during his own music period, he became a leader and teacher in front of this class of Kindergarteners, sharing everything he knew about Dr. King.

Again, I defer to Asante who asserts that a culturally relevant curriculum can help to connect students to their prior knowledge, and to lessons that have meaning for them in their lives:

When we are confronted with limited achievement, lack of motivation, and inadequate creativity, we must examine the structure of our curriculum, question the imposition of the mythic vision of a monocultural society, and revise the social studies narrative of the United States. It is inevitable that we will become less successful if we do not have a culturally relevant curriculum (Asante 2014, x).

In concert with Asante, bell hooks (2003, 69) suggests that Black people can “create positive self-esteem” by resisting white hegemonic scripts in a society where everyone is “socialized to varying degrees to hate and fear ‘blackness.’” For hooks, it is imperative that Black parents (and, I would add, all teachers) provide Black children with “positive images that counter the representations imposed by the dominant culture of whiteness” (2003, 70). hooks’s call for creating positive self-esteem aligns with Laing (2013, 177) and other Africanist-centered arts educators who advocate for a curriculum that assists, rather than impedes “Black children’s capacity for imagining a bright future for themselves and the world” (Laing 2013, 177). Laing suggests that the idea of “bonding cultural capital” through the arts means Black students come to know that to be a part of Black culture is to “be part of something that is both beautiful and complex” (2013, 181, 183). As hooks reminds us, “The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it’s to imagine what is possible” (Sheppard 2013, 154 quoting hooks). For my part, I will continue to advocate for a curriculum in which students can critically engage in conversations in which they see Black Americans living out lives of artistic beauty *and* resistance, past and present.

### *Folk Arts in Education*

My pedagogy of potlikker includes Black vernacular arts traditions typically considered within the domain of oral folklore. Part of the recent discourse within the educational wing of folklore studies (Folk Arts in Education, or FAIE) centers around the ways that “folklore,” including folk arts, folkways, or folklife customs, can be promoted as part of a current critical, multiculturalist pedagogy. In their collection of real-life stories among local, subaltern communities, Webber & Mullen (2011,

215) recognize that “the stuff of folklore does tend to be fundamentally counterhegemonic, a push back against grand narratives.” At the same time, they lament that there has been relatively little attention to folklore and storytelling as counter-hegemonic practice (2011, 215):

Scholars in the human sciences would do well to attend to individual storytellers and their rhetorical strategies, as well as the contents and contexts of the narratives, in order to understand their counterhegemonic dimensions. By contrast, for approximately the last two hundred years folklorists have paid attention to both the literary and sociopolitical questions raised by stories.

In her article, “Folklore in Schools and Multicultural Education: Towards Institutionalizing Noninstitutional Knowledge,” Lynn Hamer (2000) makes the similar case that folklore, as “noninstitutional knowledge” presents folklorists and educators the opportunity to build on theoretical approaches of concern to critical multiculturalism, “especially restructuring institutional practices and fostering students’ development as active participants in society” (2000, 47). In her efforts to dispel the notion that folklore is only about “woven baskets, family stories, and pieced quilts,” Hamer presents a review of published literature documenting the extent to which FAIE practitioners implement folklore in pedagogy, specifically in relation to the five approaches to multiculturalism outlined by Sleeter & Grant (1988, 2009). Of these, Hamer found that the “human relations” approach, e.g., “respect for oneself and others, positive relationships, and elimination of stereotypes,” was most commonly and explicitly (2000, 49) practiced. Hamer’s findings also showed, however, that that FAIE practitioners tended to avoid concerns central to critical multiculturalism, particularly concerning race, and gender (Hamer 2000, 50). With this assessment, Hamer offers the following warning from Hansen (1990, 4) that

Racism and sexism, themselves, embody folk beliefs passed on through tradition. People learn many valuable lessons through tradition, but they can also learn prejudice from some traditions. The knowledgeable student of folklife cannot look at traditions through rose-colored glasses (Hansen 1990, 4).

With this admission, Hamer looks to FAIE work that goes beyond “celebrating sameness and difference,” to “look at what happens in folklore at the borders of groups, as well as institutionalized racism.” She cites Wigginton, who advocates for giving students an “ethical yardstick, against which to

measure their traditions” (Hamer 2000, 50 quoting Wigginton (1991/1992). Such an awareness is important because “non-critical folk arts in some ways may be as bad as no folk arts at all. Silence and failure to acknowledge some of the harder issues can lead to superficial understanding and may actually reinforce stereotypes rather than challenge them” (Hamer 2000, 50 quoting Kodish, 1996, 5).

Hamer also found commonalities with FAIE and Sleeter and Grant’s multicultural social reconstructionism (Sleeter & Grant 1988: 211) or “multicultural social justice education” (Sleeter & Grant 2009: 229). While Hamer found common ground between FAIE and McCarthy’s (1994) critical emancipatory multiculturalism, she observed that the author provided few specific examples of how to apply it in schools (Hamer 2000, 55). Within these critical frameworks, Hamer lauds the many examples in FAIE literature of folksongs, oral histories, and other genres that “include references to social injustice in the past as well as continuing inequities in the present.” In my assessment, I agree with Hamer’s assertion that critical folklore initiatives in education are “taking place in small, isolated, and largely unrecognized FAIE initiatives” and that these agendas are in operation across the nation (2000: 55, 56). Bowman (2006) provides a similar assessment, citing the many community-based FAIE projects being carried out in communities across the country.<sup>22</sup>

In the context of a critical folklore, I submit that a pedagogy of potlikker can contribute to the many culturally relevant, critical educational initiatives within FAIE. As noted, my application of the term “vernacular” to the entirety of the Black arts traditions contained within these chapters places these traditions within a critical pedagogical framework. For me, it requires a slight shift to the “left of center,” by teaching folklore that includes narratives that push back against and resist racism. This opens the window for folklore to become part of a critical race theory (CRT) agenda.

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<sup>22</sup> As one of the exemplary models for this work, Bowman (2006, 72–73) highlights the “Hmong Cultural Tour” project carried out by retired 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher Mark Wagler of Madison, Wisconsin in collaboration with the UW-Madison Center for Upper Midwestern Cultures, and Wisconsin Teachers of Local Culture (WTLC). For more on this and other cultural tours within WTLC coordinated by Wagler and folklorists Anne Pryor, and Ruth Olson, see: <https://wtlc.csumc.wisc.edu/>, “Teacher-Led-Projects.”



### *Critical Race Theory*

The practice of critical race theory (CRT) began with “legal scholars of color who were concerned that critical theory gave far too little attention to race” (Sleeter & Grant 2009, 201). These scholars subsequently turned their legal lens toward “the relationship between race, racism, and power” (Sleeter & Grant, 201 quoting Delgado & Stefanic, 2001, 2). The issue of race relations in the US then became the crucial element in the birth of CRT which “arrived as a response to what had been deemed a sputtering civil rights agenda in the United States” (Cummings 2010, 499). To these definitions, I am adding Rabaka’s take on the historical imperative for CRT in law discourse and practice (Rabaka 2011, 17):

Contemporary critical race theory, which could be defined as *anti-racist praxis-promoting theory critical of the ways in which white supremacy impacts institutions and individuals* has its origins in the work of several civil rights lawyers in the early 1980s... Non-white legal scholars, in complete agreement that law is non-neutral, criticized the mostly white male leaders of the CLS [Critical Legal Studies] movement for failing to recognize and critically theorize the crucial role and continued relevance of race in social and political interactions and institutions. Their work was quickly recognized as *critical race theory*, and they called themselves *critical race theorists*.

### *CRT in Education*

In a paper presented at the 1994 American Education Research Association (AERA), Gloria Ladson Billing and William Tate noted the “intersection of race and persistent educational inequity,” and then challenged scholars to “examine more closely the ways that seemingly race-neutral policies and practices served to reinforce and reify education inequity” (Dixson et al., 2017, 1). This challenge brought CRT to the attention of educators. For my part, I am drawn to CRT because it is focused on stories and narratives. CRT scholars use “storytelling, narrative, autobiography, and parable as a way to expose and challenge social constructions of race.” Thus, CRT “makes use of the experience of people negatively affected by racism as a central validating data point” (Taylor 2009, 8). In the words of Edward Taylor, this use of personal, experiential narratives allows CRT to “embrace[] this subjectivity of perspective and openly acknowledge[] that perceptions of truth, fairness, and justice reflect the

mindset of the knower” (2009, 8). Derrick A. Bell similarly attests to this aspect of CRT writing and lecturing and goes on to emphasize the power that those first person narratives have in promoting societal change (1995, 907):

The narrative voice, the teller, is important to critical race theory in a way not understandable by those whose voices are tacitly deemed legitimate and authoritarian. The voice exposes, tells and retells, signals resistance and caring, and reiterates what kind of power is feared most – the power of commitment to change.

All too often, standard stock stories typically used in school curricula tell sanitized versions of African American history, including the depiction of Rosa Parks as a “tired seamstress instead of a long-time participant in social justice endeavors,” or Martin Luther King as a “sanitized folk hero,” rather than a “disdained scholar and activist who extended social justice causes around the world and who challenged the USA on issues of economic injustice and aggression in Southeast Asia” (Ladson-Billings 2009, 29). Another issue concerning “master scripts,” or stock stories is what Ladson-Billings refers to as “race-neutral,” or “color blind” perspectives taught in schools that presume a “homogenized ‘we’ in the celebration of diversity” (2009, 29):

This perspective embraces a so-called multicultural perspective by ‘misequating the middle passage with Ellis Island’ (King 1992, 327). Thus, students are taught erroneously that ‘we are all immigrants,’ and, as a result, African American, Indigenous, and Chicano students are left with the guilt of failing to rise above their immigrant status like ‘every other group.’”

Their remains a need for further CRT scholarship in the educational domain. As summed up by Dixon, Anderson & Donner in *...All God’s Children Got a Song*:

Racism is still a pervasive part of the American landscape. It is, therefore, important for CRT scholars in education to tell these counter-stories as a means to challenge the story of white supremacy. Thus, despite roots that go back to the origins of this country, we are singing a new song (2017, 5–6).

This reference to song in *...All God’s Children Got a Song* is not mere rhetorical gesture. Beginning with Derrick Bell (1995), CRT has been equated with African American spirituals. Here, Bell offers two similarities between them:

Comparing critical race theory writing with the Spirituals is an unjustified conceit, but the essence of both is quite similar: to communicate understanding and reassurance to needy souls trapped in a hostile world. Moreover, the use of

unorthodox structure, language, and form to make sense of the senseless is another similarity (Bell 1995, 910).

Bell, and Dixon et al. each point to the relevance of coding, or double messaging in African American spiritual. The songs are Signifying texts that referred simultaneously to a spiritual, heavenly “hereafter” and a mundane emancipation from oppression and bondage here on earth (Dixon et al. 2017, 2). Dixon, Anderson, and Donner show that when placed in their historical context, spirituals can become vehicles to combat current manifestations of continued racist attitudes and practices in US society.

As we noted...the similarities between CRT and spirituals are not surprising. The persistence of racism and the institutionalized threats to persons of color continue to reinforce the hostility of an ‘unfriendly world.’ A decade after the first edition of this book, we reiterate the relevance of the language of the spirituals to contemporary analyses of race and racism in the United States (2017, 2).

Hip hop scholar Andre Cummings draws similar connections between CRT and rap music, noting that practitioners in both areas share a desire to bring people’s real experiences to the attention of the public. He equates hip hop as politically and historically on par with CRT:

While these two movements seem significantly separated by presentation, arena, and point of origin, they share startling similarities. Among the many similarities between Critical Race Theory and hip hop, include the use of narrative in response to racism and injustice in a post-civil rights era, a fundamental desire to give voice to a discontent brewed by silence, and a dedication to the continuing struggle for race equality in the United States (Cummings 2010, 500).

There is some concern that CRT scholarship “focus[es] on storytelling to the exclusion of the central idea such stories purport to illustrate” and at the expense of “more detailed stories that place out stories in more robust and powerful contexts” (Ladson-Billings in Dixon, et al., 2017, ix). In response to Ladson-Billing’s concern, I can report that in my classroom practice, I place spirituals and freedom songs squarely in their social and political contexts as songs laden with double meaning and protest whether sung in church or in civil rights movement marches. Similarly, freedom songs like “Back of the Bus,” set the context for learning about Rosa Parks’ life of political activism, and her acts of resistance

that sparked the Montgomery bus boycott which, in turn, led to the dismantling of the laws of segregation (Smitherman 1994, 29).

Both CRT and critical multicultural education scholars recognize the need for further scholarship in the application of CRT in school pedagogy and curriculum. May and Sleeter (2010), for example, point to the need for further development of the application of CRT in schools, as well as the need for CRT to embrace other expressions of social racism, including religious bias towards Muslims (2010, 8–9). These authors also note that in 2005 – ten years after the Ladson-Billings/Tate presentation at the 1995 AERA meeting – Ladson-Billings wrote that while CRT “remained in its infancy,” at the same time, it was also a “theoretical treasure – a new scholarly covenant, if you will, that we as scholars are still parsing and moving towards a new exegesis” (May & Sleeter 2010, 8 quoting Ladson-Billings 2005, 119).

### *Africana Critical Theory*

As part of his extensive research on hip hop and its predecessors (spirituals, the blues), Reiland Rabaka has reframed CRT within a more singular, Africanist perspective that he has “humbly chronicled and called Africana critical theory” (2007, 8). Developed out of Africana studies, and deeply influenced by Pan-Africanist thinkers W.E.B Dubois and Franz Fanon, Rabaka uses his Africana critical theory as a jumping off point for incorporating the “life-worlds and lived-experiences of continental *and* diasporan Africans” (2007, 9). Rabaka’s Africana critical theory, as he frames it, is necessary to counter and challenge the “physical and psychological colonization,” that African people have endured and that they

have been systematically socialized and ideologically educated to view and value the world, and to think and act employing a European imperial *modus operandi*... Africana critical theory, quite simply, does not privilege or give priority to European and/or other cultural groups’ thought traditions since its philosophical foci and primary purpose revolves around the search for solutions to the most pressing social and political problems in continental and diaspora African life-worlds and life-struggles in the present age (Rabaka 2011, 31).

Rabaka's Africana critical theory is not wholly different from the goals of CRT proponents, barring its singular focus on African diaspora philosophy and experience in the United States. Indeed, Africana critical theory is synonymous with the five guiding principles for CRT in educational theory as outlined by Solorzano & Yosso (2009). These precepts include, "intercentricity" of race with other forms of oppression, challenging dominant ideologies, a commitment to social justice, privileging experiential knowledge, and a transdisciplinary focus (Solorzano & Yosso 2009, 132–134). While these precepts are of equal importance, transdisciplinarity, in my view, is what binds them together.

With regard to transdisciplinarity, Solorzano & Yosso emphasize that CRT in education challenges ahistoricism and unidiscipline studies by placing race and racism in both historical and contemporary contexts, and by incorporating knowledge from a variety of fields including, but not limited to ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, and law. The end result is to "guide research that better understands the effects of racism, sexism, and classism on people of color" (2009, 134). Rabaka's Africana interpretation of transdisciplinarity casts an equally wide net that includes the humanities and the arts. In his analysis of "classical [historical] and contemporary continental diasporan thought and practice" (2007, 5), Rabaka (2011, 27) explains the role of transdisciplinarity in Africana studies:

...because Africana studies is a *transdisciplinary human science* – that is, *an area of critical inquiry that transgresses, transverses, and ultimately transcends the arbitrary and artificial academic and disciplinary borders and boundaries, the conflicted color lines and yawning racial chasms, and the jingoism and gender injustice of single phenomenon-focused, monodisciplinary disciplines, owing to the fact that at its best it poses problems and incessantly seeks solutions on behalf of the souls of black folk and other wretched of the earth employing the theoretic innovations of both the social sciences and the humanities as well as the political breakthroughs of grassroot and revolutionary social movements.*"<sup>23</sup>

The inclusion of women's studies and "gender injustice" in both CRT and Africana critical theory is of importance to my pedagogy of potlikker, particularly in relation to women jazz and blues singers, who, as my 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders discovered (see chapter seven, this thesis), had to face both racism and sexism in their professional lives. I agree with Rabaka (2012, 85) that these stories need to be told:

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<sup>23</sup> From Franz Fanon's book title, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968).

Whether one engages in the iconic artistry of Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday or Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin or Etta James, Cassandra Wilson or Erykah Badu, Me'Shell Ndegeocello or Amel Larrieux, what one is really being exposed to are the long-erased or long-ignored stories – the womanist signifying, testifying, and witnessing – that emerged from African American women's unique life-worlds and life-struggles.

I am greatly encouraged by both Rabaka and those CRT proponents who view transdisciplinarity as a crucial component in CRT and Africana critical theory. As I illustrate in my final chapter, it is within transdisciplinary, cross-curricular learning that a critical pedagogy of potlikker can be most successful. While Rabaka explores applications of his Africana critical theory in higher education, K–12 schooling has remained outside his area of focus.<sup>24</sup> Cummings (2010) has similarly aligned his hip hop research and praxis with CRT, but has not addressed how this union can be applied in primary and secondary educational settings. Such initiatives are, however, well documented by Hanley (2013), Mooney (2016), Swartz & King (2018), Lee (1993), Alim & Baugh (2007), and Love (2018), among others. In her PhD study on hip hop pedagogy, Marcella Runell Hall (2011, 123) highlights the relevance of hip hop education to CRT, writing that hip hop has always been about telling stories that “name one's own reality” (from Love, 2004), and “telling stories, in one's own voice, about one's own experience, regardless of how it makes other people feel, and without apology to people who may disagree with your version of truth” (Hall 2011, 123).

In the 2017 edition of *...All God's Children Got a Song*, Dixson and Anderson suggest that while CRT has been a success as an intellectual movement, its applications and benefits for practice in schools have not yet caught on. In other words, “we are STILL not saved.” (2017, 50). As part of a “new exegesis” for CRT, I propose that *all* forms of African American vernacular arts traditions presented in this thesis can be part of CRT in education. The Black vernaculars that I present within this pedagogy of potlikker have the capacity to tell stories that further serve to inculcate critically informed and engaged citizens, lawyers, educators, artists, congressman, senators, and presidents of the future.

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<sup>24</sup> See *Hip Hop's Amnesia* (2012) for Rabaka's insights on departments of African American Studies, Women's Studies, Global and International Hip Hop Studies, and other related departments in higher education.

*Recent Developments for CRT in Education*

Critical Race Theory in education has become a polarizing issue in current political debate. In a 2021 *Time* magazine article, Olivia Waxman highlights how opposition to CRT centers on the fear that teaching about systemic racism in the United States will serve only to “teach children to hate America or divide the nation by emphasizing our difference.”<sup>25</sup> Opponents of CRT further argue that using CRT in education is anti-White and that it will teach White children to feel guilty about their race. The issue has become a legal weapon as conservative legislatures and aligned advocacy groups believe that fighting critical race theory in education will be a “winning electoral message.”

Although focused on the Rockwood, Missouri school district, Waxman’s article highlights the issues in the CRT debate being played out in communities across the country. What stands out amidst the hyperbole are those parent and community voices who see CRT as a vehicle for promoting positive social change, not only for students but for their communities and the country. As one Rockwood parent asked, “As adults, if we can’t have these hard conversations, how can we possibly expect our children to?” This vision is explained by Terry Harris, the executive director of the Rockwood school district’s student services, and a proponent of CRT in Rockwood’s schools. Undaunted by personal threats from members of the community, Harris states, “We have to talk about the fact that race and racism is real and is a much of the fabric of America as apple pie or the Fourth of July or the Second Amendment...Just because that’s where we are doesn’t mean that’s where we have to be.”

Harris maintains that students often “have a better grasp” on what’s at stake than their parents do: “[The students] may not agree on everything, but they want to know the truth about how the U.S. got where it is today.” Commenting on the fears over CRT and racial divisiveness, Laura Pickett, a recently graduated Black high school student in the Rockwood district had this to say:

It’s actually more divisive to not want to be aware of anyone else’s history that’s different from your own...I was very afraid when I first heard about legislation trying to ban teaching on critical race theory and take away teaching on slavery and racism, because it seems as though it’s erasing who I am and my history (Waxman, 2021).

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<sup>25</sup> *Time Magazine*, June 24, 2021 (double issue July 5/July 12, The Politics of Teaching America’s Past).

In response to the push by Wisconsin Republicans to ban CRT in Wisconsin's schools, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* columnist James E. Causey (2021) echoes Pickett's concerns and reaffirms that the future of our country depends on an informed and educated citizenry:<sup>26</sup>

Over the decades, young people have played a critical role in changing society. Teaching critical race theory is one way to remind them of their responsibilities and inspire them to keep fighting. Whitewashing racism will not stop racism.

Causey's argument that an "age appropriate" CRT should be taught in Wisconsin schools raises further questions about what an CRT educational framework should look like (a line of questioning Causey does not pursue). Future debates over CRT may well center around what is taught and how. Can CRT proponents and teachers convince the naysayers that they, too, have a stake in ensuring a more equitable society? What training will educators be given to implement CRT in age-appropriate ways, and how can arts teachers be involved?

Returning to my central thesis regarding CRT, potlikker narratives can provide an age-appropriate window for students to enter hard history by helping them to understand what racism felt like from the perspective of those who have struggled against it in the past, and to foster empathy for those who are experiencing racism today. The future, however, depends on how we can engage in conversations about critical race theory in education. As the departing superintendent of Rockwood's school district Mark Miles reported, "I'm concerned as a fellow citizen that some have lost the ability to truly consider the perspective of another...That's the mark of an educated citizenry."

### *Qualitative Research, Narrative Inquiry & Transdisciplinarity*

As an ethnographic, historical, and integrated narrative arts endeavor, this thesis, in the broadest theoretical framework, is a qualitative and transdisciplinary narrative arts project. Drawing from Merriam & Tisdell's approaches to qualitative research, I would describe my study as both "pure" research in that it "contributes to a knowledge base" in a particular field (in this case, education), and

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<sup>26</sup> "Critical Race Theory Should be Taught in Schools," *Milwaukee Sentinel Journal*, Sept. 30, 2021.



“applied” research in that it contributes to a culturally and socially relevant curricular practice that works towards changing the curricular status quo (2015, 5). The potlikker narratives that I present in this study can be further articulated within what Merriam & Tisdell identify as “critical research,” or “critical inquiry” within a qualitative research paradigm (2015, 10):

A basic assumption of critical research is that “all thought is mediated by power relations that are historically and socially constructed” and that “Inquiry that aspires to the name ‘critical’ must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society (from Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011, 164)...It is a contrast between...a research that accepts the *status quo* and a research that seeks to bring about change” (from Crotty 1998, 113).

Early on in my research for this thesis, I came across Lora Bresler’s definition of narrative inquiry. I have found myself returning to this definition throughout my process of writing and thinking about Black vernacular arts as narratives. In “Embodied Narrative Inquiry: A Methodology of Connection,” Bresler (2006, 21) observes that the term “narrative” is an expansive one, defined and interpreted in a numerous ways including narrative as “discourse,” as “articulated personal meaning,” as a “mode of thinking,” as a “vehicle in the process of education,” and finally, as “story.” Bresler does not present these definitions as discreet concepts within narrative study, but rather as the ways in which narrative inquiry has been investigated and applied across disciplines including folklore studies, historical and sociological research, literary theory, and education (2006, 22). While Bresler’s applications for narrative inquiry focus on music and other art “objects,” her conception extends to all arts expressions. From her perspective, a narrative arts approach is a transdisciplinary endeavor because it incorporates stories as tools that teach beyond their discreet forms to make connections to the larger world (22):

... all forms of artistic expression – music, drama, dance, poetry, visual art, media – are ultimately forms of storytelling; they are articulation in which one describes overtly or implicitly “what is important,” presenting a view of the world and of oneself...the generative power of that connection is at the core of my conceptualization of narrative as an act of coming to understand the world empathetically exploring and negotiating polysemic meanings.

In *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, Riessman (2008, 17) describes the “narrative turn” in similar, transdisciplinary terms. She points out that it is found in every field and social science

disciplines, including folklore, sociolinguistics, communications, and sociology, that it is international, and does fit within the boundaries of any nation, and that it is “ripe for a detailed methodological inquiry.”

Within the transdisciplinary guidelines of both CRT and Africana critical theory, the role of potlikker narratives in schools can be part of a school curriculum that transcends curricular boundaries. From my position as an integrated arts educator, I am attuned to Bresler’s assertion that the arts articulate “what is important” in relation to the world and oneself, and that the arts can lead to an empathetic understanding of the world. I am likewise drawn to transdisciplinary arts educator Rosemary Johnston’s remarks about the unique place that the arts hold for transdisciplinary learning, that they are “not primarily concerned with their discipline per se, but what they express *beyond* the disciplinary constraints of their form and structures: ideas about critical *beingness* – versions of what it is to *be*” (Johnston 2008, 226). In a transdisciplinary pedagogy, education becomes much more than simply teaching skills, much more than “curricula crammed with an increasing diversity of subjects.” As Johnston frames it (26),

Education is *educatio*, bringing out, leading out, encouraging the development of physical and intellectual and spiritual potential; equipping with life skills; inspiring creative propinquities of thinking . . . It is connecting individuals to community, to *past* community, to *present* community, and to *future* community. It is also providing the means whereby individuals can connect with themselves, in both a linear historical sense and a horizontal geographical sense. It is process and content. The Delores Report to UNESCO (1996) met with mixed response, but it got this right: it sets in place four pillars as its foundations of education:

1. Learning to know
2. Learning to do
3. Learning to live together, learning to live with others
4. Learning to be.

Using this broader, transdisciplinary mode of thinking and teaching, a pedagogy of potlikker can stretch across disciplines to teach valuable historical realities and ways of “critical beingness” in the world.

*Literature Review & Potlikker Narratives from My Classrooms*

In gathering the repertoire for my pedagogy of potlikker, I have drawn from my own curriculum resources, and from numerous folkloric collections, anthologies, and other ethnographic and anthropological studies on African American culture and vernacular arts traditions. Several publications have aided my situating work songs, ring plays, ring shouts, and spirituals in their proper historical contexts: the Federal Writers Project's *Slave Narratives* (Federal Writers Project, 1976; Spencer et al., 2015); Frederick Douglass biographies (1845, 1855, 1882); Zora Neale Hurston's fieldwork (1935, 1990, 1999), and Roger Abrahams' book, *Singing the Master* (1992). The works of Sterling Stuckey (1987, 1993), Lawrence Levine (1977), Mintz & Price (1976). Alan Dundes (1990), Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1985, 1988), Gates & Tatar (2018), and Samuel Floyd (1995). These publications have proven to be invaluable resources, not only for locating specific songs, Trickster tales, and other Black vernacular texts, but for their contributions to establishing continuities of Africanisms in Black American vernacular traditions, most saliently, in the rhetorical art of Signifying. My understanding of how a pan-African culture was formed in the antebellum south – key to my understanding of African epistemes in all Afro-American vernaculars – has been significantly informed by Herskovits (1941), Stuckey (1987), Gomez (2005), Eltis (2000, 2010), and Rediker (2007). These authors, along with African language historians John K. Thornton (1998) and Paul Lovejoy (2000), dispel previously held notions of impermeable language barriers and cultural fixity by offering contemporary interpretations of a cultural “unity” among captive Africans hailing from various parts of western and central Africa.

My reading of Hurston's remarkable story of how the Trickster High John de Conquer followed the slaving ships across the Atlantic Ocean “like the albatross” led me to tracing this and other Afro-American Tricksters back to their West African roots, to the Tricksters Eshu Elegbara and Ananse, the Spider (Akan). Gates & Tatar (2018), Vecsey (1981), and van Duin (2007) each shed light on the Trickster Kwaku Ananse's roots in Akan mythology, and the Trickster's relationship with Nyame, the Akan high god. While Deidra Badejo (1988) links both High John and Brer Rabbit to the Yoruba divine linguist Eshu Elegbara (Legba, among the Fon), Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) focuses on Eshu's

relationship with the Signifying Monkey. Lewis Hyde (1998) and Ivan Van Sertima (1989) provide further insights into the universal revolutionary qualities of Tricksters, providing the context for locating these same attributes in High John and Brer Rabbit. Perhaps more than other tellers of the African and African American Trickster tale, Black story collectors and tellers Julius Lester (1987, 1991, 1994) and William J. Faulkner (1993) lay bare Eshu's legacy as a troublemaker and revolutionary in Black American story traditions. Through Lester and Faulkner's critical lenses, we learn that High John the Conquer and Brer Rabbit were working southern plantations as social activists and spiritual community leaders.

In my chapter on jazz, Tricksters Eshu Elegbara and Brer Rabbit make their final appearance. Gates (1988), Samuel Floyd (1995), and Edward M. Pavlić (2004) each attest to Eshu's linguistic influence on jazz musicians and their abilities to improvise or, to "speak new words." Underscoring one of the foundational elements of jazz and, indeed, all Black vernaculars discussed in my pedagogy of potlikker, is the all-important participation from the audience—community members who are the ultimate judges of a successful performance. Both Stuckey (1987) and Floyd (1995) bring this essential element of Black performance and aesthetics to the fore with their re-telling of "Brer Rabbit in Red Hill Churchyard." Highlighting the sacred-secular continuum in African American vernaculars, Brer Rabbit plays the role of priest and consummate jazz musician, directing a grave-side ritual with his fiddle playing, bringing his community together in dance and music to honor a departed ancestor.

In establishing Signifying as a foundational element in Black vernaculars, I give Roger Abraham's *Singing the Master* (1992) its full due. Abraham's close reading of the antebellum ring shouts in "steal away" religious settings and corn husking "entertainments" guided his theory that the high value placed on rhetorical eloquence in Sub-Saharan Africa established an "Afro-American aesthetic system which has been maintained to this day" (1992, xxv–xvii). Even more committed to an Africanist origin theory for Afro-American vernaculars are Geneva Smitherman (1977, 1994, 2000, 2006), Amiri Baraka (1968, 1971, 1991), and Reiland Rabaka (2007, 2011, 2012, 2013).

Both Smitherman and Baraka affirm that Black American vernacular practices are grounded in African orality, and that Africanisms these practices have been maintained in the United States through the strength of oral tradition itself, that is, passing on life customs and knowledge from one generation to the next. Smitherman's investigations into the roots of Black American communication patterns and rhetorical arts resonate with my prior research on West African verbal arts that locates Signifying as a central performative element in Black orature. Equally germane to this thesis are Smitherman's theory of the "sacred-secular continuum" (2000, 216) and Baraka's "changing same" (1968, 205–241) both of which ground Black American vernaculars within an Africanist, unitary world view in which the sacred and secular worlds are not easily separated. This continuum, as I illustrate throughout this thesis has direct bearing on the rhetorical, Signifying power of the sung, spoken, danced, and instrumentally played "word."

Reiland Rabaka's Africana theory has similarly informed my ever-growing conviction that Black vernacular traditions, from antebellum songs and dances to rap and jazz, contain texts rife with social commentaries, criticisms, and protest. As Rabaka maintains (along with Smitherman and Baraka), Black music has never been just music but has always been inextricably linked to a Black aesthetic sensibility that is about "poetics *and* politics, aesthetics *and* activism" (Rabaka, 2012, 233). Embracing an even broader view than Baraka, Rabaka finds room for feminist and gender perspectives in relation to the blues, jazz, and hip hop, in particular (2012).

From Lydia Parrish (1942), Bessie Jones (Jones & Hawes, 1972; Jones, 1983), and Art Rosenbaum (1992, 1998), we learn how antebellum oral arts practices have survived as living traditions in contemporary Gullah communities in the Georgia Sea Islands and neighboring coastal communities. These authors, moreover, illustrate how the art of Signifying is still on the minds of contemporary performers of the ring shout and other song traditions. Jones & Hawes underscore, for me, the ongoing value of teaching ring plays from the Gullah traditions in school settings because they are, as Jones illustrates, "good for children."

As previously detailed, I have found inspiration for my pedagogy of potlikker from African heritage knowledge authors King & Swartz (2014, 2016, 2018) and pioneer scholars of critical race theory (CRT) in education. Drawing from Delgado (1989), Bell (1995), Dixson, Anderson & Donner (2017), and Ladson-Billings (2017), I contend that Black vernacular arts can be part of a “new exegesis” for CRT curriculum. I have also taken encouragement from those working within the field of Folk Arts in Education (FAIE). Lynn Hamer (2000) further advances a critical perspective for FAIE within a multiculturalist education paradigm by illustrating the intersections between FAIE and Sleeter & Grant’s (2009) “multicultural social justice education.”

Included in this thesis are student, family, and guest artist narratives collected from lessons I carried out in elementary and middle schools in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin, between the years 2011–2020. A portion of these narratives were created within two school-wide integrated arts-story projects that I spearheaded at Orchard Ridge Elementary School in Madison. The first of these, “Telling Stories” (2016), provided a variety of story-telling venues and formats for both students and adult family members. While this project was designed to include all members of our school community, it was designed with a more singular focus on our African American and Latinx students and families.

The Telling Stories workshops were led by four Milwaukee-based artists: *Dia de Los Muertos* historian and *papel picado* artist Rosa Zamora, African and African American storyteller Tejumola Ologboni, spoken word poet Dasha Kelly, and collage artist, Della Wells.<sup>27</sup> These story creating workshops were conducted for students during the school day and for adult family members during the evenings at the community neighborhood center. In my estimation, the Telling Stories project was a way that we, collectively, as a school community were able to come closer and, as Bill Moyers (1995, xi) has put it, “recognize the reality of one another’s lives” (brackets, mine).

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<sup>27</sup> In both her student and adult workshops, Ms. Zamora explained how the *Dia de los Muertos* holiday in Mexico is a melding of ancient Aztec mythology and religious rites, and Christianity. The holiday is now celebrated on All Saint’s Day on the Christian calendar. Aztec elements and rituals involving the *offrenda* (altars through which the souls of the dead can visit the living) and *papel picado* (cut paper designs) remain integral to the tradition.

The second project (Spring, 2020), “Freedom in Jazz Music and African American Visual Arts” was a collaborative, integrated arts effort with the Madison Jazz Society School Residency program, me, and fellow teachers at Orchard Ridge. This project linked the theme of freedom to jazz music and its Black pioneers, to visual artists during the “jazz age,” and to the art of improvisation in music and visual arts. Themes of justice and freedom were brought to the fore within student biography reports on the lives of pioneer jazz musicians, and the racist and sometimes sexist attitudes they confronted in their personal and professional lives.

The stories that were generated in the “Telling Stories” and “Jazz & Freedom” projects provide evidence of the learning and engagement that can take place in a story-based narrative arts curriculum. It was my intention that the projects demonstrate, at the very least, pathways to create opportunity for *all* stakeholders in the school community to experience, express, and share stories through a variety of venues and formats. Through these collaborative efforts, an integrated, story-based curriculum can take root and flourish.

*“Passing Our Children Over the Graves of Their Ancestors”*

This pedagogy of potlikker is not intended as a prescriptive template for implementing Black vernacular arts in schools but rather as a descriptive outline and context for their potential inclusion. While many of the stories, songs, raps, and spoken word pieces that I present in these chapters come from my own projects and lessons, I do not provide step-by-step lesson plans for how these arts should, or could be implemented in classroom curricula. These potlikker narratives are not a prescription for solving the social, racial, and political issues that confront our schools and communities, nor are they a final solution for addressing the so-called “achievement gap.” This latter term all too easily sets up a Black/White dichotomy about student potential, feeding into a “deficit model” way of thinking and viewing achievement for African American and other students of color and, for that matter, White students too.

By the same token, I do not naively suggest that my pedagogy of potlikker will eliminate the anger, hurt, and frustration that some Black students feel when they fail at the test-driven curriculum that serves many of their White classmates well but leaves them behind. What I am offering with this thesis is a guide for harnessing the narrative and educative power that Black vernaculars have towards teaching the rich legacy of African American arts, and for teaching all students about freedom and social justice. A significant component of this effort is, as the Akan proverb *Sankofa* teaches us, to “go back and retrieve it.” As Payne illustrates, this proverb is still enacted in a traditional custom in Gullah communities in Sea Islands of Georgia and the Carolinas (2008, 10–11):

On the Sea Islands...when a respected person passed away, after the internment, custom called for children to step across the grave. The best parts of the spirit of the deceased were understood to pass into the children. As a nation, we have done a terrible job of passing our children over the graves of their ancestors and, given their already tenuous relationship to the rest of society, that failure often falls with the greatest weight on African American and other children of color. That may be the best way to think of what education for liberation can do at its best: It is a way to pass children over the graves of their ancestors, to give them a moral grounding in the past that will help them ask their own questions in the present and seek their own answers.

While I have stated and do assert that the potlikker narratives in this thesis have the potential to benefit everyone, my keenest gaze is upon African American students. If nothing else, this pedagogy of potlikker will help them to pass over the graves of their ancestors. Like King & Swartz, I hope that “[the] ancestors are pleased” (2018, 75).





## Thesis Chapter Outline

### *Interlude: A Brief History of Potlikker as Food & Story*

The “Interlude” serves as the bridge between Chapter One and the remainder of my thesis. It tells the full history of potlikker and its origins in both food and story, with an introduction to Tejumola Ologboni (Teju the Storyteller), from whom I first learned about potlikker, the “Hambone” story, and High John de Conquer. Several publications in this section illustrate how the terms “potlikker,” “Pot Liquor,” and “Pot Likker” have been applied to narratives that cross over ethnic boundaries and topics, including personal and family histories and overcoming obstacles. Providing a context for the intersections between contemporary southern cuisine (including potlikker), story, and politics is John T. Edge’s publication, *Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South* (2017).

### *Chapter Two: Tracing an Afro-centered Black Aesthetic*

Melville Herskovits’s *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) serves as an historical template for countering the central, hegemonic narrative that Africans arrived in the New World with no past, no memory and therefore, no identifiable culture. It also provides the necessary historical context for looking at how elements of this myth persist in contemporary Black music and arts criticism. Through Herskovits, I dig deeper into the controversy surrounding the polemical debate over the “question of origins” in Black American vernacular arts and the rift between “essentialists” (Africanists) on the one hand, and “assimilationist,” or integrationists, on the other.

Baraka’s “changing same” (1968, 205–241) in Black American music criticism parallels Guthrie Ramsey’s “pot liquor” principle. It is that particular “essence or flavor” in Black music that is not necessarily asked for but is missed when it’s not there (Ramsey 2004, 214–15), that something that “we dig and pass on as best we can” (Baraka 1968, 206). In my quest for Amiri Baraka’s “changing same,” and Guthrie Ramsey’s “essential ingredient” in Black vernaculars, I look to the cultural movements in which an Afrocentric, “Black Aesthetic” emerged within Black American cultural and literary

discourse. These movements include Pan-Africanism, the Harlem Renaissance (New Negro movement), and the Black Power and Black Arts movements, the latter, according to Rabaka (2012, 129), being the “artistic arm” of the former. As Rabaka maintains, African American cultural movements are “rarely, if ever, divorced from African American social and political movements” (233). As such, these movements set the stage for reviewing potlikker narratives as forms of resistance throughout American history, and their application in 21<sup>st</sup> century schooling.

### *Chapter Three: Roots & Routes*

Grounding Black American vernacular traditions within West African oral arts traditions provides a theoretical and practical knowledge base from which educators can better understand the cultural, historical, and aesthetic relevance of these arts in school curriculum. In Chapter Three, I locate those West African cultural epistememes most germane to Africanist retentions in Black vernacular arts in the United States. These epistememes include the primacy of the spoken word within oral arts practices, concepts such as communitarianism and social reciprocity, the unity of sacred and secular life, a cyclical time orientation, the rhetorical art of Signifying, call and response interactions, and processes of cultural transmission and change. In this inquiry, I look to sub-Saharan West African cultures along and inland of the Gulf of Guinea, including, but not limited to, the Ewe and Akan, and neighboring Yoruba, and Fon cultures. It is from these regions along the Guinea Coast, and points west along the “Windward Coast” to Senegal and the Senegambia regions, that a majority African people were captured and enslaved in the United States. In present-day political boundaries, these ethnic groups and related sub-groups inhabit areas from eastern Nigeria to the Ivory Coast and Liberia. These geographically contiguous groups share common cultural traits, particularly in their religious belief systems and traditional oral arts practices. It is from these cultures that a nascent Pan-Africanism was born in the United States.

*Chapter Four: Antebellum Potlikker Narratives in Work and Play, Past & Present*

Chapter Four begins with analyzing the art of Signifying in songs, stories, and dances performed by plantation hands during the antebellum period in the southern United States. Included here are the corn shucking songs sung during harvest ceremonies (sanctioned by White plantation owners), rowing songs, and expressions of worship in the form of the spiritual and ring shout ceremonies. Within these performative settings, I take a close look at the songs such as, “Daniel,” “Juba,” and “Pater-rollers,” and the cakewalk dance as early forms of social commentary, protest, and resistance.

Answering CRT scholars’ call for the inclusion of spirituals in a critical race theory pedagogy, I analyze the ways in which the coded, double messages in these songs provided hope for emancipation in the ever after and in the here and now. Songs such as “Steal Away...” (to Jesus) also meant “steal away” to the brush arbor meetings where Africans worshipped in their African-derived styles, away from the scrutiny of the “massa” and preachers in White churches. “Before I’ll Be A Slave,” called out for emancipation in the mundane and spiritual worlds, while “No More Auction Block,” was an unveiled jubilation sung by enlisted Africans as they marched towards freedom during the Civil War.

*Chapter Five: Traditional Tales of Resistance and Freedom*

The divine Tricksters, Eshu Elegbara (Yoruba) or Legba (Fon, Ewe), and Ananse (Akan), and their earthly manifestations as Ijapa (Turtle), and the Akan Trickster Ananse (Spider) provide the starting place for understanding Signifying as a central, rhetorical speech gesture in African American vernacular expressions. On this side of the Atlantic, Trickster figures took on new personas, including High John de Conquer and Brer Rabbit. In presenting Trickster tales for school curriculum, I defer to African American storytellers Julius Lester (1969, 1987), Virginia Hamilton (1993), and William J. Faulkner (1993). Through an emancipatory interpretation, High John and Brer Rabbit are revealed as protagonists of agency, gaining their rights and freedoms through wit, cunning, humor, and community involvement. In Faulkner’s stories, Brer Rabbit moves closer to his divine origins, taking on the role of

a spiritual leader who cares deeply for his fellow compatriots – whether standing up to the “long tails” or plotting schemes in which he rallies the troops together to defeat their common oppressors.

*Chapter Six: The Dozens & Halo (“Big Song”), Toast Ballads, Rap & Spoken Word*

The *halo*, or “Big Song” tradition among the Anlo Ewe of southeastern Ghana, and similar practices throughout West Africa, demonstrate that songs of social criticism, protest, and socially sanctioned insult have long been and continue to be, part of West African verbal arts traditions. One need not look to the past for these retentions, as they are part of contemporary, living arts traditions on both sides of the Atlantic. Ritualized songs of insult among the Anlo Ewe and other West African groups, along with poetic “name calling” such as the Ewe *megbenkowo* (“back names,” or “nicknames”) and *ahamankowo* (to make a hint, or allusion), show remarkable likenesses, down to the form, function, and rules of play, to the Black American forms of competitive and poetic insult such as “the dozens.” Bringing a critical race theory perspective from West Africa, *halo* and other “naming” rituals are forms of social control, as well as vehicles for public litigation and arbitration.

Because of the potential for this type of Signifying to slide into verbal and/or physical aggression, I do not recommend that the dozens, or other forms of “naming,” in their traditional form of play, be part of school curriculum. As an alternative, I present “The Cornbread Man,” as told by Tejumola Ologboni (Teju the Storyteller) during the 2016 TSII project. Mr. Ologboni performed this Afrocentric version of the Euro-American “Gingerbread Man” folktale for the entire school to demonstrate how to play (or *not* play) a game of the dozens: with words instead of fists and, moreover, with words that deescalate, rather than escalate emotional responses (lest you get eaten up by Fox).

*Chapter Seven: Blues & Jazz, A Final Word on Teaching Freedom*

Blues and jazz curricula provide pathways for learning about these important African American musical legacies, and their place in the continuum of Black vernaculars as expressions of freedom. Emerging at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both genres reflect the socio-political eras in which they

emerged and flourished. In post-bellum America, African American's kept their hopes "stayed" on freedom even as they encountered the barriers of institutionalized racism during Reconstruction and Jim Crow. As I demonstrate, blues and jazz provide ample opportunities for students to write, speak, scat, play, and sing their own stories, keeping up the tradition of "telling it like it is"<sup>28</sup> through Black vernacular arts. The *Jazz & Freedom* arts residency I co-directed at my school provides a model for a transdisciplinary, integrated arts project that teaches beyond "music per se," placing blues and jazz at the center of a pedagogy of potlikker that teaches about freedom and justice for all.

#### *Chapter Eight: Summary & Conclusion*

In my concluding pages, I revisit the subject of critical race theory in education and the still relevant counter-hegemonic narratives within antebellum songs, stories, and ring plays. In doing so, I reaffirm that while teaching the difficult history embedded in these and other Black narrative traditions is challenging, they are even more relevant given the resurfacing of White supremacist ideologies in America. Still, the way we teach the hard facts of the Black Holocaust and the age of students who learn it must be carefully considered. As vehicles for learning about America's hard history, the stories must be respected and cared for. In the spirit of the West African proverb, *Sankofa*, we, as educators can teach the stories from the past to help all students work towards a better present and future.



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<sup>28</sup> Rabaka (2013, 293) uses this term in reference to rap music and hip hop culture building on the "African American tradition of using song and poetry to 'tell it like it is' and protest social injustices."

## Interlude: Potlikker

### *Tejumola Ologboni (Teju the Storyteller)*

In 2014, I developed the first of two “Telling Stories” projects, and invited Tejumola Ologboni, a.k.a., “Teju the Storyteller,” to be an artist-in-residence at my school.<sup>29</sup> Over the course of several days, Teju shared African American Trickster tales, and “potlikker” stories that included the telling of the cross-Atlantic voyage and enslavement with the entire school. He also gave classroom storytelling and writing workshops. In my observation log, I’d written about the high level of student engagement during these story sessions, and how, in clusters, the students followed Mr. Ologboni in the hallways like he was the Pied-Piper, begging him to sing “Hambone” and play the “Miss Mary Mack” patten-juba game again. Mid-week, a fellow teacher remarked that she had noticed this same excitement among students during their story sessions with Teju. Later that day in the lunchroom, she asked, “How can we keep this level of engagement going?” My reply was, “let’s keep culturally relevant arts and storytelling central to our curriculum.”

As a prelude to the Black verbal and musical arts contained in my pedagogy of potlikker, I begin with a full introduction to potlikker and how I came to choose the term as the central metaphor and theory for my thesis which began, at least in part, with a good story.

### *Potlikker, an Essential Ingredient*

*After a feast was held, there was much cleaning to be done. Pots, pans, and dishes had to be washed and put away. What food remained was used to feed the slaves. The big pot that had been used to cook turnip, mustard, or collard greens had gallons of left-over liquid. This was called pot liquor.*

Jackie Torrence, *The Importance of Pot Liquor* (1994)

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<sup>29</sup> Tejumola Ologboni was the winner of the first National Open-Invitational Tall-Tale Tellers Contest (Liar's Contest), sponsored by the National Association of Black Storytellers, and the 2002 Recipient of the Zora Neale Hurston Award for "contributing to the perpetuation and preservation of African American Folklore." His stories appear in Goss & Barnes, *Talk That Talk*, and Coleman & Coleman, *Pot Likker: Stories for Teachers and Learners*. For more, see [www.tejuthestoryteller.com](http://www.tejuthestoryteller.com).

*Enslaved people, having mostly only scraps of fatback, ham hocks, and collard greens, mustard greens, turnip greens and beans for their meals, cherished the leftover liquid for its nutritional value, and saved it to initiate the next meal. Pot liquor helped to keep people alive in the face of from “can’t see” in the morning to “can’t see” at night after unbelievably debilitating toil.*

Eleanora Tate, *A Few Essential Ingredients for My Writing Stew* (2014)

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*Dey had pot likker an' ash cake an' such things as would make 'em grow.*

The Federal Writers Project–Works Progress Administration, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves* (1976)

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*Our efforts to “de-essentialize” our thinking about culture sometimes results in our draining in group sensibility of what makes it a good thing. If we take away the “essence” or flavor, what remains is a pot of sustenance with some nutritional value but nothing with which to sop up your cornbread.”*

Guthrie Ramsey, “The Pot Liquor Principle: Developing a Black Music Criticism in American Music” (2004, 215)

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As a culinary referent, the term “potlikker” (or pot likker, or pot liquor) originates in the southern United States as the name for the nutrient-rich liquid left over from cooking foods such as salted hams and/or collard, mustard, turnip, or other greens. As a food that sustained enslaved Africans on southern plantations, potlikker signifies both nourishment and survival. In his recent publication, *The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South*, food historian John T. Edge writes, “Like great provincial dishes from around the world, potlikker is a salvage food. During the antebellum era, slaveholders ate the greens from the pot, setting aside the potlikker for enslaved cooks and their families, unaware that the broth, not the greens, was nutrient rich” (Edge, 2017, 7). In *The Importance of Pot Liquor* (1994) storyteller Jackie Torrence presents her version of the term’s culinary and nutritional origins:

Pot liquor was at one time a Southern staple. As the mustard greens, turnip greens, collard greens, and meat were cooking, the nutrients seeped into the liquid. When eaten by the slave, the pot liquor strengthened the slave’s body. This was by no means deliberate – it just happened – but the value did not go unnoticed...The strength and endurance the slaves displayed as they toiled under oppression was remarkable. Pot liquor became an important ingredient in their diet. It is said to have been given to slaves as a healing potion, and they used it to cure chicken pox, measles, and mumps (10).

The term *potlikker* is also used as a literary designator for orally transmitted narratives. While this nomenclature as a discreet, named genre is not widespread, its use as a moniker in folktales—both orally transmitted and transcribed in print—and written personal narratives have been subsumed under this title by storytellers and story collectors.

I was first introduced to *potlikker-as-story* by Tejumola Olgoboni, a tale-teller in African and African American story traditions. My occasion for meeting Teju was the 2012 Annual Midwest Folklife Festival in Bishop Hill, Illinois where I was working as a contracted field worker for the Wisconsin Arts Board. One of my duties that weekend was to introduce Teju and his performance to the festival audience. After my introduction noting his family storytelling lineage and his background in African, and rural and urban African American story traditions, I joined the festival goers to hear his stories. With his first story, “Hambone,” I was immediately captivated by his dynamic and interactive performance style, which included call and response singing, drumming, and “*pattin’ juba*,” or “*hamboning*” (hand clapping, patting, and slapping arms, legs, and chest, and foot stomping).

Teju’s performance of the “Hambone” story began with a drumming invocation: a call and response chant, “*drum talk, talkin’ that drum talk*,” followed by a short narrative describing the cross-Atlantic voyage endured by African captives and the hardships they continued to live under within the oppressive and brutal conditions of enslavement. As part of this introduction, Teju spoke of the “talking drums” of West Africa and how drumming was prohibited by slave holders who feared that the drums were being used by Africans to signal and incite uprisings.<sup>30</sup>

As Teju tells it, the “Hambone” story is a survival story: a leftover hambone from the holiday feast in the Big House (“where the man who calls himself ‘Master,’ lives”) is given to the plantation hands who then passed it around their living quarters, enriching many pots of soup with added nutrients. At

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<sup>30</sup> The matter of drums being banned on antebellum plantations is briefly discussed in Jones & Hawes (1972), and Radano (2003, 101, 366n43). For bans on playing log drums on plantations, see Herskovits (1941, 138). Rediker (2007, 278) cites that “self-chosen” drumming (as opposed to forced) occurred on slave ships where “the entire ship, being wooden, was one vast percussion instrument.” Epstein (1977, 8–17) notes that instruments were allowed on slave ships to provide a means of exercise for their captives, and as an attempt to keep up their spirits.



Bishop Hill, Teju taught the audience the song lyrics: “*Hambone, hambone, where ya been? ‘Round the world and back again.*” Enacted in this manner, the tale is emblematic of the self-determination of enslaved Africans, and the ways in which they drew upon their own community for strength and sustenance.

Teju’s reference to drums as speech surrogates, his incorporation of “pattin juba,” drumming, and call and response singing in his performances are not gratuitous add-ons for the sake of entertainment. While some critics may regard these performative gestures as essentialist re-enactments of stereotypical practices from a distant and imagined African past, I see them as an example of culture change, i.e., the transformation of African oral arts traditions into their new forms in the United States. In this particular narrative, Teju is retelling the history of how African drumming practices were out of necessity transformed into an African American expression called “pattin’ juba,” a performative tradition that receives full attention in Chapter Three. These references were not only integral to Teju’s telling of the Hambone story itself, but also to the larger history of American enslavement woven into his presentation.

As a music educator familiar with the challenges of teaching America’s Black holocaust history—to both Afro-American and Euro-American students—I was acutely aware that the largely White audience at Bishop Hill was not only being reminded of, but also invited to take part in the telling (via call and response chanting and singing) of the larger story of North America’s racist heritage. I immediately felt the deeper intention and import of Teju’s story: that his audience remember the horrors of enslavement, and not forget the perpetrators.

Recognizing Teju’s gifts as a storyteller, I invited him to be a guest-artist in residency at my school. The invitation was prompted not only by his talents as a storyteller alone but also by his ability to weave the harder history of American enslavement into his tales. In so doing, he made Trickster tales culturally, socially, and politically relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences. Before his visit, I asked if he would include the “Hambone” story in his presentation. His response was, “Oh, you mean the

‘potlikker’ story.” During a later interview with Teju, I asked him to tell me more about potlikker. Here is what he had to say:

The potlikker stories are this: We weren’t supposed to have nothin’ – right? They were supposed to get everything. But somehow, we made a way where there wasn’t no way. That’s another way they call the stories—“Makin’ a way where there ain’t no way.” So, in that makin a way where there ain’t no way, the biggest and most celebrated character is High John the Conquerer. And I don’t know if you’re familiar with High John the Conquerer as a character, but High John always gets...always makes a way where there’s no way (personal correspondence, December 2017).

Teju then proceeded to tell me one or two stories featuring High John de Conquer, a Trickster figure disguised as a plantation hand, who would outwit the “Master” at every turn through cunning and humor. Digging deeper into the origins of potlikker-as-story, I found Teju’s reference to “*makin’ a way out of no way*,” in Zora Neale Hurston’s essay entitled, “High John de Conquer” in the Alan Dundes’ compilation of Black orature, *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel* (1990, 541–548). Hurston’s writing and storytelling reveals that the nourishing, sustaining, and survival aspect of vernacular lore in the antebellum south was embodied in the powerful, rebellious trickster figure High John de Conquer who, along with Brer Rabbit, was “making a way out of no way,” and “hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick.”<sup>31</sup> As Dundes writes, these colloquialisms “are beautiful metaphors for the gusty philosophy of life required in a land where prejudice and racism abound” (542).

As I illustrate in Chapter Five, High John de Conquer, along with his “cousin” Brer Rabbit, are part of a cultural legacy with ties to West African oral arts traditions, including those among the Ewe, Fon, Akan, and Yoruba ethnic groups. As such, they are cultural survivors. “Folklore is,” as Tolagbe Ogunleye writes, “an historical thread that ties the cultural heritage of Africans in the diaspora and those living on the continent of Africa” (1997, 436). On the North American continent, the elements of these tales told in the motherland were retained but transformed to meet the needs of a new world, and new social conditions under enslavement. Referencing Hurston, Ogunleye continues the subject of

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<sup>31</sup> See Lewis Hyde, in *Trickster Makes This World*, 1998, 277–278 for similar descriptions of the trickster figures Brer Rabbit and High John de Conquer, and the frequent use of the phrase “making a way out of no-way” in relation to these character’s function as folk-heroes.

culture change, “far from being a halcyon tradition frozen in some antique emulsion, folklore is an art form that is still in the making, always in process” (Ogunleye 1997, 436). Listen closely as Hurston tells how High John de Conquer crossed the ocean along with captives on the cross-Atlantic voyage, and transformed himself after arriving in the New World (Dundes 1990, 543):

He had come from Africa. He came walking on the waves of sound. Then he took on flesh after he got here. The sea captains of ships knew that they brought slaves in their ships. They knew about those black bodies huddled down there in the middle passage, being hauled across the water to helplessness. John de Conquer was walking the very winds that filled the sails of the ships. He followed them over like the albatross.

While the High John and other Afro-American Trickster tales function as potlikker survival stories, the genre, in written literature, also includes personal narratives. Each of the forgoing collections of potlikker stories have direct bearing on my pedagogy of potlikker in that they reveal the healing capacity of story in contemporary educational and real-life settings. Some of these stories are reminiscent of the African American storyteller Simon Brown’s autobiographical memories about how he and other enslaved Africans either endured, or escaped from slavery (see this thesis, Chapter Five). In this context, the term “potlikker” is again repositioned from its culinary designation to a literary motif signifying struggle and survival. For example, in *The Importance of Pot Liquor*, Torrence (1994) includes narratives of her childhood and the difficulty she had overcoming her speech impediment (to later become a storyteller), stories her grandfather told her about Brer Rabbit outwitting Brer Bear, and stories he told her about her great-grandfather, who survived enslavement.

My grandfather, James Carson, was the son of a slave named Samuel Mitchell Carson. Grandpa was quite proud of the family history, and he never forgot to tell me about it. He talked to me of his father’s many exploits as a slave, and of the trials that his family endured as free men. (1994, 19)

Closing her Introduction to *The Importance of Pot Liquor*, Torrence writes,

Some of the ingredients in these pages are anecdotes from my childhood; others are the stories told in my family that have nourished me in good times and in bad. They may not be big or monumental, just little things of seemingly small significance; but these stories, these tales, and anecdotes were pot liquor to my life (1994, 16).

Other publications illustrate how potlikker-as-story crosses over ethnic boundaries. In *Pot Likker, Stories for Teachers and Learners* (Coleman and Coleman, 2001) is a collection of stories about overcoming obstacles, from the perspective of students and teachers from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The stories in this volume are intended to

...nourish one's mind, heart, and soul...They show people struggling to overcome academic failure or personal and cultural obstacles to their development. They also illustrate techniques that teachers and learners have used to propel themselves forward. (Coleman & Coleman 2001, vii)

In another collection, *Pot Liquor: Tales and Recollections, Told by the People of Stewart County, Georgia*, Fussell (2002) indicates that potlikker—as both food and story—is nostalgically embraced and celebrated among ethnically diverse communities in Georgia. In the preface to Fussell's collection, Susan Moye writes that the stories are intended to provide some of the “essence,” “taste,” and “flavor” of Stewart County (2002, p. xv). Taken as a whole, the stories provide a sense of place from the perspective of ordinary working people, some who have lived and farmed in in Stewart County for generations. Moye further describes the gist of the collection:

The people of this particular place are a distillation of the larger South. The past and the present blend together here into a pot liquor of tales that is deliciously palatable and, as we say in the South, “it goes down well.” You will get a savory treat here, whether you taste just a tale or two, or go for the whole bowl of Pot Liquor.” (Moye, in Fussell, 2002, xv).<sup>32</sup>

Before closing my introduction to potlikker, I would like to further acknowledge John T. Edge's writing on the intersections between southern food, story, and politics in *Potlikker Papers, A Food History of the Modern South* (2017) Edge centers his research fully in the context of cultural, social,

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<sup>32</sup> Altogether, the compilation is an eclectic one, with stories ranging from anecdotal reminiscences to ghost stories, unsolved mysteries to cataclysmic events, family stories, and the like. Only one of these stories deals head-on with the history of racial tensions in the south. In “A Manifestation of Our Separateness,” the author recalls, with regret, childhood memories of the racial divides in his town, and how he was not allowed to stay overnight at his Black friend's house. Later in life, when he returned to his town a storeowner of upscale goods, he lamented upon the reality of a still segregated town (Fussell, 2002, 99). By the editor's own admission, the African American residents of Stewart County are underrepresented in the collection. At the time of publication, a documentary that would provide a more “equitable” compilation of stories from Stewart County was underway (2002, 4).

and political times and places. Crediting his mentor and friend, journalist and social activist John Edgerton for his similar approach, Edge writes,

Reading his words, I learned that food didn't have to be an exercise in indulgence...Time and time again, Edgerton asked how Southerners could reconcile a history of gross injustice with a deserved reputation for great food and hospitality. Edgerton wondered how a culture rife with bigotry could produce hickory-smoked whole hog barbecue, parchment-crust fried okra, and downy spoonbread soufflés (Edge 2017, Foreword).

Upholding Edgerton's legacy, Edge devotes his introductory chapters to political and social history in the south, framed around issues of race. Particularly compelling is his first chapter, "Kitchen Tables," which features the little-known activist work of women who, both literally and figuratively, fed and sustained the Civil Rights movement from their kitchens. Edge focuses on the work of one woman in particular, Georgia Gilmore, whose own political activism may have been overshadowed by more prominent Civil Rights leaders. Once she introduced herself to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., however, her kitchen and food became a magnet for Civil Rights workers, unknown and famous, who came to gather, eat, and talk politics. In the 60s, her kitchen and food were enjoyed by King, and presidents John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. Here, Edge describes a typical scene in Gilmore's kitchen:

At a time when blacks and whites did not dine easily together in public, they elbowed together in Gilmore's kitchen, lined with white laminate counters, to order from menus she printed in pencil on notebook paper. "I just served 'em and let 'em talk," Gilmore said, channeling the democratic ethic of the day (Edge 2017, 24)

In the following passage, Edge centers potlikker as the essence that is carried through his book; it is a metaphor that tells the story of how the tradition surrounding food, place, and people, are wrapped up together in layers of social, historical, and political significance.

For the last sixty years, the span of this book, the dishes we have cooked and the meals we have staged have served the region and the nation as emblems of Southern struggles. Conversation about food have offered paths to grasp bigger truths about race and identity, gender and ethnicity, subjugation, and creativity. Today, Southern food serves an American lingua franca. Like the Black Power fist and the magnolia blossom, fried chicken discloses, cornbread suggests, and potlikker tells.

In this "Interlude," I have sought to convey that the term, "potlikker," in relation to both food and story, represents cultural continuity, survival, and activism. With its rootedness in African orality,

potlikker as story becomes a metaphor for tradition and change, an indication of the ways in which oral arts traditions from the African continent were both maintained and transformed, handed down from one generation to the next. In Chapter Two, I will trace the contours of the historical debate over the “question of origins” in Black cultural forms, centering potlikker narratives in an Afrocentric and emancipatory pedagogy.



*Sankofa*

## Chapter Two

### Tracing A Black Aesthetic

#### Introduction

##### *The Question of Origins & the Essentialist/Anti-Essentialist Debate*

In his foreword to *The Annotated African American Folktales* (2018, xxviii), Henry Louis Gates Jr. dissects the historical and polemical debate over “African origins” in terms of Black cultural aesthetics, “cultural authenticity,” and the relationships between Black Americans and their African cultural forbears. The “dispute over origins, Gate maintains, “had political as well as cultural implications” relating to racial equality (Gates 2018, xxix). Understanding the origins of this debate is a necessary endeavor if we are to fully grasp the cultural, historical, and socio-political significance of African vernacular arts and their implementation in an Afro-centered, culturally relevant school curriculum.

As I pointed out in Chapter One, early 20<sup>th</sup> century Black folklorists such as Anna Julia Cooper and her colleagues at the Hampton Folklore Society were concerned with the preservation of what they viewed as African-derived Black folkloric traditions. These traditions, they feared, would be forever lost to the gradual assimilation of Black culture into White society. As I discuss in further detail below, this Afrocentric stance went up against the assimilationist, or integrationist views of powerful social and political leaders who sought the assimilation of Blacks into “normative (white) American practices and values” (Gates 2018, xxix). The debate over African origins of Black folkloric traditions was thus one between Africanists on the one hand, and integrationists, or assimilationists on the other.

In current Black arts criticism today, the debate over African origins in Black vernacular arts lingers as a discourse surrounding “essentialist,” vs. “anti-essentialist” thinking. “Essentialists” seek retentions of African elements, while “anti-essentialists” tend to minimize the validity of cultural retentions, or African continuities in Black arts traditions in the New World. Buttressed by an alleged paucity of hard evidence of African retentions, anti-essentialists tend to emphasize the impact of European culture on Black America. In addition, anti-essentialist thinking points to the trauma of

slavery as a primary and formative experience in molding African American identity and cultural expressions. Advocates on both sides of this debate seek emancipatory outcomes, but with different agendas and approaches.

In current multiculturalist discourse, the term “essentialism” is much-maligned by scholars because it denotes stereotyping, generalizing, and racializing whole groups of people based on specific “essential” traits, both physical and/or behavioral and cultural (see May 2003, 202). My aim here is to probe the matter of essentialism from another vantage point, one that sees an emancipatory and Afrocentric Black aesthetic as one articulation of Black identity and consciousness in African American vernaculars, and not as a monolithic racial experience. My approach, which could be called an “anti-anti essentialist” stance, has been addressed in both Black arts criticism and critical multiculturalist theory. In his article “Critical Theory and the Human Condition: FOUNDERS AND PRAXIS,” Stephen May describes “redistributive justice in the public sphere,” as a concept that is clearly distinguishable from “the violent essentializing of racism,” and observes that while “ethnic and national categories may be essentialized in the same way as ‘race’ categories have been historically, they need not always be” (May 2003, 205).

Music critic Guthrie Ramsey employs a food-to-music metaphor when he describes “pot liquor” as a particular “essence, or flavor” in African American music; it is that “essential something that is not necessarily asked for but is understood as “necessary and desirable” (2004, 215). Using his “pot liquor” theory as his guide, Ramsey takes a similar position as May:

Without question, critiques of essentialism (or anti-essentialism) have achieved a lot of moral good. But I wonder if the dismissal of ethnic (or better, social) particularity in cultural criticism leaves us with an undesirable, universalistic blandness that refuses true cultural difference (2004, 214).

The danger in a staunch anti-essentialism, as I see it, is that it veers precipitously towards a nullification or erasure of Africa in the formation of a Black aesthetic. By extension, some anti-essentialists imagine that, once removed from their homelands and situated in America, the enslaved African was a *tabula rasa* left with nothing but a decimated cultural system and world view, with no agency or will to create



a distinct Black cultural identity. In his article “The ‘Blues Aesthetic’ and the ‘Black Aesthetic,’” Amiri Baraka (1968, 207) sardonically put it:

The slave ship destroyed a great many formal art traditions of the Black man. The white man enforced such cultural rape. A ‘cultureless’ people is a people without a memory. No history. This is the best state for slaves; to be objects, just like the rest of massa’s possessions.

To put the contemporary debate over the “question of origins” in its historical context, I use anthropologist Melville Herskovits’s landmark publication, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941, 1<sup>st</sup> edition; 1990, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) as a guide. In this volume, Herskovits presented five “myths” or false narratives about the continent of Africa, its peoples, and civilizations. These five myths were being used and, to some degree, are still being used to justify the denial of African cultural retentions in Black American culture. My focus on the rootedness of Black American vernaculars in African oral traditions is, in part, a response to influential contemporary scholars such as Paul Gilroy (1993) and Ronald Radano (2003) whose anti-essentialist views I discuss further along. Indeed, anti-essentialist thinking plays significant role in current academic critiques of Afrocentricity. To highlight the ways in which these myths persist in contemporary Black arts and aesthetics criticism and discourse, I will provide a condensed review of Herskovits’ myths and the counternarratives that discredit them.

Herskovits’s counternarratives to the five myths outlined in *The Myth of the Negro Past* help to ground the tenet that a “unity” of Black identity and culture was formed among Africans in the early antebellum years of American enslavement. Myth #3, for example, held that the ethnolinguistic diversity of captive African peoples was so great that they had no tools for communicating, or forming any kind of unified Black cultural identity in the New World. Herskovits was one of the first to map out the linguistic and cultural origins of diasporic Africans in North America, and the first to point to similar patterns of language and culture between them. The counternarratives provided by Herskovits, and by those who came after, provide a starting place for understanding how a nascent Pan-Africanism took root at the very beginning of and throughout the Black Holocaust.

Bringing the “question of origins” debate full circle, I end this chapter with an overview of the social movements in which an Africanized, politicized Black Aesthetic took shape during and after American enslavement, including Pan-Africanism, the Harlem Renaissance (New Negro Movement), and the Black Arts and Black Power movements. African American cultural movements and political movements are intertwined; the cultural expressions that arise from within these movements, therefore, involve “poetics *and* politics, aesthetics *and* activism” (Rabaka 2012, 233).

### Herskovits and “The Myth of the Negro Past”

As Gates chronicles, the debate over African origins was alive and well in late 19<sup>th</sup> century scholarship, “simmered through the Harlem Renaissance,” and reached its zenith with the “heated debate” between sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits in the 1930s and 40s (2018, xxix; see also Levine 1977, 4; 20). Frazier, along with Robert E. Park, epitomized the anti-Afrocentric view of Black culture in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both scholars held that Africans in America had no authentic culture of their own, and portrayed African acculturation in America, in Frazier’s words, as an “incomplete assimilation of western culture” (Gates 2018, xxix). This view typified much of 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship on this matter, with Frazier merely reiterating, albeit in less overtly pejorative terms, what had been claimed by Park in 1919: that, ““The Negro...when he landed in the United States, left behind him almost everything but his dark complexion and his tropical temperament...coming from all parts of Africa and having no common language and common traditions, the memories of African which they brought with them were soon lost”” (Levine 1977, 4 quoting Park).

Frazier’s solution to this alleged inability of Africans to fully integrate into White society was to enact social welfare programs and antidiscrimination policies that would, as he saw it, end the “social isolation” of Black Americans, and promote their assimilation into “normative (white) American practices and values” (Gates 2018, xxix). Reinterpreting this view, Gates writes: “Deprived of any cultural inheritance of their own and barred by discrimination from full entry into white America,

Negroes were left, in Frazier's view, with what Baker summarizes as a 'pathological culture'" (2018, xxix).<sup>33</sup>

While Herskovits's initial position regarding African "folk survivals" was not dissimilar to Frazier's, his stance gradually evolved.<sup>34</sup> By 1930, he argued that evidence for "the relation between African and African American culture resides in in 'folklore, religion, and music.'" By 1941, Herskovits had adopted the pro-Africanist stance of his doctoral advisor and mentor, the "father of anthropology," Franz Boas (Gates 2018, xxviii). While both Frazier's and the Boasian positions promoted antidiscrimination and equality for Blacks, Frazier's assimilationist approach was one in which "cultural pathologies" within African American culture needed to be corrected. The Boasian approach, on the other hand, promoted cultural relativism in which the African rootedness of "Negro Folk culture" provided "further proof of the inherent equality between the races." This thinking also designated "the Negro as the author and inheritor of a valid, authentic culture" (Gates 2018, xxix).

With the publication *The Myth of the Negro Past* in 1941, Herskovits "convincingly demonstrated that the American Negro was an extension of the African Negro, an African people in the New World" (Gates, 2018, xxix). In presenting his five "myths," Herskovits laid bare White European ethnocentric narratives about African peoples and cultures, each narrative propped up as justification for the institution of American enslavement. Herskovits's demystification of these narratives, according to African and African American religion scholar Albert J. Raboteau (*Slave Religion* 1978, 48), was not simply a matter of "detached scholarship," but had "important ramifications in the struggle against racism." In the following outline, I have rearranged Herskovits's five myths according to their order of magnitude and staying power in 21<sup>st</sup> century scholarship, in collective, modern-day consciousness and by extension, in the "official knowledge" in school curriculum.

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<sup>33</sup> From Lee D. Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture* (2010, 13).

<sup>34</sup> In his 1925 essay "The Negro's Americanism" in Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925), Herskovits maintained that "the American Negro was culturally '*sui generis*,' and that there was no "Africa" remaining in African American cultural and social institutions, because the Middle Passage had effectively obliterated any remnants of Africa even in African American vernacular culture" (Gates 2018, xxviii).

*Myth #5, The Biggest Lie*

The primary myth that Herskovits set out to discredit is “myth #5,” which holds that the trauma of the Middle Passage erased any traces of captive Africans’ cultural heritage. Nearly half a century later, Gates (1988, 4) echoes Herskovits, writing that this widely held notion, “as odd as it is a fiction,” served only the institution of American slavery and the economic interests it upheld. To the contrary, the “full erasure of traces of cultures as splendid, as ancient, and as shared by the slave traveler as the classic cultures of West Africa would have been extraordinarily difficult.” Furthermore, “inadvertently...a truly new African culture, a truly Pan-African culture fashioned as a colorful weave of linguistic, institutions, metaphysical, and formal threads” was born (Gates 1988, 4).

Herskovits has been criticized for “romanticizing the African context” (Lovejoy 2000, 19; Radano 2003, 33–34), and for not having “highly systematic” methods for locating Africanisms in Black America (Mintz & Price 1976, 9). Even so, his 1941 publication is cited in scholarship as a major turning point in the African origins debate, even by those scholars who strive to point out the work’s shortcomings.<sup>35</sup> For example, Mintz & Price (1976, 9) wrote that

a generalized heritage of the sort Herskovits postulated for African-Americans probably does not exist. Yet we believe that it is less the *unity* of West (and Central) Africa as a broad culture area that is called into question by our criticism that the *levels* at which one would have to seek confirmation of the postulated unity.

Years later, in his foreword to the second edition of *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1990, xviii), Mintz writes of the long-lasting impact of Herskovits’s 1941 publication, and that “everything he wrote must still be studied and carefully pondered.” To this end, Mintz summarizes Herskovits’s five myths in the new edition (1990, xviii):

Herskovits argues that the idea that there is no African past is a myth. That myth rests on others: that Afro-Americans are childlike, and readily adapt themselves to harsh circumstances; that only the least abled Africans were captured and enslaved; that slaves of the New World were drawn from all of Africa precluding any cultural continuities; that African cultures were in any case so feebly constituted that they could not have survived contact with European cultures. But once the myth is

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<sup>35</sup> For more on the critiques of Herskovits’s retention theory and methods, see Lovejoy 2000, 10 & 19; Mintz & Price 1976, 8–13; 63; Raboteau 1978, 48–52 & 54–60; and Levine 1977, 4.

recognized as such, then the brilliant and many-hued past of African Americans can be recovered.

*Myth #3: Diversity vs Unity*

The notion that there was no cultural unity among enslaved Africans in the United States is both the most contested and yet frequently supported narrative to justify denials of African cultural heritage in Black America (Herskovits 1941, 294; Gates 2018, xxx). Herskovits, for his part, believed that there was far more cultural unity among Africans than previously thought, and he used this theory to debunk what he called “Myth #3.”

Myth #3 is based upon two somewhat contradictory suppositions, the first being that captives were drawn “from all parts of Africa” representing such greatly diverse cultures, languages, and customs that no communication or common cultural linkages between captives was possible. The second supposition contradicts the first in that it acknowledges an awareness of common heritage and language systems among captive Africans and, thus, the enslavers’ practice of separating them, ostensibly to quell rebellion. This supposition holds that Africans were “distributed in the New World so as to lose tribal identity, no least common denominator of understanding or behavior could have possibly been worked out by them” (Herskovits 1941, 294). Herskovits’s arguments, and those of other scholars since, provide counter-narratives to dispel this assumption.

The theory that traders and buyers intentionally separated ethnically and linguistically related Africans to deter revolts has been challenged in scholarship. Gate’s research (2018) refutes conventional wisdom about the extent to which Africans were segregated at points of departure and at their ports of arrival in North America. From slave trade historian David Eltis, Gates learned that though slave ships left Bonny in the Niger Delta (one of three major embarkation points in West Africa) with two-thirds of the captives on board being Ibo (also spelled Igbo) and three-fourths speaking Ibo, “slave rebellions on these vessels were far fewer than on ships leaving Upper Guinea where the ethnolinguistic mix was far greater” (Gates 2018, xxxi quoting Eltis, 2016, private correspondence).

When asked about willful separation of captive Africans in the New World, Eltis responded that the scholarly literature points to the exact opposite, with many scholars affirming that “planters did have preferences for certain ethnicities” (Gates 2018). Backing up his assertion, Eltis (2000, 244, 245) suggests that because planters’ “profits depended on an awareness of cultural differences, they were incentivized to keep African nations together. . . No more than Europeans did peoples of African descent come to the Americas as random units of labor.” Factors such as language, diet, and knowledge of certain crops weighed in favor of keeping a homogenous African population on plantations (244). Eltis also informed Gates that there is no evidence that slaveholders had more than a slight understanding of linguistic differences between captive Africans, and no evidence that they separated captives based on language or linguistic identification to avoid rebellion (Gates 2018, xxxi–xxxii).<sup>36</sup>

That is not to say that the separation of linguistically and culturally related peoples did not occur. Language historian John K. Thornton (1998, 196–197) points out that when “randomization” of Africans in the New World did take place, it was most likely carried out during the “process of sale and subsequent employment...with the side effect of limiting the growth of an African culture.” He emphasizes, however, that ships bound for North America “drew their entire cargo from only one or perhaps two ports in Africa and unloaded them in large lots of as many as 200–1,000 in their new Atlantic homes.” Given this, Thornton questions the extent to which buyers could “maximize diversity” among Africans arriving on their shores (196). He also notes that while there is some evidence pointing to planters deliberately trying to deter rebellion by diversifying captives, other planters were of the mind that keeping Africans of the same “*terre*” (nation) together would achieve the same end by creating stable plantation communities (Thornton, 196).

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<sup>36</sup> Eltis (2000, 245) suggests that the notion that captives were randomly picked up at various points along the African coast, resulting, as Mintz & Price (1976, 3–26) claim, a “‘crowd’ of disparate cultures rather than a grouping in any cultural sense” is over drawn. He refutes the claim by pointing out that, at least in the early British Americas, a “large degree of homogeneity in provenance zones existed.” Eltis’s research shows that the Senegambia, Gold Coast, and Bight of Biafra regions made up over half of the African arrivals in the Chesapeake coastal areas of North America (2000, 247).

To support his theory of a broad cultural “unity” among captive Africans, Herskovits turned his anthropological lens to where “slaving took its greatest toll...where “the major portion was drawn from certain fairly restricted areas lying in the coastal belt of West Africa and the Congo” (Herskovits 1941, 295). Some forty years later, anthropologist Sterling Stuckey described this region in terms of regional and country borders, writing that, “the majority of Africans brought to North America to be enslaved were from the central and western areas of Africa – from Congo-Angola, Nigeria, Dahomey (present day Benin), Togo, the Gold Coast (present day Ghana), and Sierra Leone” (1987, 10).<sup>37</sup> More recently, Eltis & Richardson (2010, 205) cite that over half of the 472,000 (documented and estimated, combined) Africans that reached North America came from the West African coastal region between Sierra Leone and Nigeria (see also Gomez 2005, 100; Stuckey, 1987, 409). For Herskovits, the “civilizations along the forested regions of West Africa and the Congo are to be regarded as forming one of the major cultural areas of the continent, which means that they resemble each other to a far greater degree than is recognized if local differences alone are taken into account” (1941, 295).

Since Herskovits, anthropologists and African language scholars have tended to emphasize the diversity of languages and cultures within these geographic zones. This approach serves as a guard against, as Paul Lovejoy phrases it, “telescoping” or “compressing the African past into some generalized shape” (2000, 19). While some authors have criticized Herskovits for doing just that, they credit him as the first to look to western and central Africa for cultural and linguistic ties between peoples of these regions. Drawing from Thornton’s (1998) reconstruction of the cultural/linguistic zones along the Atlantic coast of Africa during the slave-trade era, African language and culture historian Sandra Greene writes that Herskovits’s concept of “culture zones” still has “considerable

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<sup>37</sup> “About half the African arrivals at Port York during two periods of heavy immigration were Ibos, Ibibios, Efikins, and Mokos from Nigeria, and another fifth came from various tribes in Angola...Most slaves spoke similar languages, lived under the same climate, cultivated similar crops, and shared comparable kinship systems. When they arrived in the Chesapeake, they may have combined common threads in their cultures into new Afro-American structures” (Kulikoff 1986, 321).

validity as a first approximation in understanding the cultural impact of the African background on the cultures of slavery in the Americas” (Greene 2000, 86–87).

*Western & Central African Language Families*

Favoring similarities over differences, Herskovits suggested that amidst the diversity of languages within the Sudanic and Bantu language families of West and Central West Africa (the two major language phyla of the region) there was an underlying uniformity. In sum, these languages were not so dissimilar to render them mutually unintelligible (1941, 80).<sup>38</sup> Within the West African “Sudanese stock” (Twi, Akan, Ga-Adangme, Ewe, Fon, Yoruba, Igbo, among them), similarities of language, according to Herskovits, formed basic patterns that “afforded a grammatical matrix to facilitate communication” (1941, 79). By the same token, Herskovits points to the high degree of homogeneity within the Bantu languages of Central West Africa (of which Kongo is the most important), asserting that “many resemblances between the two types [Sudanic and Bantu] appear” (1941 295, brackets, mine). In Herskovits’s view, these underlying uniformities betray the notion that Africans had no “linguistic vehicles” with which to “establish in the New World customs in the Old” (1941, 79).

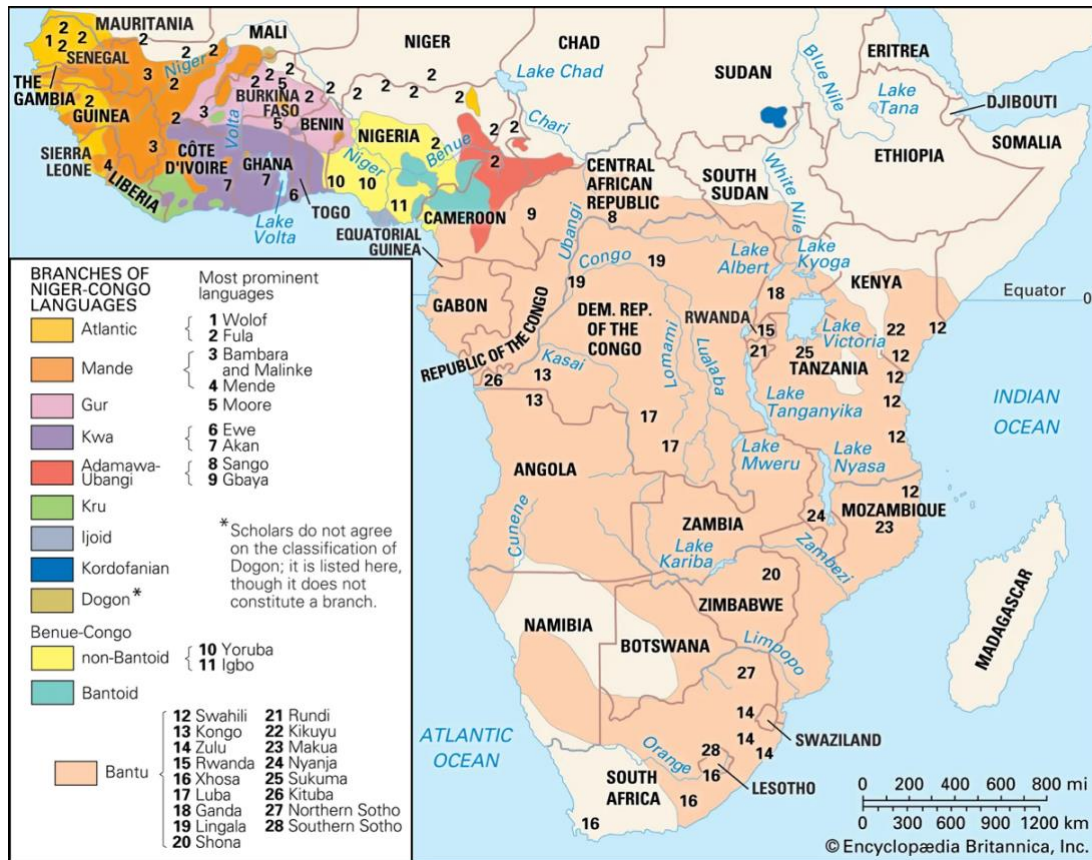
Linguistic scholarship prior to, and after Herskovits’s 1941 publication support his conclusions. In 1927, language scholar Dietrich Westermann recognized the distinctions between the Western Sudanic languages (now called Niger-Congo) and the Eastern Sudanic languages (now called Nilo-Saharan). In addition, Westermann identified vocabulary cognates between the Western Sudanic and Bantu but did not suggest a common genetic origin for these languages (Bendor-Samuel, 2018). Not until the 1930s and 40s did African language historian Joseph Greenberg establish that the two language zones “formed

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<sup>38</sup> From Alice Werner (1930), Herskovits cites the “Hamitic” stock as the third major African language family (Herskovits 1941, 79), an outdated reference to North and East African peoples. According to Tucker G. Childs (2003, 34–35) the “Hamitic Hypothesis,” is based upon racialized linguistic categories in which some languages (and their speakers) were “seen as less developed and more primitive than others...Languages such Fula, Maasai, Somali, and Nama were grouped together in a group called “Hamitic” and were said to have varying amounts of ‘Negro admixture’ and to belong to a superior Caucasoid racial type (Childs 2003, 35).



a single genetic family” (Bendor-Samuel, 2018; see Greenberg 1963; Map 2–1 illustrating the “Bantoid” language as a sub-group of the broader Niger-Congo language family).



Map 2–1: “Distribution of the Niger-Congo Languages” (Encyclopædia Britannica, online)<sup>39</sup>

### *Multilingualism & Ethnic Identities*

As with cultural behaviors and customs, language is subject to fluctuation through intercultural exchanges between peoples living along the Atlantic West and West Central coasts of Africa. Unifying cultural traits from within these culture zones, then, should be defined, as Mintz & Price contend, not on concrete, formal, discrete cultural items or behaviors (i.e., a “mechanical” view of culture), but rather upon “intercultural variations” (1976, 9) between them. More recent scholarship on African ethno-linguist retentions in the New World continues in this vein, with even more focus on

<sup>39</sup> Bendor, John “Niger-Congo Languages” (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Niger-Congo-languages>)

those dynamic, ongoing acculturative processes within western and central African cultures themselves.

Rather than proceeding as if diasporic Africans had lived within fixed categories of language and ethnic affiliations in their homelands, ethnolinguistic scholars now look towards an approach that challenges notions of language and cultural fixity. From the perspective of peoples living within the western and central African cultural “zones,” multilingualism and mutual intelligibility are also tied to group cultural identities. Ethnic identities, like everywhere in the world, are subject to change through geographic proximity, trade, and commerce (Thornton 1998, 186–87). As Greene (2000, 87) points out, economic factors helped to “unify the zones.” Even if people living within the zones did not exchange languages, they still “might share religious ideas or aesthetic principles to such a degree that they possessed a common religious or artistic heritage despite their linguistic diversity” (2000, 87 quoting Thornton 1998, 186, 87). In his introductory chapter to *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, Paul Lovejoy (2000, 12) asserts that these same intercultural exchanges did not stop once captive Africans began the cross-Atlantic journey, they did not stop “being ‘Africans’ once they were on board ‘European’ ships.”

Thornton (1998) draws his linguistic “items” from Greenberg’s *Languages of Africa* (1963). He acknowledges that Greenberg’s research has been “outdated” by more detailed studies, but that it nonetheless “builds a family tree that appreciates the degree of similarity of languages...it is especially valuable in that it gives a rough indicator of mutual intelligibility, ideal for our purposes here” (1998, 187). G. Tucker Childs (2003, 39) also cites Greenberg’s African language classification and asserts that “further analysis has not dramatically changed his findings with regard to Africa; some solace can be taken in that his classifications have been generally accepted.”

Building on Greenberg’s classification system, Thornton (1998, 187–191) locates Africans in the New World as coming from three culturally diverse areas with seven distinct subcultures among them: Upper Guinea (an area between the Senegal River and to modern Liberia), Lower Guinea (from western Ivory Coast to Cameroon), and the Angola coast, stretching inland at least as far as Zaire, now the

Democratic Republic of the Congo: see Map 2–2). While the cultural makeup in these areas may not reflect Herskovits's "uniformity," Thornton posits that they were "not so diverse as to create the cultural confusion posited by those who see African diversity as a barrier to the development of an African-based American culture" (1998, 187).

Thornton (1998, 186) also proposes that a diversity of language does not mean that language barriers are impermeable. He argues that early (17<sup>th</sup> century) observers of culture and language exaggerated or over-emphasized the importance of their differences. Like Herskovits, Thornton maintains that amidst the diversity of cultures and languages along the Atlantic African coast, there are fundamental similarities and moreover, a fluid dynamic between them. Keeping in mind factors such as multilingualism and a less rigid notion of ethnic categories in West African societies, Thornton contends that not every "linguistic or national unit" in West Africa "possessed a culture entirely different from its neighbors," and that even with intercultural differences, "multilingual people can understand a wider variety of speech than mono-lingual people can." Linguistic boundaries are "always a bit flexible and confused, particularly in the days before national education programs defined standard languages" (185–86). Opposing a "maximum diversity" theory among diasporic Africans, Thornton reasserts that ignoring factors such as multilingualism and shared non-linguistic cultural traits tends to force the notion of maximum diversity "beyond its true limits." Furthermore, the fact that some African groups were taken far more frequently than others "often had the effect of bringing people of similar backgrounds together more than a maximum-diversity hypothesis will allow" (1998, 191).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See also: Tucker Childs (2003, 20–21) on the nature of multilingualism and "multiple ethnicities and identities of many Africans." Childs asserts that "ethnic labels in the African continent are at best meaningless, at worst the legacy of a colonial construction designed to control and oppress... Thus, ethnicity might be more accurately viewed as one of a number of negotiable aspects of one's identity... it is not unlikely that a typical citizen of Nigeria will speak at least three different languages in addition to Nigerian Pidgin English. What this means is that many people speak more than one language and will use different languages for different purposes. Thus, they will adapt to the situation in which the (language) survey question is being asked." Fasold, Wralph W. (1984) points to other caveats about interpreting language boundaries and classifications.

*The Middle Passage: Language, Oral Arts & “Incubators of Unity”*

The multilingualism that equipped Africans to communicate across ethnic divisions in their homelands was undoubtedly put into practice as soon as they boarded the ships that carried them across the Atlantic. Cultural and linguistic border crossings were not just “manifestations of the creative adaptation to conditions of slavery through acts of cultural resistance;” rather, people with diverse origins on the African continent “recognized cultural and linguistic cohesion when it occurred, and they “invented common historical traditions when necessary...” (Lovejoy 2000, 13). As such, the invention of new historical traditions was never more necessary than at the initial point of entry into the American slave system, on board ships headed for the New World.

Historian Marcus Rediker (2007, 277) considers multilingualism a primary factor in his assessment that divisions on board Middle Passage vessels were “less extreme than once thought.” The fact of colonialism on the African continent meant that many Africans spoke the European languages of their captors and, especially along West Africa’s coastline and inland rivers, had established “maritime,” or “pidgin” tongues through trade and commerce (277–279). Sierra Leoneans in the 1970s, for example, spoke a lingua franca, but they also spoke “English, French, Dutch, or Portuguese with tolerable fluency” (278).<sup>41</sup> As a matter of urgency during the Middle Passage, Africans also communicated with one another by “sign and gesture,” and learned English aboard ship, most of them by speaking with sailors (278).<sup>42</sup>

From Rediker’s readings of sailors’ travelogues, we learn that captives also communicated aboard ships through their oral arts traditions. “On every ship, there were various and important forms of expressive culture: singing and dancing (of the self-chosen, not forced, variety), drumming (the entire

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<sup>41</sup> In another example of language exchange through trade and commerce, Thornton (1998, 10) notes that Yoruba had emerged in the as a “lingua franca” from the Gold Coast to the Niger Delta (Volta to Benin, and the Bight of Biafra), “though other lingua francas functioned both east and west of this.”

<sup>42</sup> From Eltis (2000, 156), “The average middle passage voyage lasted two to three months in the early sixteenth century, and by the mid-nineteenth century slavers were routinely crossing to Bahia in less than three weeks and to Cuba in five.”

ship, being wooden, was one vast percussive instrument), and storytelling” (Rediker 2007, 278).<sup>43</sup>

Sailor records indicate that women told stories “upon the plan of Aesop’s fables, Aesop himself being an African.”<sup>44</sup> There were also dramatic dance enactments of “Slave-taking or Bush-fighting,” in which men “leaping, sallying, and retreating, and all other gestures,” acted out the trauma and violence of captivity (2007, 279). Rediker also notes the frequency of singing on cross-Atlantic journeys as “an essential means of communication among people who were not meant to communicate,” and a way to foster group solidarity during the Middle Passage (2007, 282):

Singing was also a way to find one’s kin, fellow villagers, and country-men and -women, and identifying which cultural groups were on board the ship. It was a way of communicating important information about conditions, treatment, resistance, and events, about where the ship was going. Singing was a means of creating a common base of knowledge and forging a collective identity.

Thus, oral arts communication helped to create a collective resistance, forming a burgeoning Pan-Africanism on the cross-Atlantic journey:

In the shadow of death, the millions who made the great Atlantic passage in a slave ship forged new forms of life —new language, new means of expression, new resistance, and a new sense of community. Herein lay the maritime origins of cultures that were at once African-American and Pan-African, creative, and hence indestructible (Rediker 2007, 265).

Opportunities for captives to express themselves creatively onboard ships were presented in both “forced” and “self-chosen”—precursors to the “sanctioned” and “steal away” performance settings on plantations in North America (Rediker 2007, 282; see Chapter Four, this thesis). Crew members who understood the languages of the captives got the meaning of their songs; others who were curious enough would have them translated (Rediker, 2007, 283). Two ship doctors described “forced singing,” in which captives “with African drums beating and the cat-o’-nine tails cracking around their bodies” were required to sing “*Mese, Mese, Mackaride*,” that is, “Good Living or Messing well among White Men.” Other songs were clearly of protest: “*Madda! Madda! Yiera! Yiera! Bemini! Bemini!*” which meant that ‘they were all sick and by and by they should be no more.’” From a ship surgeon’s logs, the

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<sup>44</sup> For possible Ethiopian (Nubian) origins of Aesop, see Richard A. Lobban (2002).

captives on ships would sing “songs expressive of their fears of being beat, of their want of victuals, particularly the want of their native food, and of their never returning to their own country” (Rediker 2007, 283).<sup>45</sup>

Rediker’s readings of these early chronicles indicates that not all songs sung on enslavement ships were sorrowful. Nevertheless, “happy songs seem to have been the exception... More commonly, below decks at night, whenever captives, particularly women, were on their own, they sang songs of ‘lamentation’” (2007, 284). Indeed, it is hard to fathom how captive Africans were able to raise their voices in song, to any degree, given the horrific conditions on these vessels of torture.<sup>46</sup> In *Reversing Sail*, historian Michael Gomez writes that the sounds most heard from captives was not music, but a “howling, melancholy noise.” The ship’s surgeon of one ship, the *Elizabeth*, reported that two-thirds of the 155 deaths on board were due to “melancholy.” To “combat this mother of all blues, captives were brought on deck and forced to dance and sing, and sometimes had to be beaten to get them to comply” (Gomez, 2005, 79). The term, “dancing the slave,” describes a forced exercise where captives were “whipped into cheerfulness... under the eye of the slavers and their crew on the deck of the slave ship” Fabre (1999, 34). The real mood of the performers was chronicled in the following poem, “The Sorrow of the Yoruba,” written by an observant surgeon aboard a ship of Yoruba captives in 1790:

*At the savage Captain’s beck  
Now the brutes they make us prance  
Smack the Cat about the Deck  
And in scorn they bid us dance  
(Fabre 1999, 37).<sup>47</sup>*

For Rediker, Stuckey, and Eltis, the enslavement vessels were sites of collective resistance, and the beginning of a pan-African Black consciousness. I will allow their words and imagery to sum up the

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<sup>46</sup> For more on treatment of captives, health conditions, and mortality rates on board slaving ships, see Rediker (2007, 273–276); Gomez (2005, 67–69, 71–72 [general]; 76 [rape], 78 [disease], 78–79 [tight-packing], 118, 205, 211, 217–21[torture], and 17–19, 120–21, 212–13, 240, 289–9 [suicide]); and Eltis (2000, 66, 117–188, 159, 185–86).

<sup>47</sup> The “Cat” being the “cat-o-nine tails” whip.

processes of community building, inter-cultural exchanges, and unity aboard enslavement vessels, beginning with Rediker (2007, 307):

Here was the alchemy of chains mutating, under the hard pressure of resistance, into bonds of community. The mysterious slave ship had become a place of creative resistance for those who now discovered themselves to be “black folks.” In a dialectic of stunning power, the community of moral suffering aboard the slave ship gave birth to defiant, resilient, life-affirming African-American and Pan-African cultures.

By Stuckey’s (1987, 1) reading, the bonds that were formed from the shared horror experienced during the Middle Passage rendered ships of enslavement “incubators of slave unity,” where the seeds of a nascent Pan-Africanism were planted:

During the process of becoming a single people, Yorubas, Akans, Ibos, Angolans, and others were present on slave ships to America and experienced a common horror— unearthly moans and piercing shrieks, the smell of filth and stench of death, all during the violent rhythms and quiet coursings of ships at sea. As such, the slave ships were the first real incubators of slave unity across cultural lines, cruelly revealing irreducible links from one ethnic group to the other, fostering resistance thousands of miles before the shores of the new land appeared on the horizon – before there was mention of natural rights in America.

And finally, from Eltis (2010, 226), who depicts the ships of enslavement as a locus of an inevitable, “elementary” Pan-Africanism:

If Europeans had an effect on how Africans defined themselves, it was to encourage an elementary pan-Africanism rather than to foster tribalism and attach ethnic nomenclatures to African groups. The initial and unintentional impact of European sea-born contact was to force non-elite Africans to think of themselves as part of a wider African group. Initially, this group might be, say, Igbo or Yoruba and soon, in addition, blacks as opposed to whites.

### *Herskovits’s Other Three Myths*

Herskovits’s myths #1, #2, and #4, are based upon such explicitly racist assumptions that it feels repugnant to dignify them with further explanation. As King & Swartz have warned, however, one must be always mindful of the past to understand the how myths can persist in subtle and not so subtle ways to perpetuate “the dominance of the White mainstream” in the United States at large and, more specifically, in education (King & Swartz 2014, 141).

Myth #1 holds that Africans adjusted easily to the “most unsatisfactory social conditions” (Herskovits 1941, 293). This assertion made it easier to “justify the enslavement and exploitation of a people whose behavior patterns were sufficiently different to be labeled as “primitive’ or childlike”” (Levine 1977, 588). Given this accepted narrative in 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship, Herskovits was compelled to point out that Africans’ rejection of slavery was continually demonstrated in numerous ways, not least by the high incidence of absconding, and the endemic, organized revolts so feared by slaveholders, “giving evidence that the Negroes could implement resentment with action” (1941, 293).<sup>48</sup> Gomez (2005, 131, 141) sums up the cumulative effect of Black resistance and leadership in large and small insurrections, and Black abolitionist activism throughout the antebellum period (2005):

Africans were never comfortable or complacent in slaveholding America; they could never sit still...The cumulative effect of all these acts, large and small, was to undermine the institution of slavery throughout the Americas. Resistance increased slavery’s cost, affecting the bottom line while raising the level of danger. Resistance also emboldened the oppressed, making the entire system increasingly unmanageable. Slavery expired with a whimper in some places, while in others it required herculean efforts to subdue. In the end, the antislavery struggle of the enslaved themselves was fundamental to abolition.

Myth #1 justified “myth #2,” which holds that “only the poorer stock of Africa was enslaved,” while the more intelligent members of villages were able to evade captivity (Herskovits 1941, 294). Herskovits illustrated that the opposite was more likely true. While there may be little evidence of selectivity on the part of White captors, processes of selection very likely came from the actions of African co-conspirators on the continent who may have left “certain categories in the upper class of African society, especially the priests and rulers” more vulnerable to being sold off to Europeans (1941,

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<sup>48</sup> Herskovits cites examples of resistance and rejection of slavery through revolts on board slaving ships, and on plantations in the Caribbean and N. America, including forms of work sabotage and various ways for earning and gaining freedom, including absconding. Infanticide and suicide were also not uncommon (1941, 86–110, 293). For more recent contributions to the history of slave resistance, revolts, and freedom pursuits during initial captivity in African homelands, on cross-Atlantic journeys, and on plantations in Brazil, North America, and in the Caribbean, see Gomez (2005, 109–149). On hunger strikes, suicide, resistance, mutiny, and insurrections on slave ships, and “gaining freedom through marketable skills, and parentage” in North America, see Rediker (2007, 276 - 310), and Gomez (2005 103, 110). “Likewise, those whose fathers were white (the 1850 [US] census states there were 246,000 mixed race persons out of 3.2 million enslaved) were in a better position to acquire their freedom, although this was far from guaranteed” (Gomez 2005, 103).



294). The validity of this practice, Herskovits argued, is evident in the widespread presence of Black leaders in the antebellum period who led revolts and were able to “successfully administer the communities subsequently established” (1941, 294).<sup>49</sup>

Likewise, the presence of “many priests and other specialists in manipulating the supernatural” accounts for the fact that religion is one of the most “recognizable Africanisms in the New World” (Herskovits 1941, 294). Stuckey (1987, 41) provides further insight as to how religious leaders provided a sense of unity among plantation hands, and that divine and political authority was ordained by rights of ancestral heritage and custom. It was the religious leaders who spoke for the captives in the New World, regardless of their ethnic origins. It is these “king priests” and their high ranking among the enslaved that helps to “explain the authority of the black preacher through slavery and later” (41).

Traditional oral artists on antebellum plantations also took on leadership roles, no doubt a result of the artists’ roles in creating narratives of resistance in Black orature. The point to be made here is that the role of both priests and artists (especially musicians and storytellers) on southern plantations “caused African-born slaves to recognize central features of life in the various ethnic homelands as they moved towards a single ethnicity in their new environment” (Stuckey 1987, 41). As we shall see in Chapter Four, the personified priest finds an important role in the Brer Rabbit and High John the Conquerer myths and tales.

Herskovits’s “myth #4” states that captives in the New World were eager to give up aspects of their own heritage once having witnessed the “superiority of European customs” (1941, 296). Herskovits’s counter-narratives to myth #4 do not deny the fact of European impact in the formation of Black identity and culture in the Americas, nor do they elide the fact that Blacks’ survival depended upon adapting and gaining access to White culture, language, literacy, and power structures.<sup>50</sup> Cultural critic

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<sup>49</sup> Herskovits makes references to African military specialists, “priestly classes,” and Africans of “noble blood” sold into slavery in the New World (1941, 105–109). For more on the occurrences of leadership (including “slave preachers”) in slave uprisings and revolts, see Gomez (2005, 109–149), Levine (1977, 75–78), and Stuckey (1987, 7, 22, 37, 41, 57, 111–112, 136).

<sup>50</sup> Herskovits (1941, 141) writes, “A further factor in inducing acculturation was an unconscious identification by the Negroes of the better way of life with the customs of those who possessed the power to get for themselves the

and Trickster historian Lewis Hyde (1998, 227) tells a freedom tale with Frederick Douglass in the role of Trickster, gaining his freedom by “stealing out of slavery” and “slipping the trap of culture, with the “theft” of literacy.

...a strong will to test the forbidden, and it kept him on the edge, where others might have accepted the portions they were offered. When [Douglass] writes of his master’s “bitter opposition” goaded him into learning to read, we witness his willfulness and at the same time see its fruit, for it was by his reading that Douglass produced a second miscegenation: through access to books he became the child of two cultures, not just two races.

In this parable, Hyde likens Douglass to Eshu Elegbara, a West African divine Trickster who mediated the boundaries of the spiritual and secular worlds. Like Eshu at the crossroads of heaven and earth, Douglass lived “on the boundaries of plantation culture, and in that in that setting he became a cunning go-between, a thief of reappropriation who quit the periphery and moved to the center” (1998, 227). Douglass’s story reveals that he understood that the path to freedom depended on gaining the same cultural capital that belonged to Whites. When Mr. Auld (Douglass’s “massa”) caught his wife teaching a young Frederick to read, he forbade her from continuing.

To use his own words... he said, ‘A [-----] should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do... Now, if you teach [him] (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him... He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master...It would make him discontented and unhappy.’

These words sank deep into my heart...It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things... I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty – to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom (1845, 33).

Douglass’s story illustrates the complex nature of acculturation in Black American life and the retentions of Africa on that life. This process is well summed up by Gomez (2005, 125) who

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good things of existence. With passing generations, prestige values among the slaves, certainly of the United States, came more and more to be based on white values.” Gomez remarks on this same point, “Although many blacks challenged slavery, many did not. There were individuals who felt inferior to whites, who believed they were under the Hamitic curse and could expect nothing better. Certainly, there were those who desired and appreciated any degree of recognition from whites. Not everyone resisted; some capitulated. The seemingly endless accounts of conspiracies betrayed are proof of this” (Gomez 2005, 121). For other Blacks, “they had become enamored of European ways and saw little value in anything African. For them, deliverance from slavery required a simultaneous rejection of African culture, the source of their lives” (Gomez 2005, 128).

underscores the intermingling of cultures in diasporic America and how African (as well as Native American) culture influenced Black American life and White culture as well:

Families also participated in cultures, and scholars continue to discuss how African cultures engaged in those of Europe and Native America. Africans had to learn aspects of European culture to survive, but they also retained degrees of their own cultures. Further, while the results of such interactions varied with time and place, it was generally the case that European forms adopted by the African-descended population were heavily influenced by African culture. From religion to music to literature to clothing, European sensibility was Africanized and then reembraced, in many instances by those of European as well as African descent. In many ways, this is the essence of American culture.

In Black oral arts traditions, intercultural exchanges were similarly part of acculturative processes. Herskovits was aware of the tendency then, as now, for students and scholars to “lay emphasis upon the importance of what the Negroes borrowed from European melodies” but stressed the need, at that time, for further scholarship on the matter (1941, 263). In the case of African American songs, Herskovits stressed that while they are not without mark of European influence, it is “rare to find a Negro song which, though quite European in melodic line, is not tinged by some African-like modulation, or is not tinged by a subtle turn by the manner of its singing” (1941, 267).

Africans naturally absorbed and adopted the music they heard from their European captors. In 1958, anthropologist Sterling Brown commented on the matter of hybridity in regards to spirituals, a subject which has been given considerable attention in music scholarship since then (1958, 283):<sup>51</sup>

A give and take seems logical to expect. Correspondences between white and Negro melodies have been established. The complete Africanism of the spirituals was never tenable. The spirituals are obviously not in an African musical idiom...But all of this does not establish the Negro spiritual...as imitative of white music, or as unoriginal, or as devoid of traces of the African idiom...Even the strongest adherents of the view that the origin of the Negro spirituals is in white music, agree now that the spiritual is definitely the Negro's own and, regardless of birthplace, is stamped with originality.

Levine's interpretation of “cross-culturation” between Whites and Blacks during the antebellum era is particularly notable in that it points to the mark of African originality in Black oral arts traditions

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<sup>51</sup> For some history on the “white-to-black” thesis on spirituals, see Cone (1991, 9–15), and Levine (1977, 19–55). Radano (2003, 138) stresses that, given the “inherently dialogical terrain of interracial vocality, spiritual songs could not have been anything but a cross-cultural mixture.”

(1977, 6). Acknowledging the disappearance of African “song literature” on American plantations, Levine emphasizes that its absence is “not synonymous with the disappearance of the structure of that literature and the purposes to which it had been put” (6). Moreover, in spite of the “widespread musical exchanges and cross-culturation with whites,” certain formal structures, such as antiphony, community orientation, “improvisational character,” and its relationships to dance and gesture, remained closer to West Africa than to Europe. Here, Levine speaks to both the structures and the purposes of Black orature in general, and the role of verbal arts as vehicles for social criticism that remained distinct in the New World (6).

In their songs, as in their tales, aphorisms, proverbs, anecdotes, and jokes, African American slaves, following the African practices they had been forced to leave behind them, assigned a central role to the spoken arts, encouraged and rewarded verbal improvisation, maintained the participatory nature of their expressive culture, and used the spoken arts to voice criticism as well as to uphold traditional values and group cohesion.

The constancy of African and African American verbal and musical arts is not so much in particulars of texts, or even formal structures (although, as I argue in coming chapters, these are evident as well), but in their function. From slavery times to a still racialized society, Black vernaculars, through musical and spoken forms, have been relaying stories of what’s going on, what’s happening in the everyday world of personal, social, political, and spiritual life. Africans in the New World had cultural knowledge and memory that enabled them to maintain the use of oral arts in everyday life, albeit in a new cultural, social, and political environment. Floyd (1995, 227) sums up the continuum as follows:

African American musics, from the folk cries, calls, and hollers of slave life to the concert-hall works of Call-Response, are such expressions – struggle fulfillment in microcosm...Transplanted Africans, in spite of their trials in new and hostile land, took the musical fruits of their legacy and merged them with European vernacular forms, spiritualizing their burden, forging a music peculiarly their own, and triggering a process and an aesthetic that would continue to the present and beyond.

## Essentialism/Anti-Essentialism in Contemporary Discourse

Henry Louis Gates has suggested that the debate over African retentions in Black vernacular traditions has been largely settled “in favor of continuities” (2018, xxix–xxx). This view, however, is not embraced by all contemporary scholars. What follows are examples of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century post-modern scholarship that place an emphasis the hybrid nature of African American Black vernacular traditions. In post-modern analysis, European influences are so thoroughly integrated into African oral arts traditions that the latter are resigned to an “imaginary,” or “mythical” African past. I am focusing here on three contemporary scholars whose anti-essentialist stances, as I see it, tend to prop up the same notions that Herskovits railed against nearly a century ago, that is, the assumptions that ancestral cultural practices could not have survived the trauma of the Atlantic passage nor the totality of American enslavement. I agree with Keyes (1996, 224) who points out that this kind of post-modern criticism tends to view contemporary African American expressive culture only in terms of modernity, thereby lessening its importance as a “dynamic tradition...anchored in culture history.”

### *Gilroy*

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy (1993, 80) identifies a dilemma between essentialist and anti-essentialist stances in regard to Black expressive culture or “styles.”

In the face of the conspicuous differentiation and proliferation of black cultural styles and genres, a new analytic orthodoxy has begun to grow. In the name of anti-essentialism and theoretical rigor it suggests that since black particularity is socially and historically constructed, and plurality is inescapable, the pursuit of any unifying dynamic or underlying structure of feeling in contemporary black cultures is utterly misplaced. The attempt to locate the cultural practices, motifs, or political agendas that might connect the dispersed and divided blacks of the new world and of Europe with each other and even with Africa is dismissed as essentialism or idealism or both.

Positioning himself somewhere between an essentialist and anti-essentialist camp, Gilroy seeks a balanced approach to the study of music in the African diaspora, offering a “tentative rebuke” to a staunch anti-essentialism (80). While he emphasizes that “weighing the similarities and differences

between black cultures remains an urgent concern,” he also suggests that those very differences between diasporic blacks in the modern world can “be employed to project the plural richness of black cultures in different parts of the world in counterpoint to their common sensibilities – both those residually inherited from Africa and those generated from the special bitterness of new world racial slavery” (80–81). Nevertheless, Gilroy (188–189) confirms that his rebuke is, indeed, tentative, as it is tempered by a return to an anti-essentialist critique of “cultural activists” (Africanists) who deny black cultural plurality in favor of “racial solidarity.”

Appeal[s] to the notion of purity as the basis of racial solidarity are more popular. These appeals are often anchored in ideas of invariant tradition and provisioned equally by positivistic certainty and an idea of politics as a therapeutic activity...When the emphasis shifts towards the elements of invariant tradition that heroically survive slavery, any desire to remember slavery itself becomes something of an obstacle...Blacks are urged, if not to forget the slave experience which appears as an aberration from the greatness told in African history, then to replace it at the center of our thinking with a mystical and ruthlessly positive notion of Africa that is indifferent to intraracial variation and is frozen at the point where blacks boarded the ships that would carry them into the woes and horrors of the middle passage.

My first concern with Gilroy’s stance is his overemphasis on cultural sensibilities generated through the slave system over those “residually inherited from Africa” (81). As a case in point, he suggests that the strong relationship between music and the moving body were formed primarily as an adaptive strategy in response to the oppressive conditions of slavery. While acknowledging important Africanisms in black music such as antiphony, call and response, improvisation, montage, and the “irrepressible rhythms of the forbidden drum,” Gilroy claims the “brutal historical conditions” as the site where the “distinctive kinesics of post-slave populations,” emerged (Gilroy n son1993, 75–78).<sup>52</sup> Such a claim is, of course, untenable for anyone who is familiar with the inextricably bounded relationship between music, dance, language, gesture, and drama in societies across the African continent (see Chapter Three, this thesis). Nonetheless, Gilroy does acknowledge the “great body of

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<sup>52</sup> See Chapter Three, “Jewels from Bondage: Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity,” in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Gilroy, 1993).

work which justifies the proposition that some cultural, religious, and linguistic affiliations can be identified even if their contemporary political significance remains disputed” (1993, 81).

My second concern with Gilroy’s position is his anti-essentialist critique of those seek an “absolute essence” of African culture. Gilroy (75) asks, “What special analytical problems arise if a style, genre, or particular performance of music is identified as being expressive of the absolute essence of the group that produced it?” My response to this question is that we should not be looking for absolute, concrete cultural artifacts left over from an “invariant tradition” but for those African cultural epistemes, or what Mintz & Price call “deep cultural rules,” “cognitive orientations,” and “common basic assumptions about social relations or the workings of the universe” (1976, 10, 11, 53).<sup>53</sup> As I point out in my next chapter, a cultural orientation that remains open to change and innovation is what keeps oral traditions in West African and other parts of the continent from becoming static and invariable in the first place. In *African Rhythm, African Sensibility*, John Chernoff (1979, 155) describes the tendency for Westerners to regard people and events in traditional societies as “nestled in and determined by the ready-made patterns of culture they uncritically accept.” To clear up this misunderstanding, Barbara Hampton redefines the word “traditional” from meaning “the preserved” to mean the “renewed, the ever-changing, the dynamic” (1998, 102). This interpretation of “traditional” is, as we shall see, part and parcel of why and how African peoples in the New World were able to transform and maintain their ancestral practices, keeping them ever vital and relevant to the present.

### *Lefever*

Anti-essentialist thinking surfaces in Harry G. Lefever’s explanations of the origins of urban forms of Signifying in the Black Toast tradition and the dozens. While Lefever’s (1981, 85) argument “that one does not need to resort to a historical explanation” to explain similarities between oral traditions seems logical enough, it seems equally illogical to accept Lefever’s position that the art of Signifying

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<sup>53</sup> See M’Baye (2009, 11) for a critique of Gilroy’s anti-essentialist (and anti-Pan-Africanist) stance in relation to contemporary Black diasporic literature. M’Baye levels specific criticism at Gilroy’s “rigid theory of hybridity that excludes Africa from the experiences of blacks of the diaspora.”

arose on American soil only as a survival strategy among poor urban blacks who are so marginalized that all they have control over are “their bodies and their speech.” (85). Levine (1977, 20) refuted such claims regarding the Trickster tales created by enslaved Africans, writing that “the stories are just too complex and too ambiguous to argue that the stories provide a simple substitute for the lack of power over them.”

Signifying speech rituals like Toast-telling and the dozens have provided members of African American communities with a means of social control over racial oppression including, “displacement of aggression, education, status ranking, and, within a legal context, social control” (Lefever 1981, 85). As I have been arguing, however, these tools were already at Africans’ disposal before their arrival in North America. Not to put too fine a point on it, the art of Signifying was already in the captive African’s arsenal of weapons to combat and protest the powers that be. In African societies,

...songs, tales, proverbs, and verbal games served the dual purpose of not only preserving communal values and solidarity but also providing occasions for the individual to transcend, at least symbolically, the inevitable restrictions of his environment and his society by permitting him to express deeply held feelings which ordinarily could not be verbalized (Levine 1977, 7–8).

My reference to Black oral arts traditions as “arsenals of weapons” has implications for Black oral arts traditions as tools of resistance, in a revolutionary sense (cultural, if not militant), on both continents. This point will be solidified in my analysis of antebellum songs of protest, Trickster tales, and in later contemporary Black vernacular forms such as the dozens, rap, and spoken word, and blues and jazz. For now, let me reaffirm that Signifying arts, as forms of social commentary and resistance were not discontinued with the Middle Passage, nor were they born anew on American soil. They were, rather, refitted to meet the needs of Afro-Americans under the “unique social and psychological pressures of the New World” (Van Sertima 1989, 103). Recalling Lovejoy’s words, Africans did not stop being Africans once they set sail for the Americas (2012, 19).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Folklorist John Roberts (2009, 113; 115) similarly refutes the idea that the harsh conditions of enslavement led to the abandonment of group values and cultural practices. Instead, he asserts, cultural continuities on American soil demonstrated the ability to adhere to them “under new conditions.”



*Radano Vs. Ramsey*

One of the most ardent anti-essentialists within contemporary Black arts criticism is musicologist Ronald Radano. His views most thoroughly and passionately argued in *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (2003). Although Radano's focus is on African American musics, he places storytelling and other Black oral traditions within the parameters of his critique (46–48). While his comprehensive analysis of the complexities of racialized, acculturative processes of diasporic Black music is, without question, an impressive scholarly work, I am compelled to challenge what I see as his underlying dismissal of other scholarly attempts to locate real and ongoing African cultural retentions in Black music and other Black vernacular arts expressions.

As iterated throughout *Lying Up a Nation*, Radano's quest for eliminating essentialist thinking is motivated primarily by the laudable goal to debunk the notion of "race" as a socially and artificially constructed black/white binary and to transcend "racial constructs of difference" (2003, 10; 3–4). Indeed, as Herskovits observed, an historically constructed binary began in the antebellum era with the dichotomy between White desire for Black song and dance traditions on the one hand and, hostility toward, and dismissal of these expressions on the other (Herskovits 1941, 138; see also Radano 2003, 34–35; 141–142, 150). As Fabre (1999, 37) points out, the ambivalence towards African performance began on ships on the cross-Atlantic journey, where captives were "whipped into cheerfulness" through forced entertainments which, in turn, elicited "hatred and attraction, contempt or praise, condescension or respect." Levine also noted this same ambivalence towards Black performance; White plantation owners who considered their hands to be "little more than barbarians" paid "fascinated and flattering attention to their song, dance, their tales, and their forms of religious expression" (1977, 114).

That these performance settings satisfied a White or colonial desire for difference in Black performance cannot (and should not) be disputed. As we know, the fascination with Black creative expressions led to obligatory or otherwise "sanctioned" Black performances for entertaining Whites

within plantation communities (see Stuckey 1987, 72, chapter Four, this thesis).<sup>55</sup> The studied attention given by Whites to these entertainments led in turn to the racially stereotyped and essentialized White minstrelsy genre (see Abrahams, 1992, 131–153). As I see it, however, an overemphasis on the impact of White racialized ideations upon Black musical forms effectively negates any agency that plantation hands had in forming their creative expressions according to their own purposes, aesthetic criteria and meaning.

Such assessments can overlook two important considerations that I will introduce here and return to later. The first of these is that while African forms may have been sustained in part through a White desire for difference and the exotic, these racialized connotations do not negate the value of Africanisms as meaningful identity markers of Blackness (or African-ness). Although plantation hands were “encouraged to act, and perform differently,” they “neither divested themselves of their own cultural heritage, nor acculturated to the behavior and performance patterns of their masters” (Abrahams 1992, xxii). As much as plantation hands performed publicly they were just as often, if not more frequently, engaged in ancestral music and dance rituals away from the scrutiny of plantation owners. These events took place in the captives’ living quarters and in “bush arbor,” or “steal away” settings in the woods where they had more privacy, making it possible for them to “continue to practice values proper to them...with no concern for White approval” (Stuckey 1987, 25; see Chapter Four, this thesis, for more on “steal away” or “bush arbor” gatherings).

Secondly, as a manifestation of their cultural heritage, plantation hands took obligatory “displays of difference,” as opportunities to Signify on their “massas.” Via song texts and dance movements, plantation hands expressed veiled criticisms of their treatment under slavery, mocking the pretensions

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<sup>55</sup> Radano (2003, 149–155) expounds upon his central thesis that the creation of early Black performance was a primarily a result “white desire or black performance,” Black’s desire to enhance their status, and the subsequent commodification of Black music by Whites (and Blacks): “Whatever musical gifts may be attributed to antebellum African-America, they evolved as something inextricably linked to the social processes developing from the master-slave relation...For black music, after all, gained its exceptional stature not because of some inherent greatness, but because of the emergence of expressions of difference that were recognizable within a familiar racial dialogic” (155).

and in White mannerisms and customs (Holloway, 1990, 223–224; Abrahams 1992, xxiii–xiv; 101). Even when antebellum musical expressions showed clear syncretization with European instrumentation, melody, and metric structures, the ancestral practice of utilizing song as a vehicle for contest, social commentary, and protest remained (see Chapter Four, this thesis, for further discussion of the ancestral practice of Signifying in Black oral arts).

What evolves in *Lying Up a Nation* is, for me, a consistent and puzzling equivocation. Radano affirms that his purpose is not to “unseat the significance and integrity of black music,” but to uphold the “commitment to a viable essence of black music that still occupies the popular imagination [that] remains an important ideological component of national memory that emerges historically as one of the many coherence systems binding people musically” (2003, 3). Yet throughout his book, Radano frequently undermines this stance by characterizing the “essence” of black music as a kind of “myth,” part of “the stories we tell in giving texture and meaning in the making of our worlds” (3).

Early on, Radano informs his readers that he is not seeking to “unearth an authoritative and truthful past” but to “listen for a story with no beginnings, content with the fragments of texts that sound forth inscriptively from the noisy legacy of colonial violence” (53). Offering evidence of “double singing” (a form rife with West African oral arts practices such as Signifying and responsorial singing), Radano acknowledges that early plantation songs of enslaved Africans point forward to a “liberative becoming,” while simultaneously pointing back to a “prior place of a homeland in Africa” (2003, 163). But this nuanced description of a dialectical, two-way culture-building process is quickly minimized, if not dismissed, by his main thesis, which is that such practices are built upon “constructed memories” from “an imagined Africa, in the dream of liberation” (163).

Radano’s thesis is undercut by his reliance upon and implicit endorsement of outdated, ethnocentric sources. In his pursuit of overcoming racialized boundaries and notions of constructed difference in African American music, Radano bases a good portion of his critique on outdated ethnographic accounts that described antebellum musical performance in pejorative terms such as “primitive,” “noise” (2003, 92–93), “savage,” (78, 101) and “heathenish” (101). He also draws upon well-

intentioned but ethnocentric and clumsy attempts by early ethnomusicologists who inadvertently supported the notion of the “exotic and different” by, to give an example, referring to West African drumming styles as “hot rhythms” (34) and over-complicating the basic structures of West African drumming patterns.<sup>56</sup>

Rather than seeking more nuanced, contextualized representations of West African drumming (and song) practices and their potential retentions in Black American vernacular traditions, Radano rests his anti-essentialist case on these pejorative and outdated accounts, buttressing his assertion that the early formation of a Black aesthetic is formed primarily from racialized and exoticized conceptions of cultural distinctiveness. As I see it, musicologist Michael Morse’s review of Bohlman & Radano’s anthology, *Music and the Racial Imagination* (2000) applies equally to *Lying Up a Nation*:

In an apparent attempt to undermine race as an idea, the concept is reinforced. In the name of attacking racism, the specious realities of racism are construed inevitable, and so shored up. In the guise of a moral renewal for musical scholarship, both the love of music and scholarship are subjected to nihilistic damnation” (Morse, 2002: 179, 181).

Radano’s assessment of cross-Atlantic connections within the domain of anthropology and folklore are equally anti-essentialist. He is particularly dismissive of Zora Neale Hurston’s work (2003, 56, 46–48). Referring to her collections of oral histories and stories as “tall tales of life in a world of difference,” Radano pinpoints the Black vernacular use of the word “lying” (as in tall tale), specifically in reference to a quote by one of Hurston’s storytellers, George Thomas: “Zora, you come to de right place if lies is what you want. Ah’m gointer lie up a nation” (47).<sup>57</sup> Radano seems to have taken the

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<sup>56</sup> One of these noted scholars is ethnomusicologist A.M. Jones whose musical transcriptions advanced the now outdated notion that West African dance drumming patterns (namely Ewe), were based on a “polymetric” system, represented by shifting bar lines in different meters on the western musical staff (see Jones, A.M., 1959). In my MA research investigating the *vudodo* (dance drumming) practice among the Anlo Ewe of southeastern Ghana, Jones’s transcriptions served only to cloud my understanding of the relationships between drumming parts in ensemble performance. It was not until I was able to study two Anlo Ewe dances – *Gahu* and *Agbadza* – in Legon, Ghana, that I was able to grasp the structure of the music in relation to the basic foot patterns of the dance: an underlying four-beat phrase off-set by the occurrence of cross-rhythmic hemiola (2 against 3 rhythmic patterns) created by the interlocking call and response interplay between the master and supporting drums, and the underlying “ground” rhythms provided by the *gankogui* (iron bell) and the *axatse* (gourd rattle), and handclapping (see Fraioli, 2006, Chapters Six & Seven).

<sup>57</sup> This quote can be found in Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935, reprint 1990, 2; 19).

notion of “lies” quite literally, hitching it to his entire premise of an essentialized Black music and folklore, hence the title of his book.

In further dismissal of Hurston’s work and, indeed, the field of anthropology in its entirety, Radano writes, “seeking the pure presence of black form, [Hurston] acknowledged that this form could only be observed through what she called ‘the spy-glass of Anthropology,’ an appeal less to the powers of science than to the mediations on which all claims of black essentialism depend” (2003, 47). In the following rebuke, Radano (51) privileges the idea that oral traditions cannot be trusted and that only empirical facts can offer insights into early African American plantation musical practices. In Radano’s view

vernacular truth develops from the ground of textual artifice... the fact remains that there is virtually nothing from which we might even begin to craft a standard history of slave musical performance, a condition that has inspired critics and historians to seek out creative if inadequate alternatives to fill the gap: grand conclusions based on shards of evidence; anachronistic overlays of early folkloristic presumptions; presentist interpretations that frame early black music as if it were born in the here and now...However diverting it may be, the Procrustean bed of tales cannot address in a practicable way the social necessity of accounting for an unaccountable past.

Authors who question Radano’s anti-essentialist positions may be few but nonetheless they create another avenue for looking at the matters of Black identity in music and other expressive arts. In his review of Radano’s *Lying Up a Nation*, Eric Porter (2005, 1512) wonders, “Does Radano’s analysis leave room for analyses of the in-group, communal, or diasporic, imaginary function of black music without consigning it to the dustbin of essentialism?” Porter’s review warns against minimizing the contributions and “nuanced conversations” of African American musicians and critics:

How do we most productively acknowledge the problems inherent in racial categories while remaining attentive to racial social experiences of blacks and others and the fact that there have been many nuanced conversations about Black distinctiveness emanating from African American musicians and critics that have been at least as invested in a common humanity as any anti-essentialist critique? (2005, 1512).

One of these more “nuanced conversations” can be found in Black music critic Guthrie Ramsey’s contributions to the Black aesthetics discourse. Integral to his thinking and writing is the matter of

essentialism. In “The Pot Liquor Principle: Developing a Black Music Criticism in American Music,”

Ramsey (2004, 210) offers an infrequently heard position:

An important issue at hand here concerns the maligned notion of essentialism in Black critical discourse. In today’s academic climate, it has become fashionable-in fact, downright honorable and politically correct-to identify and then denounce essentialism as part of a cluster of racist ideologies that have aided in the subjugation of scores of groups throughout history and all over the world. But in my view, not all notions of essentialism need to be considered racist per se; some exist as powerful displays of human agency, intention, and culture building.

Ramsey does not suggest that a “monolithic racial experience can be identified,” but that “the sum total of [these various] experiences has a contour and thrust that can be discussed and theorized even as we recognize differences within the group.” (2004 222). While acknowledging the “staggering and adverse” effects that stereotyping has on groups of people, he asserts that “all communities have well-formed ideas about who they are in the world and what behaviors, worldviews, and cultural practices define them best.” To illustrate, Ramsey offers a passage written by Philip Brett, from an article entitled “Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet.”

...dominant culture has a tendency to project itself onto everything it encounters and to assimilate everything to its own idea of itself... instead [of] valuing, exploring, and trying to understand different things, people, and ideas, in terms that are closer to the way in which they perceive themselves (Ramsey 2004, 214 quoting Brett et al., 1994, 10).

In his conclusion, Ramsey (2004, 221) makes a more pointed and politicized statement about Black music and master narratives, moving closer to the politically activist stance of Amiri Baraka:

If a theory or cultural practice does not grow out of a specific context of domination and resistance; if it does not center the social realities of real historical actors; if it promotes master narratives that attempt to explain all difference, what humanistic or even political good is it? If discursive race eclipses and flattens out social race, if it seeks to make cultural race practices homogenous, I wonder if it might not become a discourse about itself and not about real people’s actions in the world.

In my own quest for Ramsey’s “pot liquor principle” in Black vernaculars, I look to the socio-political movements in which an Afrocentric “Black Aesthetic” emerged within Black American cultural and literary discourse. The movements that I include in the following section are the Harlem Renaissance (New Negro movement), and the Black Power and Black Arts movements. In Chapter

Seven of this thesis, I discuss the Black Lives Matter Movement and those artists who have used their music and poetry as forms of protest within it. These movements have direct implications for potlikker narratives and their application as stories of resistance in school learning.

## Black Aesthetic and Political Movements

Afrocentric perspectives in the formation of a “Black aesthetic” are most often traced to those intellectual and political leaders and movements and prominent black artists and writers of the early 20th century. In *The Quest for a Black Aesthetic*, Bernard Bell (1972, 715) reveals the polemic surrounding the development of a Black aesthetic consciousness based on an Africanist view of Black culture in America:

Since the Twenties, it could be argued, black artists, spurred on by ethnic pride and institutionalized racism, have been turning in increasing numbers ...toward an aesthetic that affirms the vision of Americans of African descent. Yet there were, then as now, those who felt compelled to reject the dual nature of the Afro-American identity.

This “dual nature of the Afro-American identity” was integral to the political and aesthetic discourse within major social, political, and artists movements in Black America. While the Harlem Renaissance ushered in the era of the Black Aesthetic among artists and art critics, the “Black Aesthetic” has been at the center of academic, social, and political discourse since at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, beginning with the Pan-African movement.

### *Pan-Africanism*

Broadly interpreted, Pan-Africanism embraces and celebrates the common origins of people of African descent. While some of the political work of the Pan-African movement was to decolonize African nations (DuBois, 1868–1963) and create a “back to Africa” movement (Marcus Garvey 1887–1940), the movement’s goal was also to decolonize diasporic Africans in the New World—that is, to liberate Blacks from social constructs of race and identity formulated by White hegemony and racism.

In seeking to construct new Black cultural identities, the ideology of the Pan-African movement looked to the African past to reclaim culture histories and legacies.

One of the most prominent leaders of the Pan-African movement was W.E.B. Dubois. As part of his pan-Africanist philosophy, Dubois coined the term, “double consciousness,” thereby giving African Americans the gift of “second sight.” As explained by Rabaka (2007, 59), this gift incorporated a vision to expose White supremacy from the inside and to uncover the achievements of the of the “whole Negro race,” which as Dubois stated, “has not as yet been given to the world” (Rabaka 2007, 59–60 quoting Dubois 1986, 819–20).<sup>58</sup>

Historian Aminah Wallace (2013: 64) points out that Dubois saw the Africans’ struggles for independence from colonial rule as inextricably linked to the African American cause for freedom here at home. In the following excerpt, she quotes Dubois, who refers to a common ancestry for diasporic Blacks, interracial acculturation, and a cultural unity based on the “common disaster” of colonization and slavery.

One thing is for sure and that is the fact that since the fifteenth century these ancestors of mine and their other descendants have a common history; have suffered a common disaster and have one long memory. The actual ties of heritage between the individuals of this group, vary with the ancestors that they have in common and many others... Europeans and Semites, perhaps Mongolians, certainly American Indians. But the physical bond is at least and the badge of color relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; and this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through...Asia to the South Seas. It is this unity that draws me to Africa (Wallace 2013: 64–65 quoting Dubois).<sup>59</sup>

In Wallace’s analysis, Pan-Africanism is at once an idea and a political movement, a movement that began, moreover, with the rebellions of enslaved Africans on North American soil (2013, 70–71). These cultural expressions, in turn, were born in ideas of “African kinships and brotherhood consciousness” (71). As such, liberation is at the heart of the movement, both at home and abroad. Wallace also notes

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<sup>58</sup> Dubois, W.E.B. *Writings*, edited by Nathan Irvine Huggins. New York: Library of America Press.

<sup>59</sup> Demarco, Joseph. (1983). *The Social Thought of W.E.B. Dubois*. New York & London: University Press of America.



that these ideas were embedded in African American orature and religion, in the spirituals, songs, narratives, and poetry of African descent slaves in the United States. As a movement, this was expressed with Black resistance but most notably with rebellions and marronage (Wallace 2013, 71).

### *The Harlem Renaissance*

In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, discourses around concepts and terms such as “Afrocentricity” and a “Black aesthetic” emerged anew with the cultural arts revolution known as the Harlem Renaissance (1920s-30s), also known as the New Negro Movement. The ethos of this period was a tremendous flourishing and celebration of the artistic and literary output of black artists, writers, musicians, academics, and intellectuals. Prominent among these were musicians such as Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and Louis Armstrong; visual artists such as Aaron Douglas and Augusta Savage; and academics, folklorists and writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison. A 1987 New York Times article, “Harlem in the Jazz Age,” encapsulates the era:

FOR THE BLACK ARTISTS, MUSICIANS, POLITICIANS and entrepreneurs who converged on Harlem in the 1920's and created what came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance, it was a time when everything seemed possible—a time, as a former resident recalled, when "it was truly bliss to be alive." Not only did blacks take pride in their African heritage, pride in black folklore, pride in just being black, but it also seemed natural to believe that art could bridge the formidable gap between the black and white worlds, that excellence and merit could produce social change.<sup>60</sup>

While Black artists in both camps promoted Black pride, distinctions were made between artists within the Harlem Renaissance movement, particularly among writers. As Jakubiak (2005, 865) asserts, Black artists were divided between the “essentialists,” and the “assimilationists,” or “integrationists.”

The question of the "essence" of the black experience has run like a rift through the body of African-American literary and cultural criticism ever since the beginning of this discipline. Already in the 1920s and 1930s W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston promote essentialism, as they emphasize the uniqueness of the black perception of reality, stress the originality of black creativeness, promote a

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<sup>60</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/02/08/magazine/harlem-in-the-jazz-age.html> (Accessed, 7/6/19)

belief in the "beauty of blackness," and reprove their fellow black writers for setting the white standards at the apex of their artistic aspirations.<sup>61</sup>

Of the artists and writers that flourished in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Zora Neale Hurston's work is particularly germane to the location of an Afrocentric aesthetic in African American story traditions and life. Her insistence on representing the black vernacular language—the voice of the people whose stories she collected—set her work apart from other, more assimilationist writers of the time. Ironically, Hurston did not consider herself or her work to be part of an anti-assimilationist agenda. Rather, she saw herself and Black vernacular traditions as much a part of White America as part of Black America. In the following passage, Hurston presents a mind-set that allowed her to see herself as both African and, equally, White. Her reference to the Trickster High John the Conquerer, however, reveals Hurston as having an African American identity deeply rooted in Black vernacular tradition:

Maybe now, we used-to-be black African folks can be of some help to our brothers and sisters who have always been white. You will take another look at us and say that we are still black and, ethnologically speaking, you will be right. But nationally and culturally, we are as white as the next one. We put our labor and our blood into the common causes for a long time. We have given the rest of the nation song and laughter. Maybe now, in this terrible struggle, we can give you something else – the soul and source of our laughter and song. We offer you our hope-bringer, High John de Conquer (Hughes and Bontemps 1958, 93).

As I discuss in Chapter Five, Hurston's interpretations of High John de Conquer stories and her understanding of the social and spiritual function of trickster tales in African American communities shed light on the cross-Atlantic retentions contained in these narratives. As one of the first African American woman to represent black vernacular traditions, Hurston was, in this regard, a woman ahead of her time.

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<sup>61</sup> In a response to these "harbingers of the Black Aesthetic," Richard Wright complained that "black writers cannot achieve artistic autonomy if they continue to separate themselves from the experience of the white majority" ("Blueprint for Negro Writing," in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Winston Napier, 45–53. New York: New York University Press, 2000).

*The Black Arts & Black Power Movements*

Emerging from both the Civil Rights era (circa. 1954 – 1968) and Black Power movements (1960s-70s) was the Black Arts Movement, or BAM (1965 – 1975). In the minds of leading BAM critics, the movement was inextricably linked to the Black Power movement (Ongiri 2010, 97). The latter was, as Black arts historian Amy Ongiri points out, an “alternative to the ineffectiveness of civil rights demands in critical areas of American life” (Ongiri 2010, 91). The post-civil rights era of both BAM and the Black Power Movement marked an even more politicized and urgent quest for the formation of counter-hegemonic black identities and cultural sovereignty. In the anti-assimilationist vein, the prominent playwright, poet (songwriter, essayist) Ishmael Reed wrote, “Blacks gave the example that you don't have to assimilate. You could do your own thing, get into your own background, your own history, your own tradition, and your own culture. I think the challenge is for cultural sovereignty and Black Arts struck a blow for that.”<sup>62</sup>

BAM was not without its detractors and critics. In the introduction to his anthology, *The Black Aesthetic*, Addison Gayle outlines the central tenets of the movement, taking an anti-assimilationist stance: “the Black Aesthetic, then, as conceived by this writer, is helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism” (Gayle 1971, xxii). In a critical review of Gayle’s anthology, David Leonel Smith chides Gayle for employing the Black Aesthetic as “an ideological tonic that cures misguided assimilationist tendencies” (1991, 94). In Smith’s view, part of the problem of BAM’s formation of the Black Aesthetic (capitals as per both Gayle and Smith), is that collectively, members of the movement failed to articulate the meaning and parameters of the term. For Smith, the problem is one of semantics: the use of “black aesthetic” in the singular as opposed to “black aesthetics” in the plural creates a discrepancy that represents a theoretical failing of the Black Arts Movement.

Consider the difference between "the Black Aesthetic" and "Black Aesthetics." The former suggests a single principle, while the latter leaves open multiple possibilities. The former is closed and prescriptive; the latter, open and descriptive. The quest for one true aesthetic corresponds to the notion of an essential "blackness," a true nature

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<sup>62</sup> (1995 interview, via, <https://aalbc.com/authors/article.php?id=2087>, accessed, 7/12/18).

common to all "black" people. This is the logic of race, a logic created to perpetuate oppression and not to describe the subtle realities of actual experience. (Smith, 191, 95–96)

Ultimately, Smith sympathizes with Gayle by acknowledging that the challenges of the time necessitated a more politicized, even separatist positioning of African American culture. In a conciliatory tone, Smith writes that “we might consider what it means to envision the African-American cultural tradition as plural, not singular. After all, most current theories of black culture are just as singular as ‘the Black Aesthetic,’ though less forthrightly political. A black pluralist historiography remains to be explored.”

In *Spectacular Blackness: The Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for the Black Aesthetic* (2010), Ongiri sheds further light on the divisions between artists during the Black Arts Movement. Detractors of the movement considered BAM to be dangerous and unsustainable, particularly with its demands that the “cultural values inherent in Western history must be radicalized or destroyed” (Ongiri 2010, 91 quoting Neale 1989, 63; 76).<sup>63</sup> While Ongiri examines both the “spectacular successes and failures” of BAM, her position is to “challenge the commonly held assertion that this movement...offered little more than racial essentialism, a hyperbolically divisive ideology, and a formalistic and essentially flawed aesthetic theorization” (91).<sup>64</sup>

Ongiri contends that both the Black Power and the Black Arts Movements were formative in the development of a contemporary conceptualization of African American identity. She sees the idea of “blackness in African American cultural production, characterized by artists and intellectuals of the era as ‘the new thing’ but naturalized into contemporary African American culture as ‘authentic’ Blackness” (89). In this vein, Ongiri denounces another outspoken critic of the movement, Stanley Crouch (1989) who dismissed Black Arts creations as “ethnic propaganda.” Crouch’s disregard, writes

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<sup>63</sup> See Larry Neale (1989) *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writing: Poetry and Prose*.

<sup>64</sup> Ongiri notes Ralph Ellison’s dismissal of Leroi Jones’s (aka Amiri Baraka) *Blues People*, with his criticism that “taken as a theory of Negro American culture,” it could “only contribute more confusion than clarity” (2010, 90–91).

Ongiri, “stands in stark contrast to the actual continuing importance of the Black Arts legacy to African American cultural production” (Ongiri 2010, 91).

As one of the leaders of the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka was, and still is, one of the most ardent and unapologetically political of anti-assimilationists. For Baraka, there is little equivocation about a singular Black aesthetic—one that is grounded in the politics of social justice and freedom. It is Black history itself that justifies a more politically separatist stance:

To depoliticize the African American Aesthetic is to disconnect it from the real lives of the Afro-American people and instead make an offering to the seizers, that is—we must understand that not only our history aesthetically is contradictory to the so-called northern cradle, but certainly as slaves and now an oppressed nation, the slave/slave master contradiction is the most serious of all. Without the dissent, the struggle, the outside of the inside, the aesthetic is neither genuinely Black nor Blue—but the aesthetic of submission – whether for pay or out of ignorance or ideological turpitude. (Baraka 1991, 109)

Baraka’s writing about black music and other black arts is Afro-centrally grounded in a black aesthetic rooted in African cultures. In his seminal book *Black Music* (1968, 206), Baraka riffs on his motif, “the changing same” that “something we dig and pass on, as best we can” to illustrate transference of ancestral cultural heritage from one generation to the next. What I find particularly compelling about Baraka’s “changing same” and its later echoes in Ramsey’s “pot liquor principle” is that the motif leaves room for the inclusion of potlikker narratives in the continuum of Black orature that has repeatedly resisted political and cultural domination. In the context of the debate over origins discussed in this chapter, I contend that these African-derived forms of orature are the more powerful markers of identity in African American vernacular traditions than European influences.

In my next chapter, I take a deep dive into West African cultural epistemic formulations that were brought to the New World, grounding Black American vernacular arts in some of the places from which they came. It is this cultural history, these places of origin that inform Black vernacular arts as tools for teaching freedom. In the spirit of King & Swartz’s “African Heritage Knowledge” in education, I reinvoke the proverb *Sankofa*: the practice of learning from the past to be better informed in the present, and to better prepare for the future.

## Chapter Three

### Oral Tradition: Roots & Routes

#### Introduction: Integrated Knowledge & West African Locales

In the United States, the “master scripts” in education subtly and not so subtly promulgate outdated, White hegemonic notions that Africans were a cultureless people when they arrived in the New World. Establishing the Africanity of Black vernacular arts in the United States undermines those master scripts. Accordingly, my central concern in this chapter is to link African American vernacular arts expressions to their ancestral roots, most specifically in West African oral arts traditions. Pedagogically, my aim is to provide a theoretical and practical base from which educators may gain insight, inspiration, and a deeper appreciation for the long and rich cultural heritage of their African American students. My pedagogy of *potlikker* aims, after all, to put the art of *Sankofa* into practice. As educators we must, as this West African proverb advises, “go back and retrieve it.”

In seeking Africanist retentions in these vernacular traditions, I look to West African epistemological orientations in which song, drumming, dance, and drama are a “tightly wrapped bundle of arts” (Stone 2008, 7), and to a West African world view in which the sacred and secular domains of life intermingle (Amoaku 1985, 36). Embedded within this sacred-secular world view is the reification of the spoken word, and the verbal art of Signifying which infuses African and Black American oral arts with the capacity to convey social criticisms and commentaries on everyday life and experiences.<sup>65</sup>

To illustrate these epistemic formulations, I draw significantly, but not exclusively, from my ethnomusicological research and MA thesis on the oral arts traditions of the Anlo Ewe of southeastern Ghana (Fraiooli 2006). I make references to the shared religious world views and oral arts practices between the Ewe and their neighbors, including the Akan, Fon, Adja, and Yoruba, all members of the Kwa subfamily of the Niger-Congo African linguistic stock (Murdock 1959, 252–253; Greenberg 1963,

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<sup>65</sup> See Rabaka (2013, 292–293) for his reference to the “urban griot” carrying on the tradition of “telling it like it is” in Black poetry and song.

8). Among these subfamilies, the Ewe, Adja, and the Yoruba show the most obvious linguistic and cultural ties (Akinjogbin 1971, 305). Through trade, warfare, and inter-marrying, the Akan influenced aspects of Ewe social, political, and religious life, including oral arts traditions, especially in the “hinterlands,” or northern Ewe territories (Amenumey 1986, 35; Gavua 2000, 14; Locke 1971, 15). Akan influence is also notable in the Ga and Ga-Adangme areas of Ghana (Nketia, 1960, 19). I make additional references to cultures along the Windward Coast (an area spanning Sierra Leone, Senegal, Liberia, and Ivory Coast) and to Bantu cultures (eastern Nigeria, and the Congo-Angola coast). By evidencing shared practices within these locales, I offer further support for African retention theories, particularly in relation to those shared cultural practices that fostered a pan-African identity in North America.

As noted, the “narrative turn” in western academic research has been leaning toward transdisciplinarity, that is, research that integrates knowledge from a variety of fields. In the relatively new field of narrative inquiry, these academic disciplines may include, “anthropology and folklore, psychology, sociolinguistics, communications, and sociology,” all methods of “narrative analysis” that are “ripe for a detailed methodological inquiry” (Riesman 2008, 17). To this list, I add the field of ethnomusicology, which is itself a transdisciplinary enterprise because it joins together many areas of knowledge including, but not limited to, music and sister arts, cultural and social anthropology, linguistics, history, hybridity, education, women’s studies, and politics.

The ultimate destination for my transdisciplinary road map is the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom, where teaching for freedom requires an integrated approach, one in which the arts are not disconnected from other areas of learning. As proponents of CRT in education have pointed out, challenging dominant ideologies and sustaining a commitment to social justice in education requires pulling together seemingly disparate fields of knowledge (Solorzano & Yosso 2009, 132 – 134). A transdisciplinary methodology is even more essential as we look towards traditional West African cultures in which the boundaries between fields of knowledge are not as clearly delineated as they are in the West. As

discussed in this chapter, traditional Black orature in West Africa provides an excellent model for integrated learning.

*A West African Divine Cosmology & Unitary World View*

I propose that one cannot understand the full extent to which enslaved Africans were able to recreate and sustain ancestral oral arts traditions in North America without first understanding the very nature of orality within the African continent. It is not enough to simply acknowledge that there is no tradition of written music in West Africa but that songs, stories, drumming, and dances are passed on “by ear and example” (Ladzekpo 1971,14). Rather, the rubric of orality provides a basis for the integration of educative, aesthetic, and sacred and secular concerns. It is a starting place for understanding cross-continental retentions in Black American vernacular arts. As Smitherman asserts, if we are to comprehend the “complexity and scope of black communication patterns” we must also have “a clear understanding of the oral tradition and the world view that undergirds that tradition” (2000, 199).

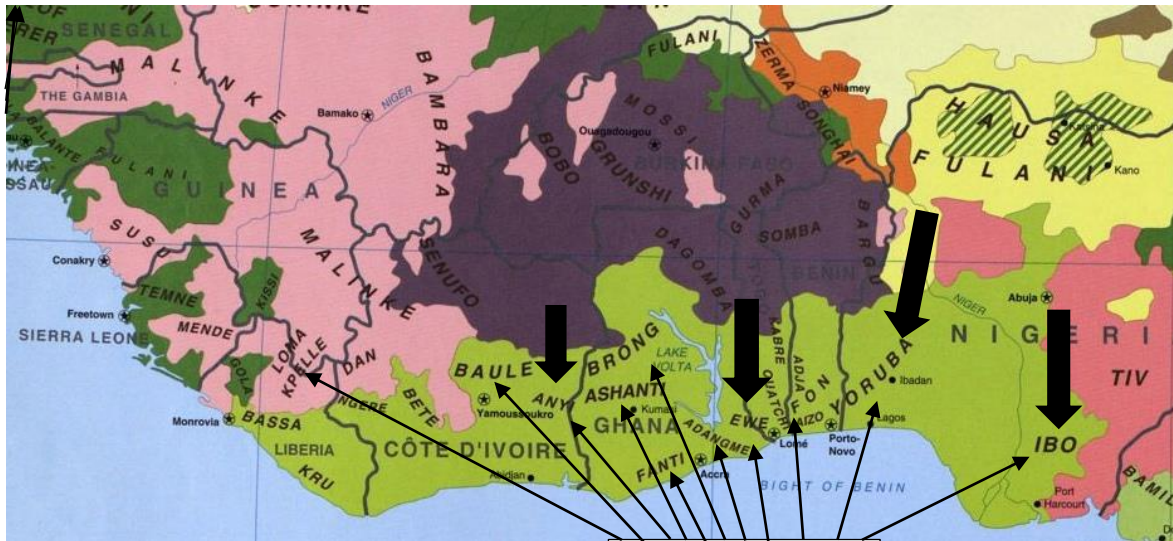
A significant concept revealed through oral systems of communication in traditional West African societies is what Ghanaian scholar and drummer William K. Amoaku (1985, 36) refers to as an "all-encompassing" or “unitary world view.” What emerges from this cultural orientation is a profoundly religious conceptualization of the world, one in which the past and the present, and the spiritual and mundane levels of existence are bound together. As Ferguson (1983, 242) maintains, religion in West African societies permeates all aspects of life and is, therefore, social, communal, and political. As an integral part of community life in traditional West African societies, singing, dance, drumming, storytelling, and other forms of Black orature are no exception to this rule. This unitary world view was imported to North America. As Herskovits observed, religion is one of the most “recognizable Africanisms in the New World” (1941, 294).

As explained in Chapter Two, over half of Africans that reached North America during the Atlantic slave trade came from the African coastal regions between Sierra Leone and Nigeria (Eltis &



Richardson 2010, 205; Gomez 2005; 100; Stuckey 1987, 409). A brief look at shared religious ontologies along the Guinea and Windward African coasts will illustrate how a “unitary world view” in West African societies was retained in Black America.

In *West African Religion* (1977), Parrinder conducts a comparative study of four main ethnic groups of West Africa: the Ibo, Yoruba, Ewe, and Akan peoples (indicated by large black arrows in Map 3–1). Culturally related groups within this region include Fon (Ewe-Fon, and Dahomey), Ga (and Ga-Adangme), and subgroups of the Akan: Ashanti, Fante (Fanti), Agni (Anyi), Brong, and Baule, among others (Parrinder 1977, 3–5). The geographic range of these ethnic groups spans approximately 1,000 miles from south central and eastern Nigeria to the Windward Coast (as far as the Ivory Coast). The Kpelle of Liberia (far left in Map 3–1), although outside of Parrinder’s study, are included here as they share similar aesthetic orientations and oral arts practices with their neighbors to the east.



Map 3–1: “Africa: Ethnolinguistic Groups”<sup>66</sup>

From west to east:  
Kpelle, Akan (Baule,  
Brong, Agni or Anyi  
Ashanti, Fanti), Ga-  
Adangme, Ewe, Fon,  
Adja, Yoruba, Ibo

<sup>66</sup> Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/item/96680239/>

Within this ethnically diverse geographic area, Parrinder's study reveals certain commonalities between its peoples. Despite differences in worship practices and ontological structures that are "stamped with their own special emphasis" (e.g., names of gods, origin mythology, human-to-divine relationships), there are certain shared core religious beliefs and orientations. Held in common is a highly communal view of the world, one in which relationships in society are maintained, not only with fellow human beings, but with departed ancestors, gods, and other divine beings (Parrinder 1977, *passim*). African religion historian John Mbiti (1989, 15–16) configured this network of relationships within an ontological order, a hierarchical classification of entities:

1. God: *Nana-Buluku-Mawu, Mawu-Lisa* (Ewe, Fon);<sup>67</sup> *Onyame* (Akan); *Oludumare*, or *Olurun* (Yoruba).
2. Lesser gods (divinities, demi-gods, or "messengers" of God) – including, but not limited to: *Eshu Elegbara* (Yoruba); *Legba* (Ewe, Fon), *Ogo-Yurugu* (Dogon), *Kwaku Ananse* (Akan), and ancestral spirits.
3. Humans
4. Animals
5. Trees, plants, and other natural phenomenon such as earth, sky, moon, water (sea, lagoon, river, lake), inanimate objects (rocks, fetishes, etc.). (Mbiti: 1969, 16–17)

At the center of this order, the human being is viewed as anthropocentric; humans are integral to the cosmological order, not separate or distinct from it. This makes "man look at God and nature from the point of his relationship with them" (Mbiti 1989, p. 48), and allows humans to function effectively in both the sacred and secular worlds where they are responsible and accountable to both (Amoaku 1976,

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<sup>67</sup> According to Coleman (2000, 3), Nana Buluku is the first, primary god in the Dahomean tradition, at once both male and female and from who "alone created the world." Nana Buluku gave birth to twins, Mawu (female), and Lisa (male). To Mawu, she gave command of the night, and to Lisa, the day. Mawu is, therefore, associated with the moon, and lives in the west, and Lisa, the sun, and lives in the east. Nana Bukulu, however, withdrew after "his-her initial act of creation," leaving Mawu-Lisa in charge of all creation (Mawu-Lisa gave birth to all *vodun*, or deities, gave the gift of divination to humans and thus is empowered with the ability to circumvent the potentially negative dimensions of Fate).

Parrinder writes that while the variants "Nana Buku" and "Bruku" are known as "Supreme God" among the Ewe in Central Dahomey (present-day Benin), and Togo, respectively, Mawu is more generally recognized as the "Supreme Being" among both the Ewe and Fon. Although Nana Buluku, Mawu and Lisa (Mawu-Lisa) are understood as omnipotent, they are considered distant and are not worshipped directly (Parrinder 1977, 19). This psychological distance is explained, from an Ewe perspective, with the following questions: "his essence is in all things – therefore, why worship just one being?" and, "Mawu is too big to be put into a small room and worshipped in only one place...How can we put into a room a Being we can never see and who is like the wind blowing everywhere?" (Amoaku 1976, 152–153; Fiagbedzi 1977, 226).

34). Owusu-Ansa (1995, 107) emphasizes that for all [over seventy] ethnic groups in Ghana, this relationship between the secular and the spiritual, particularly ancestral relationships, is real, dynamic, and ongoing.

[T]he spirit world is considered to be as real as the world of the living. A network of mutual relationships and responsibilities links the dual worlds of the mundane and the sacred. The action of the living, for example, can affect the gods or spirits of the departed, while the support of family or “tribal” ancestors ensure prosperity of the lineage or state. Neglect, it is believed, can spell doom.

In this ontological system, the demi-gods and deified ancestors are the most accessible and personal and play a major role in the day-to-day relationships and communion with the spirit world. According to a creation story common to mythologies throughout Ghana and other parts of West Africa, god at one time lived very close to earth but when too many demands were made upon him (sometimes he-she, as in Mawu-Lisa), he retreated far away to the heavens, leaving the immediate cares of the world to the intermediary, or “lesser” gods (Nukunya 1992, 54).<sup>68</sup> A Fon version of this origin story, detailed below, explains the more immediate relationship many West Africans and diasporic Africans have with an important intermediary god, the divine Trickster and linguist, Eshu Elegbara.

This sacred-secular world view has echoes in Black America, as noted by both Black music and culture historians. Levine (1977, 30, 31) states that neither enslaved Africans nor their forebears “ever drew modernity’s clear line between the sacred and the secular,” and that the term “sacred” is not “antithetical to the secular world.” From this African cultural vantage point, “religion is a means of extending the world spatially upward, so that communication with the other world becomes ritually possible and extending it temporarily backward so that the paradigmatic acts of the gods and mythical ancestors can be continually re-enacted and indefinitely recoverable.”

Arthur C. Jones (1993, 1) asserts that the development of African American spirituals in the New World has everything to do with the retention of a sacred world view in which “communion with the spirits and with tribal sisters and brothers (those living and those dead) was not only desirable, but

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<sup>68</sup> Names of gods are from Amoaku (1976), Quarcoopome (1987), Parrinder (1977), and Sawyerr (1970).

necessary for life, as much as food or water” (see also Stuckey 1987, 30–31). One of the most religious expressions on antebellum plantations was within the circle in the sacred “ring shout,” where “the Spirit ‘gotta hold of’ slaves” (Coleman 2000, 51). Contemporarily, Black audiences and participants show signs of being “moved by the spirit” in secular and religious performative settings. Whether listening to the “rapper-preacher” in church, or a “soulful black singer,” in a night club, participants will engage in similar displays of “getting down,” “shouting,” and “gettin happy,” by “hollering, clapping hands, and stomping feet” (Smitherman 2000, 215–16):

Given the unity of the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the profane, in traditional African culture, it is not surprising to find the “circle unbroken” in Black America...What we are stressing here is the heavy preservation of Africanisms in the church which have had an impact on Black American culture at large ...Thus, while the secular style might be considered the primary domain of the street, and the sacred that of the church, no sharp dichotomy exists, but a kind of sacred-secular continuum.

As I illustrate in coming chapters, both antebellum and contemporary forms of Black orature find their place on the sacred-secular continuum. As Baraka puts it, “this phenomenon is always at the root in Black art, the worship of spirit—or at least the summoning of or by such force” (1968, 207).

### *The Spoken Word*

The high status of verbal arts in West African societies is best explained by West African wordsmiths themselves. For Senegalese poet Leopold Senghor, the spoken word in Africa societies is the “expression par excellence of the life force” (Senghor 1965, 110). Not only did “God create the world through the word,” but for humans, it is the “living and life-giving breath” and is, therefore, imbued with spiritual and magical potency (Senghor 1965, 110). In Akan communities the reverence for the spoken word is reflected in proverbs such as “If you do not use your vocabulary, you fall in a ditch;” “A man dies, but his tongue does not rot;” and “We speak to a wise man in proverbs, not in plain language” (Ross 1982, 56). Among the Yoruba, the importance of ornate proverbial speech is exemplified by adages such as “The proverb is the workhorse of conversation,” and “A wise man who

knows proverbs, reconciles difficulties” (Smitherman 2000, 233; 236). Ewe poet Kofi Anyidoho (1997, 123) reflects on a similar attitude among the Anlo Ewe of southeastern Ghana:

There is constant dwelling on *nu* (mouth) as the outlet for words and on the need for words that reinforce good relationships, suggesting a fundamental respect for words that must not be ignored in a study of the poetics of Ewe verbal art. One concept of the soul among the Ewe has special relevance to oral poetics when we realize that the Ewe word for life soul, *gbogbo*, is also the same word used for breath, and breath, of course, is the basis of the physical production of the word. For the Ewe and others of similar ontological systems, it is understandable that the transition from the physical to the metaphysical properties of the word is quite easily made.

Transnationally, Smitherman invokes the word, “Nommo,” as “an African concept that has survived in African American culture as a belief in the power of the word—‘the awareness that the word alone alters the world’” (Smitherman, 2000, 54).<sup>69</sup> Translated into contemporary Black American speech culture, “Creative, highly verbal talkers are valued; RAPpin, LYIN, SIGNIFYIN, TESTIFYin, PLAYin the Dozens, WOOFin—skillful use of these and other verbal rituals from the Oral Tradition is what gets a person PROPS” (Smitherman 1994, 8). Folklorist Roger Abrahams (1985, 10) similarly recognizes the “high value of eloquence in Africa,” and its translation into “various African American forms of eloquent and ornate speech-making.” He notes that African and diasporic folktales illustrate the “continuing vigor of the African aesthetic” and “draw upon some of the most profound dimensions of the African style” (1985, 4).<sup>70</sup> Smitherman further attests to the retention of African oral traditions and worldviews in both verbal and musical forms of Black American rhetoric (2000, 21):

But, as we shall see in closely examining the many facets of the oral tradition, the residue of the African World view persists, and serves to unify such seemingly disparate black groups as preachers and poets, bluesmen and Gospel-ettes, testifiers and toast-tellers, reverends and revolutionaries. Can I get a witness?

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<sup>69</sup> Walker and Kuydendall (2005, 233) explain this concept further: “Because the African brought to America a fertile oral tradition augmented by the pervasiveness of nommo, the generating and sustaining power of the spoken word, orature permeated every department of African American life... The presence of nommo is evident in great literature, poetry, and speeches. To bring an audience to life is the goal of great African American speakers. See Adisa A. Alkebulan in *Journal of Black Studies* (2013, Vol. 44, No. 1), for more on the origins of the word “nommo” among the Dogon of Mali.

<sup>70</sup> Some of the data and folktales that Abrahams collected for *Afro-American Folktales* (1985), were derived from travel reports and plantation journals, dating back as far as 1815 (1985: xv).

## Signifying

One of the most important congruencies between continental and North American diasporic oral arts traditions is the verbal art of Signifying. This section provides additional support for understanding the integrality of the Signifying arts in Black orature on both the African and North American continents, and their application in school curriculums. While mythical and sacred origin stories of the West African divine Tricksters Eshu Elegbara and Kwaku Ananse may seem far afield, these stories are the underpinnings of a rich and meaningful Black oral literature, infusing historical and contemporary African American Trickster tales, songs, dances, and other spoken arts with their function to Signify, to lay bare hidden meanings, and to “tell it like it is.” Providing the historical and cultural context of these Tricksters and their Signifying ways will underscore the depth and beauty of Black orature as well as evidence its current relevance to education.

### *The Importance of Eshu Elegbara/Legba: A Divine Linguist and Trickster*

In *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Gates traces Signifying in African American oral and written literature to the divine West African Trickster figure, the Yoruba deity Eshu Elegbara (or just Eshu). This deity is known as Legba among neighboring West African ethnic groups including the Ewe, Adja, and Fon (or Dahomean) (Gates 1988, 5; Parrinder 1977, 55; Rosenthal 2005, 187). The well-known Akan (Ashanti) Trickster figure, Ananse the Spider, has similar roots in Akan divine mythology (Pelton 1980, 38–70).<sup>71</sup> For now, Eshu Elegbara (or Legba) will take the spotlight. To understand why the art of Signifying is so foundational to Black American rhetorical speech, one must get to know him.

Legba is the youngest and favorite son of Mawu-Lisa, a West African male/female Supreme Being. This relationship is revealed in a Fon origin story, retold here by Lewis Hyde (1998, 173–74). Legba got tired of being blamed for everything bad that happened—“as if Mawu never had anything to do

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<sup>71</sup> Pelton (1980) discusses Ananse as an “agent of Nyame” (high god) among the Ashanti, the Dogon Trickster Ogo-Yurugu’s roots in mythology (164–222), and Legba and Eshu Elegbara as the divine linguist/Trickster among the Fon, and Yoruba, respectively (71–163).

with it”—and so he played a trick on his mother. As a result, Mawu got blamed for stealing yams out of her own garden. Humiliated, she left earth but went “only about ten feet up” until Legba devised another plan to have Mawu doused with dirty dish water every night (Hyde 1998, 173–174). This so angered Mawu that she retreated earth for good, leaving Legba behind at the crossroads to be her mediator and messenger between the sacred and secular worlds. When Mawu assigned Legba his new role as divine linguist, she told him,

You are my youngest child, and as you are spoiled, and have never known punishment...I will keep you with me always. Your work shall be to visit all the kingdoms ruled over by your brothers, and to give me an account of what happens...If one of the brothers wishes to speak, he must give the message to Legba, for none knows any longer how to address himself to Mawu-Lisa (Coleman 2000, 8–9 quoting Herskovits & Herskovits 1958, 126).<sup>72</sup>

This is why, in Yoruba mythology, Eshu is said to walk with a limp, “precisely because of his mediating function: his legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world” (Gates 1988, 6). Coleman describes Eshu’s legacy as a cross-Atlantic phenomenon:

He is so prominent that he alone is universally known, in one form or another, throughout West Africa and the African Americas. He crossed the Atlantic Ocean along with the African slaves. In order to come to terms with the rhetoric of West Africans and African Americans, knowledge of him and his peculiar characteristic is foremost (Coleman 2000, 8).

As the “guardian of the cross-roads,” Eshu Elegbara communicates Mawu’s will to mankind and also “carries the desires of man to god” (Gates 1988, 6). The lines of communication between the divine and secular worlds are open through prayer and ritual. Eshu is commonly appealed to through the art of divination, or geomancy, a key determinant of humans’ fate and freedom (free will). As the go-between, Eshu demonstrates that one must “cultivate the art of recognizing significant communications...or the lessons of the crossroads—the point where doors open or close, where persons

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<sup>72</sup> Eshu Elegbara/Legba is appealed to through prayer, ritual, and divination. According to Parrinder (1977, 57), “the shrines of Eshu and Legba are everywhere...in the market, at cross-roads and groves, outside or in the house.” Because Eshu Elegbara is associated with fertility, his form in shrines often includes an exaggerated phallus (57).

have to make decisions that may forever affect their lives—will be lost" (Thompson 1983, 19; see also, Coleman 2000, 19).

Among the Yoruba, Ewe, and Fon, the art of divination is carried through the *vodun* (divinity) named Fa-Gbadu (from Ifa, in the Yoruba language; Afa, in Ewe); it is she-he who provides the palm kernels that are used in divination practice.<sup>73</sup> According to one origin story, Fa-Gbadu and Legba are sister-brother partners in the divining process. The story opens with the statement that Fa-Gbadu is always in a tree:

At night she closes her eyes when she sleeps but cannot open them herself. Instead, Legba climbs the tree and opens the eyes of his sister every morning. When Legba asks which eye to open first, she does not speak, but places a palm-kernel in his hand. This is how Gbadu (Fa) and Legba communicate on matters pertaining to the domain of Mawu and to the kingdoms over which Gbadu rules—namely the Sea, the Earth, and the Sky (Coleman 2000, 16 quoting Herskovits & Herskovits 1958, 173).<sup>74</sup>

Among the Yoruba, it is said that Eshu “sets the affairs of earth in order, guards, and helps the children of men...[and] can circle the earth in an instant,” and has the agility to balance and harmonize the forces of good and evil (Pelton 1980, 135–36). Legba is, however, “a tricky governor, whose pathways of information are always surrounded by the mud of ambiguity” (Davis 1991). On the one hand, Legba embodies hope because he opens the channels of communication between the sacred and secular worlds. Oppositely, he represents peril because “he tends to play tricks with the information he has, to keep us perpetually aware that he oversees the network of exchange. His nickname is Aflakete, which means ‘I have tricked you’” (Davis 1991).

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<sup>73</sup> *Vodun*, as defined by Coleman (2004, 4) are “the spirits of ancient Dahomey (modern Benin) ...the vodun is the multifaceted reality that is personified as deities and that animates everything in the universe.” Among the Ewe of Ghana, personal deities associated with the Afa (Ifa divination) associations are referred to as *vodowo* (Anyidoho 1983, 95). Parrinder (1977, 26), translates the terms *obosom* (Twi language, Akan), *vudu* or *vudu* (Ewe-Fon), *orisha* (Yoruba), and *chi* (Ibo), as ‘god,’ or ‘divinity.’ Parrinder notes that Mawu is “included among the gods (vodu) at Abomey”, but Olorun, the Yoruba supreme deity is “never called an *orisha*” (26)

<sup>74</sup> Herskovits & Herskovits (1976, 12–13) offer another interpretation of the Mawu-Fa relationship: “It is Mawu who sent the art of divination to earth so that man might know how to appease the anger and thwart the ill-intentions of the reigning pantheon heads, Mawu’s children...Fa is the writing of Mawu which creates life, therefore, Mawu is Fa and Fa is Mawu.”



Gates suggests that Eshu's ambiguity is probably why his mouth, "from which the audible word proceeds, sometimes appears double; Eshu's discourse, metaphorically, is double-voiced" (Gates 1988, xxv). True to Trickster's Signifying nature, Eshu encompasses the attributes of individuality, satire, parody, chance, and uncertainty (Gates 1988, 6), and Davis (1991) confirms that Eshu is "a master of exchange, or crossed purposes, of crossed speech." Coleman (2000, 18) describes the Dahomey/Fon system of divination as being associated with "the stories of the world," a storytelling system in which Fa's message is most often relayed in stories and parables. These narratives "encompass the universe of communal experiences with both mundane and cosmic matters, with very little recognizable difference between the two" (Coleman 2000, 18).

#### *A Tale of Two Friends*

The well-known West African Trickster tale, "Two Friends," is often used as an example of Eshu's two-sided nature as the sometimes troublemaker, sometimes helpmate. In this latter role, Pelton (1980, 138) describes Eshu as a "sociotherapist." The tale—along with Eshu, himself—traveled to the Americas, where both, out of necessity, took on different features and forms (Hyde 1998, 237–238; Gates 2018, 17).<sup>75</sup> In a Yoruba version of the fable, Eshu wears a two-sided cap, white on one side and black on the other. When Eshu passes between two friends' adjoining farms, one friend sees that the cap is black, while the other sees that it is white. The friends argue over the color of Eshu's cap, each insisting they are right. Havoc ensues, properties are destroyed, and Eshu exists laughing, confessing that "sowing dissention is my great delight" (Pelton 1980, 141; Hyde 1998, 238–240).

But it is not Eshu's intention to disrupt absolutely. Gates maintains that Eshu is the master of contradictions and opposing forces including "disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture...all of these characteristics, plus a plethora of others, only begin to present an idea of the complexity of this classic figure of mediation and of the unity of

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<sup>75</sup> One of Eshu's, or Legba's pan-African incarnations is "Papa Legba," in Haiti (Gates 1988, 223).

opposed forces” (1988, 6). In fact, Eshu’s redemptive side is revealed in “Two Friends.” After all was said and done, Eshu approached the friends and said, “Both of you are right...As you can see, one side is white and the other is black...you each saw one side [of the hat] and, therefore, are right about what you saw.” Eshu then admonished the friends for not taking him into consideration before they started arguing, “When you vowed to be friends always, to be faithful and true to each other, did you reckon with Eshu? Do you know that he who does not put Eshu first in all his doing has himself to blame if things misfire?” (Hyde 1998, 239). Gates illuminates this redemptive, socially healing aspect of Eshu’s nature (2018, 17):

What Eshu reveals is the impossibility of settling on fixed meanings or of creating closure. Meaning is always determined by perspective and the vantage point from which something is seen, as the story of Eshu’s cloth cap tells us. The fact that the cap is both black and white suggests an embracing of contradictions, and Eshu reveals the enrichment that comes with the swerve towards both/and rather than either/or.

Other West African Trickster gods are imbued with these same qualities of complexity and contradiction. Ananse, the Akan Spider Trickster god, and Eshu share the same impulses to bring about an apparent “change for the worse,” in order to create the “necessity for further transformation” (Pelton 1980, 140). Thus, in their communications, Eshu, Legba, and Ananse help right the wrongs of our humanness, they “unleash the forces of destruction” in the world so that the human condition can be more sharply defined and. At the same time, they “open[] new roads between heaven and earth” (Pelton 1980, 139–40).

#### *A Line of Descent*

Gates (1988, 53) makes a compelling case for a “line of descent” between Eshu and his North American counterpart, the Signifying Monkey, not because he has “unearthed archeological evidence of a transmission process, but because of their functional equivalency as figures of rhetorical strategies

and of interpretation.”<sup>76</sup> Coleman agrees, noting that together, Eshu and the Signifying Monkey, as “quintessential tricksters,” are “models of the mastery of figurative ways of speaking.” They are cross-continental travelers, embodying the “essence of Signifyin(g) in the African American oral and literary tradition and the basis for advancing a theory of interpretation for a close reading of that tradition” (2000, 168).

My own close readings of African American Trickster tales reveal cross-Atlantic connections, not only with Eshu (and his offspring, Ijapa the Turtle), but also with the Akan Trickster, Ananse the Spider. I will return to these characters in Chapter Five, where I make a case for the transformation of these mytho-forms into their pan-African incarnations: the antebellum plantation-hand turned Trickster, High John de Conquerer and his furry cousin, Brer Rabbit. As narrative forms in education, these characters and their stories possess a wealth of wisdom about American enslavement and the recidivism of White supremacist ideology and activism in 21<sup>st</sup> century United States culture and politics.

## Signifying in West African Oral Arts Traditions

### *More Than Music: Oral Arts & Community*

Trickster tale traditions are not the sole domain of Signifying arts in West African societies. As Levine (1977, 7–8) makes clear, rhetoric in songs, tales, proverbs, and verbal games provided occasions for expressing communal values and solidarity. In addition, these oral traditions created opportunities for expressing “deeply held feeling[s] which could not ordinarily be verbalized...institutionalized ritual insult was well known and widely practiced in the African cultures from which the slaves came” (Levine 1977, 350).<sup>77</sup> Indeed, “through innuendo, metaphor, and circumlocution the Ashanti, Dahomeans, Chopi, Ibo, Ewe, Yoruba, Bashi, Tiv, Hausa, and other African peoples could utilize their

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<sup>76</sup> Gates also suggests that the Signifying Monkey is “probably derived” from Echu-Elegua, the Afro-Cuban cousin of Eshu Elegbara. In Cuba, Echu-Elegua is often depicted with a monkey at his side (1988, 52).

<sup>77</sup> Levine (1977, 481) notes that the tradition of ritualized insults exists in many cultures, citing American Indian cultures. See also: Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (1980, Chapter Ten).

songs as outlets for individual release without disturbing community solidarity” (Levine, 1977, 9). This type of messaging was (and still is) often featured prominently in songs that function as socially sanctioned modes of social criticism.

One example is found in the early anthropological work conducted by R.S. Rattray (1923, 153). Rattray’s work documented that during the Ashanti *Apo* festival, “men had the freedom to speak about anything in their head and tell their neighbors just what they thought of them.” Although most songs of insult utilized indirection and innuendo, criticisms could also be expressed in less veiled terms. One song, directed at an Ashanti village chief, proves both timeless and transnational (Levine 1977, 350, from Rattray, 1923, Chapter 15):

*Your head is very large,  
And we are taking victory from out your hands.  
O King, you are a fool.  
We are taking victory from out your hands.  
O King, you are impotent,  
We are taking the victory from out your hands.*

The African tradition of Signifying or, as Levine put it, the “tradition of being able to verbalize publicly in song what could not be said directly to a person’s face,” served African Americans well throughout slavery (Levine 1977, 247). It continues to be a prominent feature in Black expressive culture today. Nearly a century after the Ashanti songster’s social commentary, the rap artist Mos Def in 2006 disses United States “commander in chief,” President George W. Bush, for his lack of response to the mostly Black victims of hurricane Katrina:

*No opinion my man it's mathematical fact  
Listen, a million poor since 2004  
And they got illions and killions to waste on the war  
And make you question what the taxes is for  
Or the cost to reinforce, the broke levee wall  
Tell the boss, he shouldn't be the boss anymore.*

*“A Tightly Wrapped Bundle of Arts”*

A reinterpretation of what we in the West call “music” will be helpful in identifying West African epistemes in Black vernacular arts in the United States. What is ultimately revealed is the primacy of

the spoken word in African oral arts practices, and the ways in which speech binds together what ethnomusicologist Ruth Stone calls a “tightly wrapped bundle of arts,” or a “constellation of arts” (Stone 2008,7). In West African performance traditions, the integration of speech with music, dance, and even visual arts underscores their indispensable function as forms of “intergenerational communication” or traditional education. Translated into current educational parlance in the United States, this means that West African performance traditions fit well within an arts integration curriculum, one in which the spoken word is drummed, danced, sung, dramatized, and made material in visual and written forms.

As the original model for these integrated arts, I look to a West African performance genre, best known in literature as “dance drumming.” This is a genre best described as a “constellation of arts,” in which rhetorical speech is a primary and foundational component (Stone 2008, 7–22). Additionally, dance drumming exemplifies what Ghanaian musician and scholar Kobla Ladzekpo (1971) has dubbed “the social mechanics” of music making—those societal values that undergird the creative processes and function of oral arts performance traditions in West African as processes of intergenerational communication.<sup>78</sup> Here I apply the term to both historical and contemporary forms of Black American vernacular expressions performed in educational as well as social settings.

Along with J.H. Kwabena Nketia (1986), Ghanaian musicologist Philip Gbeho was one of the first African scholars to bring an awareness of West African musical genres to the West. Questioning the application of western musicological terminology to African forms Gbeho asked, “What do we mean by the term ‘music’ in Africa?” His reply, “It is the combination of three things that are interdependent and never separated” (1954, 62). Being “musical” then means that all performers must have “knowledge and understanding of all the dances, the drumming, and the songs” (Gbeho 1952, 31). Ruth Stone, who conducted extensive research among the Kpelle of Liberia (see Map 3–1), arrived at a similar

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<sup>78</sup> The term “social mechanics” is applied by Ladzekpo (1971) to processes of composition and performance of Ewe dance drumming (*vudodo*, or *vufofu*). I am applying the term to West African musical traditions in general, and as it relates to Black American vernaculars.

conclusion. For the Kpelle, there is no word for “music” as an isolated sound phenomenon; “the visual arts, the musical arts, the dramatic arts—all work together in the same domain and are conceptually treated as intertwined.” They are a “tightly wrapped bundle of arts that are difficult to separate, even for analysis” (2008, 7).<sup>79</sup>

While examples of unaccompanied singing, or purely instrumental expressions are evident throughout West Africa, the “musical” events described by Gbeho represent some of the most prestigious and complex styles of public performance.<sup>80</sup> In this setting, performances weave song, dancing, and the playing of instruments (such as drums, iron bells, gourd rattles, and other percussion) and dramatic elements together (see Nketia 1986; Hampton 1997, 102; Gbeho 1952; Agawu 1995).

Stone (2008, 7) sees this level of integration of the arts throughout the African continent:

...singing, playing instruments, dancing, masquerading, and dramatizing are part of a conceptual package that many Africans think of as one and the same. Honest observers are hard pressed to find a single indigenous group in Africa that has a term congruent with the usual Western notion of “music.” There are terms for more specific acts like singing, playing instruments, and more broadly performing (dance, games, music); but the isolation of musical sound from other arts proves a Western abstraction, of which we should be aware when we approach the study of performance in Africa.

### *A Case for the Primacy of Language*

As with the Kpelle, the western terms “music” or even “rhythm” are not readily applicable to similar dance drumming styles among the Ewe of Ghana. For example, in Ewe, the term, “*vufofu*” does not mean “music” in the western sense but refers to “the total musical event involving playing of

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<sup>79</sup> The Kpelle word *sang*, describes a well-danced movement, a well-sung phrase, or especially fine drumming (Stone 2008, 7 23)

<sup>80</sup> Nketia’s comparative study (1986) of West African musical types illustrate that unaccompanied song types, such lullabies, children’s play songs, some types of work songs, as well as purely instrumental musics occur in West African societies and throughout the African continent. Nketia provides examples of “dance dramas” that require a full “orchestra” performed within social, political, and religious performative settings throughout Ghana, including, but not limited to Ga, Adangme, Ewe, Fon, Ashanti (Akan), Dagbani, Dagarti, and Fanti (or Fante) communities (1986, 21–50; 218–230).

musical instruments, singing, and dancing” (Amu 1997, 43).<sup>81</sup> While the English term “dance drumming” and the Ewe term “*vudodo*” imply a central focus of dance or drumming (or both), a compelling argument can be made for the centrality of song, and by extension, speech. Ghanaian musician and scholar Nissio Fiagbedzi (1997, 165) considers drumming “an extension of adjunct to vocal music.” Ladzekpo (1971, 7) similarly points out that while Western listeners may think that drumming is the most prominent feature of a *vuha*’s (dance drumming club) performance, for the Ewe, it is the songs. Ghanaian musicologist Kofi Agawu cites other prominent Africanist musicologists (himself amongst them) who have recognized the centrality of language in African musical performance more broadly (2003, 107):

According to Klaus Wachsman, “there is hardly any music in Africa that is not in some way rooted in speech. Chernoff says that “African music is derived from language” and that “it is important...to link African music studies to the language map of Africa. The close connection between language and music also explains the centrality of song in African modes of expression. “Vocal music,” writes Francis Bebey, “is truly the essence of African musical art.” David Locke agrees: “Song is the heart of African music performance.”

This bias towards singing stems from the high value placed on the rhetorical, spoken word within the context of African oral traditions. It is for this reason that a Kpelle drummer might comment on a particularly fine dancer’s performance as “the dance she spoke” (Stone 2008, 7). In my own quest to unravel the “tightly wrapped bundle of arts” that is Ewe dance drumming, my MA research brought me to the conclusion that the spoken word, in the form of rhetorical speech, functions as a generative, compositional factor to which every artistic mode within the structure of dance drumming can be linked (Fraoli 2006, 195–260).<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Other translations refer to the instruments, and the act of playing, as in “*vu*” (drum), and “*vudodo*” (beating the drum) (Agawu 1995, 7; Fiagbedzi 1997, 160; see also Gorlin 2000, 9). The Ewe term “*nukpokpo*” further defines *vudodo* performance as “a show” as in “*meyi nu kpo ge*” or, “I am going to watch a show” (Fiagbedzi 1997, 153).

<sup>82</sup> For other important studies that illustrate the relationship between West African tonal languages (and other African tonal languages) and song and drum texts, see Nketia (1960, 34–53; 1986, 177–188, 90–91, 198). In Gahu performances, the meaning of song texts may be displayed as iconographic forms or in dance gestures and choreography (Fraoli, 2006; Locke 1987, 5; see also Amoaku, 1976, 1985; Anyidoho, 1983).

My transcriptions and analysis of song and drum texts that I learned in Ghana were inspired and guided by Kofi Agawu's particular focus on the interrelationships between language and music making in Ewe and Akan cultures (Agawu 1987, 1988, 1995; 2003, 106–115). Agawu analyzes these West African oral arts traditions using a unitary conceptual framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of musical sound (rhythm, melody) with speech and other forms of communication in performance, while also acknowledging the intertextual, communicative functions of oral arts with the rest of life in traditional West African societies (1987, 403). The "vitality of this music," writes Agawu, "is best understood and appreciated in the context of a larger scheme which embraces just about all aspect of West African life." On rhythm, which is so often abstracted for analysis in academic studies, Agawu asserts that

Africans do not suddenly "become rhythmic" on the village arena where they do their daily dance and drumming. Rather, a unitary conception informs the variety of ways in which they express themselves rhythmically, whether this be in the form of children's game songs, or lullabies, or music accompanying worship, or work songs, or songs of insult, or greeting formulas, or dance, or speech... In such an integrated context, events that are normally described as "functional" are shown to be directly linked to those that are described as "artistic." The distinction is ultimately irrelevant in the West African context (1987, 403).<sup>83</sup>

From the above descriptions of traditional West African oral arts, we can begin to find context for the "complexity and scope of black communication patterns" in Black American vernacular traditions. We shall see, for example, how the elevated status of Black singers and song composers in the antebellum period mirrors that of Ewe singers who take on a prominent role in the creation of new musical styles and repertoire (Ladzekpo & Pantaleoni 1970, 7). As in West Africa, reverence was paid to antebellum songsters because of their verbal skills in creating topical songs containing pithy

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<sup>83</sup> While scholars acknowledge the role of language in West African musical performance, Agawu maintains that language is overlooked as an integral component of performance structures (2003, 108). In an earlier work (1987, 415), Agawu writes "It is true that drumming and dancing constitute the most prevalent forms of recreation in traditional West African society, but music is founded on language, not on drumming, for if one understands the rhythmic formations that stems from language, one misses a crucial dimension in what would appear to be a purely instrumental genre. To the West African, the idea that an instrumental genre exists outside the domain of words and their meaning is simply absurd" (Agawu 1987, 415).



commentary on events, persons, or groups of people, and everything relevant to their daily lives. Like those of their forebears, Black songs were both the medium and the message through which the drama of everyday life unfolded. In the following section, I will examine further a West African “unitary world view” in which the oral arts play a vital role as vehicles for intergenerational communication in both the sacred and secular domains of life, past and present, and transnationally.

## Oral Arts and Community, Call & Response & Improvisation

### *The Sacred-Secular Continuum*

At the outset of this chapter, I outlined a West African “unitary” conception of the world in which the sacred realm is inextricably linked with the rest of community life. Amoaku maintains that among the Ewe of Ghana, there is no traditional (as opposed to western influenced) musical activity that is devoid of this world view, that is, without some allusion to the gods or spirits or "some gesture intended to link the visible with the invisible world" (1985, 35).<sup>84</sup> In *African Music in Ghana* (1963, 9), Nketia points to the ways that traditional musical events among various ethnic groups in Ghana and other African societies can simultaneously serve a social and religious function.

There is in Ghana a clear awareness of the emotional value of music which is utilized in a practical way to meet the requirements of social life. There is evidence from anthropological monographs that this is so in other African societies. Considerations of enjoyment are always at the forefront, for music and dancing are always at constitute a dominant avenue of dramatic expression...Aesthetic pleasure is looked for even in the dirge.

An important part of a West African “unitary” world view is a pervasive and heightened awareness of community, referred to as the "communal ethos" by Anyidoho (1983, 232) and "communitarianism" by Dor (2004, 28). Keeping in mind that the traditional West African community includes members of both the mundane and the supernatural worlds, behavioral sensibilities involving reciprocity,

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<sup>84</sup> Pantaleoni (1972, 14) writes that the word “traditional” should not be interpreted as “something out of date or less than vital in a culture, something that a few people are trying to preserve.” Pantaleon asserts that the term does not properly describe the various dance drumming traditions of Ghana which are still a very present, vital, and forceful part of Ghanaian culture.

interconnectedness, and collectivity are highly regarded in all aspects of West African traditional life as they are vital to the maintenance of good relationships within both realms of existence. In *African Rhythm, African Sensibility*, Chernoff (1979, 167) reflects upon the ways that music, dance, and drumming are intimately connected to how Ghanaians live and interact with one another—and their gods:<sup>85</sup>

In Africa, music helps people to work, to enjoy themselves, to control a bad person or to praise a good one, to recite history, poetry, and proverbs, to celebrate a funeral or a festival, to compete with each other, to encounter their gods, to grow up, and, fundamentally, to be sociable in everything they do (Chernoff 1979, 167).

This statement underscores what is perhaps the most fundamental aesthetic quality in West African traditional arts performance events: their power to bring people together in communal involvement and participation (Chernoff 1979, 36, 149). Rabaka (2012, 35) interprets this communal ethos in contemporary Black American expressive culture as a form of social reciprocity and responsibility (2012, 35).

In Africa America, as in Africa, an artist must do more than represent themselves. They must also “rep” (i.e., represent) their community and culture. They must speak the special truth of their community to the wider world. No matter how technically proficient one may be on their chosen instrument. No matter how much facility one has to sing high or low, or rap fast or slow, without “soul,” the *je ne sais quoi* of both continental and diasporan African art, there would be nothing truly distinct or, more to the point, “African” about African American music (Rabaka 2012, 35).

### *Call & Response*

The communal ethos is readily apparent in one of the most identifiable Africanisms in both African and Black American vernacular art forms, that of call and response. In West African dance drumming ensemble performance, both master and supporting drums are tonally graded to highlight call and response dialogues, and lead singers lead the choruses in antiphonal responses (Nketia 1986, 53, 140–

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<sup>85</sup> Chernoff’s research in *African Rhythm, African Sensibility*: focuses mainly on the Anlo Ewe, Dagomba, and Akan of Ghana, with references to the Yoruba and other neighboring ethnic groups.

143; Agawu 1987, 415; Locke 1982, 219).<sup>86</sup> Adding to the layers of call and response interactions are the audience's hand-clapping patterns, another aspect of the communal nature of musical performance (Locke 1982, 218; Gruber 2004, Jones 1959 Vol I, 170; Fraioli 2006, 209). As Chernoff observes, the very act of community involvement serves as a unifying aesthetic sensibility. In reference to the Anlo Ewe specifically, Anyidoho (1983, 242) writes that the essence of performance is the invaluable audience presence, participation, and critical response.

To be sure, call and response interactions are embedded in both musical and spoken African American vernacular forms, whether built into performance patterns and interactions between singers, players, dancers, or between performers and the audience. About call and response, Smitherman writes, "this is basic to black oral tradition" (2000, 64). Through her telling, one can easily see how call and response techniques in the "sacred style" are transferred to secular musical and spoken forms, like rap, the dozens, and spoken word (in spoken word, "snapping" would be the appropriate response):

The speaker's solo voice alternates or is intermingled with the audience's response. In the sacred style, the minister is urged on by the congregation's Amen's... (In both sacred and secular political rap styles, the "Preach Reverend" is transposed to "Teach Brother.") In the secular style, the response can take the form of a back-and-forth banter between the speaker and various members of the audience. Or the audience might manifest its response in giving both skin (fives) when a really down verbal point is scored (Smitherman 2000, 64).

### *Improvisation*

Also basic to black oral tradition is the art of improvisation. In the West African tradition, showmanship, competition, and improvisation contribute significantly to the level of inspiration and innovation in dance drumming performance. These qualities are revered in expert dancers, drummers,

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<sup>86</sup> The interlocking rhythmic patterns between drum parts in an Ewe ensemble are known as "dialogs" or "vugbe" (Ewe vernacular) or, as Locke calls them, "lead and response themes" (Locke, 2010). The Ewe term "vugbewo" (from "vugbe = drum voice) refers to speech-based drum patterns, also called "burden texts" which in turn are developed to inspire and regulate the dance (Agawu 1995, 6; Younge 1991, 22). For more on the integrality of call and response in drumming and singing, see Fiagbezi 1997, 161; Fraioli 2006, 195–258).

and singers. For example, the lead singer and composer (*heno*) in the Anlo Ewe dance drumming ensemble must, in addition to appealing to a broad traditional base, demonstrate an individuality of style, combining language and melody in such a way that elicits admiration from the audience. The audience's approval, in turn, encourages further stylistic elaboration and improvisations (Fiagbedzi 1997, 161). Then and only then do the "genius and talents of the poets come into full play, contradicting the notion that performers are generally following rigidly laid down patterns of art" (Awoonor 1975, 116).

Within the spirit of competition, individuality and personal flair are anticipated, with the desired outcome of raising the standards of performance. Thus a spectator will recognize a particularly fine performance by the time-honored practice of pasting money to a performer's forehead, while shouting slogans or sympathetically "dancing on the spot" (Agawu 1995, 107). It is no wonder, then, that lead drummers, expert dancers, and singers with "cooked tongues" (expert ability) are "greatly admired, respected, or even adored" (1995, 107). This status was similarly bestowed upon diasporic Africans whose oratory skills and musicianship raised them to levels of leadership, prestige, and power during American enslavement (see this thesis, Chapter Four; O'Meally 2014, 21; Abrahams 1992, 107–130).

### *Time Binding & Community*

An African concept of time, writes Mbiti, "governed as it is by the two main dimensions of the present and the past, dominates African understanding of the individual, the community and the universe which constitutes the five ontological categories mentioned above" (1969, 16). What follows is a brief analysis of a traditional African time-orientation that will provide further cultural context for understanding the West African epistemes detailed thus far, including the sacred-secular ontological continuum, communitarianism, call and response interactions, and the significance of the circle in African American performative contexts.

Pennington (1990, 123; 124) uses the term "time binding" to explain how people, in any culture, measure and utilize time as a means for controlling their environment. Factors that determine how time

is “bound” to cultural beliefs and practices are based upon the extent to which people in each culture view their control of human destiny: is it thought to be in the hands of human beings? Conversely, is human fate determined by beings in the supernatural world and if so, to what extent? Pennington poses additional questions as part of further examining the nature of temporality in culture (137):

One may ask, for example, do religious doctrines of culture teach that the soul extends its existence indefinitely into the future or do they teach that the soul does not extend beyond the present? And likewise, is the ego seen as extending into the future, following a unilinear progression, or does the ego refer to the past for its completion?

Although time binding is largely culturally determined, Pennington urges caution against a reductive dichotomy between fatalistic and “doing-oriented” societies. From a Western viewpoint, fatalism is “a world-view in which it is believed that humans do not have the power to cause events...or [to] predict the future with any confidence” (1990, 128). Fatalism, therefore, can be used as a self-correcting mechanism so that failures, accidents, or misfortunes can be blamed on supernatural powers. But note that Pennington identifies a difference between fatalism and a “sense of complete futility.” Thus, the dichotomy between fate and self-determination is in part a “false one, since fatalists are also activists” (1990, 128).

Traditionally minded West Africans exercise self-determination and free will in their spiritual relationships (Fiagbedzi 1977, 98–102). In both informal and ritualized settings, West Africans actively petition their gods and ancestral spirits through prayer, invocations, sacrifices, and offerings (Gaba 1997, 87–91; Anyidoho 1997, 142; Agawu 1995, 52–54; Mbiti 1989, 58–89). While these practices demonstrate reverence, at the same time there is a certain amount of control over and personal distance from the gods and ancestral spirits. As such, prayers and libations may mix praise and blessings with criticism and curse (Gaba 1997, 89):

If you do not do this for us you shall forever remain in dirt. But if you do it for us and we continue to live, grandfather (you know that) a deity’s shrine should not remain desolate. We shall continue to surround you with great honor.

“Dual unities” emerge from relationships with divinities; the Supreme Being (Mawu/Ewe & Fon; Olorun/Akan; Oludumare/Yoruba) is personal *and* remote, and she/he (as in Mawu-Lisa) is a singular,

Supreme Being manifest in a multiplicity of sacred entities, each with its own limited sphere of influence and power (Ferguson 1983, 242). It is this same psychological distance that nourishes a spirit of tolerance and pluralism among West African peoples, and helps explain why, for example, the Christian god was accepted as one more manifestation of the Supreme Being both at home and in the New World. What we should also keep in mind is that petitionary activism in the form rhetorical speech (mixing prayer with praise and insult) is extended to relationships in the mundane world. Such is the stuff from which the art of Signifying is born.

### *Sankofa*

For the Ewe and the Akan, looking to one's ancestral past is symbolized by the Adinkra proverb, "Sankofa" or "Toakyireefa." Among the various translations of the symbol are, "One should not ignore one's past," and "Don't forget the back without which there is no front." This proverbial concept is represented by a bird looking backwards [Figure 3–1] (Amoaku 1976, 181; Pennington 1990, 136) or, alternatively, a heart (Dansy 2009, 39).



Figure 3–1. Two *Sankofa* symbols (Dansy, 2009)

In its most distilled translation, *Sankofa* means "the past informs the present" (Pennington 1990,136). That is, *Sankofa* symbolizes the belief in reincarnation and the importance of maintaining a balance between the past and the present through relationships and dialogues with the spirits of departed ancestors. In all interpretation, *Sankofa*, as a temporal concept, is cyclical rather than linear or, as Pennington suggests, it is like a spiral, or helix (1990, 124):

This view may be likened to a helix in which, while there is a sense of movement, the helix, at the same time turns back upon itself and depends upon the past from which

it springs to guide and determine its nature; the past is an indispensable part of the present which participates in it, enlightens it, and gives it meaning.

In the performance arena, *Sankofa* informs ways that West Africans think about their craft and their individual creativity in relation to their community, past and present. On this point, Chernoff (1979, 126) writes that the young drummer in West Africa (specifically among the Ewe, Akan, and Dogon peoples) begins his career knowing that

power comes from tradition, that his hands are guided by the hands of dead drummers who have created in his tradition before him” [and that] his musical creativity directly dramatized his mind as it is balanced on the understanding that his individuality, like the rhythms that he plays, can only be seen in relationship (126).

In this sense, the drum becomes the “voice of the ancestors” who watch over the “moral life of a community...The elders, to put it more simply, participate best because they know more dead people (Chernoff 1979, 150).

Ghanaian drummer and musicologist Willie Anku writes that one should also look to *Sankofa* to think about the interrelationships of drumming patterns in an Ewe drum orchestra. He suggests that the cyclical and/or helical (spiral) nature of multi-part drumming interactions reflects a microcosm of this cyclic time orientation (Anku 2000, 7). As such, all musical dialogues, including those created by drums, iron bells, rattles, and hand clapping progress not in linear musical time but extend vertically through cyclical, ever expanding and spiraling dialogues. This is a “feedback network” in which instruments “talk” to each other in all combinations, and a “counterpoint among separate parts” (Locke 1987, 7; 2010).<sup>87</sup> This musical dialogue has been called “apart-playing” by Robert Farris Thompson (1966, 93–94) and reinterpreted by Chernoff (1979, 47) as the “separation of parts,” where each individual pattern contributes to the cross-rhythmic fabric of the ensemble playing.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> See also, Fraioli (2006, 152–178).

<sup>88</sup> For a description of “apart dancing” (the separation of arms, legs, and the torso in the dance in response to different drum parts), see Robert Farris Thompson (2011, 2–3).

The sacred significance of the circle is also known among the Bakongo (Kongo, or Congo) of west central Africa (Congo-Angola region). Stuckey describes the circle as “drawing West and Central Africa closer together than they were previously thought to be” (1987, 10). The fact that most Africans came to the New World from these locales suggests that these areas contributed to the “centrality of the circle in slavery” (1810). In both work and play settings in the antebellum south, apart-playing interactions were translated into performance “in which a central performer interacts in counterpoint or some other contrasting mode with the rest of the performing group” (Abrahams 1992, 91). As I discuss in my next chapter, patterns of apart playing resurface in the call and response interactions between singers and dancers in the ring shouts and ring plays in antebellum plantation life. This practice of “apart playing” is especially evident in African American children’s ring plays and singing games that have long been part of school music curriculum.

*Sankofa* takes on further meaning for those Africans who see their heritage all too quickly disappearing, leading to the “go back and retrieve” interpretation of the term (Agawu 1995, 25). This interpretation also applies to African Americans wishing to retrieve their cultural heritage (1995, 25). In its application to the teaching of African heritage knowledge in schools, *Sankofa* is equated with the “bird that looks back to go forward” (Payne & Strickland 2008, 116). That is to say, “knowing one’s history is essential for understanding present circumstances and successfully moving forward into the future” (Potts 2008, 204; see also King & Swartz 2018, 95; 2014, 117–119).

### *Traditional Education*

Oral arts practices are integral to educative and socialization processes in traditional West African societies. Referred to as “intergenerational communication” by Felix Boateng (1990, 110), this socialization process involves the transfer of requisite knowledge, skills, and modes of behavior in oral African societies from one generation to the next, ensuring that children are prepared for their adult roles in community life. Such learning does not occur in a colonial-imposed schooling system but is accomplished by apprenticeship, role modeling, and participation in community events (Owusu-Ansah



1995, 117, see also Amoaku 1976, 37). In the traditional view, these intergenerational interactions provide a smooth transition from childhood to adulthood, with the goal that children grow up knowing what it means to become human.

Like other aspects of traditional education, the necessary abilities to sing, drum, dance, or tell stories in West Africa are “learned but not taught” (Robertson 1985, 101). Through participation, observation, and play, children gain competency in various verbal and musical arts. This process of intergenerational communication is explained in detail by Ghanaian educator, E.Y. Egblewogbe (1975, 34):

From now on the child acquires his own techniques of learning through practice and observations and relying on his initiative and ability. This is well provided for. For, apart from cradlesong and the nonsense syllables imitating drum rhythms, many of the children’s games in which the growing child participates incorporate songs. Similarly, the stories told to him and which he soon learns to tell contain song interludes and drum rhythms. Moreover, the child is always carried to public ceremonies, rites, and traditional dance arenas where he shares in the spirit of the music as well as watches experienced performers. Like drumming, dancing begins with joy of movement in the child. As he grows, he learns through observation and practice to adapt his movements to the rhythm and also to copy the traditional style of dancing.

Stuckey’s (1987, 33) research on the life of Simon Brown, who was born into slavery in Virginia in 1843, exemplifies the continuance of traditional African educative processes in North America, particularly in the “ring shout”:

Since the overwhelming majority of slaves brought into Virginia until the end of the slave trade were African born, they provided the foundation of values from which slave culture was erected, New World experience being interpreted largely from an African point of view....Born into slavery in 1843, Simon participated in the most sacred of rituals in the 1850s by the age of thirteen—a common practice in slave communities in both the North and South, as children, within a year or two after they were able to walk, joined in some ceremonies, especially in the ring shout. In fact, slave culture was, despite its centeredness upon the elders and ancestors, a culture in which the very young played a more vital role than scholars have assigned them.

Traditional educational practices from African homelands have been integral to maintaining Black oral arts traditions in North America well into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries in classrooms and on playgrounds across the United States. In particular, African retentions in oral arts practices are evident

in the Gullah communities of the Georgia Sea Islands and neighboring coastal areas. That region's concentration of Africanisms in lifeways customs and practices, sacred "ring shout," "ring plays," and storytelling traditions comprise some of the oldest, extant African American vernacular expressions in the United States (see this thesis, Chapters Four & Five).

### Three Factors of Tradition & Change

The discussion of African retentions in Black American vernacular expressions would not be complete without looking at some of the ways in which cultural practices within traditional African societies are maintained while continuously adapting to both indigenous and outside influences. As a guide to this process, Nketia (1959, 31) identifies three major factors of change in West African oral arts traditions: (1) "built-in" factors within a relatively homogenous community, (2) contact with other African cultures, and (3) contact with foreign (Western or other) cultures. As a model for these indigenous perspectives on tradition and change, I look to the Anlo Ewe in Ghana and similar traditions among neighboring Akan and Yoruba peoples. Indigenous attitudes towards innovation, improvisation, and displays of individual virtuosity and creative genius within Ewe performance traditions, for example, demonstrate clear parallels with aesthetic principles in African American vernacular traditions.

#### *Indigenous Factors*

Nketia's first type of change results from "built-in factors"—those cumulative, creative efforts of individuals and groups within a relatively homogenous society (1959, 31). Within these creative efforts is an aesthetic sensibility that encourages innovation and newness in traditional West African oral arts practices but only if the new forms do not stray too far from tradition (Fiagbedzi 1977, 116). Thus changes in traditional dance drumming performance styles are tempered by a strong communal ethos that respects what has been handed down by one's ancestors, living and deceased. For example, among the Ewe, the "mother principle" can be applied to the formation of a new *vuha* (dance drumming club) and its new repertoire, including new songs and drumming and dance styles (Fiagbedzi 1977, 76; 116).

In this context, the mother principle presents members of the *vuha* with the responsibility of tempering displays of individual creativity, and even creative genius, within the expectations of the community and what has come before (Anku 2000, 92). This aesthetic sensibility has been similarly identified in Black American vernacular arts by Krasner as “encouraged innovation and aesthetic continuity,” in which an “audience would be disagreeably surprised if the form were abandoned” (Krasner, 2008, 83 quoting Hurston 1934).<sup>89</sup>

Respect for tradition does not, however, imply the absence of an appreciation for displays of individual virtuosity and creativity in traditional West African societies. Creativity and personal style ensure that arts such as dance drumming remain “continuously vital form[s]” (Chernoff 1979, 61). These aesthetic considerations are equally apparent in the Anlo Ewe *halo* (songs of insult) tradition where displays of verbal acuity, originality and showmanship are central to a performance’s success. Performative elements of competition, showmanship, and Signifying made the cross-Atlantic voyage and are equally at play in the Black American verbal competition of the dozens, in jazz, as well as in free-styling rap music battles and spoken word poetry slams (see Chapter Six, this thesis).

#### *Contact with other African Cultures, and European Colonization & Christianity*

Indigenous West African perspectives towards change indicate an openness that extends beyond immediate locales to other “foreign” African groups as well as to the influences resulting from European colonization and Christianity (Nketia 1959, 31). Changes from other African cultural groups have historically occurred through migration, economic pursuits, or war (Nketia 1959, 31). Other changes can occur because of a certain “measure of built-in tolerance” that allows for exchanges between traditional culture and outside, modernizing influences (Fiagbedzi 1977, 40). For example,

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<sup>89</sup> Hurston, quoted in *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island Press, 1981 [1934]), 83.

intercultural exchanges with the northern Ewe, the Akan, and the Yoruba have engendered a variety of changes in southern Eweland such as dance choreography and singing styles, innovation in instrument construction, drum poetry (speech surrogates, or texts “spoken” on drums), or local variants in community gods.<sup>90</sup>

This same “measure of built-in tolerance” for new ideas and cultural approaches also made it easier for the Ewe to accept the message of Christian missionaries. Belief in an ontological hierarchy of spiritual entities supports a “plurality of focus”—an adaptive strategy in which a multiplicity of divine beings serves needs as they arise (see also, Fiagbedzi 1977, 40 & 103; Gaba 1997, 100). Coleman recognized this plurality, which is exhibited throughout West Africa, as both a communitarian and a pluralistic impulse that focuses on “the individual in relation to a densely populated universe inhabited by both human and spiritual beings... a result of both Africans and African Americans possessing a tendency toward blending other religious perspectives into their own belief systems” (Coleman 2000, 33).<sup>91</sup>

Herskovits, in perhaps one of the earliest anthropological observations on African syncretism, noted the “lack of proselytizing” among Africans, meaning “they have no zeal for their own gods so great as to exclude the acceptance of new deities” (1941, 70). To the pre-Christian Ewe, therefore, the message of the White man’s god was “just another god,” whose message was not difficult to hear, especially if it promised salvation or in other ways countered the attitude and treatment of the slave traders and/or colonial rulers (Fiagbedzi 1977, 40). Like other colonized African peoples, the Ewe live comfortably between two religious world views: traditional African and Christian (Agawu 1995, 52).

This adaptive strategy served Africans well in creating new hybrid forms of spiritual worship and expression in the New World. These new forms emerged not only because of the eventual influences of Christianity but, first and foremost, through social exchanges between diverse African ethnic groups

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<sup>90</sup> For more details on these types of inter-cultural adaptations between Ghanaian and other West African groups, see Pantaleoni 1972, 65; Amoaku 1976, 211–243, 254–256; Fiagbedzi 1977, 24–25; Younge 1991, 26; Agawu 1995, 90–99; Anyidoho 1997, 141; Kafui 2000, 122–124.

who were thrust together on ships crossing the Atlantic and on the southern United States plantations. As stated elsewhere, one of the most adaptable cultural traits linking Africans' past with their American present was their religion and their tendency to blend "other religious perspectives into their own belief system" (Raboteau 1978, 4).<sup>92</sup> While there were significant cultural differences between West Africans brought to the New World, there were also

similar modes of perception, shared basic principles, and common patterns of ritual were widespread among different West African religions. Beneath the diversity, enough fundamental similarity did exist to allow a general description of the religious heritage of African slaves, with supplementary information regarding particular peoples, such as the Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo and others, whose influence upon the religions of Afro-Americans have long been noted (1978, 7).

This predilection towards syncretism is based upon "respect for spiritual power wherever it originated," and accounted for "the continuity of a distinctively African religious consciousness" in America where "the gods of Africa continued to live—in exile" (Raboteau 1978, 5). In *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*, Mintz and Price (1976, 45) similarly assert that "additive, rather than "exclusive" attitudes among West African and Central African peoples "may help us to imagine something of the initial cultural situation for an aggregate of recently enslaved Africans." Africans in the New World may not have found the Christian god altogether different from

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<sup>92</sup> Herskovits wrote that the tendency to adopt new gods from other cultures "goes far in explaining the readiness of the Negroes to take over the conceptions of the universe held by the white man; and points the way, also, to an understanding how, though forms of worship may have been accepted, not all of African world view or practice was lost" (1941, 72).

Dewulf (2013) provides an example of Euro-African syncretism originating from central western Africa, in the formation of the Pinkster (Dutch, for "Pentecost") festivals in the United States beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Focusing on the Pinkster musical and dance parades in New York (most notably at "Pinkster Hill" in Albany), Dewulf refutes previously held notions that the Pinkster tradition is derived from the Dutch colonialists in the "New Netherlands" and then adopted by enslaved Africans. It is more likely that Angolans and Congolese, who made up most of the diasporic Africans in New York, were already familiar with the Catholic Pentecostal practices introduced by Portuguese colonizers in central Africa—and on the islands of Santiago and São Tomé—as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Dewulf 2013, 254–55). "In fact, Pinkster processions in Albany were neither Dutch nor something new, but rather a North American variant of an Afro-Portuguese, Atlantic Creole tradition" (Dewulf 2013, 245–46, 258). See Sterling Stuckey's discussion of Pinkster as a Pan-African performative event related to Black solidarity and freedom in the northern United States (1987, 88–89; 160–62; 180, 255–56, 132–133).

their own concept of a supreme god. From an Africanist perspective, the workings of the Christian Holy Spirit “could readily be interpreted as identical with conjuration and spirit possession in their ancestral religions” (Coleman 2000, 51).

The retention of African sacred traditions in the New World, and the oral arts practices that expressed them, was also impacted by the attitudes and actions of White slave holders. As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, enslaved Africans were encouraged to perform “differently,” which allowed them opportunities to maintain their traditions in full view of their oppressors. In addition, Africans took every opportunity to practice their religious customs more fully in accord with their heritage in the night-time camp meetings or “steal aways.” In large part, these clandestine gatherings were the breeding ground for new, Pan-African creative expressions that pushed back against the oppressive conditions of slavery.

Another factor aiding the retentions of African elements in antebellum oral arts practices was the delay on the part of White planters, at least until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, to convert their plantation hands to Christianity (Levine 1977, 60). This delay was born out of a fear that religious conversion would free the enslaved from Sunday labor (an economic fear) and more importantly, the fear that conversion would “imbue the slaves with dangerous notions of religious equality and make them ‘intractable’” (60). Finally, there was a fear that “African ‘savages’ were unworthy associates for white Christians” (60). Consequently, traditions that expressed the sacred through singing and dance were thought of as savage and were dismissed as spiritually unmeaningful. As Stuckey wrote, “Opposition to African religion, therefore, was limited in effectiveness because the African was thought to have a religion unworthy of the name, when, in fact, his religious vision was subtle and complex, responsible for the creation of major—and sacred—artistic forms” (1987, 25).

### *Chapter Conclusion*

In closing this chapter, I reinvoke Amiri Baraka’s “changing same” and Guthrie Ramsey’s “pot liquor principle” as two interrelated concepts that embody processes of tradition and change in oral arts

from the African continent to North America. At the heart of these metaphors is the reality that while Africans' lives were radically changed because of the Black Holocaust, many epistemological elements their African cultural heritage were maintained.

As I have outlined, key cultural orientations shaped the way that Black oral arts expressions were transformed on American soil. The first of these is a profoundly religious conception of the world in which the mundane and spiritual domains of life intermingle. Captive Africans brought this unitary, secular-sacred world view to the Americas. Along with Eshu Elegbara (and High John the Conquerer), this world view followed them across the ocean, "like the albatross" (Hurstun, from Dundes 1990, 543). As the African impulse of spirituality became infused in Black arts, "something African" became "African American":

This phenomenon is always at the root in Black art, the worship of spirit – or at least the summoning of or by such force...African music is African in origin, African American in its totality, and its various forms (especially the vocal) show how the African impulses were redistributed in its expression, and the expression itself became Christianized and post-Christianized (Baraka 1968, 207–208)

The second important Africanism I have highlighted in this chapter is the reification of the spoken word as it is evidenced in Signifying in Black orature. While discrete plots, lyrics, and characters in stories, mythologies, songs, and other expressions may have lost their original contours, new forms came into being. Just as Ramsey's "pot liquor principle" seeks a particular "essence of flavor" in Black music, Baraka's "changing same" embodies a Black aesthetic sensibility that cannot be separated from either an African sacred-secular continuum or from an innate, African functionality in Black vernacular expressions, which are vehicles for social commentary and social change. With these traditions, Africans kept hope alive during and beyond American enslavement. From this point forward, I keep in mind these two rich and meaningful metaphors—the "pot liquor principle" and the "changing same"—as I present Black American vernacular traditions as vehicles for teaching freedom, from antebellum expressions to contemporary forms.



## Chapter Four

### Antebellum Potlikker Narratives in Work and Play, Past & Present

#### Introduction

The guidelines set by my pedagogy of potlikker are evident in the Black, antebellum vernacular expressions discussed in this chapter: a communal ethos, call and response interactions, the merging of sacred and secular purposes in music and dance, and the verbal art of Signifying. In keeping with my goals for teaching freedom, I present these vernacular traditions as educative tools that can “broaden our understanding of modes of resistance African Americans have utilized from the antebellum period to the present” (Burnam and Maultsby 2013, 65).

For the origins of antebellum songs, dances, ring shouts and ring plays, I look first to the private and sacred gatherings that African plantation hands carved out for themselves, namely the “steal away,” gatherings where the African American spiritual first emerged in the “ring shout” or the “shout.” I then turn to work songs, particularly those performed in the corn shucking celebrations or “corn frolics” (harvest festivals), and other entertainment events sanctioned by White planters. Finally, I look to the songs, dances, and rhythms of childhood, where the formation of the ring (circle) remains a central performative element. The lines between the orals arts pastimes of adults and children are not drawn sharply here. Processes of “intergenerational communication” during American enslavement ensured that children were part of community gatherings that exposed them to the songs, rhythms, and dances of adulthood.

I have sourced all Black vernacular spoken and sung narratives in this chapter from secondhand materials, some of which date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many of the documented narratives (e.g., the *Slave Narratives* from the Federal Writers Project, Works Progress Administration) are in the Black vernacular language and syntax of the eras in which they were transcribed and printed by collectors, chroniclers, anthropologists, and folklorists. Although the use of the “N” word in these texts is both culturally and historically accurate, I am personally uncomfortable with using it in the



context of a pedagogy intended for primary and secondary schools. In all cases, I have replaced the “N” word with a poetically (and politically) appropriate alternative such as “brother,” or “man,” indicated in [brackets] and followed by (brackets, mine).

### *Share the Music & Making Music*

African American vernacular creative expressions have long been part of school music curriculum textbooks and other teacher resources. As a public school music teacher, I have previous knowledge of some of the songs and ring play games included in this chapter as presented in the textbooks *Share the Music* (Bond et al., 2000) and *Making Music* (Beethoven et al., 2008), both of which have been part of my music classrooms since the early 2000s. These textbooks, and earlier music curriculum series have had a considerable impact on keeping the knowledge of African American vernacular pastimes alive for generations of music teachers and students. Nevertheless, questions remain about how these traditions are presented in these textbooks, the extent to which teachers take advantage of them, and how they are being implemented. While there is not room here for an in-depth analysis of these textbooks and their presentation of every song I cite, I would like to offer a few general comments about them.

To a greater or lesser extent, both the *Share the Music* series and the *Making Music* series cite African American spirituals, work songs, and ring plays as having originated in American enslavement and/or as early African American “folk songs.” In the Teacher’s editions of these textbooks, supplemental information on American enslavement, the Civil Rights movement, and other historical and cultural contexts is provided under sidebar headings such as “Cultural Connections,” “Spotlight On,” “Character Education,” or “Across the Curriculum.”

To the editors’ credit, connections are made between spirituals and political movements and/or social issues, particularly in the upper-elementary texts. Information such as, “Between 1800 and 1861 (the start of the Civil War), African American spirituals came to be an important part of America’s musical heritage,” and “These songs expressed slaves’ longing for freedom” (*Making Music* 2008, 232), provide a good starting place for learning about spirituals and their dual function as songs of

worship and songs of resistance and protest. Discussion topics are prompted in the Teacher's editions with, for example, suggestions to "develop a list of additional reasons why people today might sing this song (for example, disability rights, homeless issues) (2008, 232). My overall assessment of these extended lessons is that they are, in the main, presented as ancillary lessons for integrated learning, a goal which is secondary to teaching the benchmarks of western music theory and practice. They are helpful only if teachers are willing to take the extra time to dig in to the "hard history" of American enslavement, and its aftermath of institutional racism in America.

As I have previously noted, this thesis is not intended as a curriculum guide. That said, I do include materials that I have taught in my own classrooms, and which are indicated as such. Prior to my research for this paper, I was unaware of the Signified meanings in some of the repertoire. In these cases, my comments reflect my own teaching experiences and how I might in the future use the materials with more historical accuracy. In the broadest pedagogical framework, I believe that all the repertoire I present here can be taught, with varying degrees of intention, purpose, and desired outcomes for all learners, in primary, secondary, and post-secondary learning environments. Where relevant, I offer an opinion as to whether the hard history hidden in song lyrics might be more appropriate for older, rather than younger, students. I will turn now to the contexts in which antebellum ring shouts, spirituals, work songs, ring plays, and dances were created.

### The Ring Shout

Central to antebellum performative settings, whether private or public, sacred, or secular, was the formation of the ring, or "ring shout." In identifying the ring as an early American, pan-African cultural expression, Stuckey (1987, 88) asserts that it was "the undulating stretch of land along the Guinea Coast that, curving through Angola [that] helped give the world the ring shout."<sup>93</sup> With its "call and response singing and counter-clockwise dancing" the shout was the most salient of African forms in North

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<sup>93</sup> Stuckey (1987, 9–115) cites the prevalence of counterclockwise dances from the Congo-Angola region of West Central Africa, to Nigeria, Dahomey (present-day Benin), the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), and Sierra Leone..

America. It “connected the singers to African ancestors and gods and symbolized African unity...The ring, in which Africans danced and sang is the key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America” (1987, ix). The shout provided enslaved Africans with a recurring, primary form of expression that at once fulfilled their “physical and spiritual, emotional and rational, needs” (25).

According to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century folklorist Benjamin Botkin (1949, 657), “to define with complete accuracy the meaning of the word ‘shout’ is impossible...The word means many things, or, rather, there are many different forms of shouting.” Botkin’s source, Robert Gordon (1932, 200), states unequivocally that, “In [the ring shout], the shouters form a circle and proceed around and around in a sort of slow processional, facing always in one direction. The speed is always slow and dignified...the feet shuffle, each step advancing the body but slightly” (Botkin 1949, 659).<sup>94</sup> In *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs & Stories from the Afro-American Heritage* (Jones & Hawes 1972, 143), Bessie Jones defines the “shout” in terms of movement of the feet: “A rapid shuffling two-step, the back foot closing up to but never passing the leading foot: step (R), close (L); step (R), close (L).” Jones’s reference to “shout” as a form of movement is even more apt when one considers that the Arabic word “*saut*” (pronounced “shout”), used among the “Mohammedans of West Africa” means “to run and walk around the Kaaba” (Parrish 1940, 54).<sup>95</sup>

A distinction is made however, between the shout and dancing in the sacred ring when shouting was to be “indulged in only while singing a spiritual. Under no circumstances might the feet be crossed.” When one young woman who

...showed the slightest tendency to move her feet too far apart, or to cross them, one of the older sisters would reprimand her sharply...quoting the words of the spiritual—  
“Watch out sister, how you walk that cross! Yer foot might slip an’ yer soul got los”  
(Gordon 1932, 201).

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<sup>94</sup> A slow, stately form of the ring shout described by Gordon (1932, 200) was also known as the “walk around,” which “might possibly be the relic of a very old type, and perhaps the ancestor of a later walk around as performed by the black face minstrels on the stage.”

<sup>95</sup> This etymology was provided for Lydia Parrish (1942) by Lorenzo Dow Turner who worked closely with Parrish in translating and transcribing the Gullah dialect. For more on Turner’s important work, see *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Turner, 1949; updated edition with a new introduction, 2002). See also, “Lorenzo Dow Turner,” in Wilbur Cross’s, *Gullah Culture in America* (2012, 149).

Citing a passage from Paule Marshall's (1929–2019) novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1984, 34), Jason Young (2006, 392) offers further insight into the importance of keeping ones' feet close to the ground while shouting, even when dancing "all akimbo":

Indeed, Marshall's protagonist, Avey Johnson, recalled the dance of faithful parishioners, the sons and daughters of slaves, who allowed their falling bodies every liberty. Still, their feet "never once left the floor or, worse, crossed each other in a dance step...even when the spirit took hold and their souls and writhing bodies seemed about to soar off into the night, their feet remained planted firm. "*I shall not be moved.*"

Abrahams describes the ring in sacred expression (albeit where feet left the ground) and its cross-over into secular settings (1992, 44-45):

In this practice, the slaves formed themselves into a ring which moved counterclockwise in a kind of leaping dance...evidence of the descent of the spirit on individuals in the congregation...These very same traits were also present in the after-dinner entertainments – the forming into a ring, the singing and moving together – and would become the essence of display in the corn shucking and other slave holidays.

In the coming pages, we will find the ring shout in both sacred and secular antebellum performative occasions, in which both adults and children participated. The fluidity between these genres will be discussed later in the context of the corn husking "entertainments," and children's ring plays.

### *Steal Away*

As an alternative to sanctioned public harvest celebrations or otherwise obligatory entertainments, plantation hands gathered in secret "steal-aways," or private gatherings. These meetings, also called "hush arbors" or "brush arbors" were often carried out at night, "in the deep woods," whether they were for religious purposes, meetings between lovers, or dances for entertainment (Abrahams, 1992, 88, 90; Crew et al. 2015, 30; Stuckey 1987, 35, Levine 1977, 42). The relative secrecy with which the "steal aways" were held enabled enslaved Africans to keep elements of their homeland customs intact.

According to Stuckey (1987, 25):

For decades before and generations following the American Revolution, Africans engaged in religious ceremonies in their quarters and in the woods unobserved by whites.... millions of slaves did the ring shout, unobserved, with no concern for

white approval. But the possibility that whites might discover the guiding principles of African culture kept blacks on guard and led them, to an astonishing degree, to keep the essentials of their culture from view, thereby making it possible to continue to practice values proper to them. Such secretiveness was dictated by the realities of oppression and worked against whites acquiring knowledge of slave culture that might have been used to attempt to eradicate that culture.

In attempts to maintain their privacy, plantation hands devised methods of “hushing” or quieting the exuberance of the meetings, whether it was the preaching, prayers, singing, or “shouts.” One caution was to gather behind wetted-down quilts and rags, “to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air.” (Raboteau 1978, 215). Indoors, revelers might direct their voices into inverted vessels or pots near a door to muffle the sound, “or so they thought” (Abrahams, 1992, 90).

Despite attempts to conceal the celebrations, plantation owners knew about the clandestine gatherings (Abrahams 1992, 88, 90). Because of the frequency of these events, owners employed “patrollers,” whose job it was to instill fear into workers who were caught off the plantation without a pass (1992, 88). Ex-slave accounts recall the brutal encounters with the night “patterollers,” which could include maiming or killing (Abrahams 1992, 116). Lou Austin clearly describes the secret nature of these occurrences in his narrative (Crew, Bunch & Price 2015, 30):

De folks ‘ud git in er ring an’ march ‘roun in time ter der singin’ an’ this when dey git wa’amed up, dey shout an’ clap an’ dance an’ sing. Some of ‘em ‘ud got weak an’ drop down then the others ‘ud keep on wid de singin’ till ‘mos come day. Some of the white folks ‘ud whip their servants effen they catch ‘em at er ring shout meetin’. But they shore had a big time down in de thickets an’ in the deep woods.<sup>96</sup>

Because plantation hands sang of “the forces that affected their lives profoundly,” songs often dealt with the brutalities and harsh conditions of enslavement (Levine 1977, 14). Variations on the theme of the “patteroller” song speak directly to such abuses. The following version comes from an interview with John C. Becton (Figure 4–1), from North Carolina, and Ferebe Rogers and Callie Elder, from Georgia: “*Run [brothers and sisters], run, patteroller ketch yer, Hit yer thirty-nine and sware ‘e didn’*

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<sup>96</sup> See Levine (1977, 41–42) for more on the “hush arbor” meetings and treatment of worshippers by the “patterolls.”

*tech ye*” (Levine 1977, 14).<sup>97</sup> Like the High John de Conquer tales (see Chapter Five), the “patterroller” songs claim bragging rights about the ways in which plantation hands were able to outwit their oppressors, as in this variation (Abrahams 1992, 117):

*Run, [brother], run; patter-roller catch you;  
Run, [brother], run; it's almos' day;  
Run, [brother], run, patter-roller catch you;  
Run, [brother], run; you better get away.  
Dis [brother] run; he run his best;  
Stuck his head in a hornet's nest.*

*Jump'd de fence an run frew de paster;  
White man run, but [dis brother] run faster.*



Figure 4-1: John C. Becton, ca. 1937-1938  
(Photo, Library of Congress: Public Domain Archive)<sup>98</sup>

In *Step It Down*, Jones (1972, 208) describes a Georgia Sea Island patter-roller song, “Old Bill the Rolling Pin,” that Signifies on a plantation pass-guard’s (“patterroller”) physical features. As with many of the stories and songs included in *Step It Down*, Jones did not specify that “Old Bill” was sung exclusively by children or adults. Children were certainly aware of the patterrollers on their home

<sup>97</sup> From Levine’s notes (1977, 449): “SW, 24 (1895), 31; WPA Slave Narratives, interviews with John. C. Becton (N.C.), Ferebe Rogers & Carrie Elder (GA).” There is no further bibliographic reference for this quote. The lines, “*Run---- run, the patroller get yo’. ... Run ---- run, the patroller get yo’*” also appear in *Memories of the Enslaved: Voices from the Slave Narratives* (Crew et al. 2015, 30) in an interview with Barney Alford from Mississippi. Born into enslavement, Mr. Alford recalls that his elders were singing this song “all the time.”

<sup>98</sup> <https://loc.getarchive.net/media/john-c-becton> Portraits of African American ex-slaves from the U.S. Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives collections.

plantations and would have relished making fun of “Old Bill” as did adults. Here’s a verse from “Old Bill the Rolling Pin” (Jones & Hawes 1972, 208):

*Now Old Bill the Rolling Pin this morning,  
Now Old Bill the Rolling Pin this morning,  
Now Old Bill the Rolling Pin,  
He’s up the road and back again,  
Big eyes and a double chin this morning.*

Even at the risk of being caught by paterollers, plantation hands simply liked their own, steal away gatherings better (Raboteau, 1978, 215). Born into enslavement on a Virginia plantation in 1843, storyteller Simon Brown relayed a story to his protégé Reverend William J. Faulkner (1891-1987) around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Simon’s story, “How the Slaves Worshipped,” retold by Faulkner in *The Days When the Animals Talked* (1993), provides insight as to why plantations hands preferred their own religious gatherings over White Christian church services (Faulkner 1993, 53-54).<sup>99</sup>

*Sundays I used to drive my master’s family to church in town in a two-horse surrey. At the church, I had to sit upstairs with the other slaves. We acted as if we enjoyed the services, but we didn’t. Sometimes, though, we liked to listen to the preacher read stories from the Bible, especially those about the brave men like Moses and Joshua and Samson. When the Bible told how Moses made old King Pharaoh turn all the Hebrew slaves loose away down in Egypt land, we black slaves thought we must be like those Jews in God’s sight. Now, that kind of God I could love and serve. But the white preacher in his sermons never did say a word about God setting the black man free. No sir, not a word. So I didn’t put much faith in the white man’s religion...But the slave had they Christian religion too, and it wasn’t cold and proper, like in the white folk’s church. The fact is, as I told you before, the black folk in my day didn’t even have a church. They meet in a cabin in the cold weather and outdoors, under a tree or a “brush arbor” in the summer times. Sometimes the Massa’s preacher would “talk” at the meetings “about being good servants to our masters and about going to heaven when we died...But oh, my, when our people got together to worship God, the Spirit would move in the meeting!*

In the privacy of their own “praisehouses,” plantation hands expressed their own brand of religion in the shout. With its fusion of African religious practices and Christian influences, the shout allowed the enslaved to worship Christian Holy Spirit “under the guise of obedience...paying deference to deities and to the deceased” (Young 2016, 392). As Baraka (1968, 210) put it, the camp meeting

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<sup>99</sup> Simon’s stories in the 1993 edition of *When the Animals Talked* are printed standard English. Stuckey relays the story in Black English sourced from a 1977 edition of the book (Stuckey 1987, 34; n, 415).

spirituals sung in the “backwoods churches” were about deliverance, and that that god the enslaved worshipped “for the most part, except maybe the ‘pure white’ God of the toms, had to be willing to free them, ...somehow, someway...one sweet day.” This new, syncretic religion allowed plantation hands “a sense of personal power, self-determination, and communal cohesion that was both different from the reality and beyond the authority of their masters” (Coleman 2000, 51). In his book, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals*, Black music historian Arthur Jones discusses the merging of traditional African religious beliefs and Christianity (1993, 7):

The conversion process was gradual, and the result was a creative blend of African traditions and Christianity, creating a new, transformed religion different in form and substance from the religion of the slave holder. In fact, many of the enslaved people during the time of the slave trade held tightly to traditional religious beliefs and practices, renewed and strengthened by the continual arrival of new captives from west and central Africa.<sup>100</sup>

#### *The Ring Shout and the Birth of the Spiritual*

Within the sacred space of the shout, the syncretic style of singing, dancing, and praising the Holy Spirit gave rise to the African American spiritual. These sacred songs were not, however, practiced in sacred settings alone. It is helpful here to remember that “neither the slaves nor their African forbearers ever drew modernity’s clear line between the sacred and the secular. The uses to which spirituals were put are an unmistakable indication of this...they were used as rowing songs, field songs, work songs, and social songs” (Levine 1977, 30). Raboteau (1978, 245) contends that if one is to fully understand the spiritual, one must imagine them as they are performed in the ring shout:

The verses of some spirituals take on new meaning when one realizes that spirituals were not only *sung* in the fields or at prayer and worship services but were shouted—that is, danced in the ring shout—with the result that the lyrics of the songs were acted out or dramatized by the band of shouters. When the singers who stood outside the ring took up the chorus, the shout proper would begin with the ring band shuffling rapidly to the beat announced by the hand-clapping and foot-tapping of the chorus of singers...Here’s an example of the lyrics of the spiritual:

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<sup>100</sup> From Stuckey (1987, 33; n402, sourcing Rawley, *Slave Trade*): “By 1800, Virginia contained large numbers of African born slaves...Between 1727 and 1769, nearly 40,000 slaves were brought into the state, and Africa overwhelmingly was the source, with more than four-fifths of the slaves coming from that continent.”



(Chorus) *Oh shout, O shout, O shout away,  
And don't you mind,  
And glory, glory, glory, on my soul!*

(Verse) *And when 'twas night I thought 'twas day,  
I thought I'd pray my soul away,  
And glory, glory, glory in my soul*

In an interview from the *WPA Slave Narratives* (Crew et al. 2015, 34), Vinnie Brunson of Texas gave a firsthand account of the spiritual as a “shoutin” song: <sup>101</sup>

*In de shoutin' song, de best singer git together an start de song, hit moves slow at fust den gits faster an louder, as dey sing dey jine hands an make a circle, den somebody git happy an jumps out in de middle of de circles an goes to dance to de time of de singing an de clappin' of hands and feet, others jine her as de spirit moves dem, till dy all make a ring dat circles roun' an roun', De folks in de congregashun jine de singin' an keepin' de time by pattin' de hands and feet an' hit makes a big noise an praise service...De spiritual songs is sung in time to de kind of service hit is—efin hit is a meetin song hit is sung fast an if hit is a funeral hit is sung, slow. Dey sing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” a heap at de praise song, an' at de funerals, bof’.*

*Swing low, sweet chariot, Comin' fer ter carry me home.  
Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' fer ter carry me home.  
I looked over Jordan an' what did I see,  
Comin' fer to carry me home?  
A band of angels comin after me.  
Comin fer to carry me home.*

Spirituals such as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” underscores the notion that for Africans in bondage, spiritual and physical emancipation were two sides of the same coin. The next section explores the dual meaning and function of the spiritual.

### *Double Meanings and Signifying in Spirituals*

The occurrence of coded, double messages in African American spirituals has been a subject of long-standing debate among scholars and assessed from “a surprising variety of directions” (Cone 1972,

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<sup>101</sup> Most of the WPA Federal Writers Project “slave narrative” interviews were conducted between 1937–38 (Crew et al. 2015, xv). The average age of interviewees was 85 (xx) which would mean that the average age of the participants was about 13 yrs. at the time of Emancipation (1865). For a discussion on the challenges posed by the WPA Federal Writers “Slave Narratives” project, and earlier interview projects conducted by African American Institutions (Fisk University, Southern University, and Kentucky State College) see, “Introduction: The History of the Slave Narratives (Crew et al. 2015, xiii–xxxv).

9–19). From the field of Black religious studies, Raboteau acknowledges that the improvisational, call and response elements of the spiritual gave it “the capacity to fit an individual slave’s specific experiences into the consciousness of the group” (1978, 246). But for Raboteau, a singer’s license to improvise on topical matters is not necessarily an indication that spirituals were composed with coded messages in mind, whether signaling freedom from bondage or for that matter, as protests (246).

What is indicated by Raboteau and others writing on the spiritual is that the narrative content of spirituals served multiple purposes for the enslaved. Being open to thematic change, the spiritual could mean one thing in one situation, and “something else in another without negating its meaning” (246). One does not need, as Levine affirms, to divest spirituals of their religious import while investing them with secular meaning (1977, 52). The meaning of the prayerful lines, *Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus...Steal away home...I ain’t got long to stay here*, could also, as some former slaves have recalled, be used as “explicit calls to secret meetings,” as well as a call to the Underground Railroad (Levine 1977, 52; Ellison 1989, 51; Brown 1958, 296). Put another way, spirituals served multiple purposes depending on the person(s) singing and in what social setting or context, with a “particular significance for a person at one time and not at another” (Raboteau 1978, 247).

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, folklorist Sterling A. Brown suggested that enslaved Africans were not so naïve as to speak openly or in the case of the spiritual, sing openly about their desires for freedom because they knew “how close to hysteria the slaveholders really were, how rigid the control could be. The very fact that a group of slaves meeting and singing and praying together was cause of anxiety to many masters, even if the slaves were singing of Jordan and Jericho” (Brown 1958, 286). Referencing Frederick Douglass’s personal use of the spiritual, Brown suggests that Douglass “tells us not only of the double talk of the slaves’ songs,” but also that he understood “the whole body of spirituals as reflecting a desire for freedom” (Brown 1958, 286). Douglass himself made this plain when he wrote, “every tone [of the spiritual] was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains” (1845,14). In his 1882 biography, *Life and Times*, Douglass wrote that for himself and others

preparing to escape from bondage, the spiritual, “*O Canaan, sweet Canaan – I’m bound for the land of Canaan,*” meant more than a hope of reaching heaven (Douglass 1882, 157):

We meant to reach North, and North was our Canaan... [It] was our favorite air and had a double meaning. On the lips of some the expectations of a speedy summons to a world of spirits, but on the lips of our company it simply meant a speedy pilgrimage to a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery (Douglass 1882, 157).<sup>102</sup>

As plantation hands integrated Christianity into their worship, they found particular significance and encouragement in the stories of the Old Testament. Levine suggests that “the similarity of these tales to the situation of the slaves was too clear for them not to see it... ‘Oh my Lord delivered Daniel,’ the slaves observed, and responded logically: ‘O why not deliver me, too?’”

*He delivered Daniel from de lion’s den,  
Jonah from de bell ob de whale,  
And de Hebrew children from de fiery furnace,  
And why not every man?* (Levine 1977, 50–51).

These similarities should not be overlooked in contemporary scholarship; indeed, they are “too clear for us to believe that the songs had no worldly content for blacks in bondage” (Levine 1977, 50). As O’Meally (2014, 8) points out, verses such as “*I’ve been ‘buked and I’ve been scorned, I’ve been talked about/ Sure as you’re born*” and other church songs involve “along with the yearning for heaven’s peace—confrontation with real troubles and the will to do something about them.” Levine’s analysis of the spiritual is particularly compelling because he locates it within what I have been referring to as a West African “unitary world view,” in which the sacred and secular, and the past and the present intermingle. Levine’s analysis evokes the proverb, *Sankofa* – that West African emblem of cyclical time that connects the past with the present, and the future, as in, “*Don’t forget the back without which there is no front.*”

These songs state as clearly as anything [that] the manner in which the sacred world of the slaves was able to fuse the precedents of the past, the conditions of the present,

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<sup>102</sup> From Raboteau (1978, 247): “While the line “*I am bound for Canaan,*” may not have always meant going North to escape from bondage, that is precisely what the line “signified for Frederick Douglass and his fellows while they plotted to escape”

and the promise of the future into one connected reality. In this respect, there was always a latent and symbolic element of protest in the slave's religious songs which frequently became overt and explicit (Levine 1977, 51).

In *Lyrical Protest* (1989) Mary Ellison goes even further than Levine, writing that the "spirituals were far more revolutionary than most people, until recently, have imagined." As such, since the early antebellum era, Blacks were actively attempting to "topple the walls of Jericho," i.e., the institutional walls of enslavement (49). This notion is supported by Lovell (1986) who writes that "the walls of Jericho are symbolic of a long-standing tradition which kept the ex-slaves out of Canaan, their promised land. If...the revolutionary implications had not been inherent in the subject matter, the slave poet would certainly have passed over Joshua and his prize battle as a dramatic theme..." (Jones 1989, 52 quoting Lovell 1986, 229). From Ellison's perspective, the dominant use of the antebellum spiritual was to resist and push back against the oppressive conditions of enslavement (1989, 50):

Wherever possible, the power of the master over the daily lives of slaves would be subverted. The spirituals encouraged slaves to take as much control over their living and working conditions as possible and spurred the determination to keep their spirits free from demeaning domination.

Although spirituals often express sorrow and despair (hence their characterization as "sorrow songs,")<sup>103</sup> these feelings can be "overshadowed by a triumphant note of affirmation." For example, "*sometimes I feel like a motherless child,*" turns in the same song to, "*sometimes I feel like an eagle in the air...Spread my wings and fly, fly, fly* (Levine 1977, 39-40). As Langston Hughes wrote, "Spirituals sing of woe triumphantly, knowing well that all rivers will be crossed, and the Promised Land is just beyond the stream" (*Share the Music* 2008; Gr. 8; I-65). Other spirituals point to a pervasive "sense of change, transcendence, ultimate justice, and personal worth" (Levine 1977, 39). These qualities, as well as elements of personal choice, agency, and triumph are manifest in antebellum spirituals such as, "*You*

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<sup>103</sup> In his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Douglass wrote: "I have been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons that could speak of the singing, among slaves as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake...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. At least, such is my experience..." (1845, 14-15).

*gotta right, I got a right... We all gotta right to the tree of life*" (Ellison 1989, 50), and "All God's Children," below. These songs call out not just for freedom, but for "real justice and a full life," during the antebellum period (Ellison 1989, 50). At the same time, lines like "*Everybody talkin' bout Heaven ain't going there,*" comment on the "hypocrisy of slave masters whose very participation in slavery was fundamentally contradictory to the beliefs they espoused in Sunday church services" (Jones 1993, 7):

*I gotta robe, you gotta robe,  
All God's children gotta robe.*

*Everybody talkin' bout Heaven ain't going  
there,*

*When I get to Heaven gonna put on my  
robe,*

*Heaven, Heaven,  
Gonna shout all over God's Heaven!*

Other spirituals, such as "Wade in the Water," "Go Down Moses," and "Gospel Train" are said to have been used as masked, or veiled "runaway songs" because they contain messages alluding to freedom from bondage (Ellison 1989, 50; Jones 1993, 50–52). While the original purpose for "Wade in the Water" was to accompany baptism rites,<sup>104</sup> the song is said to have been used by Harriet Tubman to warn fugitive slaves to "wade in the water" to "throw bloodhounds off their scent" (Jones, 1993, 50).<sup>105</sup>

*Jordan's water is chilly and cold,  
God's going to trouble the water,  
It chills the body but lifts the soul,  
God's going to trouble the water.*

*Wade in the water,  
God's going to trouble the water.*

*Wade, in the water,  
Wade in the water, children.*

*If you get there before I do,  
God's going to trouble the water.  
Tell all my friends I'm comin' too.  
God's going to trouble the water*

Given the inclination for Black song poets to improvise, lines from one spiritual could be inserted into another. For example, the verse "*If you get there before I do...tell all my friends I'm comin' too*" in Harriet Tubman's improvised version of "Wade in the Water," can also be found in "Swing Low, Sweet

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<sup>104</sup> For more on "Wade in the Water," and its use in baptism rites, see Reverend William J. Faulkner's retelling of Simon Brown's story of "How the Slaves Worshipped" in *The Days When the Animals Talked* (Faulkner 1993, 57).

<sup>105</sup> According to Sarah Bradford, Tubman sang this song to communicate her intentions to abscond: "*When dat chariot comes...I'm gwine to leave you...I'm boun' fer de promised land...*" (from Cone 1972, 80). Sarah Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People* (1961, 27–33); New York: New Corinth Books.

Chariot,” another song thought with possible veiled messages of freedom (Ellison 1989, 51; 155; McKissack 2007, 54; Cross 2012, 231):<sup>106</sup>

*If you get there before I do,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
Tell all my friends I'm coming too,  
Coming for to carry me home.*<sup>107</sup>

During the Civil War, the double-sided messages in spirituals were less veiled. The following lyrics, “*Before I'd be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave/And go home to my Lord to be saved*” (Levine 1977, 52) is a clarion call for emancipation, intended for both the mundane and spiritual realms. Black Union soldiers

found it no more incongruous to accompany their fight for freedom with the sacred songs of their bondage than they had found it inappropriate to sing their spirituals while picking cotton or shucking corn. Their religious songs, like their religion itself, was of this world as well as the next (Levine 1977, 53).

The lyrics of “Many Thousand Gone” (“No More Auction Block for Me”), with their “jubilant rejection of all the facets of slave life,” clearly demonstrate that slaves were able to express their views of enslavement openly while marching to war (Levine 1977, 52):

*No more auction block for me  
No more, no more  
No more auction block for me  
Many thousand gone.*

*No more peck of corn for me...  
No more driver's lash for me...  
No more pint of salt for me...  
No more mistress call for me...  
No more children stole from me...  
No more slavery chains for me...  
Many thousand gone.*

Such spirituals can now be seen as a precursor to the freedom songs of the Civil Rights movement, with unveiled, overt protests and political commentary.

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<sup>106</sup> In *Let's Clap, Jump, Sing & Shout*, Mckissak (2007, 54) offers a list of words used in spirituals and their coded meanings, e.g., “crossing over” = “crossing into freedom,” and “chariot” = a conductor on the Underground Railroad “who will carry slaves to freedom.” In *Gullah Culture in America* (2012, 231), Cross writes, “Thus we find phrases like “wade in the water,” which referred to escaping by wading in streams so that dogs being used to hunt runaways couldn't find them; “swing low, sweet chariot,” refers to carts in which escapees could be hidden...or ‘the Gospel train’ whereby slaves were disguised as parishioners on their way to a church meeting.”

<sup>107</sup> Verse from Hughes & Bontemps (1958, 295).

### *Separation of Church and State*

Being an advocate of the separation of church and state in education, I have often been conflicted about singing religious songs in my classrooms, whether in the form of Christmas carols or African American spirituals. For this reason, I explain to my students that spirituals had double meanings for the enslaved, simultaneously expressing a longing for spiritual salvation and freedom from bondage. The double-voiced nature of spirituals and their political and social relevance becomes even more apparent for students as they learn of the songs' roles as anthems for the Civil Rights movement. I contend, however, that the African American spiritual should also be taught in school curriculum in the context of American enslavement. Through this body of song, students can learn that African Americans did not wait until the 20<sup>th</sup> century to start fighting for their rights but have been doing so since the early antebellum period. Critical race theorist David Bell proclaims as much in a statement that reflects both the secular and spiritual meaning behind the spiritual in non-dogmatic terms: "slaves used their songs as a means of communication; giving warning, conveying information about escapes planned and carried out, and simply uplifting the spirit and fortifying the soul" (Bell 1995, 10).

As I discussed in Chapter One, students of color are regularly confronted with racial inequities in the United States. They "know what's going on." As advocates for CRT in education Dixon & Rousseau Anderson attest, the need for songs that affirm the humanity of African Americans is even more urgent considering the "racial climate" of our times (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson 2017, 1–2).

### *Corn Shucking & Other Work Songs*

In *Singing the Master* (1992), Abrahams analyzes the antebellum corn shucking harvest festival and provides a window through which to view it and other early forms of Signifying in Black American vernacular arts. He presents the corn "frolics" as exemplifying the complex relationships between African plantation hands and White plantation owners, particularly in the ways in which Africans turned these events and other public occasions into opportunities to "sing the master." I draw

significantly from Abraham's study here, because it locates the antebellum ring shout and corn husking events as the sites where an emergent, politicized, and Africanist Black aesthetic emerged.

Prior to the Civil War, harvest festivals on White plantations brought large numbers of participants, along with Saturday night dances and other sanctioned entertainments. To the White plantation owners, these events were entertainments "verging on the spectacular...this was a spectator event; to slaves, it was a mutual participation in working, eating, and dancing" (Abrahams 1992, xxiv). While rooted in English (Anglo) pioneer harvest traditions, the antebellum corn husking "frolics" in the United States were, according to Abrahams (1992, 83) "animated with the style, spirit, and social and aesthetic organization of sub-Saharan Africa." These events allowed plantation hands to enjoy themselves while maintaining traditional elements of "African eloquence and improvisation in speech, songs, and dance." In this way they provided Africans in America with "the basis for the development of an Afro-American aesthetic system which has been maintained to this day" (1992, xxv–xvii).

In a collection of Georgia narratives (Georgia Writers Project, 1940, 186), Henry Williams, at 90 years of age, remembers participating in the harvest celebrations as a child. In his description of a harvest celebration, we find the formation of the ring:

[I] membuh the big times we use tuh have wen I wuz young. We duz plenty uh dances in those days. Dance roun' in a ring. We has a big time long bout wen de crops come in an everybody bring sumpin tuh eat wut they makes an we all give praise for the good crop and then we shouts and sings all night. And when the sun rise, we stahts to dance.

The element of contest and competition in corn husking events lightened the labor of corn shucking; it also raised the level of aesthetic creativity and innovation. In 19<sup>th</sup>-century accounts of the ritual, harvested corn was set into two large piles upon which the leader, or "captain" of the festivities would perch, directing the songs and dance as part of the contest (Abrahams, 1992, 9-15). It was customary, whether in Kentucky, West Virginia, or Georgia, for a song leader to "keep the shuckers busy, hand and tongue...he would mount the pile and improvise, the rest and many of the whites joined in the refrain" (Dunaway 2003, 210). Occasionally, the leader would pick someone from the crowd and improvise at



his expense” (210). While Blacks and Whites were known to shuck together on such occasions, the leaders of the festivities were always those recognized among the plantation hands as gifted song poets and singers. The call and response format between these lead singers and the group is evident in the following corn shucking scene from Coosa County, Alabama:

They commenced at the outer edge of the pile of corn...There were usually two or more recognized leaders in singing the corn songs, and as they would chant or shout their couplet, all the rest would sing the chorus...the hands would fly with rapidity in tearing off the shucks... (Dunaway 2003, 210).<sup>108</sup>

Sourcing an 1882 account, Abrahams (1992, 91) writes that songs were kept up throughout the contest, “thus maintaining a high level of involvement of everyone within hearing distance” (91).<sup>109</sup> As the corn piles grew shorter, the pace of the singing would quicken. Anyone finding a red ear of corn would “have to be kissed,” or else got an “extra swig of liquor.” A song might then be sung: “*Pull de husk, break de ear—Whoa, I got a red ear here*” (1992, 13).<sup>110</sup> The occurrence of the “red ear” and the corn shucking event itself are described in detail by Bill Heard in an interview for the Georgia Writer’s Program (Georgia Writers Project: *Drums and Shadows* 1972, 142):

When de corn~shukin's started evvywhar dey tuk time about at de diffunt plantations. De fust thing dey done atter dey got together was to "lect a general; he led de singin', and de faster he sung de faster de shucks flew. Plenty of corn liquor was passed 'round and you know dat stuff is sho to make a [shucker] hustle. Evvy time a red ear of corn was found dat meant a extra drink of liquor for de [shucker] dat found it. Atter de last ear of corn was shucked a big supper was served and day danced and sung de rest of de night (brackets, mine).

“*Roun’ the Corn Sally*”

As with the spiritual, work songs were readily adapted to other situations, and could be sped up or slowed down, depending on the setting, or task at hand. As a case in point, “Roun’ de Corn, Sally” was

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<sup>108</sup> See Dunaway (2003, 210–211) for other 19<sup>th</sup> century accounts of corn shucking contests in which responsorial singing is directed by a song leader.

<sup>109</sup> David C. Barrow, “A Georgia Cornshucking,” *Century Magazine* 24 (1882), 873–878 (see Abrahams 1992, 182, n17).

<sup>110</sup> Abrahams cites two Georgia ex-slaves, Marinda Brown, and Lina Hunter with these “red ear” quotes, respectively, originally printed in George P. Rawick’s 1979 publication, *The American Slave*, vol. 4, pt. 2, 266–67. Volume and page numbers are given for Lina Hunter’s quote only.

sung as a “rowing song” when the right occasion arose. The rowing was the work of “mainland slaves” who ferried planters between the United States in and around the southern coastal sea islands (Epstein 1977, 167). On water, as on land, plantation workers merged the sacred and the secular in song. In 1845, Sir Charles Lyell—a passenger in a “long cypress canoe”—observed that

Occasionally they struck up a hymn, taught them by the Methodists, in which the most sacred subjects were handled with strange familiarity, and which, though nothing irreverent was meant, sounded oddly to our ears, and, when followed by a love ditty, almost profane (Levine 1977, 31).

Nor did plantation hands miss the opportunity to join collectively, through call and response, to Signify on their masters while ferrying them about. On June 7, 1819, a passenger named William Faux wrote in his journal:

I noticed to-day the galley-slaves all singing in chorus regulated by the motion of their oars; the music was barbarously harmonious. Some were plaintive love songs. The verse was their own, and abounding either in praise or satire, intended for kind or unkind masters (Epstein 1977, 167).

To illustrate the “flexibility of slave music,” Epstein recounts an incident that occurred on a boat in 1832 in southern Maryland:

When a passenger requested “Roun de Corn Sally,” she was told, “Dat’s a corn song; and we’ll hab ter sing it slow ter row to.” Sing it they did, improvising words to fit the members of the party, as well as the mournful “Sold off to Georgy.”

“Roun de Corn Sally,” the song sung on that 1832 boat ride, is typical of the sometimes bawdy character of the corn song. The first verse may well have earned the repertoire its reputation as “devil’s music,” while the second takes a satirical dig at residents in the “Big House.”<sup>111</sup>

*Hooray, hooray, ho! Roun’ de corn, Sally  
Hooray, for all de lubly ladies (Roun’ de corn, Sally!)  
Dis lub’s er thing dat’s sure to hab you (Roun’ de corn, Sally!)  
He hol’ you tight, when once he grab you (Roun’ de corn, Sally!)  
Dere’s Mr. Travers lub Miss Jenny;  
She thinks she is as good as any.  
He comes from church wid her on Sunday—Un don’t go back ter town till Monday.*

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<sup>111</sup> Epstein (1977, 175) writes that when teachers from the Hampton Institute (before it became Hampton University) attempted to collect secular songs, they were told, “Not o’ dem corn-shuckin’ songs, madam. Neber sung non o’ dem since I ‘sperienced religion. Dem’s wicked songs.”

I first came across “Go Around the Corn, Sally,” in the *Silver Burdett Making Music* curriculum series, Grade 2 (2002, 12) in which it is primarily a lesson for teaching musical tempo (the song starts slow and gradually gets faster) and steady beats. No cultural context is provided in the student edition, but the Teacher edition informs music educators that “Go Around the Corn Sally” is a “work song,” typical of those that “enslaved African Americans often made up to sing in the fields. When working in the cotton fields or corn fields, they sang to make the work go faster.” If the *Making Music* version of “Go Around the Corn Sally” was sung in the antebellum corn husking contests, then the lyric “*faster still, faster still*” would seem to provide the necessary momentum to pick up the pace with the corn shucking work itself:

*Go around, round and round, go around the corn Sally.  
Hey now, hey now, go around the corn, Sally.  
Faster still, faster still, go around the corn, Sally.  
All around, all around, go around the corn, Sally.*

Further questions for teachers and students to ponder are presented in the “Across the Curriculum” sidebar in the Silver Burdett Teacher’s edition: “Why did African Americans create work songs? Who were some of the people who might have been singing this song?” These questions beg for historical accuracy but do not provide it. What students don’t learn from this text is that while corn songs were sung as “entertainments” for plantation owners, the hands were also providing outlets for their own pleasure that included “dissing” their “masters.” In the “Cultural Connection” section of the teacher’s edition, the Silver Burdett authors write that “many cultures around the world have some form of songs for people to sing to pass the time while working” (*Making Music* Teacher’s Edition 2008, 12). While this information may be accurate, it mitigates the harsh reality of enslavement, as if working under the conditions of the Black Holocaust can be equated with the labor of a free people.

“*Juba*”

In a fully contextualized lesson, “Go Around Sally” could be paired with “Juba,” a corn song that provides the unambiguous message that enslaved people frequently composed and sang songs criticizing

their unjust treatment. Like other topical corn shucking songs, “Juba” comments on the task at hand while obliquely critiquing the plantation owners in attendance of the festivities:

*Shuck corn, shell corn  
Carry corn to mill.  
Grind de meal, gimme de husk;  
Bake de bread, gimme de crus’;  
Fry de meat, gimme de skin,  
And dat’s de way to bring ‘em in.*  
(Abrahams 1994, 124, from Perrow 1913, 139) <sup>112</sup>

“Juba” offers a counter-narrative to the impression of the “contented and happy slave” that appears in de-contextualized songs like “Go Around the Corn Sally.” “Juba” is also an excellent example of how an African American song has been passed on, maintained, and interpreted in various performative contexts down the generations, from the corn husking frolics to Frederick Douglass, from the minstrelsy stage to Bessie Jones (1972), and from the all-female acapella music group Sweet Honey and The Rock (1989) to my classrooms. In its 20<sup>th</sup>-century configurations, “Juba” is presented as a song, dance, and patting juba or “clapping play” for children. I will be returning to “Juba” in these contexts throughout this chapter. To date, I have not come across “Juba” in any music curriculum series textbooks.

### *Leadership & Community*

The “captain” of the corn shucking festival “organized the work and led it in African-patterned ways (Abrahams 1992, 58). The high social status given to lead singers and master drummers within West African performance traditions was similarly bestowed upon antebellum plantation workers, whose oratory skills and musicianship raised them to levels of prestige and power. Lead singers, as captains of the event, and the fiddlers and callers as the driving force of the dance, all “served as models of leadership” (1992: 92, 109). The practice of “apart-playing” in West African drumming interactions

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<sup>112</sup> Sweet Honey and The Rock sings “*and that’s how my mama’s troubles begin*” (All for Freedom 1989).

(see this thesis, Chapter Three, *Sankofa*), can also found in the corn shucking ring where both the lead singer and others joining in “step to the center of the group, to whom the rest of the performers then respond playfully” (Abrahams 1992, 91).

The big voices and the master improvisers of the quarters take their place at the center of the ring (in this case the [corn] pile) and call for the response of their fellow workers and players (brackets, mine) ...These figures were first among equals in the organization of the activity...As improvisors and exhorters in song, these people were the leaders of the revels.

The leadership status among “men of words” was integral to the ways by which enslaved Africans were able to survive during American enslavement with their cultural memory and pride intact:

Work songs of slavery and (relative) freedom fall within the space of secular black vernacular expression. These often ruggedly eloquent songs functioned to pass the time, to synchronize the work pace, and to reflect on the scene the workers witnessed. These story songs and rhymes were often expressed by virtuoso singers and wordsmiths whose underground talents, unseen by the broader society, are celebrated in the world in which they reign as “men of words,” power figures (O’Meally 2014, 21).

As with West African traditions of singing and dance, the corn husking festivals, along with other “entertainments,” were occasions when plantation hands were able to “achieve some sense of shared feelings, values, and experiences, even while they entertained those looking on” (Abrahams 1992, xxvi). African hands were not “simply imitating the festive forms of the masters but were entering into the full experience of celebration” and doing it in their own style (1992, 86-87; 130). Skits and dances depicting motions of labor while seemingly propping up the institution of enslavement helped plantation workers to maintain their dignity through work (Stuckey 1987, 72).<sup>113</sup> But the fact that such events allowed plantation hands to achieve a degree of autonomy, agency, and pride within the confines of the slave system should not be read as a record of the contentment of the slaves’ contentment but rather as preserving

the value...they placed on experiencing the intense moments of life together. Happiness was not a condition, as Frederick Douglass pointed out in discussing slave

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<sup>113</sup> Stuckey describes such “motions of labor” to include “swinging a scythe, tossing a pitchfork of hay into a wagon, hoisting a cotton bale, rolling a hogshead of tobacco, sawing wood, hoeing corn – without the restriction and effort imposed by the load” (1987, 72).

songs in his autobiography, but the expression of intense feelings as they were experienced by the whole group moving together in common purpose. The expression of the experience of the spirit as it descended upon the group is an important concept to bear in mind considering how African style was maintained in event such as the shucking (Abrahams 1992, 85).

### *Signifying in the Corn Shucking Festivals*

The corn harvest festivals were equally significant for both plantation hands and for “the spectators on the portico” (Abrahams 1992, xxv).<sup>114</sup> For planters, corn husking festivals provided not only entertainment, but also opportunities for displaying their largess and thereby gaining deference, social prestige, and status within their own social spheres (Abrahams 1992, 44, 52, 63). Hoping to show off their plantations as sites of harmony, stability, and a “benign and protective institution,” planters expected their hands to “display themselves in set scenes” (Abrahams 1992, 49). In this way, the corn shucking events perpetuated the myth of the plantation community as “family writ large” and the notion of the “contented and happy slave” (xxi, 49).<sup>115</sup>

In his 1824 novel *The Valley of the Shenandoah* (set in Virginia, 1716), George Tucker’s fictional planter expressed that “the corn songs of these humble creatures would please you...for some of them have a small smack of poetry, and are natural expressions of kind and amiable feelings—such as praise of their master, gratitude for his kindness, thanks for his goodness, praise of one another” (Epstein 1977, 172-73, from Tucker, 1824). In *Slave Counterpoint*, Philip T. Morgan writes that Tucker’s character “got a little closer to the mark” when he added that the songs “now and then, included “a little

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<sup>114</sup> Some of the data and folktales that Abrahams collected for his book *Afro-American Folktales* (1985) were derived from travel reports and plantation journals, dating back as far as 1815 (1985: xv). Abrahams’ research for *Singing the Master* includes documents on the corn shucking harvest festivals dating back to at least the late 18th century (see Abrahams 1994, xxi).

<sup>115</sup> For Douglass, the purpose of supplying plantation hands with food, and especially drink during holidays and other celebratory gatherings was to suppress the “spirit of insurrection among slaves...All the license allowed, appears to have no other object than to disgust the slaves with their temporary freedom, and to make them as glad to return to their work, as they were to leave it. By plunging them into the depths of drunkenness and dissipation, this effect is almost certain to follow...Thus the holidays, become part and parcel of the gross fraud, wrongs and inhumanity of slavery. Ostensibly, they are institutions of benevolence, designed to mitigate the rigors of slave life, but, practically, they are a fraud, instituted by human selfishness, the better to procure the ends of oppression and injustice” (Douglass 1855, 253–256).

humorous satire. Someone...strikes up, and singly gives a few rude stanzas, sometimes in rhyme, and sometimes in short expressive sentences, while the rest unite in chorus, and this he continues, until some other improvisatore relieves him (Morgan 1998, 590, from Tucker 1824).

On closer scrutiny, corn songs reveal that there was much more going on at the corn-husking festival than “simply a playing out of that stereotypical self-image” and plantation hands “getting happy” (Abrahams 1992, 21; 85). These sites of “obligatory play and performance” at the bequest of planters became opportunities for cultural invention and social commentary, protest, mimicry, and parody (Abrahams 1992, xxiv). Even when feasting plantation hands did not “content themselves with effusive thanks, but performed sly, satiric songs and skits about the lords’ and ladies’ behavior (87–88). As we shall see below, corn songs both reveal and conceal the tensions between the planters and the enslaved.

Reminiscent of sacred and secular appellatory rituals and pastimes in West Africa, corn songs might begin topically related to the event at hand. But they could also contain criticisms of unjust treatment.<sup>116</sup> In the following description, we should make note of the call and response singing between a leader and chorus, and the verbal acuity required of the lead singer to improvise on the topics at hand with wit and irony:

The structure of the songs, pivoting about the repeated lines of the chorus, anchors the commentary of the leader, freeing him up to improvise upon whatever comes to his notice. This includes praise, scandalizing, and commenting on the activities taking place or soon to come...Alternatively, the song maker might, at one and the same time, describe some of the activity of the occasion while commenting ironically on the plight of the slaves. (Abrahams 1992 122; 124).

These descriptions reveal how the verbal art of Signifying was as powerful a tool on antebellum plantations as it was in African homelands. As Abrahams (1992, 112) explains,

Verbal play directed at a powerful figure is perhaps the keynote of African American expression...such lore emerges from the “African tradition of indirection” [Joyner 1985, 189] through which the doings of humans are commented upon in a condemnatory way. The notion of employing song or rhyme for making oral

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<sup>116</sup> For more on the mixing of praises and “curses” in appellations and prayer among the Anlo Ewe of Ghana, see (Anyidoho 1997: 128; Atakpa 1997: 188). In this thesis, see Chapter Three (*Time Binding & Community*); and Chapter Six (*Toasting Origins*).

commentary came directly from the various African cultures from which the slaves were taken. Singers attack pride and vainglorious pretension wherever they see it, especially in the doings of those in power.<sup>117</sup>

The following text from an 1841 account and reprinted in Epstein (1977) describes “corn husking or picking matches” in which a lead singer and chorus sing “one of their wild songs, often made as they go along” (Epstein 1977, 173). The text alternates between expressions of humility, contentment in labor, and praise for the “master” and, perhaps, a bit of satire (Epstein 1977, 173–74):

<i>Leader—I loves old Virginny</i>	<i>Chorus—So ho! boys! So ho!</i>
<i>I love to shuck corn</i>	<i>So ho....</i>
<i>Now’s picking cotton time</i>	<i>So ho...</i>
<i>We’ll make the money, boys.</i>	<i>So ho...</i>
<i>My master is a gentleman.</i>	<i>So ho...</i>
<i>He came from Old Dominion...</i>	<i>So ho...</i>
<i>And mistress is a lady...</i>	<i>So ho...</i>
<i>They used to tell of cotton seed</i>	<i>So ho...</i>
<i>As dinner for the negro man</i>	<i>So ho...</i>
<i>But boys and girls, it’s all a lie</i>	<i>So ho...</i>
<i>We live in a fat land...</i>	<i>So ho...</i>
<i>I gwine home to Africa.</i>	<i>So ho...</i>
<i>My overseer says so.</i>	<i>So ho...</i>

This and other antebellum song texts indicate that while the plantation hands resented the inequity of their situation, some accepted it as inevitable. But the fact of inevitability did not deter plantation hands from being social critics (Ellison 1989, 52), as illustrated in the following song remembered by Sylvester Brooks from Texas (Crew et al. 2015, 32). Brooks reported that this song was sung at Thanksgiving time, when “de big boys an’ girls would get togedder an go roun to de white folks houses, and de quarters too, and give dem a serenade, one of de songs dat dy sang wuz dis:

*De Ole bee make de honey-comb,  
De young bee make de honey,  
[Black folks] make de cotton an’ de corn  
An’ de white folks get de money. (Brackets, mine) (2015, 52)*

Ellison (1989, 52) offers an Anglicized variation:

*The big bee flies high  
The little bee makes the honey  
The black folks make the cotton— the white folks get the money.*

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<sup>117</sup> Charles Joyner, “Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community” (1985, Vol. 82, University of Illinois Press).



The following song, which dates to 1816, is said to have been sung during “corn husking or picking matches” (Epstein 1977, 174 quoting Thornton 1841). It refers to a minister who made his hands work on Sunday: <sup>118</sup>

<i>L. The parson say his prayers in church.</i>	<i>C. It rain, boys, it rain.</i>
<i>L. Then deliver a fine sermon.</i>	<i>C. It rain...etc.</i>
<i>L. He cut the matter short my friends.</i>	<i>C. It rain...etc.</i>
<i>L. He say the blessed Lord sent it.</i>	<i>C. It rain...etc.</i>
...	
<i>L. Now's the time for planting bacco.</i>	<i>C. It rain...etc.</i>
<i>L. Come [now], get you home.</i>	<i>C. It rain...etc.</i>
<i>L. Jim, Jack, and Joe and Tom.</i>	<i>C. It rain...etc.</i>
<i>L. Go draw your plants and set them out.</i>	<i>C. It rain...etc.</i>
...	
<i>L. 'Twas on a blessed Sabbath day.</i>	<i>C. It rain...etc.</i>
<i>L. Here's a pretty preacher for you.</i>	<i>C. It rain...etc.</i>

*“Juba,” According to Frederick Douglass*

In his second biography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855, 250), Frederick Douglass refers to the term “juba” and its possible origins, as well as to “pot liquor,” rendering his “Juba” a particularly apt potlikker story. Needham Love, a freed man from Arkansas put the song’s connection to “pot liquor” into sharp perspective: “They used to feed the children pot-liquor and bread and milk. Sometimes a child would find a piece of meat as big as your two fingers, and he would holler out, ‘Oh look, I got some meat’” (Crew et al. 2015, 43). In his discussion of the song “Juba,” Douglass mentions the practice of “pattin juba” (slapping hands, thighs, chest, stamping feet), which provided accompaniment for corn songs, and comments on the lyrical criticism in “Juba.” As Douglass put it, the song makes a “sharp hit” directly at the “massas” and the inequitable distribution of food under enslavement (1855, 250):

<sup>118</sup> As to authenticity of the song’s origin and date, Epstein (1977, 174) suggests that if Thornton (1841) was correct in dating the incident in the song to twenty-five years before he transcribed it (i.e., 1816), then the “longevity of the song is quite remarkable for an improvised corn song.”

The fiddling, dancing and “jubilee beating,” was going on in all directions. This latter performance is strictly southern. It supplies the place of a violin, or of other musical instruments, and is played so easily, that almost every farm has its “Juba” beater. The performer improvises as he beats, and sings his merry songs, so ordering the words as to have them fall pat with the movement of his hands. Among a mass of nonsense and wild frolick, once in a while a sharp hit is given to the meanness of slaveholders. Take the following, for an example:

*We raise de wheat, dey gib us de corn;  
Dey bake de bread, dey gib us de cruss;  
We sif de meal, dey giv us de huss;  
We peal de meat, dey gib us de skin  
And dat’s de way dey take us in.  
Dey skim the pot, dey gib us de liquor  
And say dat’s good enough for [dinner] (Brackets, mine)*

Douglass’s references to the “jubilee beating,” and “Juba beater” suggest two possible derivations for the title of the song “Juba.” In a collection of southern folklore, Botkin (1949, 708) takes its meaning from the word “jubilee,” whereas Holloway traces its origins to the Bantu word *diauba*, meaning to pat or “beat time, the sun, the hour” (1990, 215). According to African dance ethnographers Stearns & Stearns (1968, 27-28) “giouba” became a secular dance called “Juba” among Blacks in the southern United States in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>119</sup> A description from this time likens “Juba” to a kind of “jig step,” performed in much the same way as the sacred ring shout, which was performed by men only:

...going around in a circle with one foot raised—a sort of eccentric shuffle... Both the words and the steps are in call-and-response form...the two men in the center start the performance with the Juba step while the surrounding men clap, and the switch to whatever new step named in the call, just before the response “Juba! Juba!” sounds and the entire circle starts moving again (Stearns & Stearns 1968, 28).<sup>120</sup>

In addition to these possible etymologies, the Americanized terms “*Juba*” and “*Jube*” appeared in minstrelsy times as names for enslaved Africans who were skilled musicians and dancers (Holloway, 1990, 215; Parrish 1942, 66). Henry Weston, a renowned African American dance teacher who

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<sup>119</sup> Parrish (1942) notes that ‘The *guiouba* was probably the famed juba of Georgia and the Carolinas’” (from Cable, G.W., “Creole Slave Songs,” in *Century*, April, 1886).

<sup>120</sup> Stearns & Stearns’s description of Juba is taken from George M. West’s *Richmond in By-Gone Days* (1856, 179–80).

performed in white minstrel shows, was given the moniker “Master Juba” (Holloway 1990, 215). I will return to Juba as it is performed in a ring play, further along.

*The Cakewalk and Minstrelsy—“We Used to Mock ‘Em, Every Step”*

Another dance form that emerged from the corn shucking and other public festivities is the dance known in popular culture as the “cake walk” (Abrahams 1992, 960).<sup>121</sup> In gestured parody, Blacks “did a take-off on the high manners of the white folks in the ‘big house,’ but their masters, who gathered around to watch the fun, missed the point” (Holloway 1990, 223, n14; see also Levine 1977, 17). The stylized dance was an “a mimicry of the white cotillion through an exaggeration of European-style walking, parading, and dancing, with the hypercorrect throwing back of the shoulders and head, and the exaggerated forward march of those white swells on parade” (Abrahams 1992, 101). In 1901, a freed woman recalls that in the 1840s, when she was young, she was fond of dancing:

*Us slaves watched white folks’ parties where the guests danced a minuet and then paraded in a grand march, with the ladies and gentlemen going different ways and then meeting again, arm in arm, and marching down the center together. Then we’d to it too, but we used to mock ‘em, every step. Sometimes the white folks noticed it, but they seemed to like it; I guess they thought we couldn’t dance any better (Stearns & Stearns 1968, 22).*

Ironically, the cakewalk became one of the most famous dance steps to come out of minstrelsy shows in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Baraka 1971, 86; Abrahams 1992, 96). The irony was not lost on Baraka, who writes that the minstrel show was “appropriated from the white man—the first Negro minstrels wore traditional blackface over their own” (1971, 85). With the cakewalk, Blacks were in effect performing a parody of themselves, mocking the stylized, White “cotillions.” While poking fun at themselves, they were “in another and probably in a more profound sense” poking fun at the White man” (1971, 85). White minstrel performers, on the other hand, had co-opted a form of Black

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<sup>121</sup> In its early form, the cakewalk (also known as the “walkabout,” or “the strut”) was a contest in which dancers would walk (or strut) along a straight line or path with a pail of water perched on their heads, the judging based upon who “stood the straightest and spilled the least amount of water” (Abrahams 1992, 97). “Prize for the winning couple would usually be a towering, extra sweet coconut cake” (Holloway 1990, 217 quoting *Ebony*, February 28, 1953).

Signifying directed at themselves, seemingly unaware that they were capitalizing on a form of self-mockery (1971, 86):

If the cakewalk is a Negro dance characterizing certain white customs, what is that dance when, say, a white theater company attempts satirize it as a Negro dance? I find the idea of white minstrels in blackface satirizing a dance satirizing themselves a remarkable kind of irony – which, I suppose, is the whole point of minstrel shows.

Throughout the 1920s and after, the Cakewalk became part of the social dance scene in America, along with other early African American dance forms and steps such as the Charleston and the Shimmy (Stearns & Stearns 1968, 13). Years ago, I taught a Cakewalk-style dance to upper elementary school students, set to the tune of Jelly Roll Morton’s ragtime jazz piano composition, “Kansas City Stomp” (1923). Unaware of the dance’s history in antebellum corn husking traditions and in minstrelsy, I taught it simply as an entertaining, popular dance style from the 1920s. While the Cakewalk can be appreciated on its merits as a form of entertainment, a pedagogy of potlikker digs deeper into the stories that Black vernacular arts hold to provide students with critical perspectives on Black music and dance expressions. As “contemporary black performers continue to assert and remind us, blacks will not simply take a place as entertainers in American life. In their performances, as in the performances of their slave forbears, they remain active moral commentators on life as they see it taking place before them” (Abrahams 1992, 152).

### Children’s Songs and Ring Play Games (Parrish, Jones & Hawes & Rosenbaum)

#### *Children and the Ring Shout*

As I foreshadowed in Chapter Three, we know that children, as soon as they could walk, would join in antebellum ring shout gatherings, where the “young and old would gather in the praise house or [ ] in one of the larger cabins, where the ceremonies were usually prolonged till after midnight, sometimes till ‘day clean’...Thus slave youths were introduced to the circle and to the singing of the spirituals within it” (Stuckey 1987, 28; 33–34; 96). In one of the first comprehensive collections of antebellum vernacular pastimes, Harold Courlander (1976, 365) writes that “half the population” would be in

attendance on Sundays, or on other “praise nights” throughout the week when “very likely more than half the population of the plantation is gathered together.” This included young and old, with “boys in tattered shirts and men’s trousers, young girls barefooted...when the ‘sperichil’ is struck up, begin first walking and by and by shuffling round, one after the other, in a ring” (1976, 365).

Descriptions of children leading their own ring shouts are provided by Charlotte Forten, a prominent free Black abolitionist and teacher during the Civil War. Her personal journals, reprinted in *The Diary of Charlotte Forten* (1953), reveal her appreciation for these musical displays of the “shouting spirit” among children in her Philadelphia community (1953, 276). On November 3, 1862, she made the following journal entry (264):

This eve. heard Harry read, then the children came in, and sang for us, and had a regular "shout" in the piazza...Besides the old songs they sang two new ones, so singular that I must try to note down the words--some of them...

*"My mudder's gone to glory and I want to git dere too  
Till dis warfare's over hallelujah.*

*Chorus -Hallelujah, hallelujah  
Till dis warfare's over, hallelujah...*

In December of the same year Forten observed, “After school the children went into a little cabin near, where they had kindled a fire and had a grand ‘shout’” (Forten 1862, 264). In *still more detail*, Forten (*Life on the Sea Islands*, 1864) describes children’s ring shouts during the time she spent among a community of freed Blacks in the Gullah community on Sea Island (Lady’s Island) off the coast of South Carolina in 1864. The following passage demonstrates that the shout was well embedded in children’s pastimes by the end of American enslavement:

In the evenings, the children frequently came in to sing and shout for us. These “shouts” are very strange – in truth, almost indescribable. The children form a ring, and move around in a kind of shuffling dance, singing all the time. Four or five stand apart, and sing very energetically, clapping their hands, stamping their feet, and rocking their bodies to and fro. These are the musicians, to whose performance the shouters keep perfect time. The grown people on this plantation do not shout, but they do on other plantations...we cannot determine whether it has a religious character or not. Some of the people tell us that it has, others that it has not. But as the shouts of the grown people are always in connection with their religious meetings, it is probable that they are the barbarous expression of religion handed down to them from their African ancestors and destined to pass away under the influence of Christian teachings (Forten 1864, 593-94).

While the above excerpt from Forten's *Life on the Sea Islands* shows that Forten was genuinely impressed by the participants' displays of creativity in the shout, as noted by Art Rosenbaum (1998, 35), a Gullah culture and music historian, Forten was clearly "at a loss" to explain its meaning.

### *Children's Play*

Whether originating in the sacred ring shout, in work, or in harvest "entertainments," songs and dances of adulthood were imitated in the domain of children's play. Based largely on interviews of freed men and women (Radwick, 1972), Wiggins (1980, 22) concluded that antebellum children's play was an essential part of transferring cultural values and traits from one generation to the next. This continuity suggests that enslaved Africans were not a "culturally rootless people but a vibrant group of individuals who created an energetic slave-quarter community characterized by black solidarity not helpless dependency" (22). Through play, children achieved "a much needed sense of community not only with other children of the plantation but with adult slaves as well...Saturday afternoons, Sundays, and various holidays [were] an opportunity for them to participate in family and community activities or merely play with their friends and relatives" (Wiggins 1980, 22 & 30). As Hemp Kennedy of Mississippi, and Jefferson Franklin Henry of Georgia remember:

One of de recreations us chilen had in dem days was candy pullings at Christmas times...We all met at one house an' tol' ghost stories, sung plantation songs, as' danced de clog while de candy was cookin... (Wiggins 30, quoting Hemp Kennedy)

Christmastime was when slaves had their own fun...They frolicked, danced, run races, played games, and visited around, calling it a good time." (Wiggins 30, quoting Jefferson Franklin Henry).

Wiggins offers some details as to how children on antebellum plantations would play their ring games and other pastimes, such as riddles (1980, 24):

The most popular group activities of the slave children, especially the girls, were "ring games" or "ring dances," accompanied by a variety of songs and riddles. There were infinite variations in these games, but the general procedure was to draw a ring on the ground, ranging from fifteen to thirty feet in diameter; depending on the number of children engaged in the dancing ring. The participants would congregate within the ring and dance to different rhythmic hand clappings.

*The Ring Shout and Ring Play in the Georgia Sea Islands & Today's Classrooms*

African retentions, including language, foodways customs, and oral arts traditions, are well documented among Gullah communities in the Georgia Sea Islands and neighboring coastal communities (see Cross 2012).<sup>122</sup> Because of their relative isolation from mainland United States, the Gullah have maintained a high concentration of African retentions in their oral arts traditions over the centuries. Folklorist Bruce Jackson attests that the Gullahs' isolation was the primary reason that "Natives, white and black, were able for a long time to live in the past" (1964, II).<sup>123</sup>

For my focus on the ring shout and ring plays and songs, I draw from several important publications, including Lydia Parrish's *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1940), Bessie Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes's *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs & Stories from the Afro-American Heritage* (1972), and Art Rosenbaum's *Shout Because You're Free: The African American Ring Shout Tradition in Coastal Georgia* (1998). These sources, and others, provide much needed historical and cultural contexts for African-derived oral arts traditions that are still in practice today, whether in the Sea Islands, in teacher curriculum resources, and/or in other sources and sites geared for teaching children. Jones and Hawes pay particular attention to how Black vernacular expressions have been maintained through oral, traditional education, which I see as a continuance of traditional educative processes from African homelands.

As one of the oldest surviving African American oral art traditions in North America, the ring shout survives into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly through the work of performance groups such as the

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<sup>122</sup> Cross (2012, 149) credits Lorenzo Turner (1949) for "rescuing the Gullah language from possible oblivion." In his research on retentions of African languages among Gullah speakers, Turner concluded that forty percent of 251 African words found among the Gullah came from the Angola-Kongo region of west central Africa, with thirty eight percent coming from the Senegambia and Sierra Leone (Morgan 1998, 567). Holloway (1990, 9) points to these same regions, describing the Gullah culture as a "melding of numerous West and Central African elements." Holloway (70) writes, "evidence demonstrates that the dominant African presence in the Sea Island region derives from the Kongo-Angola and Windward Coast ethnic groups."

<sup>123</sup> Cross (2012, 49) cites the lack of bridges connecting the Sea Islands to mainland United States (up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century) as one important reason why Gullah communities were able to maintain their cultural integrity.

Georgia Sea Island Singers, the McIntosh County Shouters, and the Moving Star Hall Singers of John's Island (Cross 2012, 214).<sup>124</sup> In *Shout Because You're Free*, Rosenbaum (1998, 52) notes that in many parts of the Sea Islands, the tradition of the ring shout was dying out in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and "by the 1960s one could not be blamed for assuming that slave songs (except some spirituals) were no longer actively being sung, and that the ring shout in community practice was extinct." This, however, was not the case in McIntosh County, where Blacks in the Gullah community

were continuing to sustain a slave-song and ring shout tradition for reasons of their own that were far from sentimental in an ongoing, though changing, community context. The shout there is taken very seriously as it is understood as a way, besides serving God, of honoring the ancestors who had endured slavery (Rosenbaum 1998, 52).

Lawrence McKiver (1916–2013) was the "boss shouter" of the McIntosh County Shouters until his mid-80s. When asked why he and others continued to perform the ring-shout, he said, "We're proud of what we're doing because it came from our poor parents" (Rosenbaum 1992, xvii). When McKiver looked upon the remains of irrigation ditches dug on his land by his enslaved grandparents, he understood that "the shout honors his forbearers who labored and suffered in slavery" (xvii).<sup>125</sup>

### *White People Collecting Black Songs*

Lydia Parrish's *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1942) is a collection of Gullah oral arts pastimes that she researched and recorded on the barrier Islands of Georgia in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. The collection includes Gullah religious music (spirituals and the ring shout), ring plays and dance songs, fiddle songs, and work songs. From this work, it is clear that Parrish had a deep

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<sup>124</sup> Both Rosenbaum (1998, 44) and Cross (2012, 246) note that the shout is performed annually during Watch Night, a Christian service held on New Year's Eve. It holds special meaning for African Americans as the Emancipation Proclamation was enacted on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1863.

<sup>125</sup> For a ring shout in performance and more on Geechee Gullah's ongoing efforts to keep the shout tradition alive, see "MacIntosh County Shouters: Gullah-Geechee Ring Shout from Georgia" (2011, Youtube). For an in-depth study on the history of the shout tradition and its continued practice in Gullah communities, see Rosenbaum's *Shout Because You're Free* (1998). The appendix in Rosenbaum's volume contains numerous photographs of Gullah ring shout performers, including Lawrence McKiver. Two photographs entitled "Learning to Beat the Stick" illustrate the ring shout tradition being passed on to children in the community of Bolden, McIntosh County, Georgia.



appreciation for the beauty, artistry, and originality of the traditions that she recorded. Parrish was also aware of African retentions in the Gullah oral arts traditions she researched and collected. One of these traditions is a category of creole songs that she referred to as “African Survivals.” But this appreciation had its limitations; Rosenbaum, in his foreword to the 1992 edition of Parrish’s volume, writes that Parrish was not particularly aware of “how crucially important these traditions were in sustaining the slaves and their descendants through incredibly adverse conditions—or that they could persist within and beyond the close-knit communities of the coast as an assertion and reinforcement of cultural values” (Rosenbaum 1992, xix).

As Rosenbaum put it, Parrish tended to see innocence and “harmless” expressions where there were deeper implications. Although Parrish knew that Sea Islanders were selective in what they shared with her regarding the religious and/or socio-cultural implications of the Gullah repertoire, she attributed their restraint “somewhat patronizingly to [the Gullahs’] innate reticence” (Rosenbaum 1992, xviii). In the foreword to the first edition of *Slave Songs*, Bruce Jackson concluded that the so-called reticence that Sea Islanders showed to Parrish was due more to an innate mistrust of Whites:

...if a Negro tells nothing to a white, he has nothing to tell anyone? She does not realize that the slave and former slave might have been loath to offer the white southern plantation owner or manager information for the same reason [ ] a union organizer does not chat freely [ ] with the company lawyer” (Jackson 1965, VII).

Alan Dundes, in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel* (1990, 489), observes that White ethnographers who intentionally sought out Black songs of protest also faced challenges: “The fact remains that it is not easy for a white man to collect Negro songs of protest in the South and also that the majority of southern gentlemen and lady folksong collectors would not have been likely to have elicited them.” Just prior to the publication of Parrish’s *Slave Songs*, Zora Neale Hurston stated as much, and more, in *Mules and Men* (1935, 2–3):

Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best sources are where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually underprivileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive...The theory behind our tactics: The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside the door

of my mind...He can read my writing, but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song.

The reluctance of Black singers to divulge what lay beneath the surface of their songs is poignantly expressed in this blues lyric (Dundes 1990, 489):

*Got one mind for White folks to see,  
'Nother for what I know is me;  
He don't know, he don't know my mind  
When he see me laughing  
Laughing just to keep from crying.*

Rosenbaum (1992, xviii) identifies several instances of Signifying texts that Sea Islanders did not share with Parrish. These Signifying texts were eventually revealed in the 1980s through public performances by groups such as the Georgia Sea Island Singers and the McIntosh County Shouters. For example, the title of the patting song, “Hambone,” is not as Parrish had suggested, nonsense, or simply a reference to the “thighs of a performer” (1992, xviii). Rather, as Frankie and Doug (1936–2006) Quimby of the Georgia Sea Islanders divulged, the song’s lyric “*round the world and back again,*” is a “bitter commentary on a hambone, having been stripped of its good meat by the masters and making the rounds of the slave cabins and imparting a bit of flavor to rations of peas or beans” (Rosenbaum 1992, xvii). Likewise, the ring shout song, “Knee-Bone” Signifies on enslavement with the lyrics “*Bend my knee-bone to the ground,*” a reference to “slave ancestors kneeling to pray in the wilderness when they found themselves in a strange continent” (Rosenbaum 1992, xviii, 80). When Rosenbaum asked Lawrence McKiver of the County Shouters why he was now willing to disclose their songs’ deeper meanings, McKiver replied, “Now we can spit it out” (xviii).

Despite Parrish’s ethnocentric and often paternalistic approach to “her Negroes,” both Jackson and Rosenbaum attest that more than most ethnographers of her time, Parrish assembled a rich and diverse repository of these oral traditions, and with an eye on their African retentions. As Jackson concluded, “But—as an open-minded reading of her collection will quickly make clear—her faults do not matter very much. Her love of the material enabled her to produce a collection such as no one else has produced, from an area vitally important to the study of American Negro Folklore” (1965, V).

Rosenbaum similarly reports that Parrish recognized the value of the sacred tradition of the shout, and “worked assiduously to collect secular songs of many types” (1992, xvi-xvii). As a result, “These African traditions surely owe something of their survival to Lydia Parrish’s work and vindicate her effort and her mission...Today, Lydia Parrish’s book continues to be a cultural touchstone for a changing African-Atlantic culture and for us all” (1992, xx).

### *Jones & Hawes and Traditional Education*

Much of the repertoire from *Step It Down* (Jones & Hawes 1972) was taught to Bess Lomax Hawes by Bessie Jones. The latter learned many of the ring plays, songs, and stories from her grandparents who grew up in the grips of American enslavement. As Hawes wrote in 1972 (xii), “many of the songs their little granddaughter learned from them are over a hundred years old.”<sup>126</sup> Hawes transcribed the songs and accompanying play patterns in *Step It Down*, offering teachers and parents a well-spring of Jones’s repertoire, albeit only a small part of her “total repertoire of the finest songs of the black tradition” (Hawes 1972, x).

By the time Hawes conducted her research in 1964, Jones (her “informant”) and other descendants of enslaved Africans were feeling free to publicize the underlying meanings of their inherited traditions. As a result, *Step It Down* provides a fuller context of these African American pastimes, allowing us to see them as deeply rooted in African traditions. Moreover, we can now see the ways in which these pastimes provided sustenance to enslaved Africans and continued to do so for their descendants (see Rosenbaum 1992, xix). Hawes took care to articulate her understanding of Jones’s perspective on the educative value of oral arts traditions in African American community life. Jones spoke adamantly about the fact that she knew her games are “good for children”—that is, Jones identified which games

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<sup>126</sup> Hawes (1972, 217) indicates that most of the songs and dances in *Step It Down* came from Jones, who “seems to have taught it to the group;” the “group” being The Georgia Sea Island Singers. This does “not preclude, of course, the possibility that they already knew her version or others” (217).

are good for building rhythmic skills and motor coordination, and which ones encourage attributes such as responsiveness and sharing (Hawes 1972, xvi).

On a profound level, *Step It Down* links the role of oral arts in traditional education in African America with those same educative processes in traditional African societies. Education scholars E.Y. Egblewogbe (1975: 11, 21) and King & Swartz (2018, 74) remind us that the purpose of traditional education in African communities is the “making of a child to become what society accepts as a person, or human being,” and “what it means to be human, a person,” respectively. This sensibility is clearly articulated by Jones and Hawes in *Step It Down*. In Hawes’s words, the communal and public nature of childhood ring plays teach

a quality which I find hard to name. Perhaps the best word for it is “interplay”: rapport with and concern for another person, a kind of responsiveness which can sustain you even when you are alone...Down from the mother’s lap...the growing child wanders into the larger complex whirl of the family, the play-group, and the community (Jones & Hawes 1972, 67).

Because games and ring plays are also full of “dramatic confrontations,” almost all of them “must be performed by a group...thus all dramatic conflict is worked through in public, so to speak” (Hawes 1972, xv). Like their ancestral counterparts, these pastimes also “involve both music and dance, and thus nearly the whole range of expressive behavior available to human beings is called upon” (xv).

As we have seen in the sacred shout tradition, the adult and child domains overlap in Black antebellum oral arts expressions, a cultural trait that was retained through African oral traditions. In *Studies in African Music*, A.M. Jones (1959, 16) asserts that among the Ewe of Ghana, distinctions between the songs of children and those of adult’s are not always clear. This lack of distinction likely reflects a bias towards reality, given that songs are intended to teach children about the facts of life and often deal with the harsher realities of living (1959, 16):

The sentiments are strongly social...they comment on life as children know it. There are references to the circumstances of birth: to poverty: to animals: to their religious cults: to the lagoon round which they live, and even to ‘boy friends’: or the song may just refer to the game being played.

When it came time for Hawes's to put songs and stories into the final chapter of *Step It Down*, she expressed some frustration that Bessie Jones "simply did not behave as though there was a separate category of song and stories for children as opposed to those for grownups...she sang or told whatever came to mind without seeming to worry too much about whether or not it was 'suitable' for a particular age group" (Jones & Hawes 1972, 189). Jones did, however, make some distinctions about ring play games. As Hawes's sees it, Jones's perspective on the educative value of ring plays is that they are "an acting out, a practicing of the roles and relationships a child must learn" (190). Songs that accompany ring plays, are, however, "far ranging in content and often forthrightly adult" (189). Reflecting on the adult content of ring plays, and that they are played by adults as well as children, Hawes writes,

Perhaps this is why the [Georgia Sea Island] Singers could still play children's games with delight, though they were all middle aged and older, and all people of position and dignity in their own community. The adult could still be a child, because the child was already adult. Where does one role end and the other begin? (Jones & Hawes 1972, 190).

### Songs and Dances for the Classroom

*"Did You Feed My Cow?"*

There are many examples of African American children's songs and games that share content with adult songs and reflect "down to earth...realistic situations." One of the first that comes to mind is "Did You Feed My Cow," a call and response song that depicts a buzzard descending on the carcass of a cow. In the *Oklahoma Narratives* (Rawick 1972, 99), we learn that "Did You Feed My Cow" crossed boundaries between adult and children's "play" in the antebellum era. One interviewee described how he and other children would have "dances and play parties and have sho' nuff good times. We had 'ring plays'...In de evening after work was done we'd sit around and de older folks would sing songs. One of de favorites was:

<i>Miss Ca'line gal,</i>	<i>Yes Ma'am.</i>
<i>Did you see dem buzzards?</i>	<i>Yes Ma'am.</i>
<i>Did you see dem floppin'?</i>	<i>Yes Ma'am.</i>
<i>How did ye' like 'em?</i>	<i>Mighty well.</i>

*Miss Ca'line gal,                      Yes Ma'am.*  
*Did you see dem buzzards?        Yes Ma'am.*  
*Did you see dem sailin'?'         Yes Ma'am.*  
*How did ye' like 'em?                Mighty well.*

I teach Ella Jenkins's version of the song from her 1966 recording *You'll Sing a Song and I'll Sing a Song*.<sup>127</sup> Inevitably, students are at first, "grossed out" when they learn about carrion birds feeding on dead animals. But they then come to appreciate learning something new—about cows, buzzards, and ticks. Younger students enjoy acting out the story, especially the "flop flop flop" of the buzzard's wings.

<i>Call: Did you feed my cow?</i>	<i>Response: Yes Mam!</i>
<i>C: Tell me, what did you feed her?</i>	<i>R: Corn and hay!</i>
<i>C: Did you milk her good?</i>	<i>R: Yes, Mam!</i>
<i>C: Did you milk her like ya should?</i>	<i>R: Yes, Mam!</i>
<i>C: Show me, how did you milk her?</i>	<i>R: Swish, swish, swish (milking motion)</i>
<i>C: Did my cow get sick?</i>	<i>R: Yes, Mam!</i>
<i>C: Was she covered with tick?</i>	<i>R: Yes, Mam!</i>
<i>C: Tell me, how was she sick?</i>	<i>R: Uh, uh, uh (shake head)</i>
<i>C: Did the buzzards come?</i>	<i>R: Yes, Mam!</i>
<i>C: Show me, how did they come?</i>	<i>R: Flop, flop, flop (flap arms on the floor)</i>
<i>C: How did they come?</i>	<i>R: Flop, flop, flop</i>

*All: Poor old cow.*

### *Hambone*

Other plantation songs illustrate facts of life on a human scale. As stated previously, we now know that in the well-known patting juba song "Hambone," the lyric "*round the world and back again*," is in fact a "bitter commentary on a hambone having been stripped of its good meat by the master and making the round of the slave cabins and imparting a bit of flavor to rations of peas or beans" (Rosenbaum 1992, xvii). Recalling my conversation with Milwaukee storyteller Tejumola Ologboni

<sup>127</sup> Ella Jenkins, *You'll Sing a Song and I'll Sing a Song*, Folkways Records, 1966. See Hughes & Bontemp (1958, 43) for a slightly different version.

(2017), “Hambone” is a potlikker story because it is about not having enough and making do with what you have (see this thesis, “Interlude”).

Jones & Hawes (1972, 34-36) present “Hambone” in their collection as a “clapping play,” complete with an off-beat (two against three, or hemiola) “pattin juba” pattern (directions for the patting pattern are given). As Jones suggests, “You just say it, and then you say it with your hands.” Hawes writes, “Most young black men, I find, know it in one version or another.”

*Hambone, hambone, pat him on the shoulder,  
If you get a pretty girl, I'll show you how to hold her.  
Hambone, hambone, where have you been?  
All around the world and back again.*

The above version appears in Parrish (1942, 114-115) with variations and improvised lyrics on the theme of the lullaby “Hush Little Baby.” John Dee Holeman’s rendition of this tune fully integrates lines from “Hush Little Baby”:<sup>128</sup>

*Hambone, hambone, have you heard?  
Papa's gonna buy me a mockingbird.  
And if that mockingbird don't sing,  
Papa's gonna buy me a diamond ring.  
And if that diamond ring don't shine,  
Papa's gonna take it to the five and dime.*

I have taught “Hambone” to 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders, with the verses as they appear in the McMillan *Share the Music* curriculum, Grade 4 (1995). A similar version appears in Wilbur Cross’s *Gullah Culture in America* (2012, 245):

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. <i>Hambone, hambone, have you heard?<br/>Papa's gonna buy me a mockin' bird</i>  | 4. <i>If that lookin' glass gets broke –<br/>Papa's gonna buy me a billy goat.</i>   |
| 2. <i>If that mockin'bird don't sing –<br/>Papa's gonna buy me a diamond ring.</i>  | 5. <i>Hambone hambone where you been?<br/>'Round the world and back again.</i>       |
| 3. <i>If that diamond ring turns brass -Papa's<br/>gonna buy me a lookin' glass</i> | 6. <i>Hambone, hambone, where's your wife?<br/>She's in the kitchen eatin' rice.</i> |

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<sup>128</sup> For more of John Dee Holeman’s verses, go to: “john dee holeman hambone lyrics” (online). For a youtube video of Holeman and Don Flemens of the Carolina Chocolate Drops performing off-beat pattin’ juba patterns (with Holeman’s bawdy lyrics) go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mOd4PheLTA>.

Given the improvisational nature of “Hambone,” I like to have students write their own verses. Along the topic of personal freedom, I ask them to write about what they would want or wish for themselves. Here’s some examples from a lesson circa 2014:

1. *Hambone, hambone, don't you see? I'm going to buy you a golden key*
2. *Hambone, hambone, have you heard? I've been turned into a bird.*
3. *Hambone, hambone, can't you see? MLK can talk to me.*
4. *Hambone, hambone, did you hear? The Packers they did beat the Bears.*
5. *Hambone, hambone have you heard? I'm gonna travel all around the world.*
6. *Hambone, Hambone have you seen? Sammy's gonna buy me a flat-screen T.V.*
7. *Hambone, Hambone don't you see? I can tell Sammy's had ham & cheese.*
8. *Hambone, Hambone talk to me—Tell me, tell me what you need.*
9. *Hambone, Hambone I need your help—Teach me how to know myself.*
10. *Hambone, Hambone we rock all night—We---are---dy-no-mite!*

*“Promises of Freedom” & “Raise A Ruckus”*

Narratives of freed Black men and women indicate that children sang variations on adult songs, including those songs that “would berate the whites” as in, “*Run [brother] run, the patteroller git you, run [sister] run, de patteroller come, watch [brother] watch, de patteroller trick you, watch [sister] watch, he got a big gun!*” (Wiggins 1980, 24–25; brackets, mine). Another adult song that found its way into children’s play Signifies on owners who reneged on their promises of freedom (Wiggins 1980, 25):

*My old mistress promised me,  
Before she dies she would set me free.  
Now she's dead and gone to hell,  
I hope the devil will burn her well*

The foregoing verse is part of a longer song titled “Promises of Freedom,” as printed in the Hughes and Bontemp anthology, *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958, 87-88). These verses reappear in a longer version called “Raise A Ruckus,” excerpted below from Jerry Silverman’s *The Liberated Woman's Songbook* (1971, 122-123):



*“Promises of Freedom”*

Verse: *My ole Mistiss promise me,  
W'en she died, she'd set me free,  
She lived so long dat 'er head got bal',  
An' she give out 'n de notion of a-dyin' at all....*

Verse: *Ole Mosser lakwise promise me,  
W'en he died, he'd set me free,  
But ole Mosser go an' make his will  
Fer to leave me a-plowin' ole Beck still*

*“Raise A Ruckus Tonight”*

Chorus: *Come along, little children, come  
along,  
Come while the moon is shining bright.  
Get on board, little children, get on board,  
We're gonna raise a ruckus tonight.*

Verse: *My old master promised me, (Raise ...  
That when he died he'd set me free, (Raise ...)  
He lived so long his head got bald, (Raise ....)  
He got out he notion of dyin' at all, (Raise ...)*

In contrast to “Promises of Freedom” and its variation in Silverman’s songbook, “Raise A Ruckus” appears in the Share the Music curriculum texts with the “Chorus” only, with the critical commentary omitted (McGraw Hill 1995, Grade 5, 20). It is titled “We Will Raise a Ruckus Tonight, An African American Jubilee.” Without further reference to African American history or culture, the student book reads, “In the early days of our country, life was hard for many people. Still, they made time for singing and dancing. Making music together was an important part of many gatherings.”

The Teacher’s Edition provides some additional detail: the jubilee was the year of emancipation from bondage and was “also a song about a time of future joy or freedom (1995, 21). “We Will Raise a Ruckus Tonight’ comes from the time when enslaved people in the United States looked forward to freedom” (1995, 20). In similar fashion to other Afro-America song forms mentioned here, this more contextualized narrative is for teachers’ eyes only and is therefore optional. By contrast, the student text avoids the topic of enslavement altogether, implying that everyone in America has experienced hard times equally; this is a bid for the inclusionary, “we are all the same, but different” axiom. In further efforts toward this type of color-blind equality, “We Will Raise a Ruckus Tonight” is included, along with Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land,” in a unit entitled “Music Unites Us.” As is common with the inclusion of “This Land Is Your Land” in school texts, the social commentary on inequitable

landownership that Guthrie wrote in the third and fifth verses is omitted.<sup>129</sup> I am again reminded of King & Swartz's admonitions to be on the lookout for curriculum that hides hard truths.

*Juba (revisited)*

Bessie Jones learned “Juba” as part of an extensive repertoire of traditional play songs, games, and stories that had been passed on to Jones from her grandfather, Jet Sampson (Jones & Hawes 1972, Stone & Harold) who was born during enslavement.<sup>130</sup> According to one of these stories, the term “juba” is linked to “giblets,” as in the leftover “ends of food” that was mixed and often served to children, field hands, and animals alike in wooden troughs (Holloway 1990, 215; Jones & Lomax, 1972, 37). Here, Jones relays her grandfather's story about “Juba” (1972, 37):

*That's one of the oldest plays I think I can remember our grandfather telling us about, because he was brought up in Virginia. He used to tell us about how they used to eat ends of food; that's what juba means. They said “jibba” when they meant “giblets”; we know that's ends of food. They had to eat leftovers.*

*He used to say they would take mixed-up food and put it together, that they had to eat out of those long troughs – mush, and cush, and all that stuff put together and put plenty milk in it. But he live a hundred and five years, so, I can't say that made him live but I say it didn't kill him. And I'm up here a long time too; I never eat like that, but yet and still he have taught us a many a time how he did that...*

In another description of “Juba,” Jones recounts that her grandfather told her that “they would make up things” instead of making complaints directly:

*They would have all the slaves down there to eat that stuff. Not just to eat, [but] they had them there to play games, sing songs – do things they did in Africa. My grandfather said many, many days they had to eat that stuff. They would make up things because they didn't like what they was doing, but they couldn't tell them they didn't want to do it (Holloway 1990, 215).*

In the “Juba” lyrics below (182) from Holloway (1990, 215–216) and Jones & Hawes (1972, 37–39), we hear under-currents of rebellion, if only imagined:

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<sup>129</sup> For a full version of Guthrie's song in picture book form, see *This Land Is Your Land* (2002) by Woody Guthrie and Kathy Jacobsen (illustrator), with a tribute by Pete Seeger.

<sup>130</sup> Jones's grandfather's name is not provided in Jones & Hawes (1972). For more on Bessie Jones's family and Jones's musical heritage, see Stone & Harold: <https://www.culturalequity.org/alan-lomax/friends/jones-0>.

## “Juba”

*Juba this and Juba that  
And Juba killed a yellow cat*

(that means a little of this and that.)  
(that means mixed-up food might kill the white folks. And they didn't care if it did, I don't suppose.) (Jones & Hawes, 1972, 370) Because they couldn't say mixed up food might kill the white folks. They was afraid to say that 'cause white folks'd kill em (Holloway 1990, 215).

*And get over double trouble, Juba*

(Means, someday they meant they would get over double trouble...cook my own food. I don't have to wait until the bread get cold and been done et off of, and the cake it et up down to the crumbs and give it to me. But I'll eat mine fresh someday (Holloway 1990, 216).

*You sift the meal, you give me the husk  
You cook-a the bread, you give me the crust  
You fry the meat, you give me the skin  
And that's when my momma's trouble begin  
And then you Juba,  
You just Juba*

(You see, so that's what it mean – the mother would always be talking to them about she wished she could give them good hot cornbread or hot pies or hot what-not. But she couldn't. She had to wait and give that old stuff what was left over. And then they begin to sing and play it...) (Jones & Hawes 1972, 38).

*Juba up, Juba down  
Juba all around the town*

(That mean everywhere,)  
(All around the whole country)  
(Jones & Hawes, 1972,38)

*Juba for ma, Juba for pa,  
Juba for your brother-in-law*

(See, that meant everybody had juba. And they made a play out of it. So that's where this song come from; they would get all this kind of thing off their brains and minds...) (Jones & Hawes 1972, 38).

*“Doing Juba”*

“Juba” is cited as a “clapping song,” in Jones & Hawes (1972, 37-40), and a dance with fancy footwork in Parrish (1942, 116). “Juba” has also been popularized by the contemporary female acapella group *Sweet Honey in the Rock* on their *All For Freedom* (1989) recording. My students have enjoyed listening to Sweet Honey’s introduction to the practice of “pattin juba” and their insistence that “you don’t just sing Juba, you have to *do* Juba.” Parrish’s description of the accompanying handclapping patterns (116) matches Jones’s basic patting juba pattern (1972, 39). The challenge of course is for students is to get to the point where they can sing and “pat juba” at the same time:

Juba pat:

- (L) Slap left thigh with left hand.
- (LB) Slap back of left hand with right hand (left hand raised from thigh).
- (L) Slap left thigh with left hand.

Repeat on the other side:

- (R) Slap right thigh with right hand.
- (RB) Slap back of right hand (raised) with left hand.
- (R) Slap right thigh with right hand.

Figure 4–2 depicts a young boy named “Snooks” showing Parrish how to do Juba: “By rapidly crossing his hands to first one knee and then the other, Snooks pats out an intricate rhythm [to the lines of the song] ... When he gets to “Now Juba!” he does some clever footwork that matches the coordination of his hands” (Parrish 1942, 66).



Figure 4–2: “Snooks” dancing “Juba” (Photo: Parrish 1942, 66)

*“Go to Sleepy Little Baby, ”All the Pretty Little Horses” & “Sold Off to Georgia”*

Antebellum lullabies were frequently sung by Black women to White women’s babies, lullabies that often expressed longing for their own children. In the 1925 publication, *On the Trail of Negro Folk Songs* (1925, 144), collector Dorothy Scarborough (144-145) provides the context of this circumstance:

The peculiar conditions of slavery made the Negro nurse lavish more affection – or at least more demonstration of affection – on her white charges than on her own children. I saw on a plantation in Louisiana a house that in slavery times was used as a day nursery, where the mothers left their children in care of one or two older women, while they worked in the fields. They would come in at intervals to nurse the babies and then go back to the cotton-row, or the rice- or cane-fields. In many cases mother love was thwarted and driven back upon itself under an institution which separated parent and child, when one or the other might be sold; so the black mother often spent her tenderest love on the white child she nursed, and some of the most characteristic of the Negro folk-songs are the lullabies by which she crooned her baby – white or black – to sleep.

Scarborough cites no less than ten variations of “Hush Little Baby,” or “Go to Sleepy Little Baby,” “Old Cow,” or just, “Lullaby,” all reported as having been sung by plantation hands, in the care of either White or Black children (Scarborough 1925, 145–48). “Go to Sleep, Little Baby” is cited by Scarborough as the original, “more gruesome” version of the lullaby, with either a mother cow or sheep leaving their young behind. In all variations the children, White or Black, are reassured that they will have cake or horses, or both (1925, 145–48):

“Lullaby”

*Hushaby, don’t you cry,  
Go to sleepy little baby.  
When you wake, you shall have cake  
And all the pretty little ponies.  
Paint and bay, sorrel and gray,  
All the pretty little ponies...*

“Go To Sleep, Little Baby”

*Go to sleep, little baby,  
Daddy run away,  
An’ lef’ nobody with the baby!  
  
Daddy an’ Mammy went downtown  
To see their pretty little horses.  
All the horses in that stable  
Belong to this little baby!*

*Variation:*

*Way down yonder in de meadow,  
There’s a po’ little lambie.  
The bees and the butterflies,  
Peckin’ out its eyes, poor little lamb cried “Mammy!”*

Linda Saport's illustrated picture book, *All the Pretty Little Horses: A Traditional Lullaby* (2002) appears to be a combination of lines from Scarborough's versions above; the resulting version softens the harsher facts of life. The author's paintings illustrate the mother sheep and lamb being reunited in the meadow, which elides the truth that parents were often separated permanently from their children under enslavement.

"All the Pretty Little Horses" (Saport, 2002)

*Hush-a-bye, don't you cry  
Go to sleepy little baby,  
When you wake, you'll have cake,  
And all the pretty little horses.*

*Blacks and bays, dapples and grays,  
Coach and six-a-little horses.  
Hush-a-bye, don't you cry  
Go to sleep little baby.*

*Mother dear, where's your lamb?"  
I left him down in the meadow.  
With the birds and the bees  
Singing in the trees,  
The poor little lamb cried, "Mammy."*

*When you wake, you shall have,  
All the pretty little horses.  
Blacks and bays, dapples and greys.  
All the pretty little horses.*

Hawes (1972, 7) writes that "Go to Sleepy Little Baby" is "always sad," with its "subcurrent of the great tragedy of slavery—the separation of mother and child" that runs through it. Mrs. Jones's version (see below), however, is "gentle rather than bitter." While it spares the image of a young lamb's eyes getting pecked out, it does not belie the fact that families were splintered, or "sold off to Georgia" by plantation owners, leaving children either motherless, fatherless, or both.

"Go to Sleepy, Little Baby" (Jones & Hawes 1972, 7)

*1. Go to sleepy little baby,  
Before the booger man catch you,  
All them horse in that lot,  
Go to sleepy little baby.  
Mama went away and she told me to stay,  
And take good care of this baby...*

*2. All them horses in that lot,  
Go to sleepy little baby,  
Can't you hear them horses trot?  
Go to sleepy little baby,*

*If I rock this baby to sleep,  
Go to sleepy, little baby,  
Someday he will remember me,  
Go to sleepy little baby.*

“Sold Off to Georgia” (Levine 1977, 15)

*Mammy, is Ol' Massa gwin'er sell us tomorrow?  
Yes, my chile.  
Whar he gwin'er sell us?  
Way down South to Georgia.*

### Ring Shouts, Ring Plays, Dances, & Skips

*If you got something to move, you can move it.  
If you ain't got nothing to move, you can't move nothing...*

Bessie Jones (1972, 107)

In *Step It Down*, Jones presents four songs, “Way Down Yonder in the Brickyard,” “Daniel,” “Little Sally Walker,” and “Just from the Kitchen” under three headings: “Ring Plays,” “Dances,” and “Skips.” The song “Daniel” described as both a “dance” and a “ring shout.” While all four songs incorporate movement, singing, and an element of dramatic play within a ring formation, Jones makes distinctions between them. As to the difference between the “ring shout” and “ring play,” Jones makes it “quite clear” that it comes down to the “question of fundamental intent” (1972, 143):

*No, the ring plays are not exactly like the ring shouts, because you are playing—you see, the children are playing and they mean to play...Some ring plays seem just like a shout in some ways but they are plays... [The children] are not shouting and they better not attempt the shouting in those days, you know what I mean, because the old folks would say you were mocking theme an then you'd get a whipping. You see, if you're going to play, you play, and if you're going to shout, you shout...*

Hawes further explains that the ring shout represents a compromise between African Americans who felt that it was “right and proper to dance before the Lord” and those “descendants of Calvinism,” who regarded any kind of earthbound joys, especially dance, as sinful. The shout, with its emphasis on “form and rule, came outside the concept of dance for both groups” (Jones & Hawes 1972, 143). If the feet never cross, the shout is not a dance (143).<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> A different take on the distinctions between the “shout,” and the “ring shout” is offered by Twining (1985, 471) who writes that the “ring shout” includes “singing, dancing, clapping, [with no foot-crossing] and is best classified as a prayer executed with the whole self,” as opposed to the “patterned group dance” of the “ring shout.”

*“Daniel”*

Although Jones & Hawes do not cite secular origins for “Daniel,” other sources lend some credence to its secular meaning. In Botkin (1949, 658), we find that variations of “Daniel” in some forms shows “tendencies towards becoming a game” and that “acting out the story” of the ring shout “was not infrequent” (Botkin, 659, sourcing Robert Gordon, 1932). Rosenbaum (1998, 122-23) provides an explanation of the shout’s secular function via the late Lawrence McKiver. When McKiver was the “boss shouter” of the McIntosh County Shouters, he introduced the song to audiences as follows:

*See, Daniel was a slave, and the slaves all were havin' a little party across the field one day. And the smoke-house was up there...And they wanted to steal some of the meat, you know, and they send Daniel in to get a piece of meat...And old boss was coming down through there, so the slaves going to sing a song to let Daniel know to get out the way... You know, I mean that fast run, that's what I'm talking about. So old boss thought they was singing a party song, but they was telling Daniel how to get out the way, so that old boss wouldn't put that whip-lash on him. So I'm goin' to sing the song—I jus' want to let you all know why we sing the song 'Move, Daniel.' ”*

Whether part of a “shout,” or a “ring shout,” the song “Daniel” is a song about freedom and a prime example of how religiosity and secularity are not mutually exclusive criteria in Black orature.

Rosenbaum suggests that “the shout becomes a dramatic symbolic expression of solidarity between Daniel and his fellow slaves, as they instruct him to move, turn the other way, and in a beautiful gesture of arms extended birdlike from the shoulders, ‘do the eagle wing’ as he evades the master...” (1998, 121). Twining agrees: “This song is an escape song in either a prayerful or real sense” (1985, 471). The following version of “Daniel” is excerpted from Jones & Hawes (1972, 144-45). The movements combine the “shout” counter-clockwise motion, clockwise motion, and other movements as directed by the lead singer (see full movement, Jones & Hawes, 144-45). Although it would seem readily transferable as a secular ring play, Jones & Hawes do not make any references to “Daniel” being played outside the sacred shout ring, nor do they refer to it being played by children. I have not, to date, found any sources that cite “Daniel” as a children’s ring play.

Lead Voice:

*Walk, believer, walk,  
Walk, I tell you, walk,*

Group Voice:

*Daniel.  
Daniel.*



(Tempo almost doubles, and stick pounding, if used, begins)

*Shout believer, shout,* Daniel.  
*On the eagle wing,* Daniel.

*Fly, I tell you fly,* Daniel.  
*Fly the other way,* Daniel

*Give me the kneebone bend,* Daniel.

*On the eagle wing,* Daniel.  
*Fly, I tell you fly,* Daniel.  
*Fly back home, Daniel.*

### *Way Down Yonder in The Brickyard*

Jones & Hawes present *Way Down Yonder* as a ring play, which means that it is not religious dance. It is a “play” and not a “skip” because there is always a player in the center of the ring (1972, 51). Here is Jones’s version of the song, with her directions [modified here] for the “play” (151).

Lead Voice:	Group Voice:	Group Action:
<i>Way down yonder in the brickyard.</i> (or skips) inside the ring	<i>Remember me</i>	Center player walks
<i>Way down yonder in the brickyard,</i>	<i>Remember me.</i>	Center player stops in front of the ring player and both “step it down” four times.
<i>Oh - step it, step it, step it down,</i>	<i>Remember me,</i>	
<i>Oh - swing your love and turn around,</i>	<i>Remember me.</i>	

When music teacher Kathy Reid-Naimen learned “Ways Down Yonder” from Doug Quimby (1936-2006) of the Georgia Sea Island Singers, Quimby “emphasized the historic meaning of this dance. He said that the hand claps [were] done with cupped hands as if forming bricks.” Quimby also put in a “finger wag” on the words “Remember me” to “remind people how hard they had to work.”<sup>132</sup> While Bessie Jones’ description of “Way Down Yonder” in *Step It Down* (1972) did not

<sup>132</sup> <https://kathyreidnaiman.com/track/1676755/way-down-yonder-in-the-brickyard> (accessed 5/3/21)

elude to Signifying, she later commented on the song text's hidden meaning in *For the Ancestors:*

*Biographical Memories* (Jones 1983, 45–46):

These games were for talking to them white folks direct, because the slave didn't like the way they were being treated...Like "Step It Down," that's the title of a song they made up because they had to make bricks in those days. They made bricks with their hands, and it used to be that lots of times people would be working and they'd get too quiet—it's not good to get quiet when you work...It makes you worry, then you get to being dissatisfied. So they sang songs to bet the pressure off their minds. And with "Down in the Brickyard," that's "Step It Down," they were talking to them...They'd clap that and go on singing it, but they were talking to those white folks... "Someday I hope you'll remember me; you're not paying me nothing, I'm not getting anything at all, but someday you'll remember me" ... That's while they were using their feet to put the bricks down.

"Way Down Yonder in the Brickyard" is included in the Silver Burdett *Making Music*, Grade 2 music curriculum book (2002, 50–51) but with the title "Way Down Yonder in the Schoolyard."<sup>133</sup> In the sidebar in the Teacher's Edition, there is nod to the Georgia Sea Island Singers keeping African American song traditions alive and to Bessie Jones's grandfather who composed the song "while working in a brickyard." There is not, however, any indication that the song was a commentary on American enslavement.

The song, with its original title and lyric, "Way Down Yonder in the Brickyard" can be found in the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade volume of *Share the Music* (Bond et al., 2000, 16). Under the heading "Multicultural Perspectives" in the Teacher's Edition (2001, 16), information pertaining to the Georgia Sea Island Singers and their role in preserving Gullah songs and culture is provided, including that the Quimby husband & wife team traveled "around the country sharing chants, work songs, stories, and spirituals their ancestors used to survive slavery." Although the inclusion of this context in the teacher's edition is laudable, additional information pertaining to Bessie Jones's grandfather and his use of this work song as a form of protest is missing. As such, "Way Down Yonder in the Brickyard" is simply an "African American Game Song" as performed by the Georgia Sea Island Singers."

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<sup>133</sup> The original song, with the "brickyard" lyrics sung by Bessie Jones is included this lesson as a listening selection (Silver Burdett Teacher Edition 2002, CD2, track 12). The illustration in the student text depicts children dancing on a wall of bricks.

What is also missing from both the “Way Down Yonder” lessons in both *Making Music* and *Share the Music* is the song’s function as a ring play dance and game, with a child in the center who then interacts with partners on the circle. In the *Making Music* 2<sup>nd</sup> grade lesson, students are encouraged to “try fancy stepping” like the children pictured in the textbook, to step on the “steady beat,” but not to “step it down” with one another.<sup>134</sup> This is the “apart playing” involving call and response interactions between performers embedded in West African dance drumming performance, in the corn husking frolics and ring shouts, and in Bessie Jones’s ring plays. In each of these arenas there is a leader-group interaction where the “ring comes to bringing itself into being through the chanter-response performance” (Abrahams 1992, 91–92).

As Hawes recognized in *Step It Down*, the ring play is “an acting out, a practicing of the roles and relationships a child must learn” (1972, 190). With songs and ring plays like “Way Down Yonder,” “Little Sally Walker,” and others that I have played with children over the years, I know that what made these plays so enjoyable for students was the peer interactions and the chance to act out life’s little dramas. As Jones and Hawes have told us, “When [the children] ‘played,’ they were constructing over and over again small life dramas; they were improvising on the central issues of their deepest concerns; they were taking on new personalities for identification or caricature; they were *acting*” (1972, xv).

#### *“Little Sally Walker”*

Not uncommonly, Black, and White children played together on antebellum plantations and absorbed each other’s singing games, creating syncretic forms of play. According to Mergen (1982, 40), “Slave children transformed European games, playing them with a different style and often deriving different lessons from their content.” A prime example of this acculturative process is the ring play “Little Sally Walker,” in which “black children changed not only the words, but also the gestures and

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<sup>134</sup> The “step it down” dance moves for “Way Down Yonder in the Brickyard” are provided in the *Share the Music*, 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher edition. They resemble Bessie Jones’s directions for the movement, but with partners facing each other in an English contra dance “longways” set instead of a circle.

rhythm of the game” (Mergen 1982, 48). Levine (1977, 198) offers two versions of the song, the English, “Little Sally Waters,” and a Black version, “Little Sally Walker,” to which Black girls “have syncopated the rhythm” and added accompanying hand-clapping “with a ‘jazz’ and ‘swing’ rhythm of the body.”

British:” Little Sally Water”

*Little Sally Water  
Sitting in a saucer,  
Weeping and crying for someone to love her.  
Rise, Sally rise,  
Wipe off your eyes;  
Turn to the east,  
Turn to the west  
Turn to the one that you love the best.*

African American: “Little Sally Walker”

*Little Sally Walker,  
Sitting in a saucer,  
Weeping and crying for a nice young man.  
Rise Sally rise,  
Wipe your weeping eyes.  
Put your hand on your hip,  
Let your backbone slip.  
Shake it to the east, O baby,  
Shake it to the west,  
Shake it to the one that you love the best.*

Hawes (1972, 107) indicates that the English version of “Little Sally Walker,” originates with British marriage rites as a “brief drama about the joys of release from shame.” The version of “Little Sally Walker” that I have enjoyed with my students (a game of which they never tire) is from Cheryl Warren Mattox’s *Shake It to the East, Shake It to the West* (1989). It is very similar to Bessie Jones’s “3<sup>rd</sup> Version” (above) of the ring play (Jones & Hawes 1972, 109).<sup>135</sup> As it stands, children enjoy acting out the “weeping and a-wailing” (for all actions, see Jones & Hawes 1972, 108).

“Little Sally Walker” (Jones & Hawes 1972, 107-111)

*Little Sally Walker  
Sittin’ in a saucer,  
Weepin’ and a-wailin’  
Over all that she’s done.  
Rise, Sally rise,  
Wipe the tears from your eyes.  
Put your hands on your hips,  
Let your backbone slip.*

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<sup>135</sup> For the English version, Levine (1977, 198) draws from folklorist Leah Yoffie’s research in St. Louis in 1944. Patricia McKissack (2017, 40) writes that, historically, “the black girls formed the outer circle, and the white girls stood in the center. After they sang the chant, the groups exchanged places and repeated the verse.”

*Shake it to the east,  
Shake it to the west,  
Shake it to the very one that you love the best.*

Mergen suggests that the African American version may have been a transition between the Anglo-Saxon song and “the more explicitly jazz and swing version of the 1940s. The conclusion might be that black play became more self-consciously Afro-American after slavery” (Mergen 1982, 48). In the process of making it their own, Blacks not only changed the lyrics and performance style of the song but infused it with new meaning derived from lived experiences in a dominant White world. This historical context comes from Jones (1983, 49):

Pa used to tell us about Little Sally Walker. There’s many times way back, he said, when a white woman—many of them were terrors—saying “he winked at me” or “he whistled at me” caused many negro boys and men to get killed. That old white woman is Little Sally Walker. And she was crying and weeping over all she had done. And so Pa said that many a time a white woman would have compassion for the colored people, and would cry...And she’d be saying, “Don’t do them that away...” And she would cry, weep over it ‘cause she didn’t like it. Some didn’t care, but anyway they done it; they had to weep. So Little Sally Walker is a white woman.

From Jones’s commentary, we get a snapshot of hard history that teachers will not see in the side bars of school music textbooks. This is the real story of 14 yr. old Emmett Till and countless other Black males who were lynched for allegedly breaking the “rules” on how they were supposed to interact with White women.<sup>136</sup> In this context, “Little Sally Walker” is not a story of redemption over mistakes made by children but, rather, the story of violence and genocide perpetrated against Black people in the United States since the “giddyup.” The recent killings of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery were not mistakes, they were both murders. The Little Sally Walkers of this world are not just White women but are White men masquerading as defenders of the public who, in too many cases, are

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<sup>136</sup> Emmett Louis Till (July 25, 1941 – August 28, 1955) was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after being accused of whistling at a White woman, thus violating the “unwritten code of behavior for a black male interacting with a white female...The brutality of his murder and the fact that his killers were acquitted drew attention to the long history of violent persecution of African Americans in the United States. Till posthumously became an icon of the civil rights movement” (Wikipedia, on Emmett Louis Till). See: *Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement* (Devery S. Anderson, 2015).

21<sup>st</sup> century “patterollers” who haven’t stopped their bounty hunting. Given its very raw subject matter, I would not endeavor to teach the difficult history of “Little Sally Walker” as part of the ring play activity with young students. Rather, I see how the song itself could fit in well with a middle or high-school curriculum that doesn’t shy away from teaching the hard history of White-on-Black violence in America.

*“Just From the Kitchen” (“Chu la Lu!”)*

This ring play song titled, “Just from the Kitchen” has been brought to elementary music classrooms since the mid-90s through the *Share the Music* (1995) and *Making Music* curriculum series, using Jones and Hawes version (1972, 51). It has been a favorite of mine since I began teaching in the public schools and had access to these textbooks; children love it because it gives them the opportunity to “fly.” An earlier version of the song, called “Chula Lu!” can be found in Botkin (1949, 430):

*I’m a big fat lady! Chu la Lu!*

*I’m just from the country! Chu la Lu!*

*Just outen’ the kitchen! Chu la Lu!*

*With a handful o’ biscuits! Chu la Lu!*

*You know I wants to marry! Chu la Lu!*

*Then, Miss Fancy...Chu la Lu!*

*Fly away over yonder! Fly away over yonder!*

*Now choose your pardner. Chu la Lu!*

*And swing him around. Chu la Lu!*

Jones places “Just from the Kitchen” in a category she calls “skips.” If it were a ring play, Jones explains, it would require a lead singer in the center of the ring (Jones & Hawes 1972, 51). In this skip,

the lead singer, standing as part of the circle of players, calls out the ‘real name’ of a different child in each verse; and the child stands in the ring as part of the circle, and calls out names of a different child in each verse; and the child whose name is sung then skips across the ring with his arms outstretched—“flying away over yonder.”

Jones describes “Just from the Kitchen” as an “after-slavery play,” as in, *He’s so glad—he’s free and got his own bread so he can fly away over yonder...He’s so glad he got himself freedom food!* (Jones & Hawes 1972, 51).

<i>Just from the kitchen,</i>	<i>Shoo lie loo,</i>
<i>With a handful of biscuits,</i>	<i>Shoo lie loo,</i>
<i>Oh Miss Mary,</i>	<i>Shoo lie loo,</i>
<i>Fly away over yonder.</i>	<i>Shoo lie loo.</i>

Flight is a recurring theme in Black vernacular expressions, one that equates flight to freedom. It is present in the ring shouts/plays above, in spirituals such as “Motherless Child,” “All God’s Chillun Got Wings,” and “Now Let Me Fly” (see Gates & Tatar 2018, 77–80), and in gospel music composer Albert E. Brumley’s “I’ll fly Away” (1929). The theme of flight is also prevalent in the High John de Conquer mythological stories of flight and the “Flying African” stories. These are all subjects to which I will turn in my next chapter, on storytelling.

“I’ll Fly Away”

*Some glad morning when this life is o’er,*

*I’ll fly away;*

*To a home on God’s celestial shore,*

*I’ll fly away (I’ll fly away).*

*I’ll fly away, Oh Glory,*

*I’ll fly away (in the morning)*

*When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,*

*I’ll fly away.*



*Sankofa*

## Chapter Five

### Traditional Tales of Resistance and Freedom

#### Introduction: Two Tale Types

In this chapter, I focus on two African American story traditions: Trickster tales and the magical-mythical “Flying African” stories. As African traditions reshaped in the New World, these stories “stand alongside other great black performance traditions in illustrating the continuing vigor of the African aesthetic” (Abrahams 1985, 4). Like music and dance in antebellum ring shouts and work settings, stories also functioned as a bridge between the spiritual and mundane domains of life for Africans in the New World. At the same time, they provided a means for building pan-African unity and cultural survival. These are stories that pushed back, articulating protest and resistance against American enslavement. Recalling Ogunleye’s words, it is these qualities that make “folklore a highly effective medium for teaching African American children about their legacy, as well as the most effective and earnest means of weaving, even thriving, through life’s adversities” (1997, 436).

Within the Trickster genre, two antebellum characters take center stage: High John de Conquer, the “Slave Trickster” (a.k.a. High John the Conquerer, or Big John the Conquer), and the better-known Brer Rabbit with his four-legged cohorts of friends and enemies. Tracing the West African roots of these characters, I illustrate how these African American Tricksters retain characteristics of their divine West African ancestors: Eshu Elegbara, and Kwaku Ananse the Spider.

Like their predecessors, Brer Rabbit and High John embody contradiction and duality. They are at once heroic and socially disruptive, morally corrupt and morally redemptive. Bridging the divide between the supernatural and the mundane worlds, they embody both archetypal and culturally specific Trickster traits. From the get-go, these traits equip Brer Rabbit and High John de Conquer with the wit, courage, and verbal skills needed to outdo their adversaries. For Brer Rabbit, that means outwitting his larger and more powerful animal foes. For High John, it means outwitting the “massa.” Zora Neale Hurston called these two Tricksters “hope bringers.” I will add to that description by



delineating their roles as revolutionaries and freedom fighters. Above all, these Tricksters are uniquely African American.

Magical-mythical “Flying African” stories are the second tale type in this chapter. Subsumed under the heading, “The Flying African” or the “Flying African Myth,” tales of flight emerged in the antebellum era as metaphorical portals to African homelands, a manifestation of enslaved Africans’ desire to escape to “a land in which their forefathers were free men” (Hunsicker 2000, 5). Maria Tatar (2018, lxv) writes that in these tales of flight, illusion itself can “become so compelling that it rivals material reality, and suddenly the word becomes flesh and phantoms of the mind have substance.” Conversely, High John the Conquerer offers “a parable of materialization and empowerment rather than a transcendent vanishing act. But in both stories, passion and desire are so forceful and energetic as to become real” (Tatar 2018, lxv). As I see it, what makes “word become flesh” in both these genres is that while they are based in myth and legend, they also incorporate real historical events and life experiences of African people in the New World.

#### *Whose Tales?*

While the Trickster and Flying African tales would seem to have sprung directly from the oppressive conditions of enslavement—and the master/enslaved relationship—they are also rightly credited as new versions of West African tales derived from ancestral mythologies or other “African discursive traditions” (Tatar 2018, lxv). Disputing the “narrative of cultural obliteration,” Tatar embraces the continuity of Africanisms in African American lore (2018, lxv): “By borrowing bits and pieces of the old and merging and melding traditions, storytellers in the New World displayed an unparalleled determination to honor ancestral knowledge by preserving the cultural memory encapsulated in stories from times past.”

In all their complexity, both African and African American Tricksters are more than the clever, humorous, and mischievous folkloric characters so often portrayed in children’s literature. The best-known Black American Trickster tales are those starring Brer Rabbit and his adversaries such as Brer

Wolf and Brer Fox. These characters first became popularized in the American imagination by Joel Chandler Harris in his “Uncle Remus” stories.<sup>137</sup> Harris’s controversial depiction of the “kindly black Uncle [Remus]” (Tatar 2018, lxxx) and, I would add, a benign, nostalgic narrative of American enslavement, were adapted and commercialized by Walt Disney, most famously in the 1946 film *Song of the South*.<sup>138</sup> The dual legacy of Harris and Disney is summed up by Maria Tatar (2018, lxxx):

Appropriating and monetizing traditional tales, both reorienting the stories for an audience of children, smoothing out their jagged surfaces and rough edges while sprucing up their frayed plot lines. Harris and Disney were less invested in preserving and restoring traditions that were steadily eroding than in turning them into a new form of cultural capital that dovetailed neatly with capitalist success.

More recently, the West African Ananse Trickster tales have been popularized in children’s picture books by authors such as Gerald McDermott and Erik Kimmel.<sup>139</sup> In her critique of McDermott’s *Raven, A Tale from the Pacific Northwest*, Judy Iseke-Barnes characterizes this and other Trickster stories retold by McDermott as forms of “commodity racism...In this process, aspects of cultural knowledge and cultural life are taken out of context, stripped of their cultural location, and given new meanings as cultural commodities” (2009, 32).<sup>140</sup> Perhaps as a response to Iseke-Barnes’s critique (or others), McDermott’s *Anansi the Spider, A Tale from the Ashanti* (2010) provides a cultural and historical introduction to the Akan of Ghana, as well as commentary on the origins of the Ananse Trickster tales and the integrality of oral arts traditions in Akan society.

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<sup>137</sup> From Lester (1987, xiii): “Between 1896 and 1918, eight volumes of Black folktales as told by Uncle Remus were published. There are 263 tales in these eight volumes, with the inestimable Brer Rabbit as the central character in 113, more or less.”

<sup>138</sup> For more on Disney’s benign narrative of the “Old South” and American enslavement see: Thomas M. Inge, “Song of the South and the Politics of Animation” (2008). As folklorist Sterling Brown writes: “the grown-up slaves were contented, the pickaninnies were frolicking, the steamboat was hooting around the bend, God was in his heaven, and all was right with the world” (Inge, 2015, 65 quoting Brown). Julius Lester noted that at the time of the first publication of the Uncle Remus tales (1876), “Uncle Remus” became a conciliatory symbol: “He was a freed slave who not only had no bitterness toward his former enslavement, but looked back nostalgically to a time he considered better. The white majority could take comfort in Uncle Remus because he affirmed white superiority and confirmed an image of black inferiority many whites needed. Uncle Remus permitted whites to look to the future free of guilt about the past” (Lester 1987, xv).

<sup>139</sup> See, for example, McDermott’s *Zomo the Rabbit* (1992); Kimmel’s *Ananse and the Moss-Covered Rock* (1988), and *Ananse’s Party Time* (2008).

<sup>140</sup> See “Unsettling Fictions: Disrupting Popular Discourses and Trickster Tales in Books for Children,” In *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*; Vol 7, No. 1 (Iseke-Barnes 2009).

African American Trickster tales have been retold through more critical lenses, notably by storytellers and collectors such as Zora Neale Hurston (1935, 1990, 1995), Julius Lester (1969, 1994), Virginia Hamilton (1993, 1996), Simon Brown (via Reverend William J. Faulkner 1993), and Henry Louis Gates, and Maria Tatar (2018). Each of these storyteller-authors set the stage for Tricksters Brer Rabbit, High John the Conquerer, and other plantation hand-heroes to play the role of activists in the pursuit of freedom and justice. Faulkner provides his readers with a very different “Uncle Remus”—the real-life African American storyteller, Simon Brown, born into American enslavement in 1843. Channeling Brown, Faulkner, perhaps more than any other storyteller, brings Brer Rabbit back to his African roots as a guardian of the crossroads and mediator between the sacred and secular worlds.

Levine suggests that the most recognizable Africanisms in Black American story traditions are the Trickster animal tales (1977, 103). On both continents, it is the physically weaker animal that bests his larger, more powerful adversaries through “wit and guile rather than power and authority” (103). Examples are the Hare or Rabbit in East Africa, Angola, and parts of Nigeria; the Tortoise among the Yoruba, Ibo, and Edo peoples of Nigeria; the Spider in much of West Africa,<sup>141</sup> and of course Brer Rabbit in the United States (103). Levine neither negates nor overstates the impact of European folk tales on Black story traditions, noting that a significant number of African American tales were brought directly from Africa and that an equal number show common themes with European folktales (1977, 82). “A careful study of their folklore reveals that they tended to be most influenced by those patterns of Euro-American tales which in terms of functional meaning and aesthetic appeal had the greatest similarity to the tales with deep roots in their ancestral homeland” (82). As a result, Levine contends that tracing exact points of origin should not take precedence over “analysis of their meaning and function” (82).

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<sup>141</sup> Berry (1991, x) comments on the “prose narratives” in the “animal trickster type” that “vary with the fauna of the area in which they are found.” He notes the “spread of Ananse,” to Togoland, where he is found “usurping the position of Soamba, or Hare, among the Dagomba...Spider is frequently accompanied by a secondary trickster of a less malignant (at times, almost loveable) character, as in Sierra Leone” where he is known as “Cunnie, the Rabbit.”

Along with other forms of Black orature, tracing Africanisms in African American story traditions is “a complicated enterprise” (Tatar 2018, lxix). At best, one can only offer evidence of these Tricksters’ “resurrection in the New World” (Tatar 2018, lxv). Research to date, however, strongly indicates that between the continents there are shared story themes, and Tricksters exhibit similar character traits and serve similar social functions. In the processes of remaking their story traditions, whether creating pan-African variations on Trickster themes, or merging them with European and Native American stories, Blacks in America made them their own.<sup>142</sup> As Hurston wrote, “everything that [the African American] touches is reinterpreted for his own use” (Tatar 2018, lxix).

#### *Julius Lester’s Advice for Storytellers*

Some of the stories I present in this chapter have retained their “rough earthiness” (Tatar 2018, lxxii), and may require discretionary use at any grade level. Lest we forget, the intermingling of adult and children’s domains of Black orature blurs their distinctions; as with songs sung in antebellum ring shouts and ring plays, so goes storytelling. “African American folktales are not just for children,” writes Tatar (2018, lxxi). Julius Lester (1939–2018) reminds his readers that the Uncle Remus tales were originally adult stories (1987, xv). Indeed, one of Lester’s goals in retelling the Uncle Remus tales is to affirm that these stories were not intended for the ears of “one little white boy, the son of a plantation owner” but were meant to be told in social gatherings that brought children and adults together. They were told by adults to adults, and if “children were quiet, they might be allowed to listen. Clearly, black folktales were not created and told for the entertainment of little white children, as the Uncle Remus tales would lead one to believe” (Lester 1987, xv).

Lester’s High John and Brer Rabbit stories are presented from a decidedly critical perspective, “for the enjoyment of adults,” with “references that children may not understand” (1987, xx). For example,

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<sup>142</sup> Gates & Tatar (2018, 163–165) include two Cherokee stories resembling the Brer Rabbit tar baby story, from James Mooney’s collection, *Myths of the Cherokee* (1902, 272–274). See also “African Tales Among the North American Indians” in Dundes, *Mother Wit and the Laughing Barrel* (1990, 114–125).

on one of his adventures, Brer Rabbit is “somewhere up around Lost Forty,” a clear reference to the “forty acres and a mule” promise made to freed African Americans at the end of the Civil War—one that was never kept. Lester’s inclusion of the story “Keep On Steppin’” features a plantation hand named Dave who wins his freedom, only to be told by his ex-owner, “*Remember, Dave, you’re still a - - - -!*” (1991 104–107). In his telling of “People Who Could Fly” (1991, 99–103), Lester makes explicit reference to both White-on-Black, and Black-on-White violence.

Lester, however, encourages his readers to make these stories their own, directing that “You, as tellers of these tales should feel free...to omit the contemporary references or descriptions with which you may feel uncomfortable. You are the storyteller, I am merely your guide to these stories” (1987, xx). My only concern with this advice is that future storytellers (teachers) who are uncomfortable with the hard facts of American slavery might choose to omit either parts of stories, or entire stories that reflect badly on Whites and minimizing, for children of all ages, the hard history of White-on-Black violence in America. While the “lost forty” reference can (and should) be explained to children, the use of the “N” word is considerably more problematic. As I have stated elsewhere, the use of this term by Black storytellers, while historically accurate, is a reminder of its historical and contemporary pejorative use by non-Blacks. I am, therefore, omitting terms in this thesis that would not be appropriate in school settings. Antebellum stories can be told without what Geneva Smitherman refers to as “problem words” (1977, 159) and still maintain their potency and relevance as vehicles for teaching freedom.

I have kept to the language and syntax of the Black and/or standard English in these stories as they were printed in secondhand sources. For example, Faulkner, while retaining some of the dialect spoken by Simon Brown, used standard English in the 1993 edition of *When the Animals Talked*. Faulkner’s stated reason for doing so was that he did not want to encourage the use of Black dialect in schools by either Afro-American or Euro-American children (1993, 7). Lester’s versions of the Uncle Remus stories, on the other hand, are updated in “fresh, street-talk language,” and “urban expressiveness” (Lester 1991, New York Times Book Review). While Lester’s stories are told using Black “street talk”

he encourages non-blacks to “see the tales as belonging to them, also” (1991, x). For Lester, Black folktales are “not meant exclusively for blacks. The authentic folktale can never be restricted to [its] place of cultural or geographical origin. By definition, the folktale partakes of the universal (x).”

### *Trickster’s Universal Nature*

On both sides of the Atlantic, Tricksters in Black story traditions are paradoxical figures full of contradictions. Often depicted as a hero of the common people, Trickster is admired for his cleverness and bravery in correcting injustices. Conversely, the Trickster embodies anti-social behaviors such as laziness, gluttony, selfishness, even cruelty (Gates & Tatar 2018, 8). Black Trickster tales can be (and are) interpreted as morality tales lessons that teach expectations for proper behavior. Hence we have the Akan Trickster, Ananse, the Spider, who through his own self-serving schemes finds himself in self-injurious predicaments, beaten up by the victims of his pranks or banished from the community altogether to spend the rest of his days hiding in a corner or a crack in the wall (Berry, 1991: 13, Egblewogbe 1975, 25, Boateng 1990, 112).<sup>143</sup> As didactic tales, the Ananse stories are recognized by Trickster historian Robert D. Pelton as being “important to the upbringing of children...No doubt the stories teach indirect moral and even more subtle structural lessons” (1980, 67).

The shape-shifting Trickster is not unique to Black traditions but follows archetypal Trickster behavior patterns across cultures. In the following passage, Vecsey (1981, 161) reflects on the universality of Trickster’s mercurial nature, which straddles the bridge between the human and divine worlds and the line between right and wrong. As such, the Trickster is a rebellious border crosser who, through his own immoral behavior, sometimes teaches how *not* to behave:

As a folklore figure he is both human and divine, a person and an animal, creative and destructive, a success and failure. His tales are sometimes myths, sometimes legends, sometimes connected with ritual, sometimes not. They can be entertainment, education, a form of humorous rebellion. They can evaluate, explain, and reflect upon realities, thereby making those realities clearer and more profound to the people who tell and hear the tales...By breaking the patterns of a culture the

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<sup>143</sup> There are numerous spellings of this Trickster’s name in literature including Anance, Anancy, Ananci, and Anansi.

Trickster helps define those patterns. By acting irresponsibly, he helps define responsibility. He threatens, yet he teaches, too. He throws doubt on realities but helps concentrate attention on realities. He crosses supposedly unbreakable boundaries between culture and nature, life and death, and thereby draws attention to those boundaries. Societies "not only tolerate" Trickster tales, but "create and recreate" them because they serve the vital purpose of questioning and affirming, casting doubt and building faith upon the most important societal concepts.

### *The Signifying Trickster*

African American Trickster tales are layered with meaning; they are not simply didactic morality plays nor forms of entertainment but are also poetic forms of resistance in which Tricksters act out their role as masterful Signifiers. In her introduction to *The Annotated African American Folktales* (2018, lxxix), Maria Tatar writes that Signifying "is the principal weapon in the arsenal of tricksters, those masters of artifice and duplicity who know exactly how to destabilize authority by undermining fixed meanings."

While Tricksters certainly provided enslaved Africans with an arsenal of poetic weaponry to combat authority figures, their socio-political function was already in place in West African story traditions. African studies and folklore scholar Ivan Van Sertima (1989, 103) explains how the Trickster played and continues to play a revolutionary role in a "more radical and complex sense" in Africa and Black America. This role is rooted in the human psyche's need for freedom from fixed ways of seeing, feeling, thinking, acting; a revolt against a whole complex of 'givens' coded into society, a revolt which may affect not only an oppressed group, class, or race, but a whole order—the settled institutions and repetitive rituals of a whole civilization" (103).

Like other aspects of Trickster's character, the revolutionary attribute is not limited to Black orality, nor is it defined in terms of race. It is, in effect a "revolution of the imagination...the ultimate conflict between man's freedom to remake himself and the world he has already made, which *imprisons* him in the tightly woven fabric of its ritualized reflexes, ideologies, and institutions (Van Sertima 1989, 109).

In *Trickster Makes This World* (1998), Lewis Hyde similarly cautions against reducing African American Trickster tales to stories of the “powerless” or racially oppressed (278). Hyde suggests that Afro-American Trickster stories tap into the deepest, most universal meaning of freedom, the freedom of the “awakened human mind” that has no racial boundaries. To read the Signifying Trickster tales as primarily about race and racism alone is to “fall into the very trap that warns against it” (278). While the “inexorable and punishing Elephant” that the Lion encounters in “The Signifying Monkey” tale “might be white folks,” the Black tale that Signifies on the more powerful adversary is also about

reading the world, a useful skill no matter what your skin color...it might also be the violence of anyone who fails to read the world deeply enough, no matter what the racial situation. African American trickster stories, in one context, are about a particular oppressed people’s refusal to be marginalized; in another context, they are about the freedom of the awakened human mind, a freedom those in power have not necessarily acquired (Hyde 1998, 278).

Thus far, I have endeavored to introduce the Trickster figure in Black orature as a complex character comprising multiple, and dual identities. In West Africa, Tricksters are at once human and divine, selfish social disruptors and social healers, and villains and heroes. These Trickster traits are both universal and yet culturally specific. The universal occurrence of Trickster tales and the common themes they hold does not “render them universally identical” (Levine 1977, 104). Recalling the Anlo-Ewe “mother principal” discussed in Chapter Three, we are reminded that West African oral arts traditions are kept alive through adaptive strategies that allow for change and incorporating present-day life circumstances and events. In his foreword to Faulkner’s *When the Animals Talked*, Spencer Shaw (1993, xii) describes how storytellers are oral recorders of history who “relate to [their] listeners news of an event that may have had a significant effect upon his own or their own lives:

As an oral artist, a teller would be put to the supreme test when it became necessary to fashion a tale in a language and style that harmonized, perfectly, with the culture and the spirit of the people from which the story had come. Although cultures share many universal traits, each group of people fashions its own cultural identity in the evolution of the creative process by extracting needed elements from the varying factors of traditions and social and economic conditions.



Reborn on southern plantations, African Trickster figures were transformed as they adapted to and functioned within the system of American enslavement, thereby becoming culturally specific. In their new environment, Tricksters such as Brer Rabbit and High John the Conquerer leaned further into their ancestral roles as rebel culture heroes, winning against, and outwitting their larger and more powerful adversaries. Now, of course, the ultimate adversary was the White plantation owner and the slave system itself. “Through Brer Rabbit and his tales of daring,” Stuckey writes, “enslaved blacks were able to see themselves not only as morally superior to the white masters, but as ultimately triumphant over them” (1993, xiv).

About Trickster tales as a form of power and resistance, Charles Joyner (1986, 4; 7) writes,

such slave rituals as storytelling functioned to give symbolic form to the validating concepts and beliefs of the slave world view...Not the least important part of the slaves' deft blend of accommodation and resistance, the trickster tales were in fact a crucial element in the development of an adaptive Afro-American culture. That culture was the most significant form of resistance against the spiritual and psychological, if not the physical, effects of slavery.”

In this New World setting, we find the rebel Trickster Brer Rabbit just as inclined, if not more so than his West African cousin, Ananse, to look out for his vulnerable friends and neighbors as he expects to benefit from them. High John, the “slave Trickster,” whether conniving to procure meat and drink for himself, or his own freedom, represents all his enslaved brethren. As Zora Neale Hurston (1990, 543) saw it, High John was “Really winning in a permanent way, for he was winning with the soul of the black man, whole and free.”

Yet these new tales were spun from old cloth, refashioned, and repurposed to meet the needs of people in a radically new and hostile environment. “As interested as they might be in material gains,” Levine (1977, 105) writes,

African Trickster figures were more obsessed with manipulating the strong and reversing the normal structure of power and prestige. Afro-American slaves, cast into a far more rigidly fixed and certainly a more alien authority system, could hardly have been expected to neglect a cycle of tales so ideally suited to their needs.

Ananse, for example, was not, as folklorist and historian Lieke van Duin explains, “too rigidly trapped within his own cultural structure at all” and so, in chameleon-like fashion, adapted to his new diasporic environs (2007, 41).

While van Duin suggests that, once transplanted in the New World, the mythic-religious importance of the Ananse tales was superseded by their function as tales of “solace and protest” (35), I am convinced that the sacred–secular dualities present in West African Trickster figures were retained in their African American incarnations. Brer Rabbit and High John the Conquer are at once human and divine, immoral, and moral. In the New World they continued to act out their two-sided nature but now in the guise of a rabbit and a plantation hand.

#### *A Word on Animal Tricksters as People, Too*

Imagining Tricksters as part human, part animal (High John is, of course, all human) is not a huge leap of faith. Brer Rabbit takes on very human traits, bridging the divide between animal and human nature, “revealing that one is not more ferocious or benevolent than the other” (Gates & Tatar 2018, 4–5). A story of how African American Trickster animals took on human characteristics is well told in Lester’s version of the Uncle Remus story, “How the Animals Came to Earth” (Lester 1987, 1–4). The story explains how Brer Rabbit once lived next door to Sister Moon. The story goes something like this: *Sister Moon had Brer Rabbit run errands on earth. This is where he discovered “Mister Man’s” vegetable gardens, cows, goats, and pigs. After Brer Rabbit and Sister Moon had an argument (which left Brer Rabbit with a split lip and Sister Moon full of holes), Brer Rabbit “jumped down” to earth, taking all the other animals with him. Before long, the formerly cordial relationship between all the animals changed: “Where before they had gotten along with each other, now they started having little arguments. It was only a matter of time before they weren’t much different than people” (4).*

While African and African American animal Tricksters retained enough of their animal characteristics to be recognizable, they were “almost thoroughly humanized. The world they lived in, the rules they lived by, the emotions that governed them, the status they craved, the taboos they feared,

the prizes they struggled to attain were those of the men and women who lived in this world” (Levine 1977, 103).

*Tricksters Old & New: From Divine Cosmology to Earthly Incarnations*

As master Signifiers, High John the Conquerer and Brer Rabbit took their cues from their West African mythological ancestors, becoming mediators between the sacred and secular worlds in a new land. Their stories “migrated right along with the gods to the New World” (Tatar 2018, lxxvi). One of these gods is Eshu Elegbara, the divine Trickster of the Yoruba whom we met in Chapter Three, and whom we revisit in this chapter. The other Trickster figure with divine origins is Kwaku Ananse, the Akan Trickster who receives a fuller introduction below.

As previously noted, establishing direct and differentiated lineages between these African and American Tricksters is a “complicated enterprise,” and moreover, one that is beside the point. What I submit is this: from a pan-Africanist perspective, Eshu and Ananse, having left their respective, culturally specific homelands, had something akin to a conjugal relationship from which emerged two offspring. Admittedly, because Eshu and Ananse share many character attributes to begin with, establishing inherited traits can be a subjective undertaking, just as it is with human progeny. In my own endeavor, I point to the most salient likenesses between these West African Tricksters and to those likenesses that linger in their African American counterparts.

*Kwaku Ananse & Eshu Elegbara*

Ananse (Kwaku Ananse) the Spider is another West African Trickster with roots in West African cosmology, this time in relation to Nyame, the Akan supreme being. Like Eshu Elegbara and Legba in Yoruba and Fon mythologies, Ananse is also a guardian of the crossroads, a “mediator between the human and divine, brokering deals with Nyame, the [Akan] Sky God who has endless patience with his bad manners and impertinence” (Gates & Tatar 2018, 5). According to religion and Trickster historian Christopher Vecsey, Ananse is related to Nyame by name (1981, 166):

Nyame is sometimes known as Ananse Kokuroko, or the Great Spider, and some Akan think of the two as relatives. They also share characteristics. Ananse, Like Nyame, possesses wisdom and prospers by it. One Akan story-teller says of Ananse that “The wisdom of the spider is greater than all the world together”...In one Ashanti myth it is Ananse who fashions man but Nyame must give him life, although other myths have Ananse as the actual creator of the world and man.

Most importantly, Eshu Elegbara and Ananse hold in common their role as keepers of stories.

Eshu, as we recall from Chapter Three, is associated with the “stories of the world,” which are imparted to human beings through the system of divination. As the parabolic story of “Eshu’s Cap” illustrates, Eshu has the power to both disrupt social order and to heal it. Ananse, too, is a weaver of stories that embody the dualities of the Trickster and humanity. According to Gates & Tatar, “It is “no accident that the guardian of stories is embodied in animal form as a spider. Like storytellers, he weaves a fine web of language that captures both the beauty and the horror of human existence” (2018, 4). Pelton (1980, 67) also characterizes Ananse as one of the mythological mediators between Nyame and human beings, one whose special function it is to “show that the passage to new life is also an ongoing story.”

Departing from his likeness to Eshu Elegbara, Ananse’s stories do not have any obvious connection with Akan religious practice or ritual; “they are simply tales” (Vecsey 1981, 167). What multiple *Ananseme* stories do illustrate, however, is Ananse’s close relationship with Nyame, at times subverting the high god’s rule, at others wanting to become him or at least be like him. In one tale, Ananse “wants all the stories to be about himself,” and so he makes a deal with Nyame to exchange animals and nature spirits for all Nyame’s stories. Through trickery and guile, Ananse captures a leopard, a python, hornets, and other animals and brings them to Nyame. All stories then, belong to Ananse and are called *Ananseme* that is, Ananse tales (Vecsey 1981, 167).<sup>144</sup> In another tale, Ananse tries to keep all the wisdom in the world for himself. In the process, the Spider Trickster inadvertently dispenses wisdom to all of humanity (Vecsey 1981, 171).

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<sup>144</sup> In *Zomo the Rabbit: A Trickster Tale from West Africa*, McDermott cites this story as a Yoruba tale. Zomo is also cited as Bantu Trickster tale (<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/files/98.02.04.pdf>).

*Indeed, his wish is to hide all the wisdom of the world from the people. He places it in a pot and tries to carry it to the top of a tree; however, he makes no progress since he is holding the large pot in front of him and his legs cannot reach the tree. His son, spying on him, tells him that it would be better if he carried it on his back. Ananse realizes that he cannot possibly have all the wisdom of the world in his possession since his son obviously is giving him good advice. In anger at his own stupidity, he throws the pot down to the ground. It breaks and its contents scatter to the people.*

And so Ananse, like all Tricksters, gets to break the rules, while his own misconduct illustrates what those rules are. In the context of social mores and in relationship to Nyame, Ananse's role is to be "the exception who probes and proves the rules." Ananse "does not teach morals when he is victorious. It is when he fails that the Akan draw ethical conclusions" (Vecsey 1981, 172–173).

### Stickfast Stories: Ananse, Brer Rabbit & The Tar Baby

#### *Ananse & the "Tar Baby"*

In folkloric terminology, the "Tar Baby" stories featuring Ananse and other West African Trickster figures, and Brer Rabbit fit within a universal archetype known as the "stickfast" theme. In tracing "Tar Baby" to other stickfast stories in West Africa, we find that various sticky figures were not necessarily made of black tar but were often composed of other substances.<sup>145</sup> Gates & Tatar recognize that African tales with "rubber men, tar dolls, and other sticky figures...crossed the Atlantic with slaves and [were] brilliantly mined to create new, socially relevant tales" (2018, 136).

In one Akan stickfast tale, Ananse, after staging his own death and funeral, proceeds to steal yams from his family's garden. To catch the culprit, Ananse's son sets out a life-size, sticky, gluey, rubber figure in the garden, where Ananse finds it on his nightly raid. Angered that there is an unresponsive and, therefore, impolite intruder in the garden, Ananse challenges the dummy and becomes stuck

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<sup>145</sup> See Gates & Tatar (2018, 143–145) for an Ewe Spider story told in Ghana and Togo: Spider gets caught in a sticky dummy and exiles himself to the rooftop eaves in shame. Kwaku Ananse, the Akan "Spider," entraps a Fairy (*Mmoatia*) makes a doll covered with "some sticky fluid" tapped from a tree (Gates & Tatar, 2018, 11). Coleman (2000, 26–27) recounts a Dahomean/Fon tale, "Yo and the Tar Drum" (an Ancestral 'Tar Baby' Story'), featuring the comic/glutton Trickster Yo and his friend Dog, both of whom get stuck on a "tar drum" during their quest to eat the King's wall that is made of food.

“fast” to it through the familiar tar-baby sequence in which hands, feet, and head are used, one by one, to strike the dummy until the Trickster is thoroughly stuck (Vecsey 1981, 173; Berry 1991, 11–12). In the morning, Ananse’s family discovers him and slowly pry him from the scarecrow. In his shame, the Spider runs to his house and does not stop “until he has hidden his face in the eaves of the roof, where the darkness is” (Berry 1991, 12–13; Vecsey 1981, 173; Gates & Tatar 2018, 143–149).

### *The African American “Tar Baby” Story*

The African American Trickster figure, Brer Rabbit is perhaps best known through his encounter with the “Tar Baby” and Brer Wolf, and sometimes Brer Fox. The story “Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby,” unfolds much like it does in the West African stickfast theme, with Brer Rabbit getting his arms and legs stuck, one by one, on the Tar Baby. But Brer Rabbit, as Gates might say, “slips the trap” by convincing Brer Wolf to throw him into the briar patch instead of eating him. When Brer Wolf obliges, Brer Rabbit runs away laughing, ““Tankee, Buh Wolf—a thousand tankee—for *bring me home! De brier-bush de berry place where I was born*” (Gates & Tatar 2018, 155). I will revisit this story theme in more detail further along.

The “Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby” story has undergone a great deal of scrutiny and analysis in literature as an allegorical tale of American enslavement. In reference to Tar Baby’s blackness, Bernard Wolf wrote, “The Negro...is wily enough to escape from the engulfing pit of blackness, although his opponents, who set the trap, do their best to keep him imprisoned in it” (Gates & Tatar 2018, 134).<sup>146</sup> Thus while “Brer Rabbit may not be able to use his brawn to escape the grip of the tar baby...he does cheat a deathtrap through mental agility and the clever use of language” (2018, 135). Levine similarly characterized the Tar Baby stories as “therapeutic exercises offering ‘psychic relief’ and a ‘sense of mastery’ (Levine 1977, 105). These stories were not merely “clever tales of wish

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<sup>146</sup> From Bernard Wolf: *Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit* (1949, 31–41).

fulfillment” but could be “painfully realistic stories which taught the art of surviving and even triumphing in the face of a hostile environment” (Levine 1977, 115).

The Tar Baby story has become somewhat problematic in the United States. That the main character is made of black tar causes the story to be a “sticky subject, especially because of the nexus of associations tied to it, linking blackness with silence and passive-aggressive behavior” (Gates & Tatar 2018, 133). Gates and Tatar do not refute the validity of this interpretation, particularly in the context of White America’s fear of blackness (2018, 140).<sup>147</sup> Despite these pejorative associations, Gates & Tatar contend that “it may be time to reclaim the story, along with the iconic power of the figure at its center” (2018, 140). In doing so, these authors refer to the West African origins of the story, as part of a recovery of the “ancestral past, resurrecting genealogies and histories, along with stories that were once the cultural properties of all African Americans” (140).

*Brer Rabbit & the Tar Baby (w/Brer Wolf & Brer Fox)*

Remixed in the United States, the Tar Baby story undergoes subtle but significant changes. Like Ananse, Brer Rabbit is clever but lazy. However, in Brer Rabbit’s encounter with the Tar Baby, we find a less repentant Trickster. As recounted above, Brer Rabbit is unwilling to help his neighbor Brer Wolf to dig a well. After Brer Wolf digs the well himself, he discovers that someone has been drinking from it; he constructs the Tar Baby trap and Brer Rabbit soon gets stuck just as his West African cousin did. But unlike Ananse, Brer Rabbit’s freedom is not assured—Brer Wolf has plans to kill and devour him. When Brer Rabbit learns of the plan, he convinces Brer Wolf that being thrown in the briar patch would be the worst possible way to die. Unaware that Brer Rabbit was “born in the briar,” Brer Wolf tosses him in the thicket, the place where Brer Rabbit is most at home.

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<sup>147</sup> Gates & Tatar (2018, 140) note that the story about “a rabbit, his antagonist, and the simulacrum designed to ensnare him may have once operated as a popular touchstone, but it has lost its cultural value. U.S. politicians have repeatedly come under critical fire for using a racial slur by invoking the tale.” In his *New Republic* (August 3, 2011) article “Tar Baby’ Isn’t Actually a Racist Slur” (August 3, 2011), John McWhortner suggests that “those who feel that tar baby’s status as slur is patently obvious are judging from the fact that it sounds like a racial slur, because tar is black and baby sounds dismissive” (Gates, 2018, 140 quoting McWhortner).

In Julius Lester's retelling of the Uncle Remus stories, Brer Rabbit retains the qualities of self-serving Trickster, never missing an opportunity for proving his superiority and cleverness over his fellow creatures. He dupes Sister Cow into giving him her milk, tries to beat Turtle in a race, teaches Brer Alligator that he's not as clever as himself, and eats out of everyone else's garden (Lester, 1987). But Brer Rabbit also finds time to protect himself and others from predators such as Brer Fox. Leading up to his encounter with the tar baby, Brer Rabbit is (mostly) minding his own business, trying to keep out of trouble with Brer Fox while saving Sister Goose from getting devoured. In retaliation for warning Sister Goose, Brer Fox sets a Tar Baby trap for Brer Rabbit and the stickfast sequence unfolds (Lester 1987, 4–16). The briar patch formula is replayed and Brer Rabbit “slips the trap.” “*Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox—bred en bawn in a brier-patch!*” en wid dat he skip out des ez lively ez a cricket in de embers” (Gates & Tatar 2018, 159 quoting Harris 1880, 29–31).<sup>148</sup> Here, Brer Rabbit bears no shame; he was, after all, minding his own business and looking out for his neighbor, Sister Goose.

### Brer Rabbit, High John the Conquerer & John and the “Marster” Stories

#### *Simon Brown's Brer Rabbit (Brer Rabbit as Rebel Priest)*

By Stuckey's account, the storyteller Simon Brown's relationship with his African traditional roots was extraordinary and, in many ways, exemplified the role of a West African storyteller and *griot*, or oral historian. Born into enslavement in Virginia in 1843, Brown had a “keen intellect and [an] extraordinary artistic sense.” He absorbed his experiences and put them into his stories “with a faithfulness as exacting as that of the most gifted historian” (Stuckey 1987, 33–34). Later, as a freed man, Brown lived in South Carolina, helping the Faulkner family work their small farm in Society Hill, South Carolina (Faulkner 1993, 3). Brown's legacy and stories were passed on, through oral

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<sup>148</sup> From: Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: The Folklore of the Old Plantation* (1880).



tradition, to his young apprentice, William J. Faulkner. Faulkner later recorded Brown’s oral histories and fables his collection, *The Days When the Animals Talked* (1993).

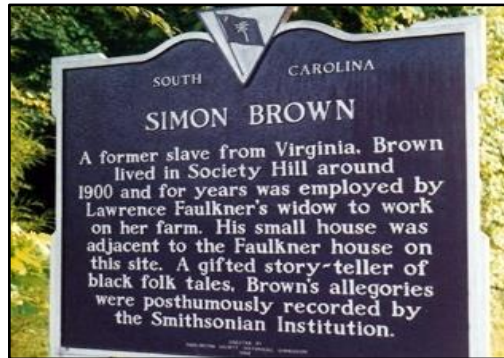


Figure 5–1: Simon Brown Roadside Marker; Society Hill, South Carolina (Photo, Darlington County Historical Commission & Museum)<sup>149</sup>

In his foreword to Faulkner’s collection, Sterling Stuckey writes that Brown was “virtually singing” his stories and that his “recreation of the events, personalities, and atmosphere of thirty years of slavery” constitute an “invaluable resource for those who would understand slavery and its consequences today” (1993, xvii–xviii). In Faulkner’s own words,

One point I wish to reemphasize is that all of the folklore of black Americans—their stories and songs, both religious and secular—and their dances served centrally to sustain them as human beings while they endured bitter humiliation and extreme suffering... A few of the tales related here are humorous, told simply to produce laughter, add spice to life, and banish boredom and fatigue. But most have a serious purpose underlying them. Some are moral tales used to teach right from wrong and to exercise control over children and young people... But perhaps the most important tales are those that reveal the black hatred of the slave system, their capacity to outwit it, and their secret call to overthrow it... Several of Simon Brown’s stories of protest and social action among creatures of the Deep Woods exemplify this point – and clearly reveal Simon’s own smoldering resentment of the slave system (1993, 72).

The first half of Faulkner’s collection is dedicated to real life events including the stories, “How the Slaves Worshipped” and “How the Slaves Helped Each Other,” as well as real and imagined heroic tales of how the enslaved escaped from bondage and avoided, at all costs, getting whipped. It is in Simon’s Brer Rabbit tales, however, where we see Trickster-as-folk hero combined with the role of

<sup>149</sup> <https://dchcblog.net/simon-brown/>

political/religious leader, fully formed as a secular-sacred border crosser. Stuckey (1987, 288) equates Brer Rabbit's role in the Brown/Faulkner tales to that of a priest:

In Reverend Faulkner's tales, the religious leader is personified by Brer Rabbit in one tale after another, especially in those in which Brer Rabbit is the defender of the interests of the weak and defenseless. While Faulkner does not present him without flaws, Brer Rabbit's overwhelming concerns are ethical, his principal function that of forwarding the struggle for communal freedom, attributes hardly at variance with those that [W.E.B.] Dubois ascribed to the slave priest.<sup>150</sup>

*"Brer Rabbit's Protest Meeting"*

The gist of "Brer Rabbit's Protest Meeting" (Faulkner 1993, 115–121) is that Brer Rabbit is increasingly angry that he and all the other short-tails in the forest could not whisk away pests like their long-tail neighbors. "Always a leader," Brer Rabbit convenes a meeting at the "Big House" with the short-tails to talk about petitioning God for to lengthen their tails. This greatly upsets Brer Lion and Brer Tiger, who were worried that the short-tails might want to "chop off pieces of our long tails and give them to those other creatures." Thinking they "couldn't stand for a meeting like that" Brer Lion and Brer Tiger called upon all the longtails to "break up the convention." Being larger, louder, and more numerous than the short-tails, they succeed in doing so. This initiative was led by Brer Lion:

*"Bam, bam, bam went the gavel. Then Brer Lion spoke up, "Brer Rabbit, I don't recognize any short-tail creatures in this meeting. Now, Brer Raccoon has made a motion that I recognize, and Brer Tiger has seconded it. Let's get on with business that's before us. All in favor of keeping the short-tails from voting in this convention say aye...There isn't anybody—and I mean anybody—who's going to trouble the Good Lord about anything. Everything is all right just the way it is. We are not going to stand for any changes...Now Brer Tiger and Brer Panther, I order you to clear all the short tails from the house."*

But before the order could be carried out, Brer Rabbit and all the short-tails marched out of the Big House with their heads held high. Once outside, Brer Rabbit spoke to all the short-tails:

*"There isn't any justice in this land. The big long-tail creatures are the most, and they run over us who are the least. They don't even want us to tell our troubles to*

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<sup>150</sup> Stucky (1987, 289) cites W.E.B. Dubois's interpretation of the "chief remaining institution" of the "Priest or Medicine Man...the healer of the sick the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people."

*the Lord. But this time they've gone too far, for no creature can stop another creature from talking to the Good Lord. We'll just keep on working and praying for him to deliver us from our misery, and one day, by and by, He will answer our prayer, and that's for sure.*

Simon's tales are modern examples of the ways in which African and African American storytelling traditions are always in flux, sustained and maintained through constant reinvention. As such, this protest story can be seen as a remix of another Brer Rabbit story, "Hankering for a Long Tail," now infused with Brown's "smoldering resentment" of the slave system.<sup>151</sup> In alignment with critical race theory in education, Brown's "Brer Rabbit and the Protest Meeting" could supplement lessons about the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment enacted in 1870, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the resurgence of voter suppression in the twenty-first century. Considering the White supremacist take-over of the Washington Capitol building on January 6, 2021, "Brer Rabbit's Protest Meeting" reads like contemporary historical fiction.

*"Brer Tiger and the Big Wind"*

Brer Rabbit and the short-tails failed to win this round with the long-tails at the protest meeting, but Brer Rabbit, always on the lookout to save himself and his compatriots, succeeds in out-besting Brer Tiger in another tale. In Brown's rendition of "Brer Tiger and the Big Wind" (Faulkner 1993, 89–94), Brer Tiger hordes the only source of food and water during a famine: a single well-fruited pear tree. Standing priest-like on a stump, Brer Rabbit gathered all the animals around him and proclaimed, "It's not right for one animal to have it all and the rest to have nothing." Brer Rabbit then assigned each animal a part to play in a scheme to trap Brer Tiger. The animals positioned themselves in the deep woods, ready to enact their mission: Brer Bear banged on trees, Brer Buzzard, Brer Eagle, and Brer Chicken Hawk flapped their wings and shook branches, and low-lying creatures caused the ground to shudder until all the "trees were a-bending and the leaves were a-flying." Convinced that a

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<sup>151</sup> A version of "Hankering for a Long Tail" appears in Abrahams (1985, 53–62).

big storm was coming, Brer Tiger allowed Brer Rabbit to tie him to a tree so he wouldn't blow away. Once Brer Tiger was tied up, Brer Rabbit called the animals in from the forest. Like a preacher, Brer Rabbit spoke to his "children" (Faulkner 1993, 94):

*Look, there's our great Brer Tiger. He had all the pears and all the drinking water and all of everything, enough for everybody. But he wouldn't give a bite of food or drop of water to anybody, no matter how much they needed it. So now, Brer Tiger, you must stay there until those ropes drop off of you. And you, children, gather up your crocus sacks and water buckets. Get all the pears and drinking water you want, because the Good Lord doesn't love a stingy man. He put the food and water here for all His creatures to enjoy." After all the animals had filled their sacks and buckets, they joined in a song of thanks to the Lord for their leader, Brer Rabbit, who had shown them how to work together to defeat their enemy, Brer Tiger.*

In both "Brer Rabbit's Protest Meeting" and "Brer Tiger and the Big Wind," Brer Rabbit emerges as religious leader, a mediator between the short-tails and the "Good Lord." Enter now, High John the Conquerer, who demonstrates this same ability to mediate between the forces that be, whether on earth, Heaven, or Hell.

### *High John the Conquerer*

In High John the Conquerer, we get a Trickster hero in human form. In some tales High John serves as a spiritual guide, carrying the enslaved on mythical journeys to Heaven and Hell and back, freeing his brethren. In other tales "John" is just another enslaved worker, "hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick," winning freedom, leisure time, and food (especially meat) in very human-like fashion, through cunning, humor, and sometimes sheer, dumb luck. Playing "stolidly stupid" was, according to Gates & Tatar (2018, 351), "one of the few strategies available under the plantation system for avoiding punishment." In this guise, "John" is a more down-to-earth plantation hero, just trying to survive the everyday hostilities and inhumanities perpetrated through slavery.

Gates & Tatar suggest that John, the plantation hand in the "John & Old Marster" tales, is a "spin-off of the mythical High John de Conquerer referred to by Zora Neale Hurston as a 'hope-bringer'" but that it is not altogether clear if the John of the Old Master tales is "related structurally to High John the

Conquerer.”<sup>152</sup> Nevertheless, these authors allow that both “John” figures are “united by their resourcefulness and ability to ‘conquer,’ as it were, in the face of circumstances that were designed to vanquish the body and soul” (Gates & Tatar 2018, 349).

I suggest that High John the Conquerer and John the plantation hand are one and the same, that the divine, mythological, and earthly attributes of this fascinating Trickster figure are carried out in all the “John” stories, whether he is flying to “high” mythical places or keeps his feet firmly on the ground. Like Brer Rabbit, High John provided the enslaved with hope for both spiritual and earthly freedom, whether through divine feats or those lesser ones that are humanly possible. Still, whether working his mojo from the ground or from the treetops, John the plantation hand still manages to connect with the spirit world.

As Hurston wrote, “High John the Conquerer was a man in full and had come to live and work on the plantations, and all the slave folks new him in the flesh” (Bordelon 1999, 78; Dundes 1990, 542). In this passage, Hurston merges Brer Rabbit and High John into one humorous Trickster-hero figure winning against “Old Massa” (Dundes 1990, 543):

Old Massa met our hope-bringer all right, but when Old Massa met him, he was not going by his right name. He was traveling, and touring around the plantations as the laugh-provoking Brer Rabbit. So Old Massa and Old Miss and their young ones laughed with and at Brer Rabbit and wished him well. And all the time, there was High John de Conquer playing his tricks of making a way out of no way. Hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick. Winning the jackpot with no other stake but a laugh. Fighting a mighty battle without outside-showing force, and winning his war from within. Really winning in a permanent way, for he was winning with the soul of the black man, whole and free.

As an entity unto himself, High John was even more accessible to enslaved Africans than the animal Trickster because he was a man (Joyner, 1986, 7):

Unlike Buh Rabbit, the slave trickster John was neither allegorical nor remote. He expressed the values and attitudes of his fellow slaves directly. In his inevitable victories over the more powerful master (and thus over the slave system), John provided his fellow slaves with perspective by incongruity. Buh Rabbit tales might

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<sup>152</sup> See also: Levine (1977, 121), for his take on the “fooling master” tales.

be narrated to the master's family as well as to one's fellow slaves, but the John tales were for telling only within the slave community. He expressed in symbolic action their plight and their hope, and thus their very identity.

*High John & Eshu Elegbara*

In her article, "The Yoruba and Afro-American Trickster; A Contextual Comparison," Diedre Badejo (1988) makes a compelling case for linking High John the Conquerer to Eshu Elegbara and the animal Trickster, Ijapa, the Tortoise. Like Ijapa, High John acquires food (preferably meat) and other benefits from his adversaries, i.e., the plantation owners. Like other animal Tricksters in Black orature, Ijapa often seeks these benefits without having to work for them. High John, too, looks out for himself, avoids work, and wins food, leisure time, and even freedom from the "massa" through his cleverness and humorous escapades. The difference between them is that High John's main objective is to escape oppression, while Ijapa's is to escape responsibility (Badejo 1988, 11). Thus while High John seeks escape from work he also, like Brer Rabbit in Simon Brown's stories, "symboliz[es] an inversion of the mundane trickster from a selfish to a witty character whose actions benefit his companions" (6).

In further comparison to Eshu Elegbara, Badejo writes that while High John "has a foot" in both the sacred and secular worlds, he exists outside the formal West African sacred rites and customs associated with divinities like Eshu Elegbara. High John, therefore, had to "play both sides, so to speak" (1988, 5). Badejo's insights ring true; considerable spiritual power was invested in High John. In fact, he also appears in the New World as a divine conduit, taking the form of a root used in "hoodoo-conjuration root-work" (Dundes 1990, 542).<sup>153</sup> In a study of this religious practice, Harry Middleton Hyatt indicates that people who sought possession of the "High John de Conker root" would have "individual power over a boss" (Dundes 1990, 542). Hurston similarly described a practice

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<sup>153</sup> From Hyatt's *Hoodoo-Conjuration-Witchcraft-Rootwork*, vol. I; (1970, 593–595). Dundes (1990, 542) suggests that "Additional fieldwork is needed to determine whether the association of John the Conquer root with John the trickster figure is truly traditional or whether it is a striking example of poetic license [on the part of Zora Neale Hurston]" (brackets, mine).

whereby those “thousands upon thousands of humble people” who still believe in High John do him reverence

by getting the root of the plant in which he has taken up his secret dwelling, and “dressing” it with perfume, and keeping it on their person, or in their houses in a secret place. It is there to help them overcome things they feel they could not beat otherwise, and to bring them the laugh of the day. John will never forsake the weak and the helpless, nor fail to bring hope to the hopeless... Things are bound to come out right tomorrow. That is the secret of Negro song and laughter (1990, 548).

It is not surprising then, that enslaved Africans recreated their ancestral Tricksters and their escapades in the New World, investing them with the power to heal. In the “Introduction” to *The Days When the Animals Talked* (1993), Faulkner writes that those enslaved Africans who survived the Atlantic voyage “met the powerful armed force of the slave system with a matching degree of soul force, which enabled them not only to live, but to multiply... Religious faith, indeed, strengthened the black peoples’ will to survive—and to triumph” (4–5). The voice of that soul force was found in the slaves’ religious songs and folktales through which they commented on the “good and evil in their lives... there, tucked among innocent-sounding praises to God and descriptions of antic animals, were veiled protests against slavery and a deep-seated faith that all slaves would one day be free” (4–5). Through their stories, plantation hands could “talk with God” and hence felt superior or “closer to God” than Whites (Faulkner 1993, 4). Hurston describes the pride that plantation hands felt relationally to High John (from Dundes 1990, 542):

John de Conquer was a bottom fish. He was deep. He had the wisdom tooth of the East in his head. Way over there, where the sun rises a day ahead of time, they say that Heaven arms with love and laughter those it does not wish to see destroyed. He who carries his heart in his sword must perish. So says the ultimate law. High John de Conquer knew a lot of things like that. He who wins from within is in the “Be class.” *Be* here when the ruthless man comes, and *be* here when he is gone.

This same sense of pride emerges in one of Simon Brown’s stories in which plantation hands, through their relationship with High John, find a “song of salvation” that lightens their load while they toil in the fields (Faulkner 1993, 5). Looking toward the “massa” sipping mint juleps on his veranda, the crew leader says, “*In a way, I feel sorry for that white man, because he’s not on speaking terms with God. He’s a lost soul*” (1993, 5).

As part of her fieldwork with the Florida Federal Writer's Project (1938–39) Hurston interviewed “Aunt Shady Anne Sutton,” who was born just after the “Big Surrender” (emancipation). Aunt Shady Anne's story, passed down to her from her mother, depicts High John the Conquer in a very Eshu-like position—at the crossroads of Heaven and Earth. Like Eshu, High John plays the role of messenger of the high god (in this case, the Christian God) and guardian of destiny, more specifically, the destiny of an enslaved people with their minds on freedom (Hurston 1995, 852):<sup>154</sup>

Of course, High John de Conquer got plenty power!...Sho John de Conquer means power. That's bound to be so. He come to teach and tell us...Now back there in slavery time, us didn't have no power of protection, and God knowed it, and put us under watch-care...My momma told me...how High John de Conquer helped us out. He had done teached the black folks so they knowed a hundred years ahead of times that freedom was coming...They think they knows, but they don't. John de Conquer had done put it into the white folks to give us our freedom, that's what. Old Massa fought against it, but us could have told him it wasn't no use. Freedom just *had* to come. The time set aside for it was there.

Comparisons of High John to West African divine mythology are even more striking when he traverses Heaven and Hell, taking on both God and the Devil. This role is vividly illustrated in a salvation story relayed by Hurston, an elaborate version of the Simon Brown “song of salvation” story told above.<sup>155</sup> In Hurston's telling (from Dundes 1990, 547–548), High John frees his fellow plantation hands from their labors, taking them on a great adventure on the back of a black crow so big that “one wing rested on the morning, while the other dusted off the evening star.” Before they leave, John tells them to put on their finest “raiments,” because their ultimate destination is Heaven. On the way, they take a detour in Hell where John (“under the name of Jack”) marries the Devil's daughter, runs for the seat of “High Chief Devil,” and wins the election.<sup>156</sup> From there, High John and his companions fly across the ocean, all “pearly blue...like ten squillion big pearl jewels dissolved in running gold,” and

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<sup>154</sup> “High John the Conquerer,” in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* Hurston (1995), a compilation of Hurston's major works, available online (1,001 pages, see this thesis “References”). “High John the Conquerer” is reprinted in Dundes (1990, 544–555).

<sup>155</sup> No title is given for this story in Dundes (1990, 547–548).

<sup>156</sup> This portion of the story appears as “John and the Devil's Daughter” in Hamilton's *The People Could Fly* (1987, 107–115). See also, “Jack and the Devil” (Hamilton 1993, 126–132).



then on to Heaven in search of a song that will “whip Old Massa’s earflaps down.” In Heaven, the travelers walk on streets that sing and receive “shining new instruments to play on. Guitars of gold, and drums, and cymbals and wind-singing instruments.” The “Old Maker” makes a tune and puts it in their mouths, and they learn it and begin to sing. Before too long, Old Massa and Old Miss realize their plantation hands, who were supposed to have been back before supper, have been away a long time. When Old Massa and Old Miss call them back to the fields to finish chopping cotton, High John instructs his fellow workers:

*Don’t tell them nothing. Nobody don’t have to know where us gets our pleasure. Come on, pick up your shoes and let’s go.” They all began to laugh and grabbed up their hoes and started out. “Ain’t that funny?...Us got all the advantage, and Old Massa think he got us tied!” The crowd broke out singing as they went off to work. The day didn’t seem hot like it had before. Their gift song came back into their memories in pieces, and they sang about glittering new robes and harps, and the work flew.*

#### *“John & the Marster” Stories*

In the “John & Marster” stories, High John, now known simply as “John,” comes down to earth. He cannot fly on the wings of a black crow that stretch from dawn to dusk, nor can he take his fellow plantation hands to Heaven where they walk on singing streets like “Amen Avenue” and “Hallelujah Street” (see Dundes 1990, 547). Instead, John plays the part of a regular plantation hand, albeit one endowed with extraordinary verbal wit, humor, and courage—all traits that enable him to stage elaborate tricks and jokes on the “massa.” John curries “massa’s” favor by working especially hard every now and then and sometimes by making him laugh.<sup>157</sup> Even in his mortal state, John is known as the “conjure man” and manages to connect with divine powers.

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<sup>157</sup> Two good examples of how John and other plantation hand-heroes win their freedom by jokes and a laugh are “A Laugh That Meant Freedom” (Hughes & Bontemps 1958, 67) and the story about “stealing pigs,” told by Hurston in Dundes, *Mother Wit and the Laughing Barrel* (Dundes 1990, 545–546). In the Simon Brown tale, “A Riddle for Freedom,” a “plow hand” named “Jim” wins his freedom by telling a riddle that his “massa” can’t solve (Faulkner 1993, 66–70). Gates and Tatar (2018) suggest that such tales can be seen as “moving in the direction of counterfactual” (351) they may also be interpreted as “symbolic denials of White southerners claim of any kind of inherent superiority over blacks (Gates & Tatar 2018, quoting historian Brice Dixon in “The John and Old Master Stories and the World of Slavery: A Study in Folktales and History” in *Phylon* 35 (1974): 429.

In a series of tales described as the “*folkloric motif of ‘man behind the statue (trees) speaks and pretends to be God’*” (Gates & Tatar 2018, 363), John may convince “Massa” that he is clairvoyant and has a direct line to the lord or, as is the case with the story “Philanewyork,” both (from Hurston in Bordelon 1999, 78–83). The two parts to the story sometimes appear in collections as separate tales.<sup>158</sup> Hurston tells the story in full. What follows is an abridgement of Hurston’s version (Bordelon 1999, 78–82). In the first section, clairvoyancy is John’s “trick.”

Seeking to profit from John’s special powers, “Massa” makes a wager with a neighbor that he can prove that High John is clairvoyant. Outside of John’s view, “Massa” and his neighbor conceal a raccoon in a pot. They tell John that if he can reveal what is in the pot, “Massa” wins his neighbor’s plantation. If not, John’s “massa” must give up his. “Massa” also tells John that if he loses the bet, he will kill him. Having no idea what is hidden in the pot, John finally gives up, scratches his head, and says, “You finally got the old coon this time.”<sup>159</sup>

Of course, because John has inadvertently identified what was in the pot, “Massa” wins the bet and rewards John with one hundred dollars and his freedom. “Massa” and his wife then take a trip to “Philanewyork,” leaving High John in charge of everything. John invites all his friends over to the “Big House,” and they have a grand time helping themselves to “Massas” meat, drink, and fine cigars. The jig is up when “Massa” and “Missus” come home unexpectedly—the trip to Philanewyork was in fact a ruse to test John. “Massa” then takes John’s freedom away saying, “I’m going to take you out to that big old persimmon tree and kill you.” But John has a plan to outwit “Massa” and asks if he can pray in front of the tree where he is to be killed. On that day, John’s friend hides in the tree and strikes matches every time John asks for a sign from god (e.g., “O Lord, if you mean to stop Massa from

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<sup>158</sup> Similar to the Hurston variant is “Old Boss and John at the Praying Tree” in Gates & Tatar (2018, 362–363). The first part of the “Philanewyork” story is printed in Hamilton “A Most Useful Slave” (1993, 160). A shorter version of the “man behind the tree” segment is printed as “Philanewyork” in Abrahams (1985, 291). For a different, equally elaborate story in which John pretends to have supernatural powers, see “They Both Had Dead Horses” (Abrahams 1985, 270).

<sup>159</sup> I will add here, and I think Lester would approve, the racist term “coon,” can be omitted by having a fox, instead of a raccoon, hidden away. John’s final words would then be, “*You finally outfoxed the old fox this time.*”

hanging me, give me a sign and “O Lord, if you mean to kill Ole Massa tonight, give me another sign)” Seeing flashes of light in the tree after each prayer, the now fearful “Massa” tells John he doesn’t need to pray anymore. “And after that, he give John and everybody else they freedom and that is how Negroes got their freedom—because John fooled Ole Massa so bad” (Bordelon 1999, 78–82).

*“Keep On Steppin”*

Numerous stories about gaining freedom or getting to heaven involve High John as well as other plantation hands or “plain folk” such as “Dave,” or “Tom.”<sup>160</sup> In Julius Lester’s version of “Keep on Stepping,” the plantation hand Dave stands in as the Signifying Trickster (1969, 104–107). As the story goes, Dave had been “slaving” for a plantation family his whole life. One day, the master’s children were rowing in a boat on a nearby pond. When the boat capsizes, Dave jumps into the water and saves the children. The grateful master tells Dave that he will give him his freedom but only if he brings in a good crop in the coming year (as if saving his children wasn’t enough) (1991, 105). And so, Dave works hard for a full year, brings in a good crop, and wins his freedom. As he starts off on his journey to Canada, “Massah” calls after him:

*“Dave! The children love you. I love you, and missy, she like you. But remember, Dave! You still a -----! Dave would holler back, “Yassuh,” but he kept right on stepping until he got to Canada. Even though Massah had let Dave’s body go free, he still wanted to keep him a slave by yelling, “Remember, you still a -----.” (Lester 1969, 105–107).*

Lester’s version is notable in that, at the part of the story when Dave doggedly goes about working another year to earn his freedom, the narrator chides Dave for not being enough like High John, who might have figured out a way to get his freedom without having to work an extra year for it. As Lester

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<sup>160</sup> For more High John stories and other plantation hands and freed men “playing” in Heaven or Hell, see “A Flying Fool” (Gates & Smith, 2014, 66, and Abrahams 1985, 280); “John Outruns the Lord” (Abrahams 1985, 278); “The Man Who Went to Heaven From Jamestown,” and “Big Sixteen” (Hughes & Bontemp 1958, 61, 127). In Hurston’s collection of tales from the WPA/Florida Writer’s Project, John, Jack, Big John de Conquer, and a prison-hero named “Daddy Mention” also traverse through mythical places known as “Diddy-Wah-Diddy,” “Beluthahatche,” and “West Hell” (Bordelon 1999, 68–69; 106–11).

comments, “Dave wasn’t like that...he’d probably been working in the sun too long and couldn’t think straight” (1969, 105). In other words, Dave wasn’t Signifying enough. Still, Dave gets his freedom and doesn’t look back. Lester’s commentary brings the story current:

You ain’t free long as you let somebody else tell you who you are. We got black people today walking around in slavery ‘cause they let white folks tell ‘em who they are. But you be like Dave. Just keep on stepping, children, when you know you’re right. Don’t matter what they yell after you. Just keep on stepping (1969, 104–107).

While the language in some of Lester’s stories may not be appropriate for school settings, “Keep on Steppin’” can still be told, even to young children and young adults with modifications but without ignoring the institutional violence of enslavement.<sup>161</sup> Written in the present tense, not the historical past, the final words spoken by Dave’s “massa” are clear: slavery might be over, but racial prejudice is still with us. Concededly, the use of the racially charged “N” word is problematic and would have to be creatively navigated to retain its impact. The line, “*Remember, you still a -----!*” could be changed, for example, to “*Remember, you still can’t vote!*” or “*You still ain’t gonna get your forty acres!*” Recalling the earlier discussion of presenting “hard history” to students, an appropriately modified *Keep On Steppin’* could provide a *Sankofa* teaching moment in which we look to the past to see how it informs the present, and the future.

### Flying Africans

In antebellum stories flight is a frequent metaphor for freedom. As we have seen in the High John tales, flight is possible with the aid of mythological Tricksters. But even High John needed help flying when he carried all those people to Heaven and Hell on the back of a crow. In Virginia Hamilton’s “John and the Devil’s Daughter,” High John first needs to find the “witch lady” before he can find the devil. The witch lady “had this giant bird. Call him a great big kinda eagle.” And so, John, flies off on the witch’s eagle to beat the Devil, and marry his daughter (Hamilton 1993, 107).

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<sup>161</sup> The “N” reference is not Lester’s invention as it is used earlier printings of the story. See “John Saves Old Master’s Children” in Courlander (1976, 429).

While themes of human flight are not common occurrences in West African mythology, Lorna McDaniel (1990) observes that there is the belief that witches and spirits possess the power of flight. That belief, “ubiquitous in Black communities expanded in the New World, parallels that in African thought, but in the New World, it is enlarged to include humans as possessors of the capability of flight” (33). This belief in the power of humans to fly is in full evidence in the opening lines of the famous story, “All God’s Chillen Had Wings” (from Bennet & Eichelberger 2020, 119–122):

*Once all Africans could fly like birds; but owing to their many transgressions, their wings were taken away. There remained, here and there, in the sea islands and the out-of-the-way places in the low-country, some who had been overlooked, and had retained the power of flight, though they looked like other men.<sup>162</sup>*

Many such stories of flight back to Africa are transcribed in *Drums & Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Sea Coastal Negroes* (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940). This theme of flight remains a constant throughout the stories, as illustrated in this account from James Moore, of Tin City, Georgia (1940, 20):

*Deah’s lots uh strange tings dat happen. I seen folks dissapeah right fo muh eyes. Jis go right out uh sight. Dey do say dat people brought frum Africa in slabery times could dissapeah an fly right back tuh Africa. From duh tings I see mysef I bliebed dat dy could do dis.*

The “flying back to Africa” theme has been linked to the real-life story that took place at “Igbo Landing” at Dunbar Creek, Georgia, in 1803, an event that illustrates both the “indomitable spirituality” and the “depth of suffering and despair” among captives bound for the New World (McDaniel 1990, 33; Gomez 2005, 130). In the Igbo Landing event approximately seventy-five Igbo (Ibo) captives were being carried on a ship from what is now Nigeria to Savannah, Georgia. While the exact sequence of events is unclear, it is known that the captives rebelled, seized control of the ship, and forced their captors overboard. The Igbos “then either jumped overboard and drowned or ‘took to the swamp’ and committed suicide collectively” (Gates & Tatar 2018, 68). Suicide, as both a logical and ideological choice was often embraced by those enslaved Africans who believed that the soul

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<sup>162</sup> “As told by Caesar Grant, of John’s Island, carter and carpenter” (Bennet & Eichelberger 2020, 122).

returns to ancestral lands after the death of the body (McDaniel 1990, 33; Gates & Tatar, 68). As McDaniel (1990, 32) explains, a variant of the “Flying African” story mythologizes the incident involving the Igbos “who walked singing into the water at Dunbar Creek, Georgia.” This story is reported by one “culture bearer” from Georgia (McDaniel 1990, 33, from Georgia Writers' Project 1940:185):

Heahd bout duh Ibo Landing? Das duh place wea dey bring duh Ibos obuh in a slabe ship an wen dey git yuh, dey ain lak it an so dey all staht singin an dey mahch right down in duh ribbah tuh mahch back tuh Africa, but dy ain able tuh git deah. Dey gits drown.

While many of the “Flying African” stories were recorded for the Georgia Writer’s Project, this tale type was common among enslaved African communities throughout the diaspora (Gates & Tatar 2018, 65):

Stories about literal flight from punishing labor in the fields can be found everywhere in the diaspora, with two different narrative twists on that miraculous feat. In the first, newly arrived Africans take one look at the conditions facing them in the New World and turn their backs on slavery. Dismayed and revolted, they take wing and fly back across the ocean. In the other, an African Shaman, or other charismatic figure chants verses to physically depleted slaves laboring in the fields and enables them to fly. Like the lead bird in migratory formation, he brings them back home.

*The People Could Fly (“All God’s Chillen Got Wings”)*

The best-known Flying African tale appears in Hamilton as “The People Could Fly” (1993, 166–173), and in Lester (1969, 99–103) as “People Who Could Fly.” The story was originally titled, “All God’s Chillen Had Wings,” and was told to John Bennett by Cesar Grant, a carter and laborer from John’s Island, South Carolina in 1907. It was first published in Bennett’s *Doctor to the Dead* (1946), a compilation of narratives collected by the author from first and second generation free-men and free-women in the Gullah communities of South Carolina at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Out of concern for

negative stereotyping or what he called making an “unintended jest of dignity,” Bennett transcribed all the stories in standard English (Bennett 1946, xxxi).<sup>163</sup>

In all versions of “The People Could Fly,” enslaved men and women are positioned as freedom fighters—agents of change from the get-go, turning southern plantations into sites of resistance. This story and its many variants suggest that the ability to persevere under the oppressive conditions of slavery was aided by a belief in the power of spiritual flight and the power of ancestral memory. In Lester’s version, Africans did not just dream of flying away but physically fought their overseers and the whip (Lester 1969, 99):

Many refused [to work], and they were killed. Others would work, but when the white man’s whip lashes their backs to make them work harder, they would turn and fight. And some of them killed the white men with the whips. Others were killed by the white men. Some would run away and try to go back home, back to Africa where there were no white people...Some of them who tried to go back would walk until they came to the ocean, and then they would walk into the water, and no one knows if they did walk to Africa through the water or if they drowned. It didn’t matter, at least they were no longer slaves.

As the story is usually told, a young pregnant mother drops from exhaustion while working in the fields but is whipped by the “driver” and forced to continue. An elder African working beside her—one endowed with the ancient wisdom of the power of words—whispers an incantation in her ear. In turn, she whispers it to her fellow workers, who whisper it to others until all those working in the field knew the magic words. Just as she is about to be whipped again, the elder shouts,

“Now! Now! Everyone!” He uttered the strange word, and all of the Africans dropped their hoes, stretched out their arms, and flew away, back to their home, back to Africa...Maybe one morning someone will awake with a strange word on his tongue and, uttering it, we will all stretch out our arms and take to the air, leaving these blood-drenched fields of our misery behind (Lester 1969, 102–103).

Neither the original “All God’s Chillen Had Wings” nor Hamilton’s “The People Could Fly” suggests militant retaliation against Whites from Black plantation workers. As previously noted,

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<sup>163</sup> The story’s first title was “Wings of Rest,” and retitled as “All God’s Chillen Had Wings” the *Yale Law Review* in 1943 (Bennett & Eichelberger 2020, xvi). “All God’s Chillen Had Wings” appear in Hughes & Bontemp (1958, 62–65), and Gates & Tatar (2018, 73–76).

Lester's stories do not hold back from explicit depictions of White-on-Black, or Black-on-White violence during American slavery. Lester clearly wants his readers to know the harsh reality of the whip and that when song, prayer, and stories of mythological flight were not enough, despair turned into anger, and anger into physical resistance.

### Stories from the *Telling Stories II* Project (2016)

In this section, I present the outcomes of three story sessions that were part of the *Telling Stories II* project I implemented at my school in 2016. As part of his three-day residency, Mr. Tejumola Ologboni gave an all-school performance which included the origin/Trickster tale, *The "Buzzard and the Monkey."* In a third-grade story writing workshop, Mr. Ologboni (Teju) had students write their own endings to the story. Teju also provided a storytelling workshop for adult family members in one of the "Adult Dinner Workshops" I created for the project. In that session, adult family members created a group story based on the theme "New Beginnings." In addition, Della Wells, a Milwaukee-based collage artist, created four large mural collages with students, grades K–5, based on the theme, "My Education Can Make Me Fly." These story projects, featured below, illustrate some of the ways in which students and family members shared life experiences touching on themes of social justice and equity.

#### *Teju & "The Buzzard and the Monkey"*

In his story-writing workshops in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classrooms, Teju reviewed *The Buzzard and the Monkey* story that he had presented at the beginning of his residency in an all-school program. He then gave students a writing prompt: "The Buzzard & The Monkey with a Twist." With this prompt, students were asked to write their own, original endings for the tale. Here's an abridged version of "The Buzzard & The Monkey," as told by Teju:

A squirrel, a rabbit and several other small animals are fooled by Buzzard into taking a ride on his back, only to become Buzzard's dinner. In hiding, Monkey, watches his animal friends get tricked (and eaten) by Buzzard, and decides to do



something about it. Monkey lets Buzzard take him for a ride; when they are high in the air, Buzzard suddenly swoops downward. Just as Buzzard is about to throw Monkey to the ground, Monkey wraps his tail around Buzzard's neck and pulls him up-up-up into the sky, then side to side which makes Buzzard very dizzy and rubs all the feathers off his head. Buzzard finally has enough and allows Monkey jump off his back to safety. Buzzard never again tricks any animal into becoming his dinner. That is why buzzards now eat only dead animals, and why buzzards are bald.

In each of the following examples, third graders dispensed their own forms of justice for the buzzard, both punitive and restorative:

*Ex. 1: After the monkey saw the buzzard eating his friends, the Monkey said, "I will try and stop him!" The monkey threw a rope around the buzzard's neck—"I've got you now!" said the monkey and took him to the barber shop and he got a haircut. His feathers never grew back.*

*Ex. 2: When Buzzard went over to Monkey he took him up and then dropped him. But then aliens came down and said, "You are evil. You will lose your feathers as a punishment!" "No! Please, not my feathers!" So they plucked all his feathers out. P.S. They also told him never to kill anyone or they will come back and do worse things than pluck feathers.*

*Ex. 3: When the buzzard offered the robin a ride to cool down he said, "Yes, but all my friends have to come with me." So they all hopped on the buzzard and they all went to the pool.*

*Ex. 4: And then, after the monkey took a lot of feathers off the buzzard, he saw a magic place that looked like a big hole of water. The monkey said, "Let's go to that big hole of water over there." But they didn't know there was a shark in the water. They flew closer and closer, then "snap!" The shark ate them piece by piece, and it tasted like ice cream. The End*

*Ex. 5: The buzzard took the rabbit, the squirrel and then the monkey for ride. Then the buzzard took all of them to the park and then they had a picnic. The monkey said, "Why aren't you eating us?" And the buzzard said, "I'm a vegetarian anyway so I wouldn't want to eat you!" The End*

*Ex. 6: First of all, the Buzzard would eat the humans' fried chicken instead of eating the other animals. Next, he will fly away from the humans' houses before they catch him. And then he will have to go to the animal academy. Finally, all the animals won't have to deal with him, and they don't have to hide from him. And they all lived happily ever after.*

These student stories retain two key elements of the Trickster tale pattern in the "Buzzard & The Monkey." Examples #1 & #2 show a clear understanding of how the Monkey outwits Buzzard, who in turn, loses all its feathers. Secondly, they included the element of the story that explains "why things are the way they are"—in this case, why the buzzards have no feathers on their neck and why buzzards eat only dead animals. While some students chose a more nihilistic outcome for the story (example #4), others showed a capacity for empathy and a sense of restorative justice, not only for Monkey and his friends, but for Buzzard, too (examples #3, #5 & #6).

*Della Wells, Faith Ringgold, and “My Education Can Make Me Fly”*

A self-proclaimed “visual storyteller,” Della Wells’ work has often been compared with Romare Bearden. Like Bearden, Wells draws from her own family life and, more generally, from African American communities and history. As one gallery reviewer writes,

Wells feels strongly that ‘being a master of your spiritual self does not come until you understand from where you came from.’ Often she incorporates her own folklore in her work which often has subtle symbols from the civil rights struggle. For Wells, folklore is a powerful tool to explore the historical, social political and economic complexities and implications of the modern African American woman living in America.<sup>164</sup>



Figure 5–2: Della Wells collage (Nashville Arts Magazine, online)<sup>165</sup>

During the *Telling Stories II* project, Della created four collages with grades K–5 on the theme, “*My education can make me fly.*” Of working with children, Della has said, “Children are told they can’t do anything or they won’t make it,” but “you have to spread your wings yourself and believe you can do it.”<sup>166</sup> This theme of flight was inspired by Della’s own work as well as that of artist and

<sup>164</sup> Online review from Artnet: <http://www.artnet.com/artists/della-wells/biography> (Artnet Worldwide Corporation, 2021). See also, Milwaukee’s Portrait Society: Gallery of Contemporary Art: Historic Third Ward, 207 E. Buffalo St.; Ste. 526; Milwaukee, WI 53202: (online <https://www.portraitsocietygallery.com/dellawells-bio>).

<sup>165</sup> <https://nashvillearts.com/2013/01/della-wells-dont-tell-me-i-cant-fly/>

<sup>166</sup> From a 2011 review of the play, *Don’t Tell Me I Can’t Fly, Inspired by the Life and Art of Della Wells*, First Stage Children’s Theatre, Milwaukee, WI. <https://www.yyork.com/Don't%20Tell%20Me%20I%20Can't%20Fly.html>.

children’s book author Faith Ringgold. In Ringgold’s *Tar Beach* (1991) a young African American girl named Cassie dreams of flying over New York City, imagining a bigger and wider world for herself. In her imagination, Cassie flies over the George Washington Bridge, which her father helped build. As she flies, Cassie explains that her father was not allowed to be a member of the workers’ union while he worked on the bridge because his father hadn’t been a member. In her flight over the George Washington bridge, she dreams that she owns it (excerpted from *Tar Beach*):

*Daddy worked on that bridge, hoisting cables. Since then, I’ve wanted that bridge to be mine.  
Now I have claimed it.  
All I had to do was fly over it for it to be mine forever. I can wear it like a giant diamond necklace, or  
just fly above it and marvel at its sparkling beauty.  
I can fly—yes, fly.  
Me, Cassie Louise Lightfoot, only eight years old and in the third grade, and I can fly.  
That means I am free to go wherever I want, for the rest of my life.*

Ringgold’s re-imagining of the “Flying African” can also be seen in her glass mosaic project constructed for the 125<sup>th</sup> Street subway station in New York City, installed in 1996 (Figure 5–3). Entitled *Flying Home: Harlem Heroes and Heroines (Downtown and Uptown)*, Ringgold depicts famous African Americans flying over buildings in New York. <sup>167</sup> The title references the jazz



Figure 5–3. “Flying Home: Harlem Heroes and Heroines (Downtown and Uptown)” (Art Along the Way, online)

<sup>167</sup> Image: “Art Along the Way,” <https://mtaartsdesign.tumblr.com/post/182983015436/flying-home-harlem-heroes-and-heroines-downtown>. For more images of Ringgold’s *Flying Home: Harlem Heroes and Heroines (Downtown and Uptown)*, see Gates & Tatar 2018, 66.

tune “Flying Home” by Lionel Hampton and Benny Goodman, with lyrics by Sid Robin (Gates & Tatar 2018, 66). Here’s the refrain from the tune that likely inspired Ringgold’s mosaic:

*And we are flying home  
I feel the freedom in my soul,  
Flying home at last, flying home  
I've got the freedom in my soul*

After seeing images of Romare Bearden’s collages and reading *Tar Beach*, students at our school went to work creating their own collages with Della (Figure 5–4). Like Cassie flying over the George Washington Bridge in *Tar Beach*, Della had students imagining themselves flying above the school building and in classrooms, as in “we own this” (Figure 5–5).



Figure 5–4: Collage Making with Della Wells: (Photo, A. Fraioli)



Figure 5–5: ORE Collage, “My Education Can Make Me Fly” (Photo: A. Fraioli)

In all its permutations, the Flying African tale is a testimony to the resilience of African Americans who have kept their history alive through the power of story. As Gates & Tatar eloquently put it, “Stories about Flying Africans deliver a message about nostalgia, solidarity, song, and a collective return home” (2018, 84). The same can be said for other stories that came from African traditions, such as the “Magic Instrument” tales in which the implements of the title magically freed enslaved laborers from toiling in the fields (e.g., “The Magic Hoe”).<sup>168</sup> These stories, along with the Tricksters High John and Brer Rabbit, were repurposed in the New World as stories about “getting ovuh,” as Smitherman would say. Rather than submitting to total cultural annihilation, Africans in their new land held fast to their story traditions. Continuing in the Black vernacular tradition, Teju Ologboni, Della Wells, and Faith Ringgold have found new ways to make traditional tales of freedom relevant for 21<sup>st</sup> century students. From new twists on old Trickster tales, Cassie’s flight above the George Washington Bridge, to student collages that imagine bright futures, freedom found its way through storytelling at our school.



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<sup>168</sup> For a story about how the “magic hoe” came to America from West Africa, see “How the Hoe Came to Ashanti” (Gates & Tatar 2018, 84–85). Other “Flying African” and “Magic Hoe” stories can be found in Courlander (1976, 285–287; 476–77; and 596; “An Ashanti Comparison”).

## Chapter Six

### The Dozens & *Halo* (“Big Song”), Toast Ballads, Rap & Spoken Word

#### Introduction

##### *African Epistemes: Language, Rapping, Signifying, and Education*

Critical pedagogy scholars and practitioners have long seen the value of connecting students’ prior knowledge, language, home culture, and life experiences as a key component to achieving success in standard school learning. Cameron McCarthy (1994, 95), for example, suggests that a critical approach to such a multicultural curriculum would include the “contributions of working people, women, and minorities to our general cultural pool” and would be the point of departure “for providing students with their own cultural capital.” In *Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Students* (1994, 10), Ladson-Billings stresses the importance of teaching basic skills while at the same time “capitalizing on the student’s own social and cultural backgrounds.” Ladson-Billing’s premise is that students “are less likely to fail when they...are not alienated from their own cultural values” (1994, 10). In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which contemporary forms of Black vernacular traditions, specifically the dozens, toast telling, rap music, and spoken word, tap into the cultural capital of African American students and families, bringing their voices, language, prior knowledge, stories, and cultural history into school curriculum.<sup>169</sup>

Like the antebellum songs and stories discussed in chapters four and five of this thesis, the dozens, Toast ballads, rap, and spoken word are deeply rooted in African oral arts traditions. As part of the

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<sup>169</sup> The term “cultural capital” is used in multiculturalist discourse to refer to peoples’ cultural values that provide advancement in society. For more on the development of the term beginning with French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, see Lamont and Lareau, “Cultural Capital: Allusions, Gaps and Glissandos in Recent Theoretical Developments” (*Sociological Theory*, Autumn, 1988, Vol. 6, No. 2) For Bourdieu’s application of the term as it relates to education, see *The State Nobility: Élite Schools in the Field of Power* (Bourdieu 1996).

diasporic continuum, these Black vernaculars exemplify how the art of Signifying has persisted in contemporary Black American culture and speech patterns. Displays of verbal showmanship, contest, indirection, social commentary, and community participation remain a constant in these traditions. As the earliest of these forms, the dozens and the toast ballads paved the way for contemporary rap and spoken word artists to harness the Black verbal art of Signifying to boast and toast, to praise and ridicule, to personally reflect, as well as to comment on and criticize contemporary society.

When Smitherman (2000, 204) writes on the continuation of the “belief in the power of rap,” she is referring not to modern-day rap music but to a Black style of speech, part of the “cultural baggage” that was brought to America from African homelands (203). Originally used to describe romantic interactions (usually employed by African American men to gain women’s affections), the term “rap” has “crossed over into mainstream public language to mean any kind of strong, aggressive, highly fluent, powerful talk” (2000, 269). Always rooting Black American orature in African orality (the “African cultural set”), Smitherman (2000, 204) suggests that the ability to “rap” is a means by which individuals can establish status, reputation, and leadership in Black communities:

Even though blacks have embraced English as their native tongue, still the African cultural set persists, that is, a predisposition to imbue the English word with the same sense of value and commitment—“propers,” as we would say—accorded to Nommo in African culture. Hence, Afro-America’s emphasis on orality and the belief in the power of rap which has produced a style and idiom totally unlike that of Whites, while paradoxically employing White English words. We’re talking, then, about a tradition in the black experience in which verbal performance becomes both a way of establishing “yo rep” as well as a teaching and socializing force.

Through Smitherman’s description of “rapping,” we can look back to the antebellum corn husking frolics and sacred ring shouts where lead singers gained status from their abilities to improvise and provide witty commentary on events and/or persons in daily life. Lefever (1981, 85) similarly acknowledges the ways that “outstanding language ability” and the “good use of language” create an environment in which language becomes “the foundation for ritualized behavior.” These rituals, in turn, serve important social functions in Black communities: status ranking, socially sanctioned outlets for aggression, and a form of traditional education and language skill development. Moreover, in the

case of the Dozens, such behaviors may provide a forum for “adjudication of in-group normative conflict” (Lefever 1981, 85).

I submit that it is the very function of Black rhetorical speech that makes contemporary African American verbal arts practices culturally relevant and meaningful for Black youth in educative settings. Indeed, because the art of Signifying is so “highly valued and widely practiced,” Lee (1993, 10–11) sees it as part of the cultural capital that Black students bring to school, and as a rhetorical device that can serve as a scaffolding tool for teaching bi-lingual literacy competency. Here, Lee stresses the cultural role that the art of Signifying plays in African American life, particularly among youth (1993, 11):

It is precisely because it is of highly valued and so widely practiced that signifying has the potential to serve as a bridge to certain literacy skills within a school environment. In many social settings within the African American community, the adolescent, in particular, who cannot signify has no status and no style, is a kind of outsider who is incapable of participating in social conversation. Signifying is a traditional form of African American discourse which has been maintained across generations and across both rural and urban environments and easily can be traced back to the period of the “African American Holocaust,” known to many as slavery.

For each of the vernacular traditions presented in this chapter, I provide a brief historical prelude to assist in placing them within their contemporary social and educational settings. As I have stated elsewhere and reaffirm here, drawing specific corollaries between African and African American oral arts traditions provides the necessary historical, anthropological, and ethnomusicological contexts for valuing and legitimizing African heritage knowledge in schools. The fact that the adult language in these traditions is not always “age appropriate” should not preclude the inclusion of these traditions in school curricula. As this chapter demonstrates, the dozens, toast ballads, and rap music can be applied pedagogically in creative and innovative ways; they need not be, as Smitherman would say, “replete with funk” (1977, 157). Examples from the work of critical pedagogy pioneers and my own lessons and storytelling projects will be highlighted throughout the chapter.



## The Dozens

While conducting research on the Anlo Ewe *halo* (“Big Song”) song duels for my MA thesis, I was struck by the parallels between *halo* and contemporary rap music, including call and response interactions, audience participation, competition, improvisation, and the use of verbal insults. I also recognized in *halo* song texts some of the same language that I overheard in a playground argument between two fifth-grade students. Afraid that their aggressive sparring and “yo mamma” insults would lead to physical confrontation, I intervened, only to be told, “It’s OK Ms. Fraioli, chill—we just playin.” What I didn’t know at the time was that they were “just playin” the dozens: an African American verbal duel requiring quick wits and the ability to Signify—that is, the ability to compose and improvise poetic and creative insults, especially about someone’s mother or other “kinfolk.”<sup>170</sup>

Like other forms of language acquisition, acquiring the verbal skills necessary to play the dozens is part of what learns in community, as it is found within Black speech patterns. Rap Brown, the controversial civil rights leader, attests to this part of his informal education on the streets (Lefever 1981, 75 quoting Brown 1969, 25–26, 30):

The street is where young bloods get their education. I learned how to talk in the street, not from reading about Dick and Jane going to the zoo and all that simple shit. The teacher would test our vocabulary each week, but we knew the vocabulary we needed. They’d give us arithmetic to exercise our minds. Hell, we exercised our minds by playing the dozens.

...There’d be sometimes 40 or 50 dudes standing around and the winner was determined by the way they responded to what was said. If you fell all over each other laughing, then you knew you’d scored. It was a bad scene for the dude that was getting humiliated. I seldom was. That’s why they call me Rap, ‘cause I could rap...But for dudes who couldn’t, it was like they were humiliated because they were born Black and then they turned around and got humiliated by their own people, which was really all they had left.

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<sup>170</sup> Although Smitherman identifies the dozens as a “form of signification” (1977, 128), she also makes a distinction between the dozens and other forms: “Whereas the Dozens is fairly blunt and pointed, signifying is subtle, indirect, and circumlocutory (2000, 277).” In addition, Signifying “often carries a serious social message” (Smitherman 2006, 76). For more on these distinctions, and Signifying as part of verbal dueling, see Mitchell-Kernan’s essay, “Signifying” (1990, 328).

*Etymology for the Dozens*

The object of the game of Dozens is “to tip one’s opponent off balance, dizzied with a whirl of words” (Hyde 1998, 273). This definition fits in well with Hyde’s etymological reference to the 14<sup>th</sup> century English verb “to dozen,” meaning “to stun, stupefy, daze” or “to make insensible, torpid, or powerless” (273).<sup>171</sup> The loser in this game is thus “put in the dozens...dazed into a kind of simple-mindedness,” losing the means to retort with equal or greater wit. An equally logical explanation for the derivation of the term comes from the antebellum auction block, where sick or older Africans would be put up for sale in lots of dozens (Smitherman 1994, 100).<sup>172</sup> In *The Dozens: A History of Rap’s Mama* (2012, 27), Elijah Wald provides some detail for this etymology from *The Black Book*, an anthology of “photographs, newspaper clippings, sheet music, and memories published under the supervision of Toni Morrison.” Among the undated anonymous pieces in *The Black Book* are two paragraphs tracing the dozens back to the enslavement era:

When slave auctioneers had exceptional “merchandise,” they sold it separately. When they felt the “items” were flawed in some way—age, illness, deformities, etc.—they sold them in lots, frequently of a dozen. Every slave knew that he was included among a dozen only if there was something physically wrong with him. Thus, to be part of a dozen was humiliating. Eventually, the term was applied to a ritualized verbal battle that black people developed to insult and humiliate each other (Wald 2012, 27).

While these and other derivation theories for the term “dozens” provide logical explanations, they remain “folk etymologies.” Not until the early decades of the twentieth century did the dozens find its way “out of yards, alleys, and juke joints and onto nightclubs and theater stages, that we have reliable documentation of the word. And by that time, it was familiar to African Americans throughout the United States” (Wald 2012, 29).

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<sup>171</sup> Wald (2012, 25–26) throws doubt on this theory, which originates with Gershon Legman in *No Laughing Matter: An Analysis of Sexual Humor* (1982, Vol. 2, 790). Wald contends that Legman’s claim is “supported by nothing but the similarity of the words, and there is no record of the verb “to dozen” (a transitive variant of “to doze,” pronounced to rhyme with “frozen”) being used in the United States (from John Leland (2005). *Hip: The History*). For the sources of Hyde’s quote, see John Dollard’s “Dialect of Insult” in Dundes (1990, 277–294).

<sup>172</sup> Mona Lisa Saloy’s online article makes a similar reference to enslavement. Online source, *Folklife in Louisiana: “Louisiana’s Living Traditions”* (first appeared in the 1990 Louisiana Folklife Festival booklet).

*Playing the Dozens*

In modern Black speech, getting “dozened” means getting “clowned,” to the point that one becomes dumfounded, speechless, or put into “hush mode” (Alim, 2007, 26). Two other words, “cappin” and “soundin” refer to the back and forth sparring in either informal conversation or more organized play (26). Through Signifying, the dozens, and boastful language, “a dude can be properly put to rest with words” (Smitherman 2000, 207). As we shall see, some of the same features of the toast ballads and rap music are found in the dozens, particularly the self-aggrandizing and boasting language, along with a plethora of disses. As mentioned above, Signifying speech in the dozens is turned on an opponent in a face-to-face duel of words, typically involving insults directed at an opponent’s mother or other relatives, as in “low-rating the ancestors of your opponent” (Smitherman 2000, 224 quoting Hurston). Here’s an example:

*Down in the jungle where the coconut grows  
Lived you old-ass mama who was a stomp-down ho* (Smitherman 2000, 228)

Dozens-style sparring can also surface in casual talk between friends:

Linda: *Girl, what up with that head* [referring to her friend’s hairstyle]

Betty: *Ask you momma.*

Linda: *Oh, so you goin there, huh? Well, I did ask my momma, and she said, “Can’t you see that Betty look like her momma spit her out?”* (2000, 226)

More ritualized “yo momma” dozens play typically begins with, “Yo mamma so...” and ends with an infinite number of variations on the mother-insult theme (Smitherman, 2006, 76):

*...dumb she thought a quarterback was a refund.”  
...fat when she stepped on the scale, it said ‘to be continued.’”  
...ugly her nickname should be Moses cause every time she steps in water it part.”  
...slow, it take her an hour to cook Minute Rice, two days to watch 60 minutes, and a year to watch 48 hours.”* (2000, 227)

In his study “The Dozens, An African-Heritage Theory,” Amuzie Chimezie (1976, 402) identifies two types of dozens play in African American forms: “clean” and “dirty,” as in the following examples:

Clean:

*You weren't born fair  
I sure can swear.  
You were born by an alligator  
And suckled by a mare.  
If you wanta play the Dozens  
Play them fast.  
I'll tell you how many bull-dogs  
Your mommy had.  
She didn't have one;  
She didn't have two;  
She had nine damn dozens  
And then she had you.*

Dirty:

*I was walking through the jungle  
With my dick in my hand,  
I was the baddest motherfucker  
In the jungle land  
I looked up in the tree  
And what did I see  
  
Your little black mama  
Trying to piss on me  
I picked up a rock  
And hit her in the cock  
And knocked that bitch  
A half a bloc.*

Although the dozens ritual is most often associated with African American boys and men, it can also be played by women. Women's signifying, however, is typically delivered with a specific purpose in mind and thus can become a "vehicle for social commentary," especially when directed at men (2000, 229). Smitherman offers an example of a raunchy diss aimed at men's sexual prowess (229):

Like the Sista retirees I heard talking about being members of the "packer's club," a snap referring to men that had had so many women in their youth that now, in their mature years, all they could do during sex was "pack chitlins," i.e., they could not maintain a firm erection."

### *African Roots of the Dozens*

Origin theories surrounding the act of playing the dozens, like its name, are varied and numerous. It is not unusual to find authors who, while nodding to the dozens's shared oral arts practices, go on to downplay its transcontinental roots. Folkloric scholars such as Dollard (1939, 20) found it "impossible" to say whether the pattern was borrowed from Western Europe and "refashioned" in African America or if it was derived from the "native African heritage or our colored people."<sup>173</sup> Later, Abrahams (1962,

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<sup>173</sup> Levine (1977, 356) acknowledges that there is truth in Dollard hypothesis since "the practice of insult was a perfect channel for anger which was either unfocused or could not be aimed at its appropriate target." However, the "problem with Dollard's thesis, as Roger Abrahams has noted, is that any aggression committed within a marginal or oppressed group can be written off as 'substitute aggression.'" Although the origins of the dozens remains obscure, Levine cites the occurrence of similar practices among the Ashanti and Dahomean cultures: "Still, there is no question that institutionalized ritual insult was well known and widely practiced in the African cultures from which the slaves came" (Levine 1977, 350).

n5, 10) acknowledged the presence of the “insult contest” throughout the African continent but had reservations in confirming that “the hypothesis that the Afro-American dozens most probably was a carry-over from Africa” (Chimezie 1976, 405).<sup>174</sup>

For his part, Lefever acknowledged the similarities between African and African American oral traditions but claimed that the dozens emerged in Black America primarily as a “survival strategy” to combat marginalization in a White society. Accordingly, there was no need to “resort” to historical explanations (Lefever 1981, 85). Lefever conceded that Signifying speech rituals like Toast-telling and the dozens do “perform important functions such as displacement of aggression, education, status ranking, and, within a legal context, social control” (85). What Lefever overlooks, however, and what I have been illustrating throughout this thesis, is that the art of Signifying already served these functions in African societies before Africans ever stepped foot on American soil.

Other authors suggest links to European traditions, such as those in Scottish-American communities where “a rich strain of boasting, obscenity, and contumely” flourished wherever men gathered in “workplaces, taverns, and men’s clubs throughout the United States” (Wald 2012, 135). Although Wald acknowledges that the dozens was “clearly” influenced by Euro-American traditions, he favors Gershon Legman’s position that ““nothing comparable to the competitive singing or rhyming of ‘Dirty Dozens’ insults exists today anywhere in the English-language tradition except among Negroes or has ever in living memory been recorded among whites...This leads us directly to Africa”” (Wald 2012, 135 quoting Legman 1982, 790–91).

Wald himself draws parallels between the dozens and similar practices in societies across the African continent including the Guissi of Kenya (138), the Yoruba, Ibo, and Efik (Ibibio) of Nigeria (142), and the Anlo Ewe of Ghana (144) among others. Chimezie’s (1976, 403–405) detailed account of

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<sup>174</sup> Abraham’s “Playing the Dozens” article first appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore* (1962, 209-20) and again in *Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel* (Dundes 1990, 297). In his introduction to Abrahams’ piece, Dundes (1990, 297) writes, “Here and there we find a Bantu people practicing a form of verbal dueling among boys in the same age set who are not regarded as quasi-kin but who share a common initiation ceremony, and the high point of the ‘dueling’ involves a pornographic reference to the opponent’s mother. This would appear to be quite similar to the dozens as it is reported by Dollard, Abrahams, and others.”

the Igbo game *Ikocha Nkocha* (“making disparaging remarks”) draws striking parallels with the dozens, including audience participation and rules about keeping aspersions from cutting too deep or too close to the truth. The game is usually played at night “under moonlight and in the presence of parents, siblings, and other adults and relatives” (403). Based on these shared patterns, Chimezie rejects claims that Signifying developed in the U.S. as a reaction to or a psychological release from oppressive conditions of slavery and continued marginalization of Blacks in America (408–409). Finally, Smitherman (2000, 225) relocates the dozens and mother-insults to several African cultures, including the Bantu of East Africa, and the Efik of Nigeria while reminding us that,

Since culture is not only artifacts, but the way people behave and think, it is logical that Africans in enslavement would tap into remembered cultural practices and verbal rituals from home and adapt them to life in a strange land. From Giddyup, the insult game would have been played in the slave communities, eventually taking on the English name, “the dozens.”

As noted, my MA research affirms the similarities between the both the dozens and African American toast narratives and several Anlo Ewe musical and verbal arts traditions. These traditions include the Ewe song form known as *halo* (Big Song), as well as the poetic “name calling” rituals known as *megbenkowo* (“back names,” or “nicknames”), and *ahamankowo* (to make a hint, or allusion). The trans-Atlantic echoes of these traditions can be observed in their forms, function, use of language, and rules of play and performance.

#### *Anlo Ewe Halo (Big Song) & The Dozens*

In addition to being purely verbal forms of dueling contests, West African song duel traditions share with the dozens many of the same performance structures, rules, and overall functionality.<sup>175</sup> Embedded in the dance drumming performance of the Anlo Ewe of southeastern Ghana is the song form known as *halo*, or “big song.” On a social level, *halo* song duels are a platform for displaying and resolving group rivalries, hostilities, grievances, and/or conflicts. As a method of settling personal or

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<sup>175</sup> For an overview of song types, including songs of social and/or political criticism throughout the African continent, see J.H. Kwabena Nketia’s *The Music of Africa* (1986, 195–205; 223–4).

community disputes, *halo*'s formal procedures mirror many of the Signifying gestures found with the dozens, including insults delivered in attack-counterattack fashion and audience involvement. Likewise, both halo and the dozens often operate to dispel social tensions its potential for dispelling social tensions, even as they may create them.<sup>176</sup>

From a critical race theory perspective—a West African CRT—the Ewe halo song tradition serves as a means of social control as well as a public forum for arbitration. As a form of social commentary and a means to facilitate social and/or political change, *halo* songs are a form of counter-storytelling, that is, a mechanism for bringing matters of public concern to the people. In a University of Iowa seminar on Black identity and oral tradition, Ghanaian-born scholar Logan (Klobah et al. 1996, 19) recalls this function of the *halo* tradition:

Among my people there's a group of poets: they sing praises and then they criticize the society and that's called halo. Those people are telling the traditions. They are not outcast. And then you also come across songs during a dance and the poets are questioning political things by telling stories. They might not go to the chief or to the ancestors and say, "Okay, you have to change this rule." The role of those poets who sing is to challenge the traditions, bringing to people another perspective on issues and actually broadening their perspective that this could be otherwise.

As with the dozens, personal and/or familial reputations, status, and honor are at stake in *halo* performance. This genre is defined by Ghanaian musicologists Daniel Avorgbedor (1999, 145) and Kofi Anyidoho (1982, 19) as a multi-media, socio-musical drama, and a dramatic confrontation, respectively. Like the dozens, *halo* performance is charged with emotion; the poetic devices, both spoken and sung, are exaggerated and dramatized for their fullest effect. *Halo* performances are most often organized when one dance drumming group has a grievance against another. The setting is the public square, with both sides (and full dance drumming accompaniment) assembled, and each side taking turns being witness, jury, and target (Anyidoho 1982, 20; Avorgbedor 1994, 94–96; Awoonor 1975, 86).

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<sup>176</sup> Ewe singers may take "poetic license" to sing about anything and anyone they choose, to express personal grievances, demonstrate superiority, or to bring shame to other individuals or groups. These types of songs may not be overtly slanderous, but can give rise to *halo* contests, or wars (Fiagbedzi 1977, 131–132; Avorgbedor 1999, 144, 153).

In preparation for a *halo* performance, each group commissions poets to delve into the personal histories of the opposing side to find scandalous details that then serve as the raw material for composing the insults that will be deployed (sung) during the performance (Awoonor 1975, 86). These insults may be verbal assaults on the "ugliness of the opponents' leadership, juicy bits about whose grandmother was a whore or whose great-grandfather built a wealth on stolen goods" (Awoonor 1975: 86). The goal is to dissipate intra-group conflict in a shower of words—indulging one's grievances through "sheer verbal overkill" (Awoonor 1975: 86, 87). The following song texts illustrate patterns of Signifying that, like the dozens, include the use of simile and metaphor to make exaggerated, slanderous insults about another's physical attributes, ancestral heritage, or personal qualities:

Song form: 1. *Emo veve wo ave 'kagae ku de adukpodzi ene*  
Your smelling face like that of a dead vulture at a garbage dump

2. *Eko tsralawo abe Klu fe abo ene*  
Your tall neck like Klu's arm

Interestingly, the "your mama's a whore" theme appears on both continents, although concededly, this form of insult may be common elsewhere. In one example, Smitherman reports that the Efik in Nigeria use ritualized insults such as "child of mixed sperm." Her translation of this metaphor is "you have more than one father, in other words, yo mama a ho" (2006, 225). The following segments of an Anlo Ewe *halo* song make a similar reference. Note that, like the dozens, *halo* protocol allows a targeted individual to respond in kind within an "attack/counterattack" format (Awoonor 1975, 87):

The attack:

*The whore was forgetful; she walked  
like the wandering duck into my song.  
You clutch the earth like a bag;  
On your stem you stand like a porcupine in  
clothes;  
Beneath your back is the hyaena's ravine;  
Your chest is as short as the red monkey  
on the corn barn.  
Alas, my song shall speak the words of song.*

The reply:

*He is winding in the air, his anus agape, his  
face like the egret's beak;  
he who eats off the farm he hasn't planted, his  
face the bent evil hoe on its handle.*



The goal for playing the dozens is basically the same as *halo* duels—to see who can come up with the most biting, humorous but caustic insults. A game of the dozens typically involves only two people, but there is usually a group of spectators who will applaud and laugh at a clever insult while freely criticizing a weak or predictable one (Pihel 1996, 253). As with *halo* duels, the audience-participation factor in the dozens brings the game into the realm of a competitive performance. This raises the stakes considerably, especially if a player’s reputation is on the line (253). Because it is often the player with the most insults (not always the best) who wins the game, experienced players will have a stockpile of them ready to lob at their opponents (Pihel 1996, 253).<sup>177</sup> There are standards, however; a player can’t get by with a generic retort like, “Yo mama.” Indeed, a lame insult will not go unnoticed by the audience, so the more exaggerated, hyperbolic, wild, and fantastic a player’s insults are, the better. After all, it is the audience that determines the winner (Pihel, 253; Smitherman 2006, 77).

There are other rules too, as there is always the risk that the dozens can “go too deep.” Like the line between indirect (metaphorically veiled) and direct insults in *halo* duels, the dynamic tension of the dozens is the result of the ever-present tension between street play and the “real world.” There is a point, however, at which reality can intrude and play gets serious (Abrahams 1970, 40). Here’s Smitherman’s (2006, 77) take on that line of demarcation:

Most critically, whatever you say about someone’s mother must *not* fall within the realm of literal truth. If you do this, you strip away the camouflage of play, reality intrudes, and you are propelled into the real world where ain nobody playin.

Levine’s (1977, 348) discussion of the dozens reflects on this dynamic tension, analyzing where deviating from the rules of play “spoils the game, robs it of its character and makes it worthless.” While the dozens is aimed at stunning and stupefying one’s opponent, the cost of getting too real can lead to “loss of control, anger, and confusion” leaving a player with the stigma of “being unable to take it”

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<sup>177</sup> Pihel (1996, 253) illustrates the similarities between Signifying in dozens-style verbal duels and freestyling rap battles where the MC has to come up with “quick replies,” and where “the performer must be able to produce lines quickly without pausing. Too long a pause in either signifying or freestyling might mean losing the battle.”

(1997, 348; 496, n45). The dozens, then, is no longer a dramatic verbal contest; when anger enters in, you have lost your “cool,” you have lost the game. The objective is to stay composed, in control, and not take insults personally. For Smitherman (2006, 77), the dozens

tests a person’s ability to maintain their ‘cool,’ or grace under pressure. For blacks, faced with discrimination and racial assaults at every turn, the Dozens taught you how to chill—Black folk could ill afford to be hot. It’s a lesson in survival by one’s verbal skills and adeptness at rhyme, rhetoric, and reason.

Smitherman’s description casts a more politicized light on the dozens which, like the *halo* tradition, is simultaneously a social coping mechanism, a form of artistic entertainment, and a socially sanctioned means of releasing tensions and hostilities (see Lefever 1981, 85; Anyidoho 1983, 239). While research on the dozens has focused mainly on its function as an intra-personal “insult-game,” two aspects of the dozens link it to the broader political and social contexts in *halo* songs: its public displays of verbal acuity and poetic insult, and its all-important audience (onlookers) response. Like the communal, call and response interactions in the play of the dozens, *halo* song contests make direct appeals to the audience, calling upon them as witnesses, judges, and jury.<sup>178</sup> In the coming pages and chapters, I will demonstrate how these aspects are also present in rap, spoken word, and jazz. The drama that unfolds in these forms of Black orature is on display for all to bear witness, as illustrated in the following *halo* song text (Anyidoho 1983: 258):

*My song has come upon the public square  
Master singer Kligu says his song has come upon the public square  
I pray you all to give ears to my voice*

*I will tell you a few things;  
It’s in settling one case that other points are raised...  
The company-crowd shudder with cold  
If you continue  
Song will sound for you  
MMD says  
Destiny confronts you  
Song fell to the ground—for the people*

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<sup>178</sup> In Ghana, the name of a dance drumming ensemble called the *Haikotu* Drum is translated as “High Court,” suggesting “conflict, contest, and resolution” and a means of settling legal matters through collective arbitration. The drumming group and its music thus became the new “battle ground” or arena for airing grievances and dispensing justice (Anyidoho 1983, 258).

*A School Lesson on the Dozens: “The Little Cornbread Man”*

In their most aggressive form, both *halo* and the dozens have the potential to incite further aggression.<sup>179</sup> Again, I am reminded of the day I interrupted two young boys trading “yo mama” insults on the playground. The boys were too young, perhaps, to play the dozens without losing their tempers and I sensed their anger getting the better of them. Prompted by this same concern that the dozens not lead to aggression, Teju Ologboni (“Teju the Storyteller”) told the “Cornbread Man” story at my school during his 2014 residency. As Teju told the tale that day in a “gymnasium” full of elementary school children, it was a lesson on how to keep your cool under pressure, how NOT to play the dozens.

This story is a remix of the Euro-American folktale “The Gingerbread Man,” which itself is a variant of “runaway food” folktales.<sup>180</sup> In this version, the plot stays the same, but the central character was changed to suit the culinary taste of the story’s creator, Jamal Karam. Karam heard the original tale as a young boy and liked it, but thought, “you know, I like cornbread better,” and so he remixed the story and called it, “The Little Cornbread Man” (Goss & Goss 1995, 270–273).

As is common for storytellers, Teju made the story his own and created a Cornbread Man full of even more swagger and braggadocio than Karam’s original character. In the tradition of African American storytelling, Teju’s Cornbread man was fully remixed and took on the persona of the Signifying Monkey, boasting and toasting his way to his own demise. Riffing on Karam’s Cornbread Man taunt, “Ha ha—hee hee hee, you may be fast, but you can’t catch me,” Teju had the whole audience chanting, “Ha ha—hee hee hee, you think you bad? You don’t know me!!!” Teju’s story then evolved into a play of the dozens, a verbal duel between the Fox and the Cornbread Man, with insults flying back and forth. The Fox plays the game to win, striking at the Cornbread Man’s pride. Blinded

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<sup>179</sup> In the past, *halo* precipitated on-going “*halo* wars” that would last for decades. For this reason, the British government outlawed public performance of *halo* in the late 1800s. According to Dor (2004, 224), contemporary *halo* song texts are more veiled; dance drumming groups “meticulously censor their song texts, probing their moral merits, removing obscene phrases and direct attacks, and casting elusive song texts in metaphoric statements.”

<sup>180</sup> This folktale first appeared in the *St. Nicholas Magazine* (founded by Scribner & Company in 1873), published in May 1875.

by his anger, the Cornbread Man stomps directly up to the Fox's snout, threatens to punch him, and is gobbled up in an instant.

Teju's telling of the "Little Cornbread Man" is in effect a cautionary tale about words and how you use them. As Teju explained to his audience, "Don't let the Fox get the better of you...if someone is teasing you, bullying you, your friends, or your family, just say, 'Ha ha-hee-hee-hee! You think you bad? You don't know me!'" "Then what you do," Teju added, is "give 'em the peace sign, turn your back and walk away." In his remix, Teju created a tale that draws on both Euro- and Afro-American American storytelling traditions, at the same time, making it completely contemporary and meaningful for school-age kids. When Teju's Cornbread Man gets into the Fox's face, the Fox disses him big-time; the Cornbread Man loses his cool and gets eaten alive. Perhaps this is the best way to teach the lesson of the dozens: stay in control and keep your language creative and cool, or you're going to lose your head.

## The Toast, and the Toast-teller as Folk Hero

### *Toasting Origins*

Given the similarity of toasts to minstrel show recitations, Abrahams (1970, 107–108) suggests that toasts were either part of pre-minstrel Black performance that was borrowed by Whites for the stage, or they were a White invention later recast by African Americans as the toast. Another theory is that the toast is related to the long, ornate dedicatory speeches (toasts) saluted with drinks at the "drinking parties" that were widespread among southern plantation owners, and that this custom was adopted by Blacks sometime around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to these possible origins, Abrahams writes that, "There did, and does exist among Negroes the custom of creating occasional poems and other long verse forms...perhaps the name 'toast' became associated with these longer rhymes" (1970, 109–110). Wald suggests that the toast ballad gained favor among older men who "did not care to get

involved in insult dueling.” For them, the toast allowed them “to use favorite dozens lines without directing them at anyone in particular” (2012, 110).<sup>181</sup>

In the absence of more substantive documentation as to the origins of African American toast-telling, I can only suggest certain correlations between the toast tradition and a West African one, again from the Anlo Ewe of Ghana. For the Ewe, the analogous setting and occasion to the toast would be in relaxed, social settings such as a beer party. At these gatherings, ritualized poetic appellations called *ahanonkowo*, or “drinking names” are exchanged (Anyidoho 1997, 128; Atakpa 1997, 188). Although referred to as “praise names,” or “personal appellations,” *ahanonkowo* are not always praiseworthy. While some names evoke admiration, others may evoke or express anything from a boast, threat, to implied denunciation (Anyidoho 1997, 128). In all cases, the Ewe use formal proverbial language in their appellations. The first of the following examples is a short “bravery name (Atakpa 1997, 188). The second is derisive in nature, and alludes to an individual who wanders from town to town, leaving one job in search of another (Anyidoho 1997, 129):

Adzigbli: *Adzigbli matsadi. Wo Adzigbli dim, Adzigbli a gale ame dim.*  
Adzigbli: It is needless to haunt Adzigble, for you haunt him and he haunts you.

*Koklodzedekadzi...Koklo dze de ka dzi; eka mekpo vovo o, koklo ha mekpo vovo o.*  
Chicken perches on a rope; rope is not at rest, chicken too is not at rest

There is a formal structure to *ahanonkowo* consisting of call and response exchanges that are punctuated emphatically with gestures such as chest pounding, foot stomping, and handshakes (Anyidoho, 1997, 128). Like the African American toast, *ahanonkowo* texts can be lengthy. While they may be used in shortened form for purposes of address, their poetic nature is fully realized as a dramatic recitation of longer texts (Anyidoho 1997, 130). As I discuss below, similar dramatic effects are

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<sup>181</sup> Levine (1977, 378) notes that he toasts were largely neglected by folklorists until Roger Abrahams’s 1970 study of the tradition in Philadelphia (*Deep Down in the Jungle*). While “The Signifying Monkey” was collected in numerous states in the 1950s, “it probably had been in circulation well before that before that” (378). Gates (1988, 71) suggests that the prevalence of the toast ballad in urban neighborhoods in the 50s and 60s is “because black people from the south migrated there and passed the tradition along to subsequent generations.”

employed in the recitation of lengthy African American toast ballads as well as in the delivery of modern spoken word poetry.

*Toast Ballads: "Bad Men" & Freedom Fighters*

While Trickster tales such as the Brer Rabbit and High John stories represent older, rural forms of oral literature, the toast is a modern, urban continuance of the African American Trickster-hero tradition. According to Smitherman (2000, 256), the toast is a "variation on the trickster, bad [brother] theme done in poetic form." Like his Trickster predecessors, the hero of the toast is "a powerful, all-knowing omnipotent hero, able to overcome all odds" (Smitherman 2000, 275). The toast hero is both the fictitious character in the story being told and the Toast-teller himself. As such, the toast-teller "personifies the self-empowerment dreams of his Black audience and symbolizes for them triumph and accomplishment against the odds" (Smitherman 2000, 275).

Some of the classic toasts are "The Signifying Monkey," "Stackolee" (sometimes "Staggerlee," or "Stack-O-Lee"), "Shine and the Sinking of the Titanic," and "Frankie and Albert" (Smitherman 1977, 158; Hughes & Bontemps 359–367).<sup>182</sup> Toasts such as "Stackolee" and "Frankie and Albert" recall the violent exploits and triumphs of famous "bad men" who are settling personal scores. In contrast to the rural folktales, which generally lack profanity and sexual innuendo, toasts are full of braggadocio or boasting talk, "replete with funk in practically every rhymed couplet" (Smitherman 1977, 157).<sup>183</sup> In Julius Lester's version of "Stagolee," the hero is presented as "undoubtedly and without question, the baddest...Stagolee was so bad that the flies wouldn't even fly around his head in the summertime, and snow wouldn't fall on his house in the winter. He was bad" (Lester 1969, 75). Of course, by "bad"

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<sup>182</sup> Both "Stag-O-Lee," and "Frankie and Albert" were rendered into the tamer, popular song "Frankie and Johnny" (Smitherman 1977, 158).

<sup>183</sup> For "clean" versions of these and other toasts, see Hughes & Bontemps (1958, 345-370; Courlander 1976, 158).

Lester means that Stagolee is both fearless and fear-inspiring. Thusly re clothed, Stagolee maintains the status of the Trickster hero-as-supernatural being with “ways lak a natural man” (Roberts 1989, 201).

Toasts were typically learned in adolescence and committed to memory (1977, 158–159). King & Maiga (2018, 70) suggest that the genre functioned as a kind of “rite of passage for urban youth, especially boys, in the United States through the 1950s and 60s” and would not just be recited but performed.<sup>184</sup> The toasts are akin to the “grand epics in the Graeco-Roman style,” in which the verse is “episodic, lengthy, and detailed” (in written form, some toast’s go on for pages) (Smitherman 1977, 159). The toast-teller captivates an audience by sheer verbal ability, drawing upon the necessary skills for successful oration: memory, creativity linguistic fluency, and “rhetorical embellishments and fresh imaginative imagery” (1977, 158).

Toasts were of great interest to folklorists and linguists who popularized them “much to the chagrin of some blacks who disdain this display of our ‘bad side’” (Smitherman 1977, 159). In some 20<sup>th</sup>-century ethnographies, the authors exaggerated the “roles known on the street” that reinforced racial stereotypes. Citing field work conducted and published by noted scholars such as Roger Abrahams (*Deep Down In the Jungle*, 1963), Bruce Jackson (*Get in the Water and Swim Like Me*, 1974), and Edith Folb (*Runnin’ Down Some Lines*, 1980), Smitherman concludes that these authors “conveyed the impression that black speech was the lingo of criminals, dope pushers, teenage hoodlums, and various and sundry hustlers, who spoke only in ‘mothafuckas’ and ‘pussy-copping’ raps” (2000, 84). Studies such as these offered a “slice of black folk character” that was “presented as the whole.” Abrahams, in his 1970 edition of *Deep Down in the Jungle*, acknowledged the shortcomings of his earlier work, conceding that he had, unwittingly fed into racial stereotypes. Smitherman (2000, 87) credits Abrahams for his “display of scholarly courage,” noting that “within the conventional research and scholarship on

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<sup>184</sup> In *Talkin and Testifyin* (1977, 158) Smitherman noted, “You used to hear Toasts quite regularly in the pool halls, barber shops, and on the street corners in the community; nowadays they are mostly heard among black prisoners who sit around for hours passing the time away reciting various Toasts they learned in their adolescence.”

black people, this research framework is all too common. It is rare to admit the wrong, but it is not rare to commit it.”

*“Shine and the Sinking of the Titanic”*

In contrast to the gun-toting exploits of “bad men” protagonists Stackolee and Frankie and Albert, epic ballads such as “John Henry” and “Shine and the Sinking of the Titanic” offer images of Black men fighting against racial injustice. Courlander (1976, 402) posited that Blacks took interest in the historic sinking of the luxury passenger vessel “Titanic” in 1912 because Jack Johnson, the 1908 Black heavy-weight world champion, was denied passage on that voyage due to his race. Smitherman (1977, 158) suggests that the ballad was composed as form of poetic justice in which the legendary “Shine,” a stoker on the Titanic, becomes the only survivor of the sinking ship.<sup>185</sup> Here’s a few verses from the ballad, printed in Hughes & Bontemps (1958, 366):

*Just then half the ocean jumped across the  
boiler room deck,  
Shine yelled to the captain, “The water’s  
‘round my neck!”  
Captain said, Go back! Neither fear nor  
doubt! I got a hundred more pumps to keep the  
water out.”  
“Your words sound happy and your words  
sound true, But this one time, Cap, your words  
won’t do.*

*I don’t like chicken and I don’t like ham—  
And I don’t believe your pumps is worth a damn!”  
The old Titanic was beginning to sink.  
Shine pulled off his clothes and jumped in the  
brink. He said, “Little fish, big fish, and shark  
fishes too,  
Get out of my way because I’m coming  
through.”*

*Captain on bridge hollered, “Shine, Shine, save poor me,  
And I’m make you rich as rich as any man can be.”  
Shine said, “There’s more gold on land than sea.”  
And he swimmmed on.*

*Big fat banker beggin, “Shine, Shine, save poor me!  
I’ll give you a thousand shares of T and T.”  
Shine said, “More stocks on land that there is on sea”— And he swimmmed on.<sup>186</sup>*

<sup>185</sup> A stoker on the Titanic would have been a person whose job was to tend to the fire for the boilers on board the ship.

<sup>186</sup> For a bawdy version of “The Sinking of the Titanic,” see “Toasts,” by William Labov, Paul Cohen, Clarence Robins, and John Lewis, in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel* (Dundes, ed.; 1990, 334–335). According to these authors, the Hughes & Bontemps’s version that I have cited in this chapter was “heavily expurgated” (334).



*“John Henry”*

The epic ballad “John Henry” has many variants; it has been transposed in forms that include the blues, a work song, a ballad song, as well as in recited prose (Courlander 1976, 384; Dundes 1990, 562). It is printed in numerous illustrated publications for children in both prose and song form. The story is about a railroad laborer named John Henry, who is endowed with super-human strength. Working as railroad “steel driving man,” John Henry blasts open the side of a mountain with his hammer. When the crew captain introduces the modern steam drill to his crew, John Henry challenges the captain to a contest “convinced that no mechanical device can ever replace a hardworking man in the building of a railroad” (Courlander 1976, 384). Here’s how folksinger Pete Seeger sang it:

*John Henry told his captain,  
“A man ain’t nothin but a man.  
But before I let your steam drill beat me down,  
I’d die with a hammer in my hand Lord, Lord.  
I’d dies with a hammer in my hand.”*

John Henry did beat the steam drill, but it cost him his life:

*John Henry hammered in the mountain,  
His hammer was striking fire.  
But he worked so hard, he broke his poor heart,  
He laid down his hammer and he died, Lord, Lord.  
He laid down his hammer and he died.  
(The Essential Pete Seeger 2013)*

The “John Henry” legend emerged during the era of sharecropping, a system which effectively kept Black sharecroppers tied to the slave system (Dundes1990, 561).<sup>187</sup> In Julius Lester’s introduction to his picture book, *John Henry*” (1994), he writes that while it is difficult to prove that an actual man named “John Henry” existed, it is certain that

between 1870–1873 the Big Bend Tunnel on the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad was built in the Allegheny Mountains in Summers County, West Virginia. This is the site of the Black folk ballad, “John Henry,” on which this text is based. There was probably an ex-slave named John Henry who worked on the tunnel, though there is little evidence of a contest between him and a steam drill.

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<sup>187</sup> For more on the system of sharecropping, see *Slavery by Another Name*, PBS.org/: narrated by the author, Douglass Blacking (2012).

In his analysis of “John Henry,” Alan Dundes (1990, 568–69) suggests there are a variety of reasons for the epic’s wide appeal for both White and Black America. First, “John Henry” expressed the common fear that modern advancements in technology and automation would put both Whites and Blacks out of work (568). Second, for genteel Whites (and genteel Blacks, too), the “John Henry” ballad allays the stereotypical White fear of the Black “bad man,” that is, the “aggressive militant who refuses to ‘stay in his place’” (569). As strong as he is, John Henry poses no real threat or danger to the White captain, or to the steam drill and the capitalist power structure it represents. “In fact, his very death in the performance of his ‘duty,’ provides final proof that he is harmless” (568–69). Lastly, for Black America, “John Henry” represents a

strong black hero who wins a contest, a basically unfair contest in which, at first glance, the white man appears to possess all the power (steam drill = power). Black awareness of the unfortunate aspect of John Henry’s fate...is indicated by versions including the verse to the effect that the old hammer which killed John Henry can’t or won’t kill the singer, implying that black people are no longer going to be killed by working for a white man! (Dundes 1990, 568–569).<sup>188</sup>

I have enjoyed sharing Lester’s version of “John Henry” (with Jerry Pinckney’s vivid illustrations) with my students. Lester puts a fresh spin on this epic ballad, turning it into a contemporary counter-narrative tale about socio-economic equality, justice, and freedom. As Lester presents the tale, the young John Henry, still unaware of his own strength, accidentally destroys his father’s porch. When he helps to rebuild it, he constructs “*a wing onto the house with an indoor swimming pool and one of them jacuzzis.*” When John Henry the man strikes a boulder with his hammer, the boulder “*shivered like the morning freedom had come to the slaves.*” In Lester’s view, the John Henry in this hundred-year-old ballad had already won the fight for civil rights and economic justice; he had already gotten his just deserts. Lester also sees in the character of John Henry the same attributes he sees in Martin Luther King: “I suspect it is the connection all of us feel to both figures—namely, to have the courage to

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<sup>188</sup> See John Hurt’s 1928 blues lyric: “*This is the hammer that killed John Henry—But it won’t kill me, but it won’t kill me, but it won’t kill me.*” (Mississippi John Hurt—Avalon Blues: The Complete 1928 Okeh Recordings (Roots & blues series); released 1996).

hammer until our hearts break and to leave our mourners smiling in their tears” (Lester 1994, dedication). In Lester’s “John Henry,” our hero is buried in the White House, where, if you “If you walk by...late at night, stand real still, and listen real closely, folks say you might just hear a deep voice singing:<sup>189</sup>

*I got a rainbow...RINGGGG! RINGGGG!  
Tied around my shoulder  
I got a rainbow...RINGGGG! RINGGGG!  
It' ain't gon'rain, no, it ain't gon'rain.  
I got a rainbow...RINGGGG! RINGGGG!*

“*The Signifying Monkey*”

The Signifying Monkey resembles the folk Trickster tales inhabiting roles in which the apparently weaker animals outwit the strong; in this case, the small and cunning Monkey Signifies on the big but slow-witted Lion. While there are many versions to the Signifying Monkey, they all tend to start something like this (Gates 1988, 55):

*Deep down in the jungle so they say  
There's a signifying monkey down the way  
There hadn't been no disturbin' in the jungle for quite a bit,  
For up jumped the monkey in the tree one day and laughed  
“I guess I'll start some shit.”*

In keeping with his Trickster nature, Monkey taunts and teases Lion into submission, ultimately getting Elephant to do his dirty work, i.e., beat up Lion. Monkey does a celebratory dance, slips from his tree perch, and falls to the ground, which is where Lion immediately pounces on him. Like his animal counterparts Ananse and Brer Rabbit, Monkey manages to “slip the trap” and make his escape before getting eaten (Gates 1988 55–58). Endings to the Signifying Monkey tales can also be formulaic. Like the older “origin” tale, the ending below explains why, for example, Monkeys like to hang out in trees (Gates 1988 55):

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<sup>189</sup> As printed in Dundes (1990, 345–347), the last verse of “John Henry” describes the hero being buried at the White House: “*They took John Henry to the White House and buried him in the san'. And every locomotive come roarin' by, says there lies that steel drivin' man, there lies that steel drivin' man.*”

*“Monkey,” said the Lion,  
Beat to his unbooted knees,  
“You and your signifying children  
Better stay way up in the trees.”*

*Which is why today  
Monkey does his signifying  
A-way-up out of the way.*

Given the X-rated vocabulary and content in the full rendition of the Signifying Monkey ballad (see Dundes 1990, 339–340; Gates 1988 56–58), King and Maiga offer a version of the Signifying Monkey ballad that has been edited with “age-appropriate language” acceptable for school settings (2018, 73; adapted from Jackson 1974, 167–68). King & Maiga’s version of the “Signifying Monkey” reads as follows:

*It was early in the morning one bright summer  
day,  
The Lion was comin’ down the Monkey’s way.  
The Monkey laid up in a tree and he thought  
up a scheme,  
And he thought he’d try one a his fantastic  
dreams.  
He’d say, “Hey Brother Lion, a big rascal just*

*Went down the way, a whole lot of things I’m  
afraid to say.  
The way he talked about you and your father  
Was a terrible sin,  
Said you and your grandmother wasn’t even  
no kin.*

Even without the “problem words,” the authors’ version still contains adult content in reference to the Lion’s parentage. To avoid this adult topic, the last line provided by King & Maiga could be revised to read, “*The way he talked about your family was a terrible sin, your father and your mother and the rest of your kin.*”

### *Contemporary Toast Poems*

During the Black consciousness movement, toasts also caught the attention of contemporary black writers, who recognized in the verse the essence of black pride, verbal ability, and “coolness, and grace under pressure” (Smitherman 1977, 159). Re-working these themes into their own written prose, these writers were able to retain the intent, spirit, and power of the toasts. In the following poem, poet Nikki Giovanni captures the same braggadocio as the toasts but without “problem words” (Smitherman 1977, 159; 161):

*I was born in the congo  
I walked to the fertile crescent and built  
the sphinx  
I designed a pyramid so tough that a star  
that only glows every one hundred years  
falls into the center giving divine perfect  
light  
I am bad.  
On a trip north  
I caught a cold and blew  
my nose giving oil to the Arab world*

*I am so hip even my errors are correct  
I sailed west to reach east and had to round  
off the earth as I went....  
I am so perfect, so divine so ethereal so real  
I cannot be comprehended  
except by permission...  
I mean...I...can fly  
like a bird in the sky.*

Eloise Greenfield's poem "Nathaniel's Rap," adds to the toast tradition, but is written from the perspective of a ten-year-old full of his own brand of swagger. The poem was published in full in Greenfield's *Nathaniel Talking* (1988), illustrated by Spivey Gilchrist. I came across this segment in the McMillan *Share the Music* curriculum in the 2000s and rapped it with my elementary students:

*It's Nathaniel talkin and Nathaniel's me  
I'm talkin about my philosophy.  
About the things I do and the people I see.  
All told in the words of Nathaniel be free.  
That's me. And I can rap. I can rap.  
I can rap 'til your earflaps flap.  
I can talk that talk till you go for a walk  
I can write it on down till you get out of  
town...*

*Rested, dressed I'm feelin fine,  
I've got something on my mind.  
Friends and kin and neighborhood,  
Listen now and listen good!  
Nathaniel's talkin, Nathaniel be free,  
Talkin' about my philosophy.  
Been thinkin all day I got a lot to say  
Gotta write it on down, Nathaniel's way - O.K.  
I Gotta rap!*

In the full text of *Nathaniel Talking* (Greenfield 1998) we listen as Nathaniel grows up. As he becomes more aware of the ways of the world, he loses some of his innocence but not his optimism. In the last poem, "Watching the World Go By" Nathaniel ponders:

*sitting on my front step  
watching the world go by  
I'm sitting on my front steps  
watching the world go by  
when I see trouble  
I know life ain't no piece of pie.*

*looking from my front steps  
I can see the world go by  
I'm looking from my front steps  
seeing how the world goes by  
when I see so much joy  
I know I got to try.*

## Rap Music

In this section, I look at the art of rap music and the broader context of hip hop culture and its evolving applications in school curriculum, including applications from my own lessons and integrated

arts projects. As part of the continuum of African American vernaculars and their place in my pedagogy of potlikker, I look to hip hop and rap as a form of Black orature with roots in African traditions.

Although the terms “rap” and “hip hop” are often used interchangeably, since its inception, the art of rapping has been but one element of the hip hop genre and, more broadly, of hip hop culture. The term “hip hop” itself most likely emerged from rap music’s beginnings in the late 1970s and early 80s. Specifically, it is associated with the first ever recorded rap song, Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” from 1980. According to Billy Collins (Eleveld & Smith 2003, 32), the use of the term “hip hop” was applied to rap music some sometime after the art form began, “[hip hop] is a word that you can hear in Sugar Hill Gang’s ‘Rappers Delight,’ just as BeBop was something you might hear after Dizzy Gillespie’s scat. Then it just became a name for the genre.” Here are just a few of the verses from “Rappers Delight,” full of fun rhymes, toasts, and boasts:

*I said-a hip, hop, the hippie, the hippie  
To the hip hop-a you don't stop the rock it  
To the bang-bang boogie, say up jump the  
boogie  
To the rhythm of the boogie, the beat...*

*Skiddlee beebop a we rock a scooby doo  
And guess what, America: we love you  
'Cause ya rock and ya roll with so much soul,  
You could rock 'til you're a hundred and one  
years old.*

*I said, "You need a man who's got finesse  
And his whole name across his chest  
He may be able to fly all through the night  
But can he rock a party 'til the early light?..."*

*I sit down and write a brand new rhyme  
Because they say that miracles never cease  
I've created a devastating masterpiece  
I'm gonna rock the mike 'til you can't resist...*

From the outset, the art of rapping was one of the five performative elements of hip hop. As Rabaka (2012, xxix, n3) details, hip hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa first ascribed four elements to hip hop: MCing (i.e., rapping), DJing, break-dancing (i.e., “breaking”), and graffiti art. However, when hip hop “lost its way,” Bambaataa “ingeniously added a fifth fundamental element of hip hop culture: ‘knowledge’” (2012, xxix, n3 from Chang 2005, 90).<sup>190</sup> In Rabaka’s remix of Bambaataa, we can see how the “dissemination of knowledge,” always at the heart of Black vernacular traditions, is continued in rap music (2012, xxix, n3):

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<sup>190</sup> Chang (2005, 89–107) goes into great detail about Bambaataa’s life, noting that “some facts about [Bambaataa’s] life are “slippery like quicksilver.”

It is extremely important, therefore, to acknowledge that instead of being “anti-intellectual,” which is one of the common stereotypes about the Hip Hop generation, one of the core elements of authentic hip hop culture is its emphasis on the acquisition, production and dissemination of knowledge... Chang quoted Bambaataa as having stated that “real hip hop” is about having “right knowledge, right wisdom, right ‘overstanding,’ and right sound reasoning—meaning that we want our people to deal with factuality vs. beliefs, factology vs. beliefs” (from Chang 2005, 90).

*Rapper as Modern-day Griot and Trickster*

As one of the more recent forms to emerge on the Africa-to-America verbal arts continuum, rap music is the most artistically complex, especially when viewed within the larger scope of hip hop culture. It is a conglomerate performance incorporating music, spoken poetry, gesture, dance, costume, and dramatic display. In this context, rap is as polyvalent and “tightly wrapped” a bundle of arts as West African dance drumming. Both art forms feature call and response audience participation, multi-layered rhythms and texts, dance, and lyrics that communicate a range of life subjects and experiences. As modern-day griots, Black rap musicians relay their everyday life experiences, including “factology” that reports on some of the harder realities of being Black in America. This latter element has been an integral component of rap from its beginnings (Hall 2011, 48):

The capacity to critique social conditions, a major tenet of critical pedagogy, has been an integral element of Hip-Hop since its inception—as both art and activism. Because of its capacity to critique, Hip-Hop is a powerful artistic medium for use in educational settings.

Reflections on rap music by African American cultural critics such as Smitherman and Rabaka place this contemporary creative expression with its roots in African orature as a natural development from the dozens and the toast ballad traditions. Smitherman elaborated on the role of the rapper as a modern-day griot, telling it like it is, a storyteller reporting and testifying: “The rapper is a post-modern African griot, the verbally gifted storyteller and cultural historian, the rapper must be lyrically/linguistically fluent; he or she is expected to testify, to speak the truth, to come wit it in no uncertain terms” (Smitherman 2000, 269). Smitherman concludes that “Rap is not the new kid on the block. Rather, its language and resistance rhetoric are well within and as old as the Black Oral Tradition itself” (2000, 198).

Echoing Smitherman, Rabaka (2013, 292) lends his Africana theoretical perspective on the African continuum of Black orature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and its relevance for today's Black urban youth:

Indeed, several hip hop scholars have pointed out how rap music is a contemporary variant of “playing the dozens” and “signifying.” Others have usurped rap’s use of song, poetry and spoken word to tell alternative, ghetto-centric stories, “kick reality rhymes,” and teach “life lessons,” all of which can be traced back to continental African griots...In a sense, most rappers are *urban griots*, using their rhymes to give voice to the often hidden hurts and daily horrors that shape black ghetto youths’ lives. In this way, rap music and hip hop culture also build on the African American tradition of poetry and song to “tell it like it is.”

Smitherman further characterizes rap music as a “contemporary response to conditions of joblessness, poverty, and disempowerment which continue to be the norm for the Black unworking class.” (2000, 269). Upski, a self-described critic from the “front lines of the White Struggle” provides an even more politicized definition of rap music: “[It is a rebellion against] white America’s economic and psychological terrorism against Black people” (Smitherman 2000, 269 quoting Upski 1993).<sup>191</sup> Rabaka (2012, 235) contextualizes rap music and what he has called the “Hip Hop Movement,” directly within contemporary American history and politics, locating African American aesthetics and socio-political movements as two sides of the same coin:

Rap music, and hip hop culture in general, is more or less a sonic symbol of the best and worst – the good, the bad, and the ugly – of African American history, culture, and politics between 1980 and the present...the propensity to divorce almost the whole of hip hop culture from late twentieth century African American social and political movements and struggles, means that once again African American aesthetics are, in most instances, understood to be the opposite of African American politics instead of two mutually related and unerringly inextricable expressions of a long-oppressed and long-exploited people.

Like other Black oral traditions discussed thus far, rap has at its heart a Signifying Trickster who is similarly hard to define and pin down. Following on the heels of the Brer Rabbit, High John, the Signifying Monkey, the toast-teller, and the dozens player, the rap artist can be interpreted as the

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<sup>191</sup> From Upski (1993): “We Use Words Like ‘Mackadocious,’” *The Source*, 48-56.



modern incarnation of the archetypal Trickster in Black orature.<sup>192</sup> In his or her most extreme badness, the Trickster-rapper is a controversial figure. This element of the “bad man” Trickster in rap music warrants further attention.

### *Hard Core, Gangsta Rap*

While controversies over hard-core gangsta-style rap lyrics (explicitly sexual, misogynist, violent or homophobic) tend to dominate popular media discourse on rap music, gangsta rap does not define the rap genre. Nor can all rap artists be neatly binned as either “conscious” or “gangsta” rappers. Pihel (1996, 251) explains this dichotomy in terms of how rap music is perceived by the dominant culture:

The various groups antagonistic toward the [hip hop] culture need hip hop to be a static, definable object. They attempt to stereotype and label hip hop (as in the conception that black urban youths are all violent criminals whose activities must be carefully monitored) in order to maintain control over this shifting and seemingly incomprehensible culture.

In his 2006 documentary film, *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, Byron Hurt unpacks many of the complex and controversial issues surrounding rap. He comes at the subject as a true aficionado—someone wholly integrated into the rap music scene. At the same time, he acknowledges that he is also someone who for years did not question rap’s predilection for amplifying the image of the Black man as a gun-toting, sex-driven, hyper-masculine tough guy. Hurt opens the film with an apology of sorts:

I sometimes feel bad for criticizing hip-hop, but I guess what I’m trying to do is to just get us men to take a hard look at ourselves. We’re like – in this box. In order to be in that box you have to be strong, you have to be tough, you have to have a lot of girls, you gotta have a lotta money, you gotta be a player. You know, you gotta be in control, you have to dominate other men, other people... you know, if you’re not any of those things, people gonna call you soft, or weak, or a pussy, or a chump, or a faggot and nobody wants to be any of those things – so everybody’s stayin’ inside the box.

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<sup>192</sup> For more on the incarnations of antebellum Trickster figures Brer Rabbit and High John the Conquerer to “badman” figures such as Stagolee, and later, the “gangsta” rapper, see *FROM TRICKSTER TO BADMAN TO “GANGSTA”*: *GLOBALIZING THE BADMAN MYTHOFORM IN HIP-HOP MUSIC* (Nyawalo, 2012).

For two years, Hurt hit the streets, recording studios, and academic institutions to glean the perspectives of rap music fans, aspiring rap artists, rap musicians, heads of media and record companies, and cultural critics. What he uncovered was a complex story, one in which rap artists are both perpetrators and casualties within a larger cultural system that valorizes the image of the sexist, super-macho male. In the film, Dr. Michael Eric Dyson describes these constructs as being deeply engrained in the American psyche:

When you think about American society, the notion of the violent masculinity is at the heart of American identity so that the preoccupation with Jesse James, the outlaw, the rebel—much of that is associated in American mindsight/reflective imagination of the nation with the expansion of the frontier...and in the history of the American social imagination, the violent man using the gun to defend his family, his kith and kin, becomes the suitable metaphor for the notion of manhood (Hurt 2006)

In a similar critique, hip hop historian Tricia Rose (1994, 16) does not apologize for hard core rap but places it within the broader context of American culture in which it thrives. While lambasting the “abuse and domination of young black women” (15) in rap culture, she also blames the media for the “viciously normalized sexism that dominates the corporate culture of the music business” (1994, 16). She also draws attention to the double standard by the “vast array of accepted sexist social practices...that result[s] in social norms for adult males” go unnoticed or are denied simply because they use less profanity (15). Belle hooks condemned the society at large in even harsher terms: “The sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and believing that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy...rap is a by-product of, not a prerequisite for, that violence” (Adams & Fuller 2006, quoting hooks 1994, 2)

In *Stepping Across: Four Interdisciplinary Studies of Education and Cultural Politics*, Julia E. Koza (2003) reprinted her 1994 study interrogating the bad “rap” that rap music gets in the media and, by extension, in educational discourse. In response to a George Will essay, Koza highlights the underlying and implicit racism in the author’s singling out Black musical products for their violent and misogynist content while never mentioning “heavy metal, country, opera, and the classical fare

typically sung in high school choirs, which often are at least as misogynistic (if perhaps not as graphic) as groups such as 2 Live Crew” (2003, 96).<sup>193</sup> In her analysis of numerous articles published in mainstream media news outlets (e.g., *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News*) from 1983 to 1992, Koza found positive reviews of rap to be in the minority (2003, 93):

Coverage almost invariably obscured the reality that the rappers and rap discussed were neither necessarily representative nor the most popular with the majority of rap fans. The rare, qualifying statement, such as, “The vast majority of rap is healthy,” or Rap is so vast, you can’t really categorize it anymore,” was barely audible amid the clatter of negativity.

A decade later, Rabaka (2013, 119–20) repudiated the misogyny in hard core gangsta rap but like Rose, hooks, and Koza, he highlighted the double standard applied to violent and misogynistic elements in White popular culture media:

I have a hard time accepting that the gangsta rappers are any more misogynist and morally repugnant than the prominent white rock rappers and comedy rappers. . . . And, even as I write all of this, I continue my condemnation in gangsta rap. I simply refuse to hold up gangsta rap as an “especially egregious” form of misogyny in American popular culture.

Rabaka also affirms Koza’s earlier point that rap music has become so diverse that it defies categorization, noting that “commercial” and “gangsta” rap, two of the most commercially successful genres, are a small fraction of more than three dozen subgenres of rap music (2013, 285–86). Rap has become a global phenomenon and the medium of choice for a wide range of diverse groups of people resulting in rap genres as varied as African rap, German rap, British rap, alternative rap, Christian rap, Midwest rap, Muslim rap, nerdcore rap, conscious rap, country rap, jazz fusion rap, feminist rap, Reggaeton, rock rap, and West Coast rap, to name just a few (286).

In sum, learning the history of rap, and with it the social complexities that undergird tough, no-nonsense, in-your-face “reality” rap should not be avoided and has its deserved place in the classroom. Nevertheless, having included hip hop and rap music in my own music classrooms, I know that using it

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<sup>193</sup> George F. Will, “America’s Slide into the Sewer,” *Newsweek*, 19 March 1990, 64.

as part of school curriculum can be a sometimes-tricky endeavor. Even with rap lyrics and content that are “clean,” there is often the random “funky” word or adult content to maneuver around. While rap music with explicit language and content may not be appropriate for most traditional school curriculums, many hip hop texts can be re-mixed for school-age children and incorporated into lessons that explore the African roots of African American oral traditions.

*Rap, Pedagogy & Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE)*

Hip hop pedagogy has evolved to such an extent that it has its own educative category, that being Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE) (see Hill, L. 2009, 10). To begin, I must acknowledge that I come to the field of HHBE as a beginner and an outsider. I do not have deep social or cultural connections to hip-hop culture, nor have I applied it in my teaching to the extent that I consider myself an expert hip hop educator. I do, however, come at HHBE with the knowledge that rap music, and hip hop culture more generally, is engrained in contemporary American popular culture and in our students’ everyday soundscapes and visual worlds. Rap’s global appeal further underscores its relevance for today’s diverse school populations in the United States; to ignore it as a pedagogical tool would be missing the opportunity it offers to connect with students, no matter their cultural, national, or ethnic backgrounds.

Examples of student raps from my elementary and middle school hip hop lessons presented in this chapter demonstrate that White, Black, and Latinx students embrace rap as their preferred medium for kicking their own “reality rhymes” (see below, 272–74). As Rabaka (2011, 198) makes clear, hip hop culture despite all its “infamous issues and ills, its scandalous controversies and contradictions,” will continue providing the world with “*terreno comune* (i.e., common ground), a *lingua franca* (i.e., common language) that cuts across the modern and postmodern borders and boundaries surrounding race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and nation.”

My appreciation for rap and spoken word poetry has deepened over the course of my teaching career, as has my understanding of hip hop’s history and its place along the continuum of Black orature

in the United States. When I began implementing rap music in my classrooms, I welcomed the opportunity to become better informed about the diversity of performance styles, subgenres, and hybrid forms within hip hop culture. I attended the week-long “Hip Hop in the Heartland” course offered yearly in Madison, where I became (somewhat) comfortable with “free styling” supported by workshop leaders and other participants in the daily “cypher.” By the end of the course, I had enough courage to perform my own spoken word poem at the culminating “poetry slam” event.

I have also seen the desire in students to learn about and express themselves through a medium that is already a significant part of their culture and identity. Teachers are now aware of the importance and pedagogical value of providing students with culturally relevant materials that draw from the students’ prior knowledge and life experiences. In this era, hip hop provides the right “hooks” to engage students in learning. Just what that learning looks like, especially at the elementary school level, is the subject of scholarly debate and interest. In the following sections, I will review some of the controversies surrounding the use of rap music in schools and some of the ways it is being implemented. I will focus on the use as a rap music as a scaffolding tool to facilitate learning of standard *and* critical literacy skills, and as a counter-storytelling medium.

### *Rap as Counter-Storytelling*

In *The Art of Critical Pedagogy*, Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008, 133) addressed the need for counter-hegemonic narratives in schools that are failing students of color. This work predates by more than ten years, the current call for Critical Race Theory in public school education. Given the clear documentation of education inequality and lack of federal funding in places where people of color reside, Duncan-Andrade & Morrell made the case that

given intolerably low academic achievement in urban schools that serve predominantly students of color (Council of the Great City Schools, 2007), there is a growing need to highlight, examine, and understand the practices that actually work in these schools, specifically those that are simultaneously focused on education and racial justice. We call these “counter-narratives” because they are stories that challenge narratives that normalize failure in urban schools and pay attention to the conditions of inequity (2008, 133).

In *Schooling Hip Hop*, Hill & Petchauer (2013, 2) note that despite its “remarkable growth,” there are shortcomings within HHBE. One shortcoming is an “exclusive focus” in HHBE on rap music texts. This emphasis excludes hip hop’s other elements such as turntablism, g-boying/b-girling (breakdancing), graffiti art, fashion, language, and spoken word poetry.<sup>194</sup> Moving beyond the examination of rap texts, Hill & Petchauer identify other cultural and aesthetic criteria such as “sampling, battling, and freestyling” that have bearing on aspects of Black adolescent and young adult lives and “related bodies of knowledge” (2013, 3). Performative elements in the play of the dozens and toast ballad recitation are equally evident in rap music—in the transference of song or story texts from one setting to another (sampling), the element of contest, boasting and one-upmanship (battling), and free-styling (improvisation). These elements, as I illustrate in Chapter Seven, are likewise embedded in jazz performance.

Hill & Petchauer also note that HHBE overlooks the role of Afrika Bambaataa’s “fifth element” i.e., “knowledge.” This omission in HHBE obscures the ways in which “youth continue to expand the boundaries of hip-hop by crafting new texts, and practices that fit within the cultural logic and aesthetics of hip-hop” (2013, 2). Multicultural music education and HHBE scholars have long noted that hip hop has been overlooked as part of a culturally relevant curriculum, particularly as a form of counter-hegemonic, or counter-narratives in pedagogy. In *Stepping Across* (2003) Koza reprinted her 1994 essay in which she noted the lack of attention given to rap music and its potential to counter the “official knowledge” of dominant culture in school curricula (2003, 79):

Rap music has been in existence for at least twenty years and has been called ‘the most significant popular innovation’ of the past two decades, but American music educators have rarely welcomed this diverse and potentially powerful genre into official school knowledge.

Ignoring, or denouncing popular culture—the culture of the people—sends elitist messages about whose understandings of the world do or do not count, both in schools and in the dominant culture.

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<sup>194</sup> Bronwen E. Low (2011, 7) notes that rapper KRS One includes beatboxing (creating beats with the voice and mouth), street language, street knowledge, and street entrepreneurialism (“trade and business”) as part of hip hop culture. In *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip Hop*, Chang extends “hip hop arts” culture to hip hop theater, literature, photography, film, spoken word and journalism (2006, xxiii).

More than a decade later, Patricia Shehan Campbell's comments confirm that it was time to "recognize that rock and hip hop music have all the potential to fit the philosophy of music-in-schools; they can be listened to for their musical features, textual features, and socio-cultural meanings" (2006, 16). Wayne Bowman (2004, 32) contributed to this discourse in his article, "Pop, goes the...? Taking Popular Music Seriously," For Bowman, it is not enough to simply add popular music to the mix of musical offerings without "situating it amidst issues of struggle, resistance, defiance, identity, power, and control." Without this politicized context, we are left with an educational program that "seeks to use popular music to achieve safe, preordained ends, ignoring the very things that account for its popularity in the first place" (2004, 32).

Priya Parmar (2007, 156) has also stressed the value of including hip hop in school curriculum, stating that educators are "cheating their students by not working in and with the various mediums that speak loudest to students...The refusal to incorporate such a pedagogy supports the belief that the culture that students bring to the schools is not legitimate or valued." The use of hip hop texts and spoken word poetry in the classrooms added cultural literacy to the curriculum and had the added benefit of the "legitimization of student knowledge, student voices, and student agency" (156).

More recently, Bettina Love (2018) reinvigorated the argument that HHBE needs to reclaim hip hop's fifth element (knowledge). Instead of wholeheartedly endorsing HHBE, Love points to "Critical Hip-hop pedagogy" (CHHP), which borrows from critical race theory to explore "race and racism, oppression, experiential knowledge, and a commitment to social justice." In her assessment, HHBE needs to go beyond the use of "rap lyrics and songs as pedagogical resources" and "stretch beyond the "meek appreciation of beats and rhymes to connect students' knowledge to their political and cultural identities" (2018, 39). An emphasis on rap's 5<sup>th</sup> elements insures that "rap as more than just a musical genre, but a site of social and cultural production with traditions, rituals, and customs that affirm youth identity on a global, national, and local level" (40). In the following section, I look at some of the ways that hip hop has been used in schools, addressing both their merits and drawbacks.

*Rap, Scaffolding, Black English & Signifying*

Wayne Au (2005, 211) calls attention to the fact that rap is often used as a pedagogical “bridge” to teach Standard English literacy and other standard school subjects. As noted earlier in this chapter, Ladson-Billings (1994) and Lee (1993) see the intrinsic value in incorporating culturally relevant curriculum as a means to motivate students who may be turned off (and tuned out) by traditional curriculum. For these educators and scholars, the use of culturally relevant curriculum is not an either/or proposition but a way to honor students’ prior knowledge, language, experience, and culture while building bi-lingual literacy competency. For Lee and her “cultural modeling framework,” it is a matter of “instruction that makes explicit connections between students’ everyday knowledge and the demands of subject-matter learning (Lee, Spencer & Harpalani 2003, 7). In this regard, Lee (1993) identifies the art of Signifying in Black English and rhetorical speech arts as pedagogical, or scaffolding mechanisms for teaching bilingual literacy competency—AAE (African American English) and SE (Standard English)—in schools.

Other hip hop scholars and authors are more wary of using rap music as a scaffolding method for achieving standard English literacy. Au’s critique is that rap music is used as a mechanism to “bring students into the dominant Discourse of education, regardless of the cultural and political implications of that act” (2005, 211). His central question is, “Are we using rap music and other forms of popular culture to transform education, or are we using it mainly to help hip-hop youth be ‘successful’ according to status quo norms of educational Discourse?” (2009, 211–212). Sleeter and Grant (2009, 76) also point out that one of the main criticisms of an assimilationist agenda is that it “seeks to eliminate minority cultures and make everyone like White, middle-class people” (2009, 76). Smitherman similarly considers that the cultural differences in how language has been shaped and embedded in culture: “a written mode for whites, having come from a European, print-oriented culture; a spoken mode for blacks, having come from an African, orally-oriented background” (2000, 203). Psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) described language assimilation in



even more critical terms: “to ‘talk like a book’ is to ‘talk like a white man.’” (Smitherman 2000, 203 quoting Fanon, 1967).<sup>195</sup> Finally, hip hop educator and scholar Christopher Emdin stresses that education for Black youth should not be a means for getting a “way out of the hood” but rather, a means for improving it (from Love 2018, 41 quoting Emdin, 2/13/2014, #HipHopEd).

Alim & Baugh (2007, 25) do not advocate eliminating conventional bodies of knowledge in school curriculum, but ask only that Black language be treated on its own terms. For example, Black poetics in rap include “conventional poetic constructions...but are rhyme-travelin far beyond that,” as rap is characterized by chain rhymes, compound internal rhymes, and secondary internal rhymes “unparalleled in American poetics” (28). Duncan-Andrade & Morell (2002, 89) describe hip hop texts as bona fide literary texts that can “foster literary interpretations” and “can be used to teach irony, tone, diction, and point of view.” Consequently, hip hop texts can be used to gain critical literacy skills. Hip hop texts offer a “serious site for social knowledge to be discussed, interrogated, and critiqued ...teaching Hip-hop as a music and culture of resistance can facilitate the development of critical consciousness” and a means for helping students gain “critical literacy and, ultimately, liberation from oppressive ideologies” (2002, 88–89).

Equating scaffolding with an “eradicationist philosophy” that intends to “wipe out any sign of Blackness in the name of preparing...students for college and the ‘real world,’” Alim (2007, 24) moves beyond rap and hip hop as mere motivational tools, raising them to be “*subject[s]* of scholarly investigation.” For Alim, capitalizing on students’ social and cultural backgrounds also means valuing and integrating Black Language (BL) into student work. As Alim notes, rap music is prime for learning about semantic and poetic devices in both oral and written poetry. Its application in schools is based upon the ideological premise that Black English is the “culturally linguistic reality of the students,” and not based upon

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<sup>195</sup> From Fanon (1967): “The Negro and Language,” In Fanon, F. (ed.), *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove, 17–40.

classroom practices that use the language and culture of the students to teach them part of the “acceptable” curricular canon... We gotta go beyond that. Our students are bright enough to know when they bein played... Why must their language and culture always be used to “take them somewhere else? *Right here* look good to me. (Alim & Baugh 2007, 27)

Alim & Baugh’s approach to language and critical literacy skill development harkens back to Afrika Bambaataa’s fifth and fundamental element of knowledge. Alim & Baugh (2007, 17) emphasize that when integrating HHBE into curricula, educators must first interrogate the notion that “knowledge” is socially constructed. To that end, Alim & Baugh (2007, 17) suggest that educators pose the following questions:

- What is knowledge?”
- Who are the producers and consumers of knowledge?”
- What are the relationships between language, culture, reality, power, and knowledge?”
- Within the Hip Hop Nation Speech Community (HHNSC), what does it mean to ‘know the ledge,’ to understand that ‘knowledge reigns supreme’?”

For guidance in teaching hip hop as counter-storytelling in schools, teachers can look to hip hop artists themselves. “Conscious” rappers such as Lauryn Hill, Pras, Public Enemy, Nas, Mos Def speak to urban youth through rap as a “voice of resistance and liberation” (Andrade & Morell 2002, 89). In 1989, Public Enemy, an early pioneer of socially conscious rap (also known as “message rap”), set the bar high for the genre with “Fight the Power:”

*1989 the number, another summer  
Sound of the funky drummer  
Music hittin' your heart 'cause I know you got  
soul*

*Brothers an' sisters, hey  
Listen if you're missin' y'all  
Swingin' while I'm singin', givin' whatcha  
getting'*

*Knowin' what I knowin', while the black bands  
sweatin' – An' the rhythm rhyme rollin  
Gotta give us what we want  
Gotta give us what we need  
Our freedom of speech is freedom or death  
We gotta fight the powers that be*

*Fight the power, fight the power ...  
...we've gotta fight the powers that be  
As the rhythm designed to bounce  
What counts is that the rhymes designed to fill  
your mind*

*Now that you've realized the prides arrived  
We gotta pump the stuff to make us tough  
From the heart, it's a start, a work of art*

*To revolutionize, make a change, nothin's  
strange  
People, people, we are the same  
No, we're not the same 'cause we don't know  
the game*

*What we need is awareness, we can't get  
careless  
You say, "What is this?"  
My beloved, let's get down to business  
Mental self-defensive fitness*

*Bum rush the show  
You gotta go for what you know  
To make everybody see  
In order to fight the powers that be...  
Fight the power...*

Some rappers take direct aim at the public schooling system and its failure to reach and engage Black youth. KRS (a.k.a. Knowledge Reigns Supreme) One's "You Must Learn," (*Ghetto Music*, 1989) and later, Lauryn Hill's "Everything Is Everything" (*Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, 1998) get right to the point of Public Enemy's call to "fight the power" by targeting the education system. At the same time, these artists offer a glimpse into an Afro-centered, anti-racist, and counter-story telling agenda within HHBE. As KRS One raps in the excerpt below, "African history should be pumped up steadily," or else "ignorance swoops down like a vulture."

"You Must Learn" (KRS One)

*What do you mean when you say I'm rebellious  
Cause I don't accept everything that you're telling us  
What are you selling us, the creator dwellin' us  
I sit in your unknown class while you're failin' us  
I failed your class 'cause I ain't worth your reasoning  
You're trying to make me you by seasoning  
Up my mind with see Jane run  
See John walk in a hardcore New York  
Come on now, that's like a chocolate cow—It doesn't exist, no way, no how.  
Just like I told you, you must learn...  
I believe that if you're teaching history  
Filled with straight-up facts, no mystery  
Teach the student what needs to be taught  
'Cause black and white kids both take shots  
When one doesn't know about the other one's culture  
Ignorance swoops down like a vulture.  
It seems to me that in a school that's ebony  
African history should be pumped up steadily,  
but it's not and this has got to stop,  
See Spot run, run get Spot  
Insulting to a black mentality, a black way of life  
Or a jet-black family, so I conclude with one concern that—You must learn...<sup>196</sup>*

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<sup>196</sup> See Hall (2011, 49, 50–51) for a slightly different version of KRS One's "You Must Learn, and Dead Prez's "They Schools," for a similar critique on the "dire social conditions in public schools."

For Lauryn Hill, standard schooling seems designed to leave Black students behind. In “Everything is Everything,” she expresses her mistrust of an educational system that fails to connect Black youth with their African heritage. When she asks, “*Who made these rules?*” she responds with her own knowledge of who she is, and the strength she gains from knowing her African heritage:

“Everything is Everything” (Lauryn Hill)

*I wrote these words for everyone  
who struggles in their youth*

*Who won't accept deception,  
In--instead of what is truth  
It seems we lose the game*

*Before we even start to play*

*Who made these rules? (Who made these  
rules?)  
We're so confused (We're so confused)  
Easily led astray...Let me tell ya that...  
Everything Is Everything...*

*I philosophy*

*Possibly speak tongues*

*Beat drum, Abyssinian, street Baptist*

*Rap this in fine linen, from the beginning*

*My practice extending across the atlas*

*I begat this*

*Flipping in the ghetto on a dirty mattress*

*You can't match this rapper slash actress*

*More powerful than two Cleopatras*

*Bomb graffiti on the tomb of Nefertiti*

*MCs ain't ready to take it to the Serengeti*

*My rhymes is heavy like the mind of sister*

*Betty*

*(Betty Shabazz!)...*

*Now hear this mixture, where Hip Hop meets  
scripture... Develop a negative into a positive  
picture.*

*Hip Hop Lessons from My Classrooms*

My own bias regarding HHBE is that rap should go beyond a scaffolding tool to being, as Alim advocates, a *subject* of investigation, tapping into rap music’s historical significance as a legitimate literary form to be appreciated on its own terms, and as a form of Black orature through which students can find their own voices, tell their own stories, create new texts. In addition, I see no reason why Black English cannot be recognized as a bona fide language that students speak, read, and write in school. As much as we push Black children to learn Standard English, they should also know that Black English (BE) is not “wrong.” The medium of rap music is one way to infuse learning with BE. White students, too, can learn that there’s more than one way to talk, and that there is loveliness, poetry, and power in the way that BE flows in written forms such as rap, as well as in everyday speech.

From any literary perspective, rap is rich in imagery, poetic language, and devices. One rap that I have used in both elementary and middle school classes to demonstrate the brilliance of rap poetics to both elementary and middle school students is “Peter Piper,” a rap from the “old school” tradition by Run DMC (1986). “Peter Piper” is loaded with literary devices common to both Black English and Standard English poetry including alliteration, simile, metaphor, and multiple rhyming schemes. It contains references to Mother Goose, English folk tales, and Alice in Wonderland, all delivered with the “narrative sequencing and flow” of Black English and rap rhythms. Run DMC is not trying to “act white” with these nods to English verse. Rather, he is Signifying on classic English nursery rhymes by reclothing them in a new Black literary idiom. Like Zora Neale Hurston said, everything that Africans in America touch is “reinterpreted for their own use” (from Tatar 2018, lxix).

As with other raps, I selected the cleanest verses from “Peter Piper” and replaced a few “problem words” with school-appropriate ones.<sup>197</sup> The rhyme can be rapped over a rap track or otherwise accompanied by students performing their own “beat box” rhythms:

*Now Peter Piper picked peppers but Run  
rocked rhymes  
Humpty Dumpty fell down that's his hard time  
Jack B. Nimble what nimble and he was quick  
But J. Master cut faster than Jack's [candle  
stick] ...  
Now Little Bo Peep cold lost her sheep  
And Rip van Winkle fell [fast] asleep.  
Jam Master Jay— king of the crossfader  
He's the better of the best, best believe he's the  
baddest...*

*His name is Jay, to see him play  
Will make you say*

*[You know] that DJ made my day  
  
Like the butcher the baker  
The candlestick maker  
He's a maker a breaker  
And a title taker  
Like the little old lady who lived in a shoe  
If cuts were kids he would be you  
Not lyin y'all he's the best I know  
And if I lie my nose will grow  
Like a little wooden boy named Pinocchio  
And you all know how the story go...*

As a multicultural musical study, students should learn that rap music is not just exclusive to the United States but is a world-wide phenomenon that crosses multiple borders, both national and lingual.

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<sup>197</sup> (candlestick) replaces “dick;” [fast] replaces “the hell;” [You know] replaces “Damn”).

Despite its origins in African diasporic traditions, the Caribbean, and the U.S., “hip hop has been consumed and refashioned in ways that respond to the experiences, traditions, imaginations, and desires of young people throughout the world (Hill, 2009, 1). It is rap music’s subversive qualities, in particular, that account for its universal appeal, offering young people a vehicle through which to “address their sense of alienation and marginalization” (Nyawalo 2012, 2). Rap music is diverse; it mixes with classical, jazz, blues, reggae, and other popular traditions. Rap’s rhythms and rhymes are infectious, danceable, and singable, and each of hip hop’s five elements can be incorporated into a pedagogy of potlikker.

Teaching hip hop as a subject means investigating hip hop’s historical, cultural, and socio-political beginnings. Students should hear the story about life in the Bronx, NYC, during the 1970s when hip hop culture took root, how the construction of the expressway cleaved the Bronx in half, leaving in its wake a poor, devastated community with little outside help from politicians (Hurt, 2006).

Understanding the oppressive conditions of life in the Bronx makes the music that rose from the rubble clear and palpable:

The culture, the energy that came from that was a very improvisational energy – a very sort of reclaiming energy that young people through dance, rapping, and Djaying and so forth – that is how the culture took hold – it was a will and response to systematic violence in the community. And when I say violence, I mean destroying homes; imagine someone putting a highway through your neighborhood (Dyson, in Hurt, 2006).

Students should learn how, in the 1960s and 70s, Jamaican-born Clive Campbell (a.k.a. DJ Kool Herc) started mixing and dubbing old funk records like James Brown’s “Give It Up or Turnit A Loose” in his new home in the Bronx. When he began cutting back and forth between two records to extend the “break” for dancing, Herc discovered the break-beat, the starting place for break dancing and many of the hip hop dance styles that followed.<sup>198</sup> During these breaks, Herc would call out, “B-BOYS GO

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<sup>198</sup> Online *Art & Popular Culture*, “DJ Kool Herc,” ([http://www.artandpopularculture.com/DJ\\_Kool\\_Herc](http://www.artandpopularculture.com/DJ_Kool_Herc))

DOWN!” The serious dancers, the ones who saved their best moves for the breaks, came to be known as “break boys,” or simply, “b-boys” and “b-girls” (Hill 2013, 14–19).

An excellent source for introducing DJ Kool Herc’s contribution to the birth of hip hop and rap comes in the form of a picture book, *When the Beat Was Born*, by Laban Carrick Hill (2013). My K–5 students love the comic-book-style illustrations and identify with Herc’s life: first as a young music-loving kid in Jamaica, and then his emigration to the Bronx with his mother. It was in the Bronx where, as a teenager, Herc re-created the neighborhood parties from his youth, complete with the Jamaican tradition of toasting, or giving “shout outs” to the crowd while spinning records. Carole Boston Weatherford’s *The Roots of Rap: 16 Bars On the 4 Pillars of Hip Hop* (2019) is a poem that offers a more condensed version of hip hop history, placing hip hop along the historical continuum of Black orature:

*Folktales, street rhymes, spirituals—rooted in spoken word,  
Props to poets Hughes and Dunbar: published, ain’t you heard?  
Soul man James Brown shouting, “I’m Black and Proud.”  
Giving birth to funk – bass line pulsing loud.  
The origins go way back – beyond old school.  
But it is in the seventies that rappers start to rule.*

As a follow-up to *When the Beat Was Born*, I have played Will Smith’s “Block Party” (2002) for my students, encouraging them to rap along. This “clean” rap brings to life the energy and excitement of the early days of MCing, DJing, and break dancing in neighborhood block parties (excerpted):

*Yo, yo forget the club  
Today we play in the block  
It's goin' down and it's blazin' hot  
Jeff pop the new CD turn tables joints  
You just got to get the amps from Boogie  
Get the van from Rock and then  
Call up Ishcabibble's, Jim's and Pat's  
And tell 'em we need cheese steaks for like,  
300 cats  
And yo, make sure it's hot or else I'm sendin'  
'em back...*

*Yo, yo and when the sun drop*

*Back in Philly that don't mean that the fun  
stop...*

*Hear the crowd cheer, brought a little smile  
out  
Mic check, one, two— I'm 'bout to wild out  
I know he's old, but*

*Maybe it's a slight chance  
I could get my brother hype  
Make him break dance—  
ha, maybe not*

*Lemme get the crowd jumpin'...*

Hip hop, as a subject of study, is equally relevant for younger elementary students. They know and relate to it, and love to dance to it as much as (if not more than) older students. Fortunately, children's books about rap music and hip hop culture are becoming more available. While most of the literature for the very young does not delve too deeply into the fifth element (social messaging) in rap, new publications legitimize rap music as a category of music worthy of inclusion in today's classrooms.

The following examples demonstrate that rap, like any other lyrical musical genre, can be used to teach the building blocks of musical literacy including steady beat, rhythm, tempo change, dynamics, stress, accent, and articulation, as well as rhyming and timing schemes in song composition. Jeff Czekej's *Hip & Hop, Don't Stop* (2010) starring the rapping Tortoise and Hare and its sequel, *Hip & Hop in the House: A Free-flowing Tortoise & the Hare Collection* (2018), offer such an introduction. As far as social content, the main message in these stories is that rap music has the potential to unite members of diverse communities and neighborhoods. In *Hip & Hop, Don't Stop*, the Hip (a turtle) and Hop (a rabbit) become friends when they discover they both love rap. The two eventually square off in a rap-battle contest. There are no losers here; both contestants tie for first place. All Hip and Hop really want, after all, is to "rock the party," which they do. Students enjoy the easy raps that Hip and Hop use to challenge each other in boasting/battle rapping style. Here's the "anchor chart" I put together for a lesson on Hip and Hop (K–2<sup>nd</sup> grades):

### Today's Lesson: A Rapping Story, Hip Hop, Don't Stop!

Hip is a turtle, he is slow.

Hop is a bunny; he's fast, you know! (Fraioni)

Hip:

*My raps are slow I take my time,  
No need to rush the words that rhyme.*

*My shell is hard, my skin is green,  
I'm the freshest turtle you've ever seen.*

Hop:

*When I rhyme, I can't slow down,  
I'm the quickest rapper living  
underground.*

*My tail is white, and I've got long ears,  
I've got phatter rhymes than Billy  
Shakespeare (Czekej 2018, 3–4)*



Nikki Giovanni's *Hip Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry With a Beat* (2008) is a diverse collection that contains school-appropriate poetry and lines from raps by Tupac Shakur and Sugar Hill Gang, among others. This collection centers hip hop poetry and the spoken and rapped word within the long and honored tradition of Black verbal artistry. From this publication, I chose Eloise Greenfield's poem, "Things" for my 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classes to perform during our final family event at the end of my first Telling Stories project (2014). The poem speaks volumes about the value of teaching students to write and memorize their own poetry and tell their own stories.

*Went to the corner  
Walked in the store  
Bought me some candy  
Ain't got it no more  
Ain't got it no more*

*Went to the beach  
Played on the shore  
Built me a sandhouse  
Ain't got it no more  
Ain't got it no more*

*Went to the kitchen  
Lay down on the floor  
Made me a poem  
Still got it  
Still got it*

#### *Student Raps: Elementary*

During my tenure at both Madison and Milwaukee schools, I implemented lessons in writing raps with some success.<sup>199</sup> Fourth and fifth-grade students were asked to express in a rap how they were feeling about what was going on around them, whether it be in school, their neighborhood, or in the world. Students toasted and boasted, rapped about rapping, and even took some Signifying digs at society. The lesson below took place in 2017, one year after the 2016 presidential election. Many of my 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade Latinex students were aware of president-elect Trump's anti-immigration legislation including proposals for the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico. Other students were aware of the "Muslim ban, and the tragic events in Syria."<sup>200</sup> Here's some examples of student raps:

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<sup>199</sup> In the 2018–19 school year, the population at this elementary school was 33% White, 30% Black, 19% Hispanic, 13% "Two or More Races," and 5% Asian.

<sup>200</sup> See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/world/middleeast/syria-assad-chemical-weapons.html>. "An investigative team from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons watchdog group accused the Syrian government of launching three chemical attacks on one village in 2017).

**Humpty Dumpty**

First off let me get something straight  
 This rap may not be great.  
 But a lot of things happening in our nation  
 The US pres wants a wall separatin al  
 Which will make our nation fall.  
 It will fall it will fall it will fall.  
 Like Humpty Dumpty on the wall  
 It will fall it will fall it will fall.

**Majestic Rap**

Hey everybody it's PBJ  
 We've got majestic rap comin' your way.  
 So lay back, relax and get some water  
 This rap's on fire and it's gonna get hotter!

**Living Rights**

Everyone should have living rights  
 But it seems a lot of people have  
     to struggle and fight  
 What with a wall and the travel ban  
 There's lots of worry in this land  
 Ev'ry thing's not alright –  
 Where's the living rights?  
  
 What's going on in Syria?  
 People dying every minute over there  
 Babies can't breathe  
     'Cause there's gas in the air  
 Seems like the world just doesn't care.  
 The government there's not flowin' right  
 Not giving rights for everyone in sight  
 Ev'ry thing's not alright —  
 Where's the living rights?

**I Get Mad**

I don't like learning, it is boring  
 People say it's fun but I end up snoring  
 I want to skip school my mom says no,  
 Only on holidays or when I'm sick or there's  
 snow.  
 I get mad.

**The Wall**

The wall, the wall, yeah we talkin bout the  
 wall and  
 It's tall, tall—really tall  
 See all those people standin there  
 They're all mumbling  
 “What's over there?”  
  
 The wall's keeping us out but nobody cares.  
 They see us standin over there and  
 We're crying on our knees  
 getting stung by bees.  
 So they say yeah they say  
 “What's wrong— how long till we get over  
 there?”

**Back To School**

We're the Oreos and we want to say  
 That we like to rap – rap all day  
 When we're on stage move out of our way  
 Cause when we rap,  
     you know we just don't play  
 We're awesome, we're cool,  
     you're gonna drool.  
 If you don't rap—you're going back to  
 school.

**Student Raps: Middle School**

In 2010, the Milwaukee Public School District laid off many Arts teachers to save money. As a relatively new hire, I was at the top of the list to get a “pink slip.” I was, however, rehired over the summer in what I called a “round robin” assignment. This meant that I taught in several different schools throughout the year, for about six weeks at a time. Thinking of myself as an artist-in-residence,

I created themed units of study that my students and I could sink our teeth into. In one of my middle school assignments, I implemented a unit on rap music. Working with this group of 8<sup>th</sup> graders was a humbling experience. It was the first class of older students with whom I had attempted a hip hop unit, complete with introductory hip hop history, musical examples, and class discussions about rap styles, followed by diving into writing raps.

This class was representative of the school student body: predominantly African American, Latinx, and bi-racial. The young rappers in this class were right up there with the best of a long tradition of Black orators. I was, and still am, in awe of their creativity and rapping skills through which they exhibited pride in themselves and their families, a keen awareness of the city they lived in (Milwaukee), and a way with words. Their raps are replete with “narrative flow” and poetic devices: internal and external rhyming, metaphor, simile, and straight up, in-your-face Signifying. In one rap, a student took the opportunity to Signify on me, her teacher for those six weeks who, in retrospect, probably did talk too much. I wish I’d had more time to build stronger relationships with these students; perhaps we could have gotten to know each other better and sat together on the bleachers.

***Big Bragger***

*I know you see the block is getting money  
That’s what we doin, riding drop top in the  
winter with the heat on  
With my chic keepin the passenger seat warm  
Pullin off in the Lamborgini like a tangerine  
Got the whole block shakin’ like a tamborine  
My chic’s got lips like Angoline.*

***Song: No Mind***

*Lissin al you kids lissin loud and clear  
You go around saggin you go around cussin  
like you have no mind.  
You look right here, you look right now  
You need to talk nice, you might just get a job.*

***Which Way***

*It’s a hot summers day headed toward the cool  
way.  
Headed to the bank makin’ cash every day.  
Family movin’ smooth headed toward the  
wrong way  
Gotta fix it up so we can have a nice day.  
Headed for the road tryin to pick up the flow;  
Flow so tight make the people go whoa!*

*It’s one thing you have to know –  
YOU ARE NOT GROWN!*

***It Ain’t about You***

*I live my life like I’m the biggest thing in it  
So if you don’t like it you can get the step on it  
I ain’t trying to impress you,  
I’m tryna make myself feel good.*

**Once Upon a Time**

*It was once upon a time  
Not long ago with a little black boy  
In the middle of the ghetto.  
Pretty good kid but he always found trouble  
But in the city life trouble finds you on the  
double.*

**Polka Dot**

*Bring da eastside to you side, dat will be a riot  
We got you beat so don't try it  
Yall just standing, y'all just lyn  
Yall gonna fail this level, so stop tryin  
Yall underneath, we at da top  
I'm just tryna find a spot like a polka dot.*

**Talk**

*You running my life  
All you do is talk –  
Words steadily flowin', breath steadily  
blowin'  
You a nice teacher, but  
I would never sit with you on a bleacher.  
I really like your glasses, oh yeah  
Don't get mad I only wrote the rap  
For a couple of classes  
If you get it together  
I promise we'll do better.*

**Twiggy Jolie's Flow**

*Erica Nevaeh is my niece you know  
She always acting like she fo'  
She just the age where she grow and  
I'm about to show you how I flow  
It's Twiggy Jolie up on this track  
All you other people is so whack  
So I'm about to turn my back  
Now that's just the end of my rap.*

**Rap and Scaffolding for Mindfulness with JusTme**

Another way that hip hop has found its way into school curriculum is within the relatively new mindfulness movement that has caught on in schools throughout the United States. According to the National Institute of Health, one in every five American children struggle with anxiety, and nearly half experience serious stressors at home such as divorce, poverty, or parent addiction (Vermont Public Radio, Education report, 2/27/20). Typical practices within the mindfulness movement might include meditation/breathing, yoga, and other mental exercises “designed to promote awareness and kindness” (NPR, 2/27/20). In the *Mindful Education Workbook: Lessons for Teaching Mindfulness to Students*, Daniel Rechtschaffen (2016 e-book, 1) advocates for mindfulness as a scaffolding mechanism to improve student performance and school climate:

Schools across the world are turning to mindfulness in the hopes that it will be an antidote for rising stress, emotional dysregulation, and attention deficit. In researching the school systems that have adopted mindfulness, we are learning that students and teachers are happier, more focused, emotionally regulated and less

affected by stress (Zenner et al., 2014). What school would pass up a chance to raise test scores, have fewer playground fights, and cultivate a more peaceful environment?

Pedagogical interventions and measures within this movement address the need for teachers and administrators to look more holistically at student frustration, anger, and other issues that keep students from being, as California rapper JusTme says, “the best I can.” JusTme has become a popular artist-in-residence in schools that want to reinforce a mindfulness curriculum through a medium that connects with students (see, [yomind.com/justme](http://yomind.com/justme)). JusTme’s raps are singable, catchy, and articulate the philosophy and messages of mindfulness pedagogy including, self-awareness, positivity, and kindness. This dynamic rapper/teacher-artist has been to several schools in the Madison Metropolitan School District and visited, at the bequest of classroom teachers, one of my Madison schools twice during my tenure. JusTme’s mindful messages and practices delivered through the medium of rap are a big draw for students and teachers. I can attest that student engagement was high during his all-school performances and when we sang and danced along with his videos in the music room.

While JusTme’s visits gave only a taste of how hip hop and rap music can be integrated into mindfulness practice in schools, I can see how it could be beneficial over the long term. While schools in the Madison Public School District are already integrating mindfulness pedagogy into classrooms with, for example, 2<sup>nd</sup> Step and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum, the added element of hip hop provides an even greater incentive for student participation in mindfulness practice. As Ladson-Billings said above, students “are less likely to fail when they...are not alienated from their own cultural values” (1994, 10).

In preparation for JusTme’s visits, I incorporated two of his songs that were circulating throughout our school and the district: “Don’t Flip Yo Lid” helps students understand what’s happening in their bodies and brains when they are confronted with situations that frustrate them or put them in “fight or flight” mode. The second, “School Day,” is a reminder to stay focused, positive, and kind.

<p>DFYL: Don't Flip Yo Lid (excerpted)</p> <p><i>People messin with me on a constant, I don't wanna be bothered with that nonsense How the brain work, gotta know the deal, I don't wanna lose it gotta find a way to keep it chill. Don't flip, yo lid - don't flip, yo lid.</i></p> <p><i>Gotta give your brain a break Deep breaths so you don't make a mistake Don't flip, yo lid - don't flip, yo lid...</i></p> <p><i>That feelin in my stomach got me feelin wrong In my chest I can feel the anger comin on Fight or flight fight or flight and the fight's growing... I feel like I'm losin my mind Why do I react every time That's why its so hard for me to stay calm My amygdala is sounding my brain's alarm It's really not a sound no not at all... Don't flip, you lid – don't flip, yo lid...</i></p> <p><i>Cortisol got my brain runnin rampant, Can't remember when its blocking up my hippocampus I can't focus, can't stay calm, Brake from the cortex isn't turned on... Don't flip, yo lid - don't flip, yo lid.</i></p>	<p>School Day (excerpted)</p> <p><i>I'm showin' up, every school day I show up at my school, I show my teachers how I act now I keep myself calm and cool,</i></p> <p><i>No more acting like a class clown I'm not bullying my friends, I'm showing kindness now I'm past hate. I know we all deserve respect So I give it to my classmates</i></p> <p><i>Being present without judgment is the new thing. I wanna be the best I can To be a top-notch student Right now I'm getting passing grades But all "A's" is the movement (A's I'm comin for ya)</i></p> <p><i>I'm stuck on being kind, I won't judge nobody. I'm mindful all the time Present moment is my party... I'm showin up...</i></p>
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## Spoken Word & The Poetry Slam

*Gil Scott-Heron*

In *Breakbeat Pedagogy*, Brian Mooney frames spoken word and The Poetry Slam (think of a slam as the dozens, or toast-telling, but in much more controlled environment and nobody's dissin on you) as outgrowths of the hip hop movement, beginning with scenes and events started by Djs Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa (Mooney 2016, 31). Although spoken poetry performance can be traced back to ancient Greece, African griot traditions, or any other culture with a history of oral storytelling

performance, the beginnings of spoken poetry readings in the US can be attributed to the “beatnik” generation, which featured American poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Gil Scott-Heron, and the Last Poets. “The poetry slam is simply the Hip Hop version of a very old tradition” (Mooney 2016, 31). Heron, who emerged from the Black Arts and Power movements of the 1960s and 70s, is probably best remembered for his performances in which he blended jazz music with his poetry. Two of his famous pieces are: “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” (1970) and “Whitey on the Moon” (1970). Heron’s satirical critiques of American society and its treatment of its Black citizens place him squarely within the long tradition of Black oratory Signifiers (lyrics, genius.com):

“Whitey On the Moon” (excerpted)

*I can't pay no doctor bill.*

*(but Whitey's on the moon)*

*Ten years from now I'll be payin' still.*

*(while Whitey's on the moon)*

*The man jus' upped my rent las' night.*

*('cause Whitey's on the moon)*

*No hot water, no toilets, no lights.*

*(but Whitey's on the moon)*

*Was all that money I made las' year*

*(for Whitey on the moon?)*

*How come there ain't no money here?*

*(Hm! Whitey's on the moon)*

*Y'know I jus' 'bout had my fill*

*(of Whitey on the moon)*

*I think I'll sen' these doctor bills*

*Airmail special (to Whitey on the moon)*

“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” (excerpted)

*There will be no pictures of pigs shooting  
down*

*brothers on the instant replay*

*There will be no pictures of pigs shooting  
down*

*brothers on the instant replay*

*There will be no pictures of Whitney Young*

*Being run out of Harlem on a rail with a  
brand new process...*

*"Green Acres", "Beverly Hillbillies", and  
"Hooterville Junction"*

*Will no longer be so damn relevant*

*And women will not care if Dick finally got  
down with Jane*

*On "Search for Tomorrow"*

*Because black people will be in the street  
looking for a brighter day*

*The revolution will not be televised*

*The revolution will not be televised*

*Will not be televised...*

*The revolution will be no re-run, brothers*

*The revolution will be live*

*The Last Poets*

Born out of the Black nationalist wing of the Civil Rights, and the Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s, the New York City group, “The Last Poets” mixed African drumming and jazz music with

spoken poetry (Parmar 2007, 140). In her introduction to *The Last Poets: On a Mission* (1996), Kim Green writes that the group's mission was

to pull the people up out of the rubble of their lives. These courageous, articulate, artistic scribes knew, deep down, that poetry could save the people. They knew that if Black people could see and hear themselves and their struggles through the spoken word, that they would be moved to change. They knew that if they took a stand for Black people and exposed their deepest fears and fires, that America could ignore them no more (1996, xxvii).

Critics have argued that The Last Poets, with their “innovative and communal lyricism” deserve consideration as the “first rap group” (Parmar 2007, 140). When young hip hop rappers in the 1980s discovered The Poets, they began sampling the group's poetry in their rap music (2007, 140). Amiri Baraka asserts that “The Last Poets are the prototype Rappers...the kina [brother] you don never wanna meet!” (1996, xiv, xvi). Green wrote that the Last Poets' story “teaches what America does to its Black men... what they do to each other. And lastly, The Last Poets' poems teach us why” (1996, xxiii). The Last Poets also wrote poetry brimming with Black pride and longing for a better world. In writing “My People,” Last Poets founding member Abiodun Oyewole felt that he “covered the strength, the tenderness, the glory, the truth as well as an ideology that we as a people should work toward” (1996, 56). Here are some selected verses from the Oyewole's poem, “My People” (57–58):

*My people are Black, beige, yellow  
Brown and beautiful  
A garden of life  
with a love as sweet as scuppernong wine  
growing in muddy waters  
making brown babies with  
pink feet and quick minds  
My people warm sometimes hot always cool  
always together...*

*Sometimes the waters are rough and the  
hungry tide swallows the shore.  
washing away all memories  
of children's footsteps  
playing in the sand  
where is the world I promised my son?*

*...must he push back the tide  
and build the world  
that I have rapped about*

*Am I so godly until I forget  
What a man is?...  
Be the revolution for our world  
turn yourself into yourself  
and then onto this disordered world and  
arrange the laughter for joy  
the tears for sorrow...into Unity, Unity  
so that the sun will follow  
our footsteps in the day...because we are born  
free  
to have the world as our playground  
My people.*

([http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/LAST-POETS/last\\_poets1.html#MY%20PEOPLE](http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/LAST-POETS/last_poets1.html#MY%20PEOPLE))



### *The Slam*

Fifteen years ago, Parmar (2007, 135) noted that 21<sup>st</sup> century spoken word poets “now perform and workshop their original work at community centers, colleges and universities, correctional facilities, coffee houses, poetry cafes, and open mike nights in bars and clubs nationwide.” In *Slam School* (2011, 13), Bronwen Low announces that the “1960s-style coffeehouse is back, in a multitude of forms.” Linking spoken word to critical pedagogy, Parmar writes that teachers who are integrating hip hop texts and spoken word into their curriculum prove that “both art forms are one kind of cultural literacy whose addition to the classroom curriculum renders positive benefits that include the legitimization of student knowledge, student voices, and student agency” (2007, 156).

Mooney’s *Breakbeat Pedagogy* (2016) chronicles one year of intensive work implementing spoken word poetry with his high school classes, demonstrating how students can use the power of spoken word poetry to express themselves, whether their poems be about love, self-discovery, school culture, neighborhood culture, gender and/or racial identity, or racism.<sup>201</sup> In describing one member of the “Slam Poetry Club” at his high school, Mooney (2016, 96) writes,

[ ] is a gay male of South Asian descent. Many of his poems deal with race, class, poverty, LGBT issues, gender equity, intersectionality, beauty, and aesthetics. As an architecture major, his design sensibilities translate into brilliant, carefully constructed poems that explore a myriad of contemporary social issues...He looks at these seemingly unrelated experiences as a web of social injustices, enforced by a system that is designed for some people to fail and for others to prosper.

Mooney is, of course, not the first to effectively incorporate hip hop education and spoken word poetry to privilege student voices and language in schools. Over twenty years ago, English teachers Heather Bruce and Bryan Davis (2000, 119) decided to develop a curriculum that “teaches for peace.” Echoing Tricia Rose’s assessment that violence in rap music is a result, not a cause, of violence in our culture, they blame schools for the “participation in both structural and systemic violence” that has closed doors for many, especially poor students, students of color, and students from limited-English

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<sup>201</sup> For a 2019 study of the applications of spoken word and the poetry slam in education, and a detailed history of the Poetry Slam, see Douglas Bishop, “The Creation of Poets: How Poetry Slam Effects Literacy Development and Identity in Young Writers” (2019, PhD Dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Lowell).

speaking families (119). Frustrated with their students' apathy and the increasing violence in the school community, their aim was to rewrite the script, to turn the classroom into a site for what Freire called "wording the world" (119, from Freire & Macedo 1987). Towards this end, Bruce & Davis are certain that teachers, as "experts in language use—can do a great deal to erase the inequality and discrimination that exists in the world. We can do a great deal to mitigate structural and systemic violence that has led to the escalation of violent behavior. We can help to word the world more justly" (119).

Recognizing that their students needed an outlet to express their feelings, Bruce & Davis set out to improve students' written *and* oral skills by implementing a program fashioned after the hip hop-style Poetry Slam. They invited local college students involved in campus poetry slams to present their work and took members of the class to coffee shops where poetry slams were happening. Another component of the project was having students read a wide variety of poetry by a culturally diverse selection of poets, including Langston Hughes (Afro-American), Gwendolyn Brooks (Afro-American.), Audre Lorde (Afro-Caribbean American), Adrienne Rich (Jewish feminist), Li-Young Lee (Chinese American), and Joy Harjo (Native American; Creek Nation) (Bruce & Davis 2000, 119).

One of the stated objectives of the poetry slam for Bruce and Davis was to use hip hop culture to "broaden connections" between their students' cultural literacies and the conventional English curriculum. While this approach was, in part, scaffolding, it was not assimilationist because Bruce and Davis offered a space in which the students' life experiences and modes of familiar discourse (hip hop culture) were valued and studied as a subject, not just as a means to an end. Valuing rap and slam as legitimate literary forms sent a message to the students that their culture and their voices mattered. By capitalizing on rap techniques such as economy of language (fewest words mean the most), rhythm, and mimesis, the teachers taught the students to express themselves in the medium of hip hop poetry, as in this piece by one of the Bruce & Davis team's students:

*I Apologize  
My whole life.  
You said you'd be there.  
No matter what I did.  
You said I'd pay.*

*And I did.  
I paid that day you sent me away.  
I never understood why.  
Those things I said. They made me hurt  
inside.*

*And after it was all over, it made me cry.  
 Dreams forgotten.  
 Hearts broken.*

*Love lost.  
 But not a word spoken* (2000, 125)

By Bruce and Davis's account, the poetry slam had a profound impact on their students. They came together as they never had before, creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and admiration as they took turns performing their poems, "working hard to electrify the room with the power of the word" on poetry slam days (125). The teachers witnessed growth in their students' pride and confidence. As one slam student said, "Poetry helps you get your mind and soul together. It gives you a different view of life than you had before" (125).

Ultimately, Bruce and Davis see the poetry slam as a mechanism that "legitimize[s] students' cultural and linguistic identifications" (126). By recognizing rap lyrics and spoken word poetry as "part of the African-American poetry continuum" and placing them in curriculum alongside the western canon (as in Shakespeare), students begin to see that their culture, their words, and their world are as valid fields of study as any other. The intention is not to disregard the rest of the literary world but to level the playing field. Within this egalitarian framework, the western, Euro-American literary canon is no longer viewed as the only tradition worth studying. Rather, it becomes simply one "other" worthy tradition among many. Quoting Bill Moyers from his book *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets* (1995, xi), Bruce & Davis (127) place their poetry slam project within the context of their hopes for a more equitable, just, and peaceful society: "Democracy needs her poets, in all their diversity, precisely because our hope for survival is in recognizing the reality of one another's lives."

## Telling Stories II: Family Member Story Workshops – A Story, & Spoken Word

Author and poet Cornelia Hoogland (1998, 84) writes that one of the values of stories lies in their potential to serve as cultural and social bridges, forcing students to "confront other than our own, to see ourselves and those we are close to in the stories of others, to address injustices, and to find ourselves changed" (Hoogland 1998, 84). Summoning Maxine Greene, Mooney (2016, 30) reflects on the power

of hip hop narratives to foster an understanding of one another's experiences for both students and their families:

The Hip Hop art space has the potential to engage urban communities in what Greene (2001, 21) calls "wide-awakeness... There is an exchange taking place, as performers and audience members gain access to one another's experiences. Greene reminds us that these kinds of art spaces should be accessible to students and the community. Today, Hip Hop culture is probably the most accessible mode of expression available to students and their families.<sup>202</sup>

To extend community participation to families and community members in the Telling Stories II (2016) project at my own school, Orchard Ridge Elementary (ORE), I implemented what I called "Adult Family Member Dinner Workshops." These workshops are a form of what King & Swartz refer to as "eldering," an Afro-centric pedagogical model that encourages adult family member engagement in schools (2016, 38–39). As King & Swartz (38) recognize, "students carry the culture of their families into the classrooms so if you're going to locate or center students you need to acknowledge their families by inviting them in." In these dinner workshops, adult family and neighborhood community members participated in storytelling workshops led by the same guest artists that worked with their children, linking the adults directly into school curriculum. Participants enjoyed catered dinners, were treated to story performances by the guest artists, and created their own story arts. These workshops provided an avenue for furthering an understanding of diversity within our school community and offered a safe place where personal stories could be created and shared. Teju Ologboni and Dasha Kelly's dinner workshops served, in Hoogland's words, as a "means of inclusion, inviting the reader, listener, writer, or teller as a companion along on another's journey" (1998, 84).

### *Teju's Evening Story*

For his evening workshop, Teju created a group story based in part on the participants' life experiences. He prompted the plot of the story by asking if anyone had a significant event in their lives

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<sup>202</sup> From Greene, M. & Lincoln Center Institute, (2001), *Variations on a blue guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute lectures on aesthetic education*. New York, NY: Teacher College Press.

that they would be willing to share. The first brave soul told the group about her recent move to Madison from Minneapolis, on a bus with her two children, bringing nothing more than a suitcase. The story evolved from there, with another participant relaying the story of his divorce, remarriage, and move to Madison with his new family. Mixing fact with fiction, everyone added new characters, with each one boarding the same bus and forming new relationships. Woven into this story that we called “New Beginnings” were personal events that, but for this storytelling workshop, might never have been shared between these family members.



Figure 6–1: Tejumola Ologboni, Family Dinner Workshop (Photo: A. Fraioli)

### *Dasha Kelly & “Where I’m From”*

For her part in the “Telling Stories II,” Dasha Kelly introduced spoken word poetry to a group of students in the afterschool program and provided an in-depth writing workshop with adult family members at the neighborhood community center in the evening. In the student session, Dasha emphasized that the potency of a spoken word poem depended on its author’s ability to deliver it dramatically and emphatically. As this was an introductory workshop, the students did not write their own spoken word pieces. They did, however, learn to deliver nursery rhyme songs using spoken word performance devices such as repetition, layering, PUNCH, *effect*, and unison (Figure 6–2). Here, I am

reminded of the oratory skills required for a successful performance of the epic toast ballads back in the day (Smitherman 1977 158).

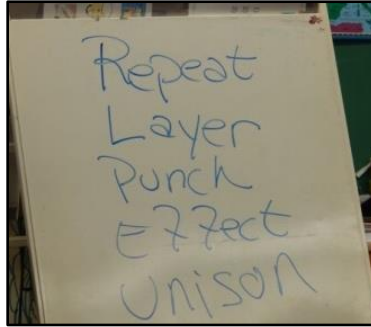


Figure 6–2: Dasha Kelly’s spoken word “anchor chart” (Photo, A. Fraioli)

In her evening workshop with ORE adult family and community members, Dasha focused on writing (Figure 6–3). After performing one of her own spoken word poems, she introduced us to our task: creating and sharing what Dasha called “word art” pieces based on the theme, “*Where I’m From.*” Dasha then guided us in writing down what we saw, heard, and felt as we imagined being inside our homes, out in our yards, streets, and neighborhood, and how to form our ideas into a short piece to be read aloud. The poems written and spoken that night were personal and honest, and reflected the life experiences of the participants, offering different perspectives on life and living in Madison.

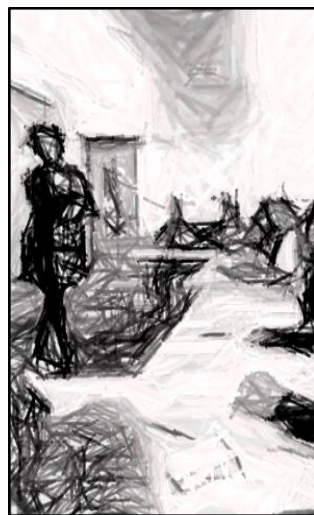


Figure 6–3: Spoken Word Poetry, Dasha Kelly and Dinner Workshop Participants (Photo, A. Fraioli)

*“Where I’m From”* (by Spoken Word Dinner Workshop Participants)

1. *Here I’m from is a small city where one’s hopes and dreams are usually crushed as soon as you start to dream about all the great things that can possibly come true. Where I’m from you hear sirens from police cars, ambulances, gun shots, loud music, loud talking, girls playing double-dutch. But also where I’m from there’s lots of love, laughter, teaching moments, books, family get-togethers, food, and prayer.*
2. *I remain in the same spot. Everything around me has changed, but it hasn’t. As a young child, I see coconut trees and street vendors. As a boy I’m surrounded by old buildings. As a teen, I see pines of northern Minnesota. As a young man who still feels like a boy, I see deserts and palm trees. And as a man who feels like a man, I see the parked cars that leave on schedule, a grandpa pushing grandkids in a stroller while walking the dog, trash that jumps from lawn to lawn until it reaches my own, the front sidewalk where one kid multiplies to many, and the smell of the best food in the neighborhood, coming from my window. This is where I’m from.*
3. *Here I’m from I see houses, kids along parked cars, lined out in the street like they never goin’ down. The stop sign at the corner with them holes in it. The teen kids who sometimes at night... that don’t have nowhere to go at night. And then when it’s most likely morning there’s sometimes when I seem to find my comfort in the warmth of my bed and... within my...soul. My block is live, meaning there’s always something going on, some type of noise being made. Where I’m from, I just want to go and hide out in my house and forget about this real nice person I used to be.*
4. *I’m from a block that’s humble. Sweet, teen boys who play basketball with my son – he’s only seven. Where I’m from, my house is filled with love, filled with music, filled with glasses from drinking. This city is not to be tempted. Don’t hang with the wrong crowd, don’t lose your focus. My block is lined with cars, houses, buildings, and flowers. The lady upstairs is also the crossing guard. The guy and his dog downstairs are both creepy. Some people don’t like the year-round Christmas decorations, but I don’t mind. I’m always at my Aunties house to escape, to eat, and hug more kids. Where I’m from you have to stay motivated because even a fence can’t keep your puppy from being stolen.*
5. *Where I Live Now—Feelin’ Free Community, where I live now  
Racism and violence [and] children everywhere.  
Where I live now; families, loneliness, work, friendship.  
Where I live now.*
6. *I’m from a house that is FULL. Full of books and electronics attached to their life-lines, their chargers. The former I make my kids pick up, the latter I make them put down. My house is full of music—mine in the kitchen, my son’s in the living room, my daughter’s in her bedroom – all competing.  
  
My house is full of scraps, all over - Kleenex and nerf bullets and craft projects and gum wrappers—souvenirs from a busy day.  
  
My house is full of voices. On the worst days, shouting and name calling followed by stomping feet and slamming doors. On the best days, laughter and positive words and I’m sorry and I love you.*

It was my aim that with this first venture into spoken word poetry, members of our school community could get to know one another through their stories. For one participant, Dasha stood in as both scribe and speaker. This single gesture crystalized for me the importance of the Telling Stories project— that it gave voice to a member of our school community even though she could not write her own words. All members, myself included, shared our spoken word pieces with the group and, like the storytelling workshop with Teju Ologboni, opened a bit of our lives and souls to other members of our community. Our group that evening was small (eleven in all), but it proved that spoken word poetry can, in the spirit of Bill Moyer, help us to recognize “the reality of one another’s lives.”

### *Spoken Word, Music & Black Lives Matter*

In *Black Lives Matter and Music* (Shonekan & Orejuela 2018) editor and contributor Fernando Orejuela writes that the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement “continues the practice of using music as personal and group expressions to organize and peacefully protest racial injustices, including sanctioned police and civilian brutality against black bodies.” At the time of this publication, the BLM movement was well underway, born in response to the death in 2012 of Trayvon Martin at the hands of George Zimmerman, a citizen “vigilante,” who was subsequently acquitted of the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree murder charge in the case (2018, 2).

After subsequent and numerous killings by police of unarmed black citizens including Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, and Briana Taylor, ethnomusicologist Stephanie Shonekan framed the Black Lives Matter movement as a continuation of the necessary and unfinished work towards racial equity and social justice begun with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (2018, 111). Shonekan wanted her college students to be able to interrogate race and “the ways in which the United States is changing in terms of racial justice” (112). In one of her courses, she incorporated music tracks that were released immediately after the murder of Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, in August of 2014. Produced by socially conscious rap artists The Game et al., Lauryn Hill, and J. Cole, these songs were



“a reaction to the tragic injustice of Brown’s murder and a reflection of the sentiment that was so palpable among the urban black community” (Shonekan 2018, 114).

“Black Rage;” To the tune of “Favorite Things”  
(excerpted from Lauryn Hill, 2014)

*Black rage is founded on draining and  
draining  
Threatening your freedom to stop your  
complaining  
Poisoning your water while they say it’s  
raining  
Then call you mad for complaining,  
complaining..*

*When the dogs bit  
And the beatings  
And I'm feeling so sad.  
I simply remember all these kinds of things  
And then I don't fear so bad.*

“Be Free” (excerpted from J. Cole, 2014)

*And I'm in denial, uh  
And it don't take no x-ray to see right through  
my smile...  
I be on the go, uh...  
And there ain't no drink out there that can  
numb my soul  
Oh no—Uh  
And all we wan' do is take the chains off  
All we wan' do is break the chains off and  
All we wan' do is be free...*

*Can you tell me why  
Every time I step outside I see my [brothers]  
die?  
Oh, I...I'm lettin' you know  
That there ain't no gun they make that can kill  
my soul  
Oh no—All we wan' do is  
Take the chains off.*

“Don’t Shoot” (excerpted from The Game, 2014)

*Our Lord, grant us good in this world  
And good in the life, to come keep us safe  
from the torment of the fire  
As we keep our hands up high and scream for justice*

*Ferguson, rest in peace Mike Brown  
And all the young soldiers out there, God help us.  
Time to take a stand and save our future  
Cause we all we got, we all we got  
God ain't put us on the Earth to get murdered...Don't point your weapons at me...*

I know that the George Floyd killing in May of 2020 affected some of my students deeply. I also know that songs can provide an emotional outlet for students who may not be able to articulate thoughts and feelings about issues that matter to them. Of the three songs, “Don’t Shoot” and “Be Free” contain

lyrics dealing directly with incidents of police brutality. While I was not able to share these songs with my students, they would have recognized the melody of Oscar & Hammerstein's "Favorite Things," to which the lyrics of "Black Rage" are set. While the irony of this poetic gesture (i.e., harsh reality set against the original lyrics about kittens and sweets) may be not be easily grasped by young students, they can learn, if they haven't already, that protestors were brutalized by the police and their attack dogs during the Civil Rights era. In the name of CRT in education and teaching historical truths, students should be aware of this history. To paraphrase the adage, if we want to know how we got here, we need to know where we've been. It's *Sankofa* all over again, we gotta go back and get it; "NEVER FORGET THE BACK WITHOUT WHICH THERE IS NO FRONT!"

Both Amiri Baraka's and Reiland Rabaka's political approaches to Black vernacular music traditions resonate with present day Black Lives Matter politics. In *Hip Hop's Inheritance* (2011, 5), Rabaka connects with Baraka's politicization of Black music traditions and aesthetics:

As Baraka's work suggests, and as *Hip Hop's Inheritance* emphasizes black music has always been much more than music. It is the music of the outcast and oppressed, the "blue notes" and break-beats, the dark rhythms and rhymes emerging from the underbelly of exiles in America, and as such it has historically and currently continue to serve socio-political purposes.

Black vernacular music's role in forming political life continues and may even become more prominent. As part of the 2020 Democratic National Convention, the DNC honored the recently deceased Civil Rights Activist and United States Congressman John Lewis by hosting a performance of the R&B/Soul/Rap song "Glory," by singer-songwriter John Legend and rap artist Common [Lonnie Rashad Lynn Jr.] (8/20/20). Like "Black Rage," "Don't Shoot," and "Be Free," the song "Glory" is testimony to the sacred-secular continuum that has been a central characteristic of Black American vernacular expressions from the antebellum period to the present. Fusing traditional gospel-style spirituality with protest and socially conscious rap, "Glory" reflects both the triumphs of Black struggles for freedom in America and the still-challenging road ahead (excerpted from the 2014 soundtrack for the film, *Selma*):

## Glory

*The movement is a rhythm to us—Freedom is like a religion to us  
Justice is juxtapositionin' us—Justice for all just ain't specific enough  
One son died, his spirit is revisitin' us—True and livin' livin' in us, resistance is us...  
That's why Rosa sat on the bus*

*That's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up  
When it go down we woman and man up—They say “Stay down,” and we stand up  
Shots, we on the ground the camera panned up—King pointed to the mountain top and we ran up  
From dark roads he rose, to become a hero—Facin' the league of justice, his power was the people*

*Enemy is lethal, a king became regal—Saw the face of Jim Crow under a bald eagle  
The biggest weapon is to stay peaceful—We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through.*

*Somewhere in the dream we had an epiphany—Now we right the wrongs in history  
No one can win the war individually—It takes the wisdom of the elders and young people's energy  
Welcome to the story we call victory...*

*One day when the glory comes—It will be ours, it will be ours  
Oh one day when the war is won—We will be sure, we will be sure  
Oh glory (Glory, glory)—Oh (Glory, glory)*

*Amanda Gorman and the 2021 Presidential Inauguration*

Without a doubt, the January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Biden presidential inauguration ushered in new hope and new beginnings for America after four tumultuous years of the Trump presidency. Delivered at the inauguration was Amanda Gorman's poem, “The Hill We Climb.” One of the latest spoken word poems to reflect this moment in history, Gorman's poem portrays a nation reckoning with its racist past and the current rancor over how we are to move forward, looking towards a more truly equitable nation for all — “*This is the era of just redemption we feared at its inception.*” For educators interested in teaching about the history of racism in America (the primary goal for CRT in education), Gorman's poem comes as a salve: potlikker for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It speaks directly to the White-supremacist violent insurrection at our nation's capital building on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 — “*We've seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than share it...and this effort very nearly succeeded*” — and to the work that needs to be done by all Americans to repair this and past injustices—“*...it's the past we step into and how we repair it.*”

“The Hill We Climb,” Amanda Gorman (excerpt)

*When day comes we ask ourselves,  
where can we find light in this never-ending  
shade?*

*The loss we carry,  
a sea we must wade.*

*We've braved the belly of the beast,  
We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,  
and the norms and notions  
of what just is  
isn't always just-ice.*

*And yet the dawn is ours before we knew it.  
Somehow we do it.*

*Somehow we've weathered and witnessed  
a nation that isn't broken,  
but simply unfinished...  
Far from pristine...*

*It's because being American is more than a  
pride we inherit, it's the past we step into  
and how we repair it.*

*We've seen a force that would shatter our  
nation rather than share it.  
Would destroy our country if it meant delaying  
democracy.*

*And this effort very nearly succeeded.  
But while democracy can be periodically  
delayed,*

*it can never be permanently defeated.  
In this truth, in this faith we trust.  
For while we have our eyes on the future,  
history has its eyes on us.*

*This is the era of just redemption  
we feared at its inception.  
We did not feel prepared to be the heirs  
of such a terrifying hour  
but within it we found the power to author a  
new chapter.*

*To offer hope and laughter to ourselves.  
So while once we asked,  
how could we possibly prevail over  
catastrophe?*

*Now we assert,  
How could catastrophe possibly prevail over  
us?*

*We will not march back to what was,  
but move to what shall be.*

*A country that is bruised but whole,  
benevolent but bold,  
fierce and free.*

*We will not be turned around  
or interrupted by intimidation,  
Because we know our inaction  
Will be the inheritance of the next  
generation...*

*The Spoken Word Artist is a Trickster, Too*

Before closing this chapter, I would like to return to its roots in the Signifying arts traditions that began in African homelands. Lest we forget, the one, central constant in these African oral traditions is the art of Signifying that originates with the shape-shifting, double-sided, fast-talking Trickster. Always adapting to the time and place of his/her generation and location, Trickster has worn different clothes, styles, genders, and racial and ethnic identities down the centuries, repositioning himself/herself within

different genres of Black orature without ever losing his/her cool. Alternately clever and foolish, eloquent, and rude, he/she (almost) always manages to have the last word. Like the earlier folk narratives from which spoken word poetry is derived, this contemporary expression is part of a collective consciousness, where the creations of individual songsters, storytellers, and toast-tellers are told often enough that they become communal, part of what Low (2011, 52) calls the “community sentiments.”

Afrika Bambaataa has bemoaned the fact that rap artists were all too often forgetting the relationship between “the self and the we” (Low 2011, 32 quoting Bambaataa 2007). For Bambaataa, the 5<sup>th</sup> element of “knowledge” in hip hop culture has always been about knowledge of self, but always in relation to community and community sentiments: “a lot of brothers and sisters lost knowledge of self. They’re losing respect of the ‘us syndrome’ and getting into the ‘I’ syndrome. You can’t build a nation with an ‘I,’ you got to build a nation with a “us” (Low 2011, 32). Perhaps spoken word is a harkening back to Bambaataa’s 5<sup>th</sup> element in that it speaks powerfully from the “I” to the “us.” Bettina Love (2018, 40) elaborates on this point, attesting that the fifth element of hip-hop—the “production of knowledge” that has been central to hip hop culture since its arrival

[is] also incomplete without directly naming *community*...At its core, each element of hip-hop arose from urban youths’ Knowledge of Self and their understanding of community...Put another way, hip-hop’s foundation is embedded in the act of critically reading one’s reality – community – to understand oppression and domination to create counter narratives of love, pain, pleasure, and activism.

Hip hop has always been part of a social dialogue that reflects communal sentiments and experiences. Like the original West African Trickster Eshu Elegbara (the divining orator at the cross-roads and social disruptor/healer), the Black orator has remained the voice of the people, using storytelling to impact peoples’ perspectives on the past, present, and future. In his analysis of the Trickster’s ongoing influence in Black literary and musical traditions, Edward M. Pavlić asks, “But what does reckoning with Es[h]u imply?” In reference to the social disruption following the dispute over Es[h]u’s two-colored cap, he probes further, “Why does a dispute over perception result in violence?” To these queries, Pavlić answers (2004, 71):

To reckon with Es[h]u-Elegba is constantly to recreate language. Static phrasings and clichés aren't enough. To reckon with Esu, one must improvise and push past pleasantries. In *The Trickster in West Africa*, Robert Pelton discusses how Esu's presence requires constant attempts "to speak ... new word[s] and to disclose a deeper grammar ... to restore ... a conversation that speaks more accurately and meaningfully of life" (161). These insights point toward the redemptive role of disruption-as-renewal in a vibrant communal space.

After hearing Amanda Gorman recite "The Hill We Climb," Kathleen M. Alley "threw her lesson plans out the window" to study the poem with her students at Mississippi State University. From Alley's perspective as a teacher-educator and associate professor of literacy, the purpose of Gorman's poem is two-fold: it helps her teachers-in-training become critical thinkers and it also educates them regarding spoken word as a literary form rooted in Black oral traditions:

Her poem is an incredible example of spoken word poetry – a form of poetry that is rooted in oral traditions and performance. Spoken word encompasses elements of rap, hip-hop, storytelling, theater and more. It is characterized by rhyme, repetition, word play and improvisation. It often touches on issues of social justice, politics, race, and community. It holds the promise of helping young people to connect with ideas as well as providing a means to deepen comprehension and develop understanding and empathy, which can then be applied to real-world situations. One of the most powerful things poetry can do is to refocus, if not transform, people's point of view.

I suggest that we all need to listen more carefully to America's young Black poets, who are the inheritors of Eshu Elegbara's rhetorical gifts. Some years back, I turned on the radio in between writing pages of a seminar paper and became riveted to "The Access Hour" on Madison's progressive community radio station, WORT. On the air was a group of local high school spoken word artists who had been working with the "Johnson Brother's Spoken Word in Motion" group.<sup>203</sup> There were several young voices sharing their poetry, but one poet voice stood out among them. He was cocky, cool, clever, and funny, and his timing and delivery were impeccable. He knew exactly where to put his words on hold or speed them up, punching in a rapid word or line for dramatic effect. His poem was about being bad (as in good) and that was just fine by him. He was Trickster personified and full of bravado and his was a powerful performance. In closing, I pose the following questions: Is spoken word

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<sup>203</sup> Brothers Derek and Dion Johnson hosted spoken word poetry slams in Madison, Wisconsin in the early 2000s.

the last word? What form, what guise will the Trickster take in generations to come? Whatever the answers to these questions are, when he/she appears, let's not forget where he/she comes from.



## Chapter Seven

### Blues & Jazz: A Final Word on Teaching Freedom

#### Introduction: More Than Music

Whether vocal or purely instrumental, blues and jazz have stories to tell within a pedagogy of *potlikker*. In this capacity, these musical forms “speak” and teach about the courage, tenacity, artistic genius, and rich cultural heritage of Africans in America. As with antebellum songs and plays, Trickster tales, the dozens, spirituals, toasts, rap, and spoken word poetry, blues and jazz have their roots in African oral arts traditions. They are, as will be shown in this chapter, part of the continuum of Black vernacular traditions in which the spoken word still reigns supreme. While most often regarded as secular expressions, blues and jazz traditions reveal their sacred-secular roots within the West African “unitary world view” discussed in Chapter Three. As Baraka (1968, 207) has written, “Indeed, to go back in any historical (or emotional) line of ascent in Black music leads us inevitably to religion, i.e., spirit worship.”

Like all musical expressions anywhere in the world, blues and jazz reflect and express the *zeitgeist* of the cultural and socio-political eras in which they evolved and flourished. I do not suggest that classroom teachers need instruct their students on every aspect of the historical, socio-political, or cultural contexts for blues and jazz that I present in this chapter. Nonetheless, I do maintain that purely musical and performative pedagogical concerns should not be divorced from either the real-life contexts in which these genres became popular or from their cultural roots in African oral arts traditions.

Blues and jazz emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when Blacks in America had their sights and hopes, to quote the well-known civil rights song, “stayed on freedom.”<sup>204</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>204</sup> From the song “Woke Up This Morning,” a reworking of the original spiritual, “*Woke up this morning with my mind, stayed on Jesus.*” The song was reworked by Reverend Osby of Aurora, Illinois, a member of the Freedom Rides during the Civil Rights movement: “*Woke up this morning with my mind, stayed on freedom*” (Carawan & Carawan 1990, 83). See, *Sing for Freedom* (Carawan & Carawan 1990, 83–85) for more on the song’s history, full lyrics, and musical transcription. The song also appears in *Share the Music*, Grade 3 (Bond, et al; 2000, 198).



they were confronted with the reality of Reconstruction and racial segregation laws enacted with the intent of keeping them in their place. Smitherman (1994, 23–24) put it this way:

After Emancipation, [African Americans] thought they could make home the rich, fertile land of the south. But Reconstruction ended, and the Federal Government abandoned them, forcing them to survive amidst lynch mobs and the Ku Klux Klan and leaving them to fend for themselves as sharecroppers trapped in a new form of enslavement.

As Floyd (1995, 78) points out, the blues were “created by a people coming to grips with the changes wrought by the onset of Reconstruction and the dawning of a new century.” Jazz historian David Evans similarly reflects on the fact that blues and jazz, along with ragtime, gospel, and developments in Black literature, art, and theatre, occurred within the reality of a post-Reconstruction America that had no interest in equal rights for its African American citizens (Evans 2006, 79, 80):

This creativity coincided with a hardening of White resistance to Black social and economic progress in the form of Jim Crow laws and the institutionalization of racial segregation, disenfranchisement of Black voter, lynching and other forms of terrorism, and the loss of jobs to the swarm of new European immigrants. It was a time of the end of the American dream that had once seemed attainable for Black Americans following Emancipation.

In 1931, during the Harlem Renaissance (1920s–30s), Duke Ellington, one of most successful and beloved jazz musicians of the era, made public his assertion that Black music was more than entertainment and dance:

The music of my race is something more than the "American idiom." It is the result of our transplantation to American soil, and was our reaction in the plantation days to the tyranny we endured. What we could not say openly we expressed in music, and what we know as "jazz" is something more than just dance music (Alper 2011).

Ellington’s counter-narrative about Black music and jazz has been maintained throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries by numerous scholars, including those cited in this chapter: Amiri Baraka (1968), James H. Cone (1972), Samuel A. Floyd (1995), Craig Werner (2006), and Reiland Rabaka (2011, 2012, 2013). In his studies on hip hop’s socio-political and musical indebtedness to both blues and jazz, Rabaka (2012, xix) explains that

African American’s unique history and culture has consistently led them to create musics that have served as the soundtracks or, more or less, the

mouthpieces for their socio-political aspirations and frustrations, their socio-political organizations and nationally-networked movements.

Both Ellington's and Rabaka's "more than music" stance is embodied by the legacy of the late ethnomusicologist John Blacking. For Blacking, music, wherever and whenever it occurs, can be analyzed and taught as a sociological and cultural form of communication, not just as a musical one. In Blacking's words, "music confirms what is already present in society and culture, and it adds nothing new except patterns of sound" (1973, 54). With Blacking's theory in mind, I highlight in this chapter those features of blues and jazz that speak to their formation as cultural and social phenomena, not just musical ones. In so doing, I will present examples of student work undertaken during the "Freedom & Jazz" residency that I co-directed at Orchard Ridge Elementary School in Madison, Wisconsin. This project will illustrate how a pedagogy of *potlikker* can teach how Black vernaculars can be, as Rabaka has put it, "about poetics *and* politics, aesthetics *and* activism" (2012, 233). I will begin with the blues and its rootedness in African oral traditions.

### The Blues: Out of Africa and Up from the Field Holler

Like other African American musics created in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the blues is a syncretic form that combines elements from African and European musical traditions. One of the most obvious European elements in the blues is the basic I–IV–V harmonic chord progression in both instrumental and vocal blues forms (Evans 2006, 80).<sup>205</sup> Regarding African retentions, Evans posits that features in the blues such as melismatic singing, itineracy, songs of frank social commentary, and preferences for stringed instruments point to a "West African savannah origin." Based on these traces, he concludes that these features are probably "pan-African" (2006, 81).

In *Africa and the Blues* (2008) Gerhard Kubik observes that music traditions across the Saharan and Sudanic regions in West and Central Africa contain several features that also show up in the blues: solo

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<sup>205</sup> This chord progression is built upon the root, or first pitch of an eight-note scale (chord I), the fourth pitch (chord IV), and the fifth pitch (chord V). Chords are typically made up of three or more pitches within the scale.

singing traditions, pentatonic melodic frameworks, instrumentation (bowed string instruments), and song forms (such as the common blues AAB verse pattern), and songs sung from a highly personal point of view (2008, 11; 28; 42–46; 81–82). Musical types within these African traditions include songs of denunciation, itinerant music, work songs, the Yoruba *chantefable* (songs in stories), and the melismatic and declamatory song styles performed by the Hausa peoples who are “scattered all across the west central Sudanic belt” (70; see also, 7–28; 30; 45–46, 94).

Noting the continuation of antebellum song styles and structures (field hollers, work songs, spirituals) in the blues, Levine (1977, 221) writes that the “rise of the blues did not call for the invention of wholly new musical forms.” Musical features in the blues such as the use of falsetto, slides, slurs, and vocal leaps, and the retention of call and response singing are “a definite assertion of central elements of the traditional communal musical style” (224). Among the changes wrought by the blues, the most significant may be the shift away from antiphonal group singing in vernacular song to a solo practice with, for example, a musician singing alone or a singer also playing guitar (Levine 1977, 217). This shift did not, however, irradicate the call and response format. In the blues, it is the singer who responds to his or her own call, either vocally or on an accompanying instrument (221). Nor was solo singing a new practice with the emergence of the blues. Whether influenced by the field hollers sung by enslaved plantation hands in the fields, by the lead singers’ calls in the corn-husking frolics, or from ante- and postbellum street vendors’ calls, “slaves and freedmen had the ingredients for a highly personalized, solo music” (221).

Most importantly, the blues expressed the collective consciousness, attitudes, and experiences of large numbers of African American in the United States (Levine 1977, 221):

The precise time and manner of the emergence of the blues are lost in the irrecoverable past. For our purposes it is not crucial whether blues songs were known to slaves or were created only after emancipation, whether they evolved from the field hollers and work songs or as is more likely, grew up alongside of them, carved out of the same matrix of Afro-American musical style. When the blues was created is less important than when it became a dominant form among Negroes throughout the country.

For Baraka (1971) the enslavement era was when and where the seeds for the blues were sown, but he agrees that it was “after the Emancipation [that] the shouts, [field] holler, yells, spirituals and ballits began to take shape as the blues (59)...if slavery dictated certain aspects of blues content and form, so did the so-called Emancipation and its subsequent problems dictate the path blues would take” (50–51).<sup>206</sup>

### *Blues as Lyrical Protest*

As a solo tradition, the blues is sung in the first person, reflecting a full range of human emotions and feelings, including the “up and downs of daily life” (Evans 2006, 84). Whether singing about love, sex, travel, work (or lack of it), poverty, trouble with the law, magic (hoodoo), or death, blues lyrics are most often realistic as opposed to idealistic and non-sentimental rather than light or frivolous (84). There is often humor in blues lyrics, but that humor is expressed with irony and cleverness, as it many also contain “double or multiple meaning, or social commentary and criticism” (84). Evans (98) further underscores the function of the blues as a form of social commentary and protest that “from its inception in the late 1800s through the 1940s, the blues served the “mass of Black America to voice, contemplate, and musically embody Black alternatives to White supremacy.” As vaudevillian Maggie Jones sang:

*Goin' where they don't have no Jim Crow laws,  
Goin' where they don't have no Jim Crow laws,  
Don't have to work here like in Arkansas* (Evans, 98).

The blues thus evolved as a personal expression that nonetheless served to broadcast the collective sentiments of a people who found themselves adrift in a society that had little interest in their becoming full American citizens. In *Lyrical Protest* (1989, 53–54), Ellison describes the blues as a “dense repository of both the African past and the current, day to day responses to personal and collective problems,” with the result that the blues men and women were community “spokespersons on social

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<sup>206</sup> Baraka (1971, 59) refers to the Anglo ballads, or “ballits” which, along with the Protestant hymns, represent European influences on African American singing styles.

and political issues...and amounted to a musical version of widely held views.” Cone (1972, 121) makes this point emphatically when he asks, “What were black people to do when the slightest expression of social resentment could mean death? Without political freedom or the means of achieving it, many blacks turned to the blues for identity and survival.” To restate Ralph Ellison’s position, “For the art—the blues, spirituals, the jazz, the dance—was what we had in place of freedom” (Cone 1972, 121).

While the blues possessed neither radical statements nor calls to revolution, they were not, as some authors contend, apolitical or devoid of protest (Cone 1972, 118–119). In his article “Signifying the Blues,” Robert Switzer writes that blues singers were “tricksters, visionaries who brought a new way of seeing and being into their communities” (2001, 64).

Of course, the masking, signifying face of the blues has been, above all, a response to racism...In the blues, the music and the words, both of them "masked" and signifying, play off one another in apparent simplicity, while in fact exploding with awesome, subversive, and liberating power (Switzer 2001, 29).

Underscoring the role of Signifying in the blues, Cone writes that the blues did not “*openly* condemn white society, and there is little *direct* complaint to *white* people about the injustice of segregation.” The relative absence of such direct statements of protest in the blues does not mean that “black people accepted their oppressed condition” (118). Rather, blues lyrics were

statements of and for black people who are condemned to live in an extreme situation of oppression without any political leverage for defining their existence. The blues attempt to answer the question: How can we black people survive in a world of white racism and hate? This question defines the sociological and theological background for an interpretation of the blues.

*Feeling tomorrow, like I feel today.  
Felling tomorrow, like I feel today.  
I'll pack my suitcase, make my get away.*<sup>207</sup>

The blues, then, embodied the collective consciousness of a people living under the tyranny that marked post-Emancipation America. As “techniques of survival and expressions of courage,” the blues expresses the contradictions experienced by Blacks as free citizens in a “free” country (121):

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<sup>207</sup> from Bessie Smith’s St. Louis Blues (1925).

*They say we are the Lawd's children, I don't say that ain't true,  
 They say we are the Lawd's children, I don't say that ain't true,  
 But if we are the same like each other, ooh, well,  
 why do they treat me like they do?*

Cone (1972, 119–120) asks us to consider blues lyrics as an expression not only of protest, but also as an expression of Black solidarity, community, and survival, as illustrated in his analysis of the following lyrics:

*Another man done gone,  
 Another man done gone,  
 From the country farm,  
 Another man done gone*

*He had a long chain on...  
 I didn't know his name...  
 I don't know where he's gone...*

[The song] is about chains, bloodhounds, prisons, and the need to escape the harsh realities of inhumanity...”It is enigmatic...you see his face, you know him, but at the same time you put him out of your mind, so that when the white man asks after him, you can say, ‘I didn’t know his name, I don’t know where he’s gone.’ This song is a moving description of the blues feeling. It is not romantic about politics, nor is it evidence that black people accepted white rules and regulations as a definition of their being. This song is about the togetherness of the black community in view of the country farm and the chain.

### *Blues As the Secular Spiritual*

“The blues,” Baraka (1971, 63) writes, “is formed out of the same social and musical fabric that the spiritual issued from, but with the blues the social emphasis more personal, the ‘Jordan’ of the song is much more intensely a human accomplishment.” In the same vein, Cone (1972, 100) observes that while the blues reflect secular complaints, longings, and desires, it must be acknowledged that blues and spirituals “flow from the same bedrock of experience, and neither is an adequate interpretation of black life without the commentary on the other.” As such, the blues “express and formalize a mood that is already present in the spirituals” (100). Sentiments expressed in spirituals, such as *Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen; I’m rolling through an unfriendly world; I’m a trouble in the mind; Sometimes I feel like a motherless child; Sometimes I hangs my head and cries*, were later expressed as the “worried

blues” (100). While both spirituals and the blues are “associated with the burden of freedom,” the blues simply described life under Jim Crow “in more concrete and vivid terms” (101).

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century blues pioneer Robert Johnson epitomized the negative association with the blues, among both White and Black Christians, as the “devil’s music.” The imagery in some of his songs, including “Up Jumped the Devil” and “Me and the Devil Blues” (also known as the “Cross Roads Blues”), added currency to the myth that Johnson sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads of heaven and hell to achieve success:

*Early this morning  
When you knocked upon my door  
Early this morning, ooh  
When you knocked upon my door  
And I said "hello Satan"  
I believe it's time to go*

Switzer 2001, 63) asserts that the negative connotations surrounding the blues as “devil’s music” is a misrepresentation of the continued relationship that blues musicians have with the Yoruba divine Trickster Eshu Elegbara and his/her role as “mediator of the crossroads” (63):

The “Devil” of blues culture is an African Trickster god, Legba, or Elegua [Eshu Elegbara], the Yoruba orisha of the crossroads symbolizing a pre-Christian, African-based spiritual holism in which good and evil are not alienated from each other into cosmic dualities or oppositional structures.

Patricia Schroeder (2015, 84) similarly suggests that Robert Johnson’s relationship with the “devil,” often dismissed as a marketing tool, was about “an African spiritual retention, a ritual that Johnson and his contemporaries may have practiced, yet about which Western researchers knew little until recently.” Like Switzer, Schroeder positions Johnson and other blues musicians at the crossroads, where “the mundane and the Sacred meet” (84). For some well-known blues artists, being at the crossroads meant being a preacher as well as a blues singer:

[In the Mississippi Delta], the singer was as likely to be preaching in a church as singing in a blues bar. Most of the important blues singers—including Son House, Robert Johnson, Charlie Patton, and Muddy Waters—were also preachers. Even though the blues [was considered] devil’s music, as Muddy Waters once said, “You’ve got to go to church to sing the blues” (Switzer 2001, 63 quoting Lamont).

Jazz writer Ben Sidran also locates the blues and the blues singer on the sacred-secular continuum: “After Emancipation...the traveling blues singer, who had taken the role of truth-teller from the black preacher, the role of Trickster, or “bad [man]” from the devil, became the ultimate symbol of freedom” (Switzer 2001, 70 quoting Sidran 1981, 24; brackets, mine). Like the real-life truths hidden in the spiritual and hip hop’s fifth element, “knowledge,” historical experience as truth is a key element of the blues. As Cone explains, divine and human truths in the blues are one in the same:

Black people accepted the dictum: Truth is experience, and experience is the Truth. If it is lived and encountered, then it is real. There is no attempt in the blues to make philosophical distinctions between divine and human truth. That is why many people reject the contention that the blues are vulgar or dirty. As Henry Townshend puts it, “If I sing the blues and tell the truth, what have I done? What have I committed? I haven’t lied” (Cone 1972, 106)

### Classroom Lessons on the Blues

As part of the 2020 *Jazz & Freedom* integrated arts project at Orchard Ridge Elementary School (see this chapter, *A School Jazz Residency: Focus on Freedom*), I taught a unit on the blues. Upper elementary (4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup>) students learned some blues history, the expressive range of the blues, and how to play the twelve-bar blues on xylophones, autoharps, and keyboards. They also wrote and sang their own blues songs.

As anyone familiar with the genre can attest, the blues express the full range of human emotions, including the joys as well as the anguish of love. One famous blues tune that I have incorporated into my blues lessons is “St. Louis Blues” written by W.C. Handy and recorded by Bessie Smith, the “Empress of the Blues,” in 1925. I teach this tune to demonstrate how Black women succeeded in the jazz music business early on. Bessie Smith, along with other musical divas of her time and after (including Ma Rainey, Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington, and Nina Simone), was part of a long legacy of Black songsters who were “‘telling it like it is’ from a woman’s point of view” (Rabaka 2013, 170). As Switzer notes, women who sang the classic blues in the 1920s “affirmed their sexuality in an unprecedented way...such affirmations of sexual autonomy and open expressions of desire give



historical voice to possibilities of equality not articulated elsewhere'" (Switzer 2001, 44 quoting Angela Y. Davis, A. 1998, 24):

*Say a St. Louis woman wears her diamond rings  
She pulls her man around by her apron strings  
If it wasn't for the powder and the store-bought hair,*

*Say, that man I love wouldn't of gone nowhere, nowhere!  
Say I love my man, like a school boy love his fire  
Like Louis Armstrong blows so nice and high  
But I love that man, until the day I die.<sup>208</sup>  
(excerpt from "St. Louis Blues")*

### *I Can Sing the Blues: Bessie Smith, Muddy Waters & Huddie Ledbetter*

For my introductory lesson on the blues, I wanted students to learn about the genre's roots in early African American life, the range of emotions expressed in the blues, and early blues pioneers. My introductory materials included information adapted from NBHS (North Berwick High School) Global Citizenship project, Scholastic's "Culture & Change: Black History in America,"<sup>209</sup> and the *Making Music* (Bond 2000) curriculum series.

### I Can Sing the Blues!

The blues has deep roots in American African American history. The blues originated on Southern plantations in the 19th Century (1800s). Its inventors were enslaved Africans and their descendants—sharecroppers who sang as they toiled in the cotton and vegetable fields.

It's generally accepted that the blues evolved from African American spirituals, work songs, field hollers, rural fife and drum music, church hymns, and country dance music. (NBHS)

Blues is the foundation of jazz as well as the prime source of rhythm and blues, rock n' roll, and country music. The blues is still evolving and is still widely played today (Scholastic).

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<sup>209</sup> NBHS Global Citizen project: ([www.edubuzz.org/nbhsglobalcitizenship/2018/09/26/s3-blues-music/](http://www.edubuzz.org/nbhsglobalcitizenship/2018/09/26/s3-blues-music/)). For "Culture Change: Black History in America" (Scholastic) see: History of Jazz / Black History in America, Scholastic.com)

When you think of the blues, you think about misfortune, betrayal, and regret. You lose your job; you get the blues. Your mate falls out of love with you; you get the blues. Your dog dies; you get the blues.

While blues lyrics often deal with personal troubles, the music itself goes far beyond self-pity. The blues is also about overcoming hard luck, saying what you feel, getting rid of frustration, letting your hair down, and simply having fun. The best blues is deeply emotional. From joy to deep sadness, the blues communicates genuine emotion (NBHS).

I then introduced Bessie Smith, Muddy Waters, and Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly) and three representative blues songs: Bessie Smith's "St. Louis Blues," Muddy Water's "Country Blues" and Huddie Ledbetter's "Good Morning Blues:"

Bessie Smith was one of the first women to record the blues. We will listen to one her most famous songs, "St. Louis Blues," recorded in 1929. It was written by the composer W.C. Handy. Listen to Bessie Smith sing "St. Louis Blues" (Bond, et al. 2000, 5<sup>th</sup> Gr. 340–41; CD 14: 1, 14:3).

*I hate to see that evening sun go down  
Yes, I hate to see that evening sun go down  
'Cause it makes me feel like I'm on my last go-round.*

*If I'm feelin' tomorrow like I feel today  
Yes, feelin' tomorrow like I feel today  
I'm gonna pack my trunk and make my getaway.*

Another legendary blues composer and singer named Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly) composed "Good Morning Blues" in 1941 (Bond, et al. 2000, 5<sup>th</sup> Gr., 218; CD 9:3):

*Good morning blues, blues how do you do?  
Good morning blues how do you do?  
I'm doing alright, good morning how are you?  
  
Called yesterday, here you come today,  
Called yesterday, here you come today.  
Your mouth's wide open but you don't know what to say.  
I couldn't sleep last night, I was turning from side to side  
Oh Lord, I was turning from side to side  
I wasn't sad, I was just dissatisfied.*

*I couldn't sleep last night, you know the blues walking 'round my bed,  
Oh Lord, the blues walking 'round my bed  
I went to eat my breakfast, the blues was in my bread.*

Muddy Waters defined the urban, Chicago-style of blues. He played with a metal slide and was the first blues musician to "electrify" the blues (played with an electric guitar). We will hear Muddy Waters sing "Country Blues" (Bond, et al. 2000 5<sup>th</sup> Gr., 218; CD 9:5).

*Some folks tell me, man I did worry, the blues ain't bad  
Well that's a misery ole feelin', well gal, I most ever had...*

*Well, brooks run into the ocean, ocean run in, into the sea  
If I don't find my baby somebody gonna bury me, um-m.*

### *I Can Write the Blues*

For the writing portion of the blues unit, I asked my students to write about something going on in their lives that they might be feeling a little "blue" about, whether it was something going on at home, at school, or "in the world." I gave them a template to reinforce that they were to write in the basic 12-bar blues AAB form, with the first "A" line being the call, the second "A" line repeating the call, and the "B" line being the answer or response to the call:

### **I Can...Sing the Blues! (to the tune of Leadbelly's "Good Morning Blues," 1941)**

A \_\_\_\_\_  
A \_\_\_\_\_  
B \_\_\_\_\_

Students' blues lyrics ran the gamut from personal reflections to concerns about their community and things going on in other parts of the world. The year was 2018, two terms into the Trump presidency. The following are some examples of blues compositions by the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students:

1. *I played music, it was the Blues  
I played music, it was the Blues  
I played music, it was so good.*

2. *Bullying is really–really, really, wrong  
Bullying is really–really, really, wrong  
I wish everybody could just get along.*

3. *In my neighborhood the rents are getting high  
In my neighborhood the rents are getting high  
So I can't live there—that's not very nice.*

4. *Why does difference matter when difference  
is good?  
I say why does difference matter when  
difference is good?  
Why is racism a thing when being different is  
cool?*

5. *I am Mexican and I don't want no wall  
I am Mexican and I don't want no wall  
I want to knock it down with a wrecking ball.*

6. *Living in America kind a sucks right now  
You know living in America kind a sucks right  
now  
Our president's not alright, can someone be  
this stupid—how?*

7. *Give me a new president, give me a new  
president right now  
Give me a new president, give me a new  
president right now  
We need a new president before our world  
goes down.*

8. *I'm going fishing, I can't get a bite  
I'm going fishing, I can't get a bite  
I got a bite, but I can't get the line tight.*

9. *It's your birthday, but you feel a little blue  
It's your birthday, but you feel a little blue  
And really sad 'cause your friend didn't come  
thru.*

*When your parents surprised you, you weren't  
feeling blue  
When your parents surprised you, you weren't  
feeling blue  
Not even a little—and that's really cool.*

When final drafts were completed, the students took pride in singing their blues songs with their classmates. I attributed their enthusiasm to the fact that their words, their feelings, and concerns—in short, their own voices—were being heard and shared. In the tradition of the blues described by Ellison (1989, 53–54), these student blues bespoke of “personal and collective problems,” amounting to a “musical version of widely held views.” On that day, students invoked the fifth element of hip hop, transferring their knowledge of self, neighborhood, and the country into the blues.

## Jazz

### *Jazz in Schools*

Perhaps more than any other Black vernacular art form, jazz has come to inhabit as (nearly) a privileged place in mainstream education as the European classical music canon. According to jazz education specialist Eric Teichman (2020, 202), “jazz, as a course of study has been a common

component of many secondary and university music performance programs long enough to have accumulated its own canon of treasured repertoire, narratives, and teaching practices.” In 2008, the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), reviewed the state of jazz education in the U.S.:

America’s own art form is finding a place in the mainstream of music education. Through its first century of existence, jazz has traveled an unpredictable path. What began as a high-spirited soundtrack to the action in New Orleans bars and bordellos has become not just a respectable musical style but an American institution, the stuff of Ken Burns documentaries, repertory concert series at Lincoln Center, and exhibits at the Smithsonian.

While a discussion of how jazz is taught in U.S. public schools is beyond the scope of this chapter, I can offer my own perspective as a K–8 music teacher of 30 years. From this vantage point, I have observed that most mainstream pedagogical sources (e.g., K–12 music curriculum textbooks, jazz choral and band programs) focus on the “music per se,” that is, learning about the different styles of jazz and its most famous practitioners, learning about its performative and formal elements (e.g., improvisation, scatting, 12-bar blues, and harmonic structure in jazz tunes), and engaging students in jazz ensemble playing and performance (see also, Garrett, 2013).<sup>210</sup> While these are certainly part of a solid foundation in jazz pedagogy, what these common practices leave out is jazz as counter-storytelling. Like Duke Ellington said, jazz is more than the “American idiom.”

If we are to honor Ellington’s and other jazz pioneers’ efforts to let jazz tell its stories, we must do more than just teach students how to improvise or how to tell the difference between bebop and swing. Rather, we should teach that jazz is part of a long and proud heritage extending from the African continent to the United States. As part of this continuum, jazz reflects Black America’s struggles and triumphs in fighting for civil and human rights in the United States. Carole Boston Weatherford invokes this heritage in her poem, “The Sound of Jazz” (2000). Here is the poem’s opening verse:

*Jazz is the downbeat born in our nation,  
Chords of struggle and jubilation*

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<sup>210</sup> “Common components of jazz curricula include theory and analysis, improvisation, arranging/composing, history, keyboard, and pedagogy, all specifically within the realm of jazz. Performance experiences include large ensembles and small combos. These components are common in secondary and post-secondary curricula that offer jazz studies” (Garrett, 2013, 2).

*Bursting forth from hearts set free,  
In notes that echo history.*

In the following discussion of Africanisms in jazz music, I illustrate how the creative impulses in jazz are generated, as with speech patterns in Black culture, by the rhetorical and Signifying power of the spoken word. Signifying in jazz surfaces, for example, in the improvisational battles between musicians. In these “cutting sessions,” the jazz musicians strive continually to make their playing different, to “make it new.” The presence of community—a foundational African epistemic formulation—ensures the success of jazz performance and the determination of the best players. I will also discuss Signifying in jazz as a continuation of the functionality of Black vernacular traditions as vehicles for social and political change. Recalling Duke Ellington’s testimony from the beginning of this chapter, jazz, along with the blues, is more than an “American idiom,” more than “just dance music.”

Another African episteme I relocate in jazz is what Smitherman has called the sacred-secular continuum, which is present in jazz music as it is in any other Black vernacular form. As we shall see, the West African Trickster-deity Eshu Elegbara and his American cousin Brer Rabbit have something to say about jazz music, and something to say through it, too. Lastly, I present *Jazz & Freedom*, a collaborative, school-wide, arts integration project I co-created with colleagues at Orchard Ridge Elementary School. I hope to show how this interdisciplinary project, which was designed in collaboration with the Madison Jazz Society School Residency program, immersed students not only in the jazz idiom itself, but also in what this idiom expresses about the culture and history of its originators.

*Jazz and Its Roots in the Word*

On the historical continuum of African American vernacular creative expressions, jazz music is undoubtably one of the most complex, hybridized forms. Its complexity can be viewed as a reflection of the city that most jazz historians point to as the time and place where jazz was born: New Orleans,

around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Monson 2006, 145). Indeed, the hybrid nature of jazz mirrors the heterogenous nature of the city within which “Native American, African, Caribbean, French, Spanish, Irish, and German elements combined to create a new...creolized culture” (Rabaka 2012, 104). Within this cultural milieu, jazz is “a music composed of many disparate parts (i.e., African, European, Caribbean, Latin, etc.) but sonically synthesized so as to create a wholly new mosaic-esque music” (103–04).

Formed out of earlier Black expressions including the ring shout, field hollers, spirituals, blues, and ragtime, jazz merged with European classical music, marches, as well as American popular song and musical theatre (Rabaka 2012, 104; Monson 2006, 145). While jazz has been characterized as being the “instrumental alter ego of classic blues,” this characterization is an oversimplification that robs both genres of their distinctiveness (Rabaka 2012, 104). Nonetheless, one of the main distinctions between blues and jazz is the latter’s emphasis on instrumental over vocal music performance. While noting the countless early vocal jazz pioneers (Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughn, Betty Carter, Joe Williams, and Abbey Lincoln, among them), Rabaka maintains that “vocal jazz has never been privileged over instrumental jazz and, as a matter of fact, many have argued that jazz’s distinctiveness is best observed...where instrumentalists capture the tone and timbre of the human voice, especially the melody and melancholia of African American voices and vernacular.” As I see it (or hear it), the relationship between the human voice and a jazz musician’s “horn” is a symbiotic one, readily apparent when a consummate scat singer (Ella immediately comes to mind) imitates the trumpet or other non-vocal instruments in the ensemble.

The ability of jazz musicians to use their instruments as extensions of the human voice gives rise to what Rabaka (2012, 104) calls jazz’s “crowning achievement,” that is, the style of improvisation unique to jazz. In jazz performance, each individual musician is expected to “develop a distinct improvisational approach to harmony, melody, and rhythm, most often through intentional variations and distortions of time, tone, and timbre.” This interpretation of jazz improvisation, with or without words, locates jazz music alongside other Black vernaculars as a highly sophisticated form of Signifying in which the

spoken word is translated into musical sound. Especially during its early stages of development, “jazz sought to express aspects of African American life, culture, and struggle that its creators felt simply could not be conveyed—*je ne sais quoi*—via words” (Rabaka 2012, 104).<sup>211</sup>

*Jazz Signifying, Black Orality (and the Word, Continued)*

A University of Iowa seminar conversation led by Barbara Eckstein, Professor of English, and Black graduate students from the United States, Togo, and Malawi touches on the links between Black oral tradition and jazz. Drawing from Kwame Anthony Appiah’s book, *In My Father’s House* (1992), the conversation centered around issues of identity, race, colonialism, and African philosophy (Klobah et al., 1996, 18). In this seminar, Detroit born doctoral student Cherry Muhanji reflected on memory, improvisation, and change in African American storytelling and the relationship between the individual and the community, key aspects of Black oral traditions. Here, Muhanji describes these traits as intrinsic to both African American storytelling and jazz:

When I was growing up, one of the things in the African American community, when we would pass along stories, you could never tell the story the same way. You could memorize, 'cause we were into memory, so it wasn't as if you could not tell it, but your effectiveness as a person in the community, your ability to participate, meant that you had to change it. The object was to tell the story differently, so there was a sense of resistance to the established story. Jazz is the same way.

Muhanji’s reference to “resistance to the established story” relates to one of the most fundamental aesthetic criteria in jazz: the art of improvisation, i.e., the ability to create new musical ideas, new musical statements. As we have seen in the antebellum ring plays and dance circles, the act of “cutting” means that the dancer breaks away from the group to “show his stuff,” or where the dancer “makes her motion to the others” (Abrahams 1992, 101, see also Jones & Hawes 1972, 58, 89). Cutting also means “entering into playful competition, a stylized practice which...stands at the center of the black aesthetic” (Abrahams 1992, 101). Stuckey (1987, 72) points out dance forms that emerged from antebellum work and play contests including “pitchin’ hay,” “corn shuckin’,” and “cuttin’ wheat” are

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<sup>211</sup> From Franz Fanon, “The Black Man and Language,” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967, 17–40.).



all as “African as the buzzard lope,” and are precedents for the “cutting sessions in which jazz artists exchange ideas.”

Part of the competition in jazz is the ever-renewing, the making something new out of the old. I reminded again of the West African “mother principal,” the aesthetic guide that keeps traditional West African dance drumming practice current through innovation and change, while still making references to what has come before. As Abrahams (1992, 102) writes, “the African aesthetic draws attention to the possibility of constant rhythmic alteration, or as the jazz man puts it, running changes.” In jazz, the “mother principal” takes on new meaning in what has been called musical “troping,” a term that Henry Louis Gates (1988, 52) has borrowed from his analysis of Signifying in Black orature and literature and applies to jazz and “language games.” In both genres, Signifying is a “mode of formal revision, it depends for its effects on troping, it is often characterized by pastiche, and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures and their differences” (52). In the following excerpt, Floyd elaborates on what is encompassed by “musical Signifying” and “troping” (1995, 8):

In other words, musical Signifying is troping: the transformation of pre-existing musical material by trifling with it, teasing it, or censuring it. Musical Signifyin(g) is the rhetorical use of preexisting material as a means of demonstrating respect for or poking fun at a musical style, process, or practice through parody, pastiche, implication, indirection, humor, tone play or word play, the illusion of speech or narration, or other troping mechanisms.

As an example of early musical troping, Gates (1988, 63) describes how Jelly Roll Morton’s 1938 “Maple Leaf Rag (A Transformation)” Signified on Scott Joplin’s original “Maple Leaf Rag,” composed in 1916. Morton’s rendition does not “destroy” Joplin’s original tune but “*extends* and tropes figures present in the original.” Floyd explains how this kind of musical troping blurs distinctions between jazz styles, the blues, and more (1995, 95):

Moreover, genres Signify on other genres—ragtime on European and early European and American dance music; blues on the ballad; the spiritual on the hymn; jazz on blues and ragtime...soul on rhythm and blues, , rock ‘n’ roll, and rock music; bebop on swing, ragtime rhythms, and blues; funk on soul; rap on funk; and so on.

In its most recognizable form, musical Signifying occurs between jazz musicians performing on the same stage who Signify on one another through improvisation and call and response—one player riffing

off the other in a musical game of one-upmanship. Like a musical form of the dozens, jazz players strive to always keep it fresh, to keep their improvisational skills sharp. Jazz saxophonist Joe Henderson's explanation of his playing reinforces that idea that jazz is an improvisational conversation, borrowing rhetorical Signifying devices from the written to the musical "word" (Floyd 1995, 141):

I think I was probably influenced by writers—I mean just a full scope in relation to the written word. You know how to use quotation marks. You know how to quote people as a player. You use semicolons, hyphens, paragraphs, parenthesis, stuff like this. I'm thinking like this when I'm playing. I'm having a conversation with *somebody*.

A cutting session dual between jazz greats Sonny Stitt and Art Pepper—both saxophone players—during the bebop era (1940s–50s) epitomized the conversational, Signifying elements of jazz improvisation. Here's Pepper's recollection of the session (Floyd 1995, 139):

[Stitt] was flying. He...did everything that could be done on a saxophone, as much as Charlie Parker could have played if he'd been there. Then he stopped. And he looked at me. Gave me one of those looks, 'All right, your turn.' And it's my job, it's my gig...I forgot everything, and everything came out. I went over my head. I played completely differently than he did. I searched and found my way and what I said reached the people. I played myself and the people loved it, and they felt it...and the people were screaming, and the people were clapping, and I looked at Sonny, but I just kind of nodded, and he went 'All right.' And that was it. That's what it's all about.

Pepper's account highlights another central element of Black oration in jazz music, that being the ever-present audience participation. Like Pepper said, he "reached the people," he "spoke" to them through his horn. Floyd (1995, 140) comments on this aspect of the cutting session in which

the arbiter of the Pepper-Stitt encounter was "the people." It was they who would decide who cut whom, and they did so in this case by their supportive response to Pepper's Signifying tropes. This too, has precedent in the culture, where public appraisal has always been the means of judging narrative and musical contests.

In the jazz medium, musicians and their audience are continuing the Black oral arts tradition of call and response interactions. Whether the contest is between singers in the West African song duels or in antebellum corn husking contests, between players of the dozens, or opponents in a rap battle or jazz cutting session, it is the *people* who ultimately are the judge of the best singer, dozens or jazz player, or rapper. Like the ancestral "mother principal," musical Signifying in jazz involves respect for one's

community, always keeping displays of individual virtuosity in balance with fellow musicians (past and present) while keeping it new. Drawing from Ralph Ellison's interpretation of the jazz impulse, Werner (2006, 132) describes jazz as "imagining the transitions," a musical form that "distills the deepest meanings of the moment we're in, how it developed from the ones that came before, how it opens up to the multiple possibilities of the ones to come." For Ellison

True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo, flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity; as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition (Werner 2006, 132 quoting Ellison 1964, *Shadow and Act*).

For Werner (2006, 132), the essence of the jazz impulse is antithetical to maintaining the status quo in Black music, whether it be in the familiar combinations of instruments in a be-bop quartet or guitar rock band, or verse-chorus and triadic harmonic structures:

The jazz impulse asks what about those parts that don't fit: the dreams, desires, unanswered questions. Part of the reason jazz comes out of the African American tradition—though it deserves the right to go absolutely anywhere—has to do with what conventions meant to black folk. Stay in your place, over on the other side of the tracks. Enjoy the back of the bus.

But jazz music does its best to blow that complacency away. Which is why jazz sounds revolutionary even when it doesn't pay attention to next week's election or anybody's party line. Jazz says we don't have to do it the way we've always done it.

### *The Jazz Musician as Trickster and Spiritual Leader in Community*

In Chapter Five of this thesis, I introduced how Trickster plays a revolutionary role in West African and Black American story traditions. As we recall, Trickster's role is rooted in human psyche's need "for freedom from fixed ways of seeing," and that Trickster's revolutionary attribute is "a revolution of the imagination...the ultimate conflict between man's freedom to remake himself and the world he has already made" (Van Sertima 1989, 103; 109). Invoking the spirit of Eshu Elegbara, the Signifying Monkey, and Brer Rabbit, Floyd (1995, 96) makes the point that Signifying tropes in jazz are derived from Black orature in the way that performers "combine the ritual teasing and critical

insinuations of Signify(ing) with the wit, cunning, and guile of the trickster in a self-empowering aesthetic and communicational device.” It is in this context that we can explore the role of the jazz musician as a Signifying Trickster in the jazz community, and the ways in which Eshu Elegbara and Brer Rabbit personify both spiritual and revolutionary impulses in jazz music.

As the ultimate purveyors of Black orality, Eshu Elegbara and Brer Rabbit have found a place in jazz criticism and interpretation. Drawing from Black oral and written literary analysis (Pelton 1980; Gates 1988; Hurston 1935), Edward M. Pavlić equates Eshu Elegbara’s gift of speaking “new words” and disclosing “deeper grammar” with the jazz musician-as-Trickster (Pavlić 2004, 71). In this musical medium, Eshu’s linguistic capabilities are transferred to the musician who, in “a constantly improvised language of perception recreates the most famous modernist commandment: Make it new.” These insights “point toward the redemptive role of disruption-as-renewal in a vibrant communal space (71). Gates (1988, 64) sees Eshu’s role in jazz as that of the gatekeeper of tradition in community, that “Eshu-as-jazz-impulse” may appear as the “little man behind the stove” who “knows the *music*, and the *tradition*, and the standards of *musicianship* required for whatever you set out to perform.” (Gates 1988, 64, quoting Ellison, 1977, 26).<sup>212</sup> Like Eshu, the “little man” appears “when we least expect him, at the crossroads of destiny” (Gates 1988, 64). Eshu may also appear as Brer Rabbit, dancing on a tombstone and playing jazz.

#### *Brer Rabbit as Jazz Musician, Community Leader & Priest*

In Sterling Stuckey’s (1987, 17) analysis of the Simon Brown tale, “Brer Rabbit in Red Hill Churchyard,” Brer Rabbit plays the role of a priest or “keeper of faith of ancestors, mediator of their claims on the living, and supreme master of forms of creativity” (Stuckey 1987, 18).<sup>213</sup> As a mediator

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<sup>212</sup> Told to Ralph Ellison, by way of advice, by his music professor, Hazel Harrington at Tuskegee. From “The Little Man at the Chehaw Station,” in: *The American Scholar* (Winter, 1977–78): 26.

<sup>213</sup> Stuckey (1987, 17) notes that, except for the Reverend William John Faulkner tales (featured in Chapter Four, this thesis), “Rabbit is trickster in ways never before associated with him.”

between the dead and the living, Brer Rabbit has a musical conversation using his fiddle with Brer Mockingbird. Together, the two perform a “new kind of music” (Stuckey 1987, 19):

*Dat mockin' bird an' dat rabbit—Lawd, dey had chunes floatin' all 'round on de night air. Dey could stand a chune on end, grab it up an' throw it away am' ketch it an' bring it back an' hold it; an make dem chunes sound like dey was strugglin' to get away one minute, an' de next dy sound like sump'n gittin' up close an' whisperin.'*

While the exact date of the first telling of “Brer Rabbit in Red Hill” is uncertain, it is possible that the tale’s arrival coincided with jazz’s emergence as a popular music form in the United States in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>214</sup> For Stuckey, Brer Rabbit’s and Brer Mockingbird’s musical offering at the gravesite recall the “improvisational and ironic flights that characterize jazz, especially on Fifty-second Street in New York in the mid-twentieth century” (1987, 20). Brer Rabbit’s performance is reminiscent of Louis Armstrong’s signature stage bow: “*An' as I watch, I see Bur Rabbit lower he fiddle, wipe he face an' stick he han'k'ch'ef in he pocket, an tak off he hat an' bow might night to de ground*” (19). Probing further, Stuckey posits that the scene at Red Hill reflects the broader context of Louis Armstrong’s environment in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century New Orleans, where jazz was integral to funeral ceremonies and “African secret societies” were “important to its sustenance and definition.” In this context, the tale “reveals its irreducible foundation in Africa” (1987, 19).<sup>215</sup>

The tale of Brer Rabbit at Red Hill may also be seen as an illustration of how the ancestral communicative power of the drum was transferred to the fiddle in antebellum culture. Stuckey (1987, 20) adopts this view, citing West African traditions where sacred drums are imbued with the power to

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<sup>214</sup> This tale and many others were told to Edward C.L. Adams by Gullah and Congaree storytellers, most notably among them Thaddeus “Tad” Goodson (of the “Tad tales”). They were originally published in 1927 and 1928 by Adams and reprinted in 2014 as “Tales of the Congaree” (Adams, Edward C.L., and Robert G. O’Meally).

<sup>215</sup> Stuckey’s description of the “African secret societies” in New Orleans bears striking resemblance to secular and religious dance drumming clubs among the Ewe of Ghana; in these groups, the songs, dance, and drumming are integral to the group’s identity and purpose (see Fraioli 2006, 87–92; 111–113; 143–148). See Nketia (1986, 48–49) for religious, music groups (“secret societies”) throughout Ghana; religious associations such as the *Yewe* cult among the Ewe are “bound by secrecy” (Nketia 1963, 18). The early New Orleans jazz scene is described by jazz musician and historian Ron L. Davis (1973, 3): “During the daytime the band often played in street parades and for funerals. The tradition of the funeral parade in New Orleans probably dates back to the eighteenth century, when the French permitted blacks to bury their dead with music—a holdover from life in West Africa. The early jazzmen continued the custom, often paid by secret societies.”

“summon gods and ancestors to appear.” There is support for this position. As Floyd (1995, 95) notes, (and as Kubik’s research has shown), bowed stringed instruments are common in West African countries and were “ubiquitous in slave culture, sometimes played by Esu...Brer Rabbit even dances on a tombstone—something Esu would probably do.” Brer Rabbit is also found playing the fiddle in another antebellum tale, “Bur Jonah’s Goat.” “It is no wonder,” the storyteller says, “*Ef you was to take that fiddle away from him [Brer Rabbit], he would perish ‘way and die*” (Stuckey 1987, 22).<sup>216</sup> It is not surprising then that Brer Rabbit’s fiddle music at Red Hill summons the spirit of “Simon” to rise up out of the grave, “*jus as natural as he don ‘fore dy bury him*” (Stuckey 1987, 20).

The element of community participation begs further comparison to the antebellum plantation, to Brer Rabbit’s musical offering at Red Hill, and finally to the contemporary jazz setting. The scene at Red Hill recalls the communal energy of the summoning of the gods and ancestral spirits at antebellum “steal away” ring shout ceremonies, and the audience’s response at Sonny Stitt and Art Pepper’s jazz cutting session. Here, the birds and the beasts of the forest dance in a circle around the grave in response to Brer Rabbit’s fiddle improvisations:

*All kind er little beasts been runnin' 'round, dancin' an' callin' numbers. An' dere was wood rats an' squirrels cuttin' capers wid dey fancy self, an' diff'ent kind er birds an' owl. Even dem ole owl was sachayin' 'round—look like dey was enjoyin' dey self. An' dat ole rabbit was puttin' on more airs dan a poor buckra wid a jug er liquor an' a new suit er clothes on.*

*Well, sir, I jes stood der wid my heart in my mout' an' my eyes bu'stin' out my head. I been natu'ally paralyze, I been so scared. An' while I were lookin', Bur Rabbit stop playin', put he fiddle under he arm an' step off de grave. He walk off a little piece an' guin some sort er sign to de little birds an' beasts, an' dey form dey self into a circle 'round de grave. An' dat was when I knowed sump'n strange was guh happen...*

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<sup>216</sup> From E.C.L. Adams, *Tales of the Congaree* (Adams & O’Meally, 2014) “Bur Jonah’s Goat.” Stucky notes the widespread use of fiddle-type string instruments in West African homelands (Upper Volta in Ghana, Mali (Songhay empire) and the ubiquitous practice of fiddle playing among enslaved Africans. Georgia slave holders attempted to eradicate the instrument on the Hopeton plantation, where one in every twenty slaves out of five hundred played the instrument (Stuckey 1987, 22.). Stuckey writes that David Dalby’s “assertion that some understanding of ‘the history and culture of the great medieval empire of Mali,’ is crucial to an understanding of slave culture” is particularly relevant to the ubiquitous presences and practice of the fiddle among enslaved Africans.” The Malian influence among slaves “is supported by linguistic studies of Lorenzo Turner [1949] who cites the prominence of Malian linguistic influences among Gullah-speaking black in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, where Wolof, Mandinka, and Bambara ethnic groups were represented in antebellum America” (Stuckey 1987, n50; 411–12).

In his analysis of the Red Hill story, Stuckey (1987, 20) equates the intensity of the participants' dancing in a ring and Simon's rising from the grave with Akan ancestral rites, in which the "voice of god" resides in the drums, emerging to call forth the ancestors and escorting them "back to their habitats at the end of the ceremony." In the musical setting at Red Hill, Brer Rabbit, like the Akan drummer, plays to both the sacred and secular worlds. As the Trickster Rabbit, he is the jazz musician incarnate, creating powerful musical moments within which the people (*all kind er little beasts*) participated. With the help of his community, Brer Rabbit succeeded in summoning an ancestor (Simon) from beyond the grave. Without community, the ritual (and the story) would not have achieved its climatic end.

In further analysis, Brer Rabbit's improvisations at Red Hill Cemetery also speak to Amiri Baraka's "changing same"—the continuation of a Black aesthetic sensibility, rooted in the sacred-secular continuum within Black vernacular expressions, that speaks of both the spiritual and earthly quest for freedom. In the jazz world, the sacred-secular crown befits, perhaps more than others, the late, great saxophone player, John Coltrane. Speaking of Coltrane's spiritual side, Floyd (1995, 190) writes that Coltrane channeled Eshu Elegbara's linguistic skills and the Signifying Monkey's "figurative adeptness... For those who knew Coltrane's art as spiritual, he is a priest, a *jazz* priest, a jazz priest whose spirituality and priestliness are emphasized and legitimized by his creative acumen." Baraka asserts that the titles of Coltrane's tunes, "A Love Supreme," "Meditations," "Ascension," each imply a "strong religious will, conscious of the religious evolution the pure mind seeks" (1971, 220). In sum, "Coltrane was the heaviest spirit" (Floyd 1995, 190).<sup>217</sup>

Of Coltrane's revolutionary side, Miles Davis asserts that during the Black Arts and Black Power movements, Coltrane's music

represented, for many blacks the fire and passion and rage and anger and rebellion that they felt... He played what they felt inside and were expressing through riots—"burn baby burn"—that were taking place everywhere in this country in the

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<sup>217</sup> Floyd quotes Baraka's dedication to John Coltrane as it appears on the dedication page of *Black Music* [1968 edition, and 2010 edition): "For John Coltrane, the heaviest spirit"

1960s...Coltrane was their symbol, their pride—their beautiful, revolutionary black pride (Floyd 1995, 190, quoting Davis).<sup>218</sup>

And so, what do Brer Rabbit and John Coltrane have in common? They both speak, through their music, of their ancestral ties to the power of words and music to liberate, in both the spiritual and material realms of life. As Thelonius Monk has told us, the Black aesthetic in jazz is “*about freedom—more than that is complicated*” (Baraka 1991, 108).

### A School Jazz Residency: Focus on Freedom

In the 2019–20 school year, in collaboration with the Madison Jazz Society, I co-designed and implemented a “Jazz in Schools Residency,” titled *Jazz & Freedom* at Orchard Ridge Elementary School. The project events took place during the months of February and March, 2020. Collaborators in this project were my fellow art teacher, the school librarian, three 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom teachers, and four local jazz musicians. The integrated nature of the project aligned with Rosemary Johnston’s transdisciplinary creed for teaching the arts. In Johnston’s view, the arts are “not primarily concerned with their discipline per se, but what they express *beyond* the disciplinary constraints of their form and structures: ideas about critical *beingness*, version of what it is to *be*” (Johnston 2008, 23). As applied to the *Jazz & Freedom* program, the broader, transdisciplinary focus of the project allowed us to make cross-curricular connections, not only between the arts, but between jazz and its historical, cultural, and social contexts. For me, the “critical beingness” component of the project meant teaching jazz music as an expression of Black excellence and cultural identity but also teaching it as a reflection of freedoms fought for and gained by African American in the United States. In the grant application to the Madison Jazz Society School Residency program, I wrote:

We feel that this residency will be a great opportunity for our students to learn about Black music (jazz and blues), dance, and visual arts and their common roots as expressions of African American freedom, especially during the periods of the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement. Themes of social justice, racial equity, and culture identity are embedded within these social and artistic movements.

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<sup>218</sup> From *Miles: The Autobiography* (Davis, Miles with Quincy Trope, 1989)



These themes will be reinforced in the residency through the art of improvisation and in student book reports on the life and careers of important “Jazz Pioneers.” As a core element of jazz, this residency will focus on improvisation as an expression of freedom, creativity, resourcefulness, and creative genius (Fraiola, 9/20).

A transdisciplinary focus for teaching the blues and jazz, along with all other potlikker narratives contained in this thesis, is in keeping with standards-based music curriculum guidelines. While current state and national music curriculum standards privilege the rubrics for gaining western music literacy skills, they also indicate that teachers should be connecting music to other disciplines including social studies, history, visual arts, literature, and oral traditions. I have always found it encouraging that my interests in music as a transdisciplinary subject—including my commitment to providing students with the necessary tools for becoming literate and proficient music makers—is recognized in both Wisconsin and national standards, as part of “best practice.” The following examples from the *Wisconsin Standards of Music* (2017), and the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) (2014) illustrate the integrated arts focus of each of the phases of the *Jazz & Freedom* project presented in this chapter:<sup>219</sup>

#### Wisconsin Standard for Music, Standard #1: Create

Grades K – 5: MG1. Cr.2.e: “*Improvise sounds and movement to accompany artistic play and music by use of voice, instruments, and a variety of sound sources*” (K – 2), and MG1. Cr.6.i (3rd–5<sup>th</sup>): “*Improvise rhythms and melodies with voice, instruments, and a variety of sound sources to add interest to a song.*”

#### NAfME/Common Anchor #1: Create/Imagine

Grades 1– 5: MU, Cr.1.5a – “*Improvise rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic ideas, and explain connections to specific purpose...such as social, cultural, and historical.*”

#### Wisconsin Standard for Music, Standard #2: Perform

Grades K–5: “*Students will analyze, develop, and convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.*” MG2. P.1.e: (K–2) “*Explore and identify the meaning of a song through its text by singing or playing an instrument;*” MG2. P.6.i: (3–5) “*Explore and demonstrate an understanding of the elements of music by reading, singing, or playing an instrument.*”

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<sup>219</sup> National Association for Music Education (NAfME), 2014 music curriculum standards: <https://nafme.org/my-classroom/standards/core-music-standards/>; and Wisconsin Standards of Music (2017) at: <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/fine-arts/WIMusicStandardsFINALADOPTED.pdf>

### NAfME/Common Anchor #6: Present/Perform

Grades K – 5 MU, Cr3: *“With guidance, demonstrate a final version of personal musical ideas to peers (K), presenting a final version of personal musical ideas to peers or informal audience...with expressive intent”* (Grades 1–5); *“describe and explain connection to expressive intent, demonstrate craftsmanship”* (5–8).

### Wisconsin Standard for Music, Standard #4: Connect

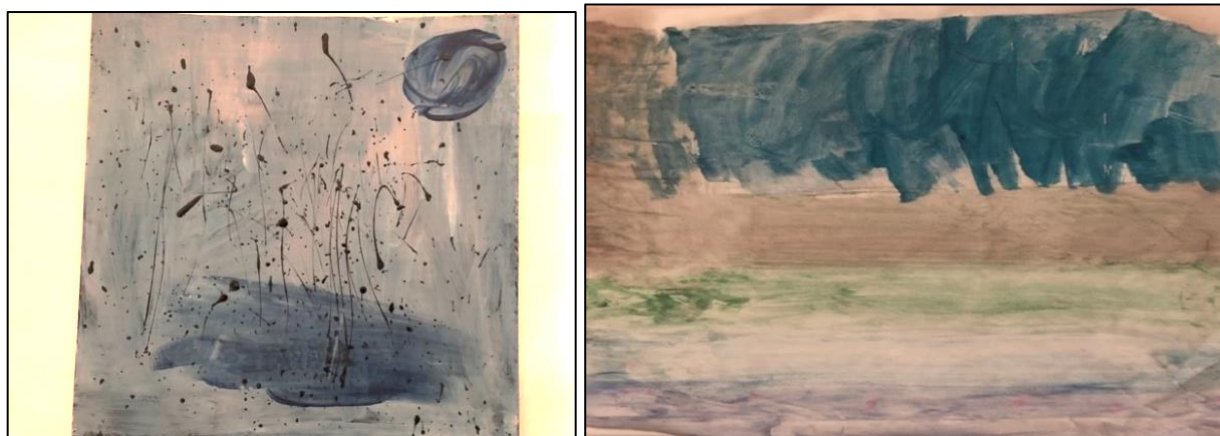
Grades K – 2: MG4.Cn.1.e: *“Explore [K – 2] and compare [3 – 5] the historical and cultural aspects of music as it relates to other disciplines and arts”* (brackets, mine).

### NAfME/Common Anchor #11: Connect

Grades 2 – 5: MU, Cn11.0.3a: *“Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.”*

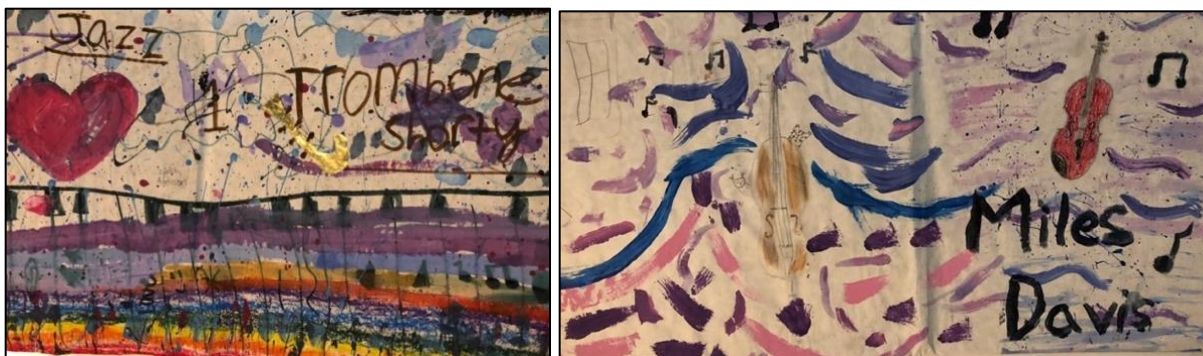
### *Create & Connect: Art Room Improvisation Stations & the Making of Jazz Pioneer “Albums”*

In 2<sup>nd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grade art classes, as part of the *Jazz & Freedom* program, our art teacher created “improvisation stations” where students painted while listening to different styles of jazz. The students were encouraged to interpret musical elements such as mood, style, dynamics (louds and softs), rhythm, melodic line, and timbre (unique tone quality or tone color) in each of the jazz selections. In



Figures 7–1, 7–2: Improvisation Station Paintings (Photos, A. Fraioli)

collaboration with partners, the students created visual art the way that jazz musicians make music: improvising spontaneously and in response to fellow musicians (in this case, fellow painters) (Figures 7–1 through 7–4). As per the lesson plan designed by our art teacher, the student paintings later became the art work for the students’ “LP record albums,” which came complete with dust jacket, liner notes, photographs of jazz artists, and “vinyl” “LPs,” with the “Jazz Pioneer Book Reports” featured



Figures 7-3, 7-4: “Trombone Shorty” & “Miles Davis” (Photos, A. Fraioli)

jazz artists featured in the book reports. This would allow students and their families to view the artwork, book reports, and because of the QR codes, listen to the music of each featured jazz pioneer prominently on the inside of each album jacket. As part of our planned “Jazz Café Night” family event, attendees would be able to explore the “Jazz Hall of Fame” gallery where the “albums” would be on display (as I detail later, the program was cancelled due to Covid-19). Joining 20<sup>th</sup> century recording technology with current digital technology, our art teacher had printed “QR” codes linked to the recording of each of the jazz artists featured in the book reports. This would allow students and their families to view the artwork, book reports, and because of the QR codes, listen to the music of each featured jazz pioneer (Figures 7-5 to 7-7).



Figure 7-5: Jazz Pioneer Book Report, “Ella Fitzgerald”  
(Inside album jacket, liner notes & LP w/QR code) (Photo, A. Fraioli)

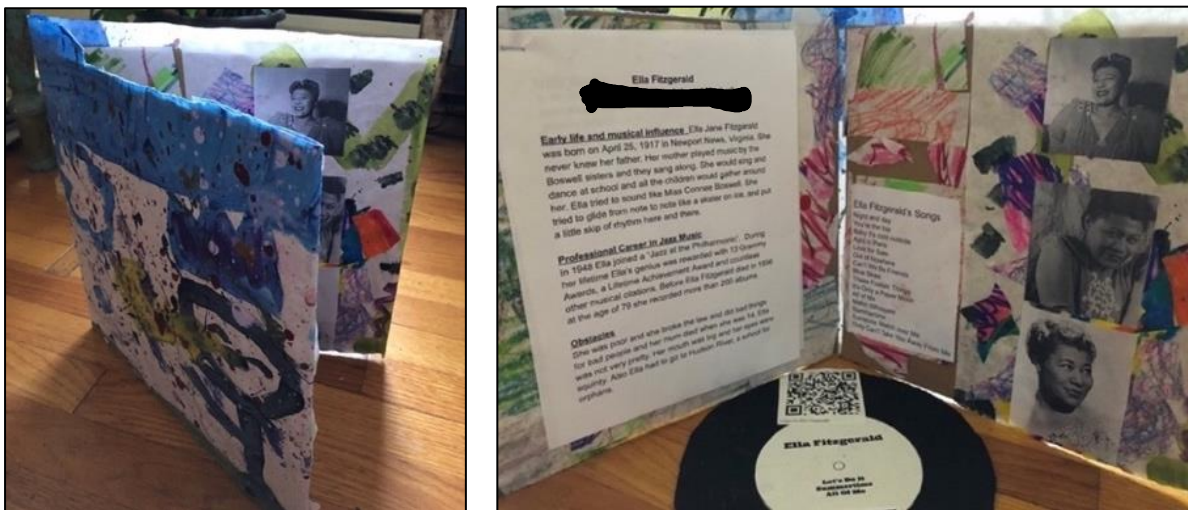


Figure 7-6: (“Ella Fitzgerald (Album cover); 7-7: “Ella Fitzgerald (Book report, liner notes, LP & QR code) (Photos, A. Fraioli)

### Create & Connect: Music Room Improvisations

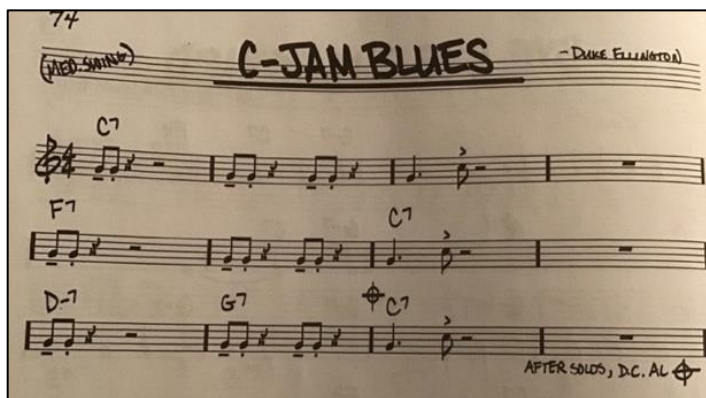


Figure 7-8: “C-Jam Blues” Sheet Music (from *The Real Book*) (Photo, A. Fraioli)

In preparation for the culminating Spring Jazz Concert (May, 2020) students (K–5) received vocal and instrumental instruction from me and from Madison jazz musician guest artists Laurie Lang (bass) and Joey B. Banks (drums). This allowed the students to be well-prepared to sing a variety of jazz tunes including *My Favorite Things*, *When the Saints Go Marching In*, *What a Wonderful World* (Louis Armstrong’s version), *Sunny Side of the Street* (also Louis’s version), and Dizzy Gillespie’s “Salt Peanuts” (with new student-written lyrics). Students (3<sup>rd</sup>–5<sup>th</sup>) learned New Orleans drum line patterns on congas, which they played for *Cherokee*, and *When the Saints* with some students improvising

during the breaks. Third graders learned to play the melody for Duke Ellington’s “C-Jam Blues” (Figure 7–8) and practiced improvising along with it on their recorders. Third graders were also treated to a session on scat singing led by bassist Laurie Lang. Scatting along with Ms. Lang’s bass line, a trio of first-time scatters improvised their lines, musically Signifying (troping) on their own and each other’s scats. Those of us in attendance responded after each of their calls:

Scat singer #1 – Bip-bop, bippity-bop	(Class repeats all “calls”)
Scat singer #2 – Zoody-zaggy zoody-zaggy-zoo	“ “
Scat singer #3 – Booly-lah, booly-lah boopity-lah	“ “
Scat singer #1 Zip-zop zippity-zop...	“ “
Scat singer #2: Doodle-ee doo...	“ “
Scat singer #3: Coopidy-doo...	“ “
Scat Singer #1: Clingity-cling...	“ “
Scat Singer #2: Dingity-ding...	“ “
Scat singer #3: Loopity-oopity oopity-doo...	“ “
Scat Singer #1: Tappity-tappity tappity-too...	“ “
Scat Singer #2: Ooo-bop be-bop...	“ “
Scat Singer #3: Ooooh la-la...	“ “

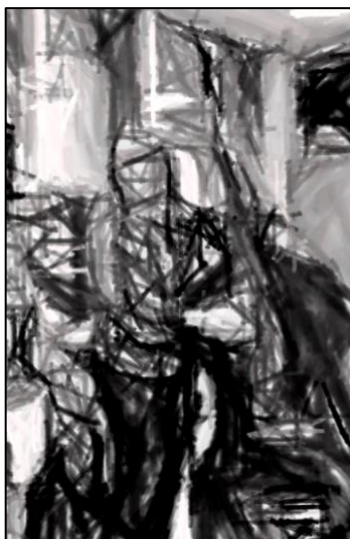


Figure 7–9: Scatting with Ms. Lang (Photo, A. Fraioli)

*Create & Connect: Jazz Pioneer Book Reports*

The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade “Jazz Pioneer” book-report section of the *Jazz & Freedom* project aspired toward Reiland Rabaka’s transdisciplinary model for Black music that “transcends the arbitrary and artificial academic and disciplinary borders and boundaries, the conflicted color lines and yawning racial chasms and the jingoism and gender injustice of single-phenomenon-focused, monodisciplinary disciplines...” (Rabaka 2011, 27). Through their artwork, research, and writing, the students’ final book reports demonstrated their artistic creativity, their knowledge of jazz pioneers and various jazz styles and movements, their awareness of racial and gender politics in the lives of the jazz musicians, and their comprehension of the cultural importance of the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance, and of places like Harlem and its Sugar Hill neighborhood, and New Orleans.

In preparation for this phase of the project, I gathered as many grade-level resources on jazz pioneers that I could find, many of them from our school library. From the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century jazz era, I chose biographies on Lili Harding Armstrong (1898–1971, piano), Louis Armstrong (1901–1971, trumpet), Jelly Roll Morton (1890–1941, piano), and Bessie Smith (1894–1937, voice); from the swing era: (1930s – 40s), Duke Ellington (1899–1974, piano), Ella Fitzgerald (1917–1996 voice), and Benny Goodman (1909–1986, clarinet); and from the bebop years (beginning in the 1940s): Dizzie Gillespie (1917–1993, trumpet), and Melba Liston (1926–1999, trombone).

Also included in the “jazz pioneer” biographies were jazz giants Miles Davis (1926–1991, trumpet) and John Coltrane (1926–1967, saxophone). Beginning with the bebop era, these musicians changed with the times to advance the “cool,” “jazz fusion” (Davis), and avant-garde “free jazz” (Coltrane) styles. For blues and jazz vocalists and instrumentalists of the same era, I selected Billy Holiday (1915–1959, voice), Muddy Waters (1913–1983, guitar and voice), and Nina Simone (1933–2003, piano and voice). Representing 21<sup>st</sup>-century musicians in student bio-reports were two living jazz artists: Troy Andrews (“Trombone Shorty” 1986–, trombone), and Esperanza Spaulding (1984–, bass). Non-biographical books focused on communities where jazz and Black arts thrived during the jazz era. *Jazz On a Saturday Night*, and *Sugar Hill* feature Harlem, New York., and the historical fiction story *Rent*

*Party Jazz* and Troy Andrew’s autobiographical story, *5’Oclock Band*,” take place in New Orleans.<sup>220</sup>

After dividing the classes into research teams (four to five students per team, about five teams per class), classroom teachers assigned one jazz artist for each group to research. Students were to write a four-paragraph essay information on the following topics:<sup>221</sup>

Paragraph 1: Early Life and Musical Influences

Paragraph 2: Professional Career in Jazz Music

Paragraph 3: Overcoming Obstacles

Paragraph 4: In My Opinion

Overall, student book reports included the salient features of the selected jazz artist’s music, career highs and lows, and their legacies—in short, what made these artists stand out as some of the greatest jazz musicians of all time.

### *Overcoming Obstacles*

Many of the biographical sources available to students discussed the challenges that jazz artists had to overcome during their childhoods. For some musicians, childhood was marked by economic hardships and the death or absence of family members. Many noted jazz musicians struggled later in life with drug or alcohol addiction and depression. Several of the books that students read dealt directly with the racial discrimination that many jazz artists experienced throughout their careers. Indeed, “well-traveled” jazz musicians could not escape discriminatory treatment while on the road (Alper, 2011):

Black jazz musicians faced constant discrimination and humiliation. Much of it was due to the common racism of the day, which forced them to ride in the backs of buses, find lodging in black neighborhoods, and enter nightclubs and theaters through back doors or freight elevators. Touring bands, on trains or on buses, suffered insults from whites who sought to put African Americans "in their place.”

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<sup>220</sup> See this thesis, “Jazz Pioneer Book Reports, Selected Resources” for a list of biographies that students used to research jazz artists and other jazz topics.

<sup>221</sup> For non-biographies, prompts specific to each book were created.

While the writing prompts did not explicitly lead students to write on issues of racism in their biographies, these issues did not entirely escape students' attention. In some cases, however, students missed key references to racial injustices that Black musicians faced. For example, Tamra Orr (2013, 23) writes that the police stopped Miles Davis so many times in his red Ferrari that he finally put "She's Mine" on his car's license plates; Lesa Cline-Ransome (2014) notes that Benny Goodman was the first White musician to put together and perform publicly with an integrated band; and Brière-Haquet (2017) writes about how a very young Nina Simone refused to begin playing the piano at her church recital until her mother was allowed to sit in the front row.

Still, many students addressed the discrimination their assigned jazz pioneer faced in his or her lifetime, such as encounters with the KKK (Bessie Smith), being harassed by male bandmates (Melba Liston), getting cheated out of royalties (Jelly Roll Morton), and, more generally, being treated "with suspicion" for being Black (John Coltrane). Students who studied women jazz artists such as Bessie Smith, Lil Armstrong, and Melba Liston wrote about these women as "firsts" who attained success in the jazz business during eras when it was challenging, even dangerous to do so. Other students reported on the cultural and historical significance of New Orleans, Harlem, and the "Great Migration." All students wrote about the unique genius of each artist, and the musical gifts they gave the world. Presented below are sections of the students' book reports that highlight these critical narratives, along with some of their "Improvisation Station" album covers and liner note designs.

### *Student Voices on Jazz Pioneers*

#### **John Coltrane**

*After high school, John went to Philadelphia and worked in a sugar factory, living with his aunt. One week, his mother came to visit and brought him a brand-new saxophone! John started playing with big bands and small blues groups. He and his friends went to clubs and concert halls and listened to famous jazz musicians. That's where he first heard Charlie "Bird" Parker. John loved Bird's music. Bird played lively be-bop music that John loved. He started to travel around, playing with different bands. But he was a black man, and people looked at him with fear and suspicion.*





Figure 7–10: “John Coltrane” (LP cover) (Photo, A. Fraioli)

### **Billie Holiday:** (Holiday Group #1)

(Holiday Group #1) *“In my opinion, Billie should deserve recognition because she became a famous singer when she could have been killed standing next to a white person because of her race.”*

(Holiday Group #2) *“Billie Holiday had a very hard life, but she still sang her heart out...Life was rough because her grandma died so she was very poor. Billie was often left with abusive relatives because her mom couldn’t take care of her...It’s almost hard to believe that she still sang, but you should always hang on to your loved ones. That is why Billie Holiday is an important part of jazz singing. Lady Day should stay a part of our hearts and lives forever. I hope you like Billie Holiday as much as I do.”*

(Holiday Group #3) *“When Billie was a child she listened to Bessie Smith who inspired Billie to do Jazz. Billie’s father, a Jazz musician who traveled around the world also inspired Billie to do Jazz. Billie always added something special to her music to make it unique. Sometimes she made it light and bouncy but it was usually slow and lazy. She had a striking appearance with her eyes halfway closed, she swayed as she sang.”*



Photo 7–11: ““Billy Holiday” (Inside album jacket) (Photo, A. Fraioli)

### Sugar Hill (Harlem, New York City)

*“The great migration happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and most of the African Americans, many of them descendants of slaves, flocked there from the south. Harlem soon became the center of black politics, culture, and thought. Sugar Hill was filled with church choirs, jazz parties, and was filled with joy...Artists, writers, performers, and intellectuals explored their own culture and affirmed black pride. They were proud to call Harlem home. They wanted to gain attention to black culture” (Weatherford, 2014).*



7–12: ”“Sugar Hill” (Inside album jacket) (Photo, A. Fraioli)

### Rent Party Jazz



Photos 7–13, 7–14: “Rent Party Jazz,” (Inside album jacket) (Photo, A. Fraioli)

*In our opinion, we don't think people should be evicted from their homes at first because the rent person can wait a little longer before collecting the rent. Especially if one of the family members who live there doesn't have a job to collect money. No, they don't deserve to be kicked out.*

## Jazz On a Saturday Night

*Do you like jazz? Do you like how it sounds? Does it make you want to dance? If it does, you should read this report about Jazz on a Saturday Night. You will learn about the origins of jazz music and the sound of jazz and more. Jazz comes from the blues, marching band, and African music. The different styles are classic jazz, hot jazz, and cool jazz.*

*Improvisation: Making stuff up as you play it was blue heights of popularity in the 1940s and 1950s and is still alive and respected around the world.*

*The Musicians: The musicians performed on stage. The audience responded to the music by tapping their toes and clapping their hands and swaying back and forth and left and right. Miles Davis was playing the trumpet, Max Roach was playing the drums, Charlie Parker was playing the saxophone and other instruments.*



Photo 7-15: "Jazz On a Saturday Night" (Album cover) (Photo, A. Fraioli)

## Bessie Smith

*This is about how Bessie Smith came into the world to be a famous singer. Bessie Smith was born in a cabin in Chattanooga. Her father died when she was born and also her mother and brother died when she was a child. Bessie's 3 sisters and 2 brothers lived with her. One of her brothers played the guitar.*

*Professional Career: Ma Rainey discovered Bessie. Bessie's singing voice was strong. Some of her songs were "Crazy Blues," "St. Louis Blues," and "Down Hearted Blues."*

*Overcoming Obstacles: Bessie had lost love, and she had to face the KKK.*



Photo 7-16: "Bessie Smith" (Inside album jacket) (Photo, A. Fraioli)

### Nina Simone

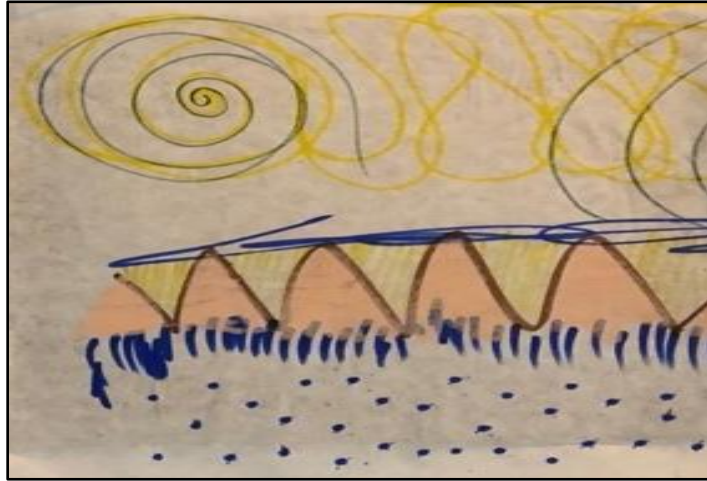


Photo 7-17: "Nina Simone" (Album cover) (Photo, A. Fraioli)

*Nina Simone, the 'High Priestess of Soul' was one of the most extraordinary artists of all time and would tell stories in her music. Nina was a singer, songwriter, musician, yet most of all a civil rights activist...Nina would sing a mix of jazz blues and folk music in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1960's Nina became a Civil Rights Activist. She took part in the Montgomery marches.*

### Jelly Roll Morton



Photo 7-18: "Jelly Roll Morton" (Inside album jacket) (Photo, A. Fraioli)

*"He was known to 'toot his own horn' because he was not recognized enough. And many of his songs became standards that other people played. When he got older, he spent all his money making recordings. And when he published his recordings the publishing company took all the money and he got none... In our opinion, Jelly Roll Morton overcame many obstacles that most people probably could not. He was a very good jazz musician and that is probably why some people call him the "Father of Jazz."*

## Melba Liston



Photo 7-19: "Melba Liston" (LP & liner notes) (Photo, A. Fraioli)

*Melba Liston's dad was not part of Melba's life because he left her not long from the time she was born. When she first got her trombone she had a difficult time playing it, being treated unfairly by the band members... Melba is one of the first women of any race to become a world class trombone player, composer, and arranger with her album being, "Melba and Her Bones."*

## Lil Harding



Photo 7-20: "Lil Hardin Armstrong," "Doin' The Suzie Q" (LP) (Photo, A. Fraioli)

*Lil Armstrong was apparently the first woman to enter the jazz field as a major figure and retain that stature and acceptance throughout her career. While in the band, Lil married her husband, Louis Armstrong.*

*Lil Armstrong's subsequent experiences were diverse. She played with many bands, including those of Oliver, Freddie Keppard, Eliot Washington, Hugh Swift, and Louis Armstrong. She led and played in an all-woman swing group called the Harlem Harlicans from about 1932 to 1936.*

### *Jazz Pioneer Demo Presentations*

Adding significantly to the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade instruction during the jazz residency were five 30-minute “demo” presentations given by guest musicians Laurie Lang (bass), Paul Hastil (piano), Paul Dietrich (trumpet), Lynette Margulies (voice), and Hanah Jon Taylor (saxophone). In these thoughtful and well-organized presentations, the guest musicians kept the students engaged with information about their instruments, demonstration of their own skills, and information about jazz pioneers. Each of the five demos focused on specific jazz artists: Ron Carter and Richard Davis (presented by Lang); Ella Fitzgerald (Margulies); Miles Davis and Dizzie Gillespie (Dietrich); Thelonius Monk (Hastil); and John Coltrane (Taylor). All demos incorporated active student engagement with either call & response and improvisation with voice, and/or body percussion and playing instruments.



Figure 7–21: Hanah Jon Taylor’s jazz demo (Photo, A. Fraioli)

Before the start of the residency, I emailed all the guest-artist musicians, informing them about the residency’s theme of “freedom” as it relates to jazz and explaining that this theme could be incorporated into their classroom instruction in any way they saw fit. Of all the guest clinicians, Mr. Taylor spoke most directly to this theme. In his presentation on John Coltrane with 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> graders, he put the artist and his work within the context of black struggles against racism during the 60s:

*My point here is that...this is the world that John Coltrane came up in, as a young person...and so since you can never really separate a music from its time, I really believe that that had a lot to do with the urgency, and I'll use that word, the urgency to be the musician that he was. So, back in the 60s, when I was a kid, there was a lot going on as well. People were working together in a community as human beings, to rid ourselves of that type of discrimination and segregation, and so we actually wrote and played and listened to music that encouraged what we felt...O.K.? So, we had John Coltrane coming up in that time, and there's a reason that many people still to this day don't know who he is because his music was considered to be part of that peace and freedom and liberation movement that was America in the 60s. Well, he played saxophone and that's why I brought my saxophone. Anybody play saxophone here?*<sup>222</sup>

### *The Sound That Jazz Makes*

One of our guest artists brought to the music room the picture book and poem, *The Sound That Jazz Makes*, by Carole Boston Weatherford (2000). When I first read the poem, I was struck by how it resonated with the residency's theme of jazz (along with blues and rap) as a Signifier of freedom. Here are a few of the verses (Weatherford Boston, 2000):

*This is the pulse of countless hearts aboard slave ships chased by sharks.  
Captives bound for a place unknown, on angry waves in boats that moan.  
This is the harbor where slave ships docked and Africans stood on auction blocks—  
human chattel, bought and sold, traded as if they were silk or gold...*

*These are the songs of blood and sweat, of men laying tracks and casting nets—  
Of the Delta bluesmen whose guitar whines, who howls of heartbreak and hard times.  
This is the church where gospel rocked, with shouts of praise that called the flock  
to lift their voices, clap their hands, and march on toward the Promised Land...*

*This is Birdland where jazz broke free, and the sounds of bebop came to be—  
Where horn men trumpeted things to come, and gold-toned saxophones blared and hummed.  
This is the rapper whose boom box blasts. These are the musicians inspired by the past.  
They all hear the age-old, far-off beat, Of Africa drumming on every street.  
Jazz is the downbeat born in our nation, Chords of struggle and jubilation  
Bursting forth from hearts set free, In notes that echo history.*

After sharing the poem with my 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes, I recruited fifteen students interested in performing the poem at our Spring Jazz Concert. I met with this group over their lunch and recess hours to prepare for their performance. The only thing left to do was to choose a jazz tune for the Madison

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<sup>222</sup> From Hanah Jon Taylor's "demo presentation," recorded at Orchard Ridge Elementary School, 4/9/202.

Jazz Society “House Band” so that they could accompany the students as they recited the poem, in the style of Gil Scott-Heron.

*Create & Present: “Jazz Café” Night, Spring Jazz Concert, & A Virtual Conclusion*

Two events were planned to culminate the jazz residency by showcasing student musical performances, Jazz Pioneer book reports, artworks, and spoken word performances. The first of these was the “Jazz Café Night” (or “A Jazzy Night!”) held for 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> grade families, scheduled for March 12<sup>th</sup>, to be followed by the All-School Spring Jazz Concert, scheduled for March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The “Jazz Café Night” was slated to include an informal jazz jam (all instruments provided), swing dancing taught by our librarian (who just happens to be an amateur ball-room dancer), a “Jazz Hall of Fame” to feature the Jazz Pioneer Album Book Reports, and a potluck to end the evening. Invitations and RSVPs were sent home and returned, and a fun-filled evening was shaping up.



Figure 7–22: “A Jazzy Night!” program cover (Design, J. Ludke)

One day before the “Jazz Café Night,” the Madison School District superintendent issued an official advisory against having community events due to Covid–19. And so, we had to cancel our “Jazzy Night.” Our Spring Concert, which was to feature student jazz performances (scatting, drumming, singing) backed up by the Madison Jazz Society residency “house band,” suffered the same fate. This necessary but difficult turn of events created a void that needed to be filled. It was especially




disheartening that the outcomes of everyone’s work throughout the jazz residency, including that of students, teachers, and residency guest artists, would not be shared. Portions of both community events

To: All ORE Families,

You are invited to the

**ORE Spring Music Concert:**

*“It’s All About Jazz!”*




When: Wednesday, March 18<sup>th</sup>  
Where: ORE Gymnasium (near the “Pod”)

*All ORE Students, Kindergarten – 5<sup>th</sup> grades will be performing.*

Program Schedule

1:10 – 1:50 pm, Kindergarten, 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Grades  
2:10 - 2:50 pm, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> Grades

This event is sponsored by



Questions? Call or email Ms. Fraioli • Music (fraioli@msd.wisc.edu, 204-2340) (Music Room)

Figure 7–23: Spring Jazz Concert program (Design, A. Fraioli)

were, however, brought to a “virtual” conclusion. The *Jazz & Freedom* guest artists (the “House Band”) organized remote and live recording sessions in which they laid down “C-Jam Blues” (with lyrics by Lynette Margulies), “What a Wonderful World,” “Sunny Side of the Street,” and “When the Saints Go Marching In.” In lieu of our “Hall of Fame,” I created a power-point of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade “Jazz Pioneer” book reports and added it to my remote teaching lessons. Given the risks of Covid 19, the “House Band” put out a valiant effort to celebrate the finale of the *Jazz & Freedom* project in virtual style. Here’s Lynette’s “C-Jam Blues” lyrics:

*C’mo—let’s go down to Orchard Ridge  
Coolest—students, at Orchard Ridge  
Oh—love that music at Orchard Ridge  
Dolphins—love to sing at Orchard Ridge  
Dolphins—love to swing at Orchard Ridge  
C’mo—do your thing at Orchard Ridge  
(Lynette Margulies)*

*Lincoln Center: Freedom Swings*

Before closing this chapter, I would like to introduce a jazz concert series called *Freedom Swings* (*FS*), which is part of the Jazz Academy’s “Jazz for Young People” program at Lincoln Center.<sup>223</sup> Had I come across the *Freedom Swings* program prior to or during our own “Jazz & Freedom” residency, I would have been able to invest our project with an even more urgent call for teaching jazz as an expression of African American freedom. Since 2013, *Freedom Swings* has reached millions of school children through three concerts: “Jazz and Democracy,” “Jazz and the Great Migration,” and “Jazz and Civil Rights.” Each concert comes with a “program guide.” The “Jazz and Democracy” program guide, while speaking to how jazz reflects the highest ideals of freedom and democracy in America, also hints at how jazz might reveal a fuller story about America’s history “if we let it.”

Jazz has since become a part of every American’s birthright, a timeless symbol of individualism and ingenuity, democracy, and inclusiveness. At its very core, this music affirms our belief in community, in love, and in the dignity of human life. And if we let it, jazz can teach us—in ways beyond our imagination—exactly who we are, where we have been, and where we should be going (*FS Resource Guide: “Jazz and Democracy”*).

The liberatory goals of *Freedom Swings* are more explicitly expressed in the “Jazz and Civil Rights” concert promotional materials and program resource guide.<sup>224</sup> The introduction for this concert includes the statement, “This concert will demonstrate how jazz can serve as a form of protest and as an instrument for social change.” Particularly pertinent to the goals for the “Jazz Pioneer Book Reports” reviewed above, *Freedom Swings* highlights the ways in which jazz musicians have used their music and their public stature to openly critique racism in America. According to the “Jazz and Civil Rights” program guide lesson, from “time to time” jazz musicians have felt the “need to use their art to protest when the United States fails to live up to its promises” (*FS Resource Guide, Jazz & Civil Rights*).

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<sup>223</sup> <https://academy.jazz.org/jfyp/jfyp-on-tour/>

<sup>224</sup> Let Freedom Swing Concert Series Resource Guide: <https://academy.jazz.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/14-15-Let-Freedom-Swing-Concert-Resource-Guide.pdf>

Notable references in the “Jazz and Civil Rights” lessons include the story about how in 1956, during the Cold War, the State Department asked Louis Armstrong to “represent the best of American behind the Iron Curtain.” Armstrong replied that “he wouldn’t go until they straightened out that mess down south.” In 1965, Armstrong turned the “Broadway ditty” called “Black and Blue” into a “searing indictment of racism” (*FS*, “Jazz and Civil Rights”). The song’s original lyric was about “dark-skinned women losing men to lighter skinned women” (Nocera 2020). In his rendition, Armstrong made a crucial lyric change from “I’m *white* inside,” to “I’m *right* inside”:

*They laugh at you, and scorn you too  
 What did I do to be so black and blue?  
 I'm right inside, but that don't help my case  
 'Cause I can't hide what is in my face  
 How would it end? Ain't got a friend  
 My only sin is in my skin  
 What did I do to be so black and blue  
 How would it end? Ain't got a friend  
 My only sin is in my skin  
 What did I do to be so black and blue?*<sup>225</sup>  
 (Nocera 2020)

Through his music and actions, Duke Ellington also engaged in public protest about the civil rights denied to African Americans. When Black students were turned away from Whites-only restaurants in the 1960s, Ellington made headlines across the country by getting himself turned away, too (*FS*, “Jazz and Civil Rights”). Like other Black artists who “despaired at the chaos” during the civil rights era, Ellington “turned inward, rejecting musical conventions in search of new forms of personal expression.” In accordance with his stance, Ellington composed “Black, Brown, and Beige: A Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro” (1946), an integrated art piece which combined western classical music with the spiritual, blues, jazz, and spoken poetry. On its musical merits, reviews of Ellington’s piece were mixed. Jazz historian Garth Alper (2011, 3) makes the point, however, that what was missing from the reviews – positive and negative – was “any mention of the effort Ellington was

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<sup>225</sup> See Joe Nocera’s article, “Louis Armstrong Performs ‘Black and Blue’” for more on the composition and Armstrong’s public responses to violence against Blacks during civil rights protests. When a reporter asked Armstrong about “Bloody Sunday,” he replied, “They would beat Jesus if he was black and marched” (Nocera 2020).

making to use his popularity to transform attitudes about race in his country.” In his public statements confronting racism, Ellington said,

I contend that the Negro is the creative voice of America, is creative America, and it was a happy day when the first unhappy slave was landed on America’s shores...We stirred in our shackles, and our unrest awakened justice in the hearts of a courageous few, and we recreated in America the desire for true democracy, freedom for all, the brotherhood of man principles on which the country had been founded (Alper 2011, 3).

Each concert series on the *Freedom Swings* website features a wide selection of Black vocal and instrumental music reflecting the Black struggle for civil rights. The current “Jazz and Civil Rights” playlist includes selections of jazz, blues, and spirituals. Among them are Louis Armstrong’s “Black and Blue,” Mahalia Jackson’s “We Shall Overcome,” The Staple Singer’s “Wade in the Water,” Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” (about lynching), Ella Fitzgerald’s “He Had a Dream,” John Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme,” Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam,” and also “We Insist, Freedom Now Suite,” composed by Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, and Coleman Hawkins. Some songs, such as “Strange Fruit” and “Mississippi Goddam,” might be reserved for middle, high school, and post-secondary students, given the former song’s graphic depiction of lynching, and latter’s use of, as Geneva Smitherman might say, language “replete with funk.”

The purpose and aspirations behind *Freedom Swings* align with this chapter’s jazz segment but also with my goals for my entire pedagogy of potlikker. As such, *Freedom Swings* introduces a variety of Black vernacular musical expressions to young people as an expression and embodiment of democracy and this country’s foundational promises of freedom for all. Moreover, the *Freedom Swings* concert series demonstrates how, from spirituals to blues and jazz, Black music makers and poets have used their voices and their instruments to tell it like it is, and, if we let them, tell us about where we as a country should be going. I am grateful to the *Jazz & Freedom* residency artists and teacher collaborators at Orchard Ridge who also saw the value in teaching and exploring jazz as an expression of freedom.



## Chapter Eight

### Summary & Conclusion

#### Thesis Summary

Questions I posed at the beginning of my thesis laid the groundwork for interrogating two interdependent principles that are central to my pedagogy of potlikker: Africanity and freedom. My research into these principles led to five key areas of inquiry: (1) What elements of homeland oral arts practices and cultural belief systems survived the Middle Passage and reemerged in the sacred ring shouts, spirituals, corn husking work songs, and Trickster tales that were woven into 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century plantation life? (2) What aesthetic elements and principles seeded in these early Black cultural productions were later remixed in the dozens, toast ballads, blues, jazz, rap, and spoken word? (3) How, in turn, do the African traits in these arts contribute to a Black aesthetic that I am calling freedom? (4) Why should these cultural productions be included in an Afrocentric and emancipatory curriculum? And (5) what *does* potlikker have to do with it?

In these chapters I have illustrated that the concept of freedom embedded in African American vernacular arts is generated by a unique Black cultural and aesthetic identity—an identity that is tied to ancestral African oral histories, knowledge, and life customs. Despite the horrors of the Atlantic voyage, the captives' homeland customs and belief systems were not thrown overboard, nor were they forgotten upon arrival in the New World. Rather, for plantation hands under American enslavement, oral arts expressions, albeit in modified forms, functioned in much the same way as they had in the African homelands—as forms of religious expression, as accompaniments to work, as forms of entertainment, as processes of traditional education, and finally, as vehicles for communicating everyday life experiences, observations, social commentary, and criticism.

There are foundational cultural elements embedded in African orality that undergird the transformation of ancestral customs into new cultural expressions in the New World: the intermingling

of the sacred and secular worlds, the reification of the spoken word, the rhetorical art of Signifying, call and response interactions, improvisation, leadership in performance, the formation of the performance ring, and the all-important element of community participation. All these key elements have contributed to the maintenance of a Black aesthetic in African American vernaculars that I am calling freedom. In various reformulations in the New World, these elements helped captive Africans maintain their oral arts traditions as narratives of protest, resistance, and cultural agency. As such, Black vernacular expressions are an excellent resource for teaching K–12 students about the prodigious cultural inheritance that African Americans have given to the United States, one that they continue to give. What folklorist Tolagbe Ogunleye (1997, 436) has written about Black storytelling traditions applies to all Black vernaculars—that these traditions are a “highly effective medium for teaching African American children about their legacy, as well as the most effective and earnest means of weaving, even thriving, through life's adversities.”

I have employed the term “potlikker” to conceptually bind the themes of Africanity, freedom, and education together. As an antebellum salvage food, the “potlikker” broth left over from a pot of cooked greens helped to nourish and sustain African peoples throughout the enslavement period and beyond. “Potlikker” is also a designation for African American folklore and story traditions, including the Trickster tales featuring High John the Conquerer and Brer Rabbit. I have expanded the term “potlikker” to include all those Black vernacular narratives that tell stories about African American freedoms fought for and gained in the United States, whether in musical, spoken, or written forms. As homeland traditions were transformed into new Black expressions in the New World, captive Africans carved out a Black cultural and aesthetic identity distinct from European American culture.

The term “vernacular” further locates my pedagogy of potlikker within a Black aesthetic construction that is Afro-centered and counter-hegemonic. African American vernaculars are bound together by Africanisms that still resonate in contemporary forms, capturing “the modernity and post-modernity of black art, culture, identity, and politics” (Horton-Stallings, 2018). Robert O’Meally (2014, 3–6) suggests that Black vernaculars can express an “in-group and, at times, defensive, secretive and

aggressive character” not necessarily intended for non-White groups. As such, these vernaculars are expressions of “resistance, self-awareness, and endurance, [that do not] wholly subscribe to the white American ethos and world view” (2014, 4).

Several intersecting critical, educational frameworks have contributed to the formation of my pedagogy of potlikker. These frameworks include African heritage knowledge (King & Swartz), critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings 2009, 2017; Bell, 1995; Dixson, Anderson & Donner, 2017), narrative inquiry (Bresler, 2006), and critical perspectives within the fields of Folkarts in Education (Hamer 2000). What these pedagogical frameworks have in common is an emphasis on the capacity of stories to speak truth to power. As such, my potlikker narratives counter the White, hegemonic stock stories, or “grand narratives,” in school curriculum about American enslavement and, more broadly, African cultural heritage in the United States. As King & Swartz have reminded us, counter narratives are needed because the “grand narrative of slavery provides no reference to how people retained African practices as well as how they created new cultural forms and continuities that have sustained them in the Americas” (2016 71).

The question of African origins in Black creative expressions has been the subject of a contested debate in social, political, and academic discourse since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 1800s, folklorists and intellectuals sought to preserve Black customs, songs, folktales, and belief systems that were evidence of an original Black culture linked to African homeland heritage. These efforts were challenged by assimilationist social theorists, both White and Black, and similarly minded politicians who saw the jettisoning of “primitive” non-White customs as a way of achieving Blacks’ social advancement and acceptance into White society (Gates 2018, xxii–xxix, Moody 2008). Since that time, prominent scholars, folklorists, linguists, anthropologists, and Black arts critics have refuted the notion that Africans arrived in the New World as a cultureless people. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988, 4) puts it, the “full erasure of traces of cultures as splendid, as ancient, and as shared by the slave traveler as the classic cultures of West Africa would have been extraordinarily difficult.”

Similarly countered is the notion Africans in the New World could not possibly have formed a cohesive Black culture because of their diverse languages and ethnic affiliations (see Herskovits 1941, 294–295; Thornton 1998, 186–19). To the contrary, cultural anthropologists and African language scholars have established that the slaving ships were the first incubators of a Pan-African unity. These were the environments in which captive Africans across ethnic lines began to arm themselves with the cultural defenses and capital they would need to collectively resist enslavement. Factors such as multilingualism, and shared customs and religious belief systems, not to mention the “common disaster” of colonization and enslavement, all served to unite western and central diasporic Africans on their way to, and in the New World (Stuckey 1987 viii, 1; Lovejoy 2000, 13; Rediker 2007, 265, 277–279, 307; Eltis 2010, 226; Fabre 1999; Wallace 2013, 64).

During the Harlem Renaissance in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the debate over Africanity in Black arts had become characterized as one between “essentialists” and “assimilationists.” Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes promoted essentialism in Black arts literature, emphasizing the originality of Black creativity and a belief in the beauty of “blackness” (Jakubiak 2005, 865). The Black Arts Movement (1965–1975) marked an even more urgent and politicized quest for the formation of a distinctly Black aesthetic in Black cultural productions. Amiri Baraka, one of the most ardently anti-assimilationist Black arts critics of the era, asserted that a singular Black aesthetic in Black art was integral to dissent and resistance against White cultural hegemony (1991, 108). Reiland Rabaka has brought Baraka’s theses current, maintaining that Black vernacular song and verbal poetics, including the dozens, toasts (e.g., the Signifying Monkey), and rap music have always been linked to a Black aesthetic sensibility that is about “poetics *and* politics, aesthetics *and* activism” (2012, 233; 2013, 60; 292–93).

Some contemporary scholars, while not outrightly rejecting evidence of Africanisms in Black American vernacular forms, still minimize their cultural and political significance as Black identity markers. Collectively, authors such as Paul Gilroy, Ronald Radano, and Harry Lefever support their positions by emphasizing the trauma of slavery on Black cultural productions, the acculturation



between White and Black worlds, and the subsequent plurality of Black cultural experience and artistic expressions (Gilroy 1993, 75–81; 188–89; Radano 2003, 34–35; Lefever 1981, 5). Radano’s emphasis on how Whites, since the antebellum era, have capitalized on Black performance through racialized “constructs of difference” sows further doubt on the idea that a distinctly Black aesthetic could have been formed in African American life (2003, 10; 121–122). These emphases make the location of Africanisms in Black vernacular arts in the United States either a difficult proposition or, as implied by Radano, an exercise in wishful thinking, a hearkening back to a mystical or imagined past, in the “dream of liberation” (2003, 3; 163, see also Gilroy 1993, 75–81; 188–89).

As a result of compiling the potlikker narratives for this thesis, I conclude that viewing the evolution of Black vernacular expressions in the United States first as response to the terror of enslavement, and second, as a continuance of African oral arts traditions has the effect of denying these vernacular expressions a more powerful identity, one that underscores the tenacity of a people who maintained their cultural heritage despite enslavement and the institutional racism left in its wake. With my emphasis on Africanity, I do not present an Afro-centered Black aesthetic as a monolithic racial experience. Instead, I am presenting it as an articulation of Black identity, aesthetics, and consciousness expressed in African American vernacular traditions. By the same token, I have not pursued the kind of essentialist agenda that Gilroy warns against, one that seeks an essentialized, “invariant tradition” in Black vernacular expressions, as if African cultural practices were frozen in time once captives boarded the ships that carried them to the United States (see Gilroy 1993, 188–89).

Rather, I have endeavored to locate those deep cultural rules from the African homelands, that is, the cognitive predilections towards openness, cultural innovation, and change, that undergird Black vernacular arts traditions and that have created a cultural and aesthetic criterion that allows Black oral arts traditions to avoid becoming static, and “invariable” in the first place. The acculturative process between European and African cultures in the United States (as well as on the African continent) has always been one of absorption, adaptation, and borrowing—in both directions. Michael Gomez (2005, 125) sums up this acculturative process: “From religion to music to literature to clothing, European

sensibility was Africanized and then reembraced, in many instances by those of European as well as African descent. In many ways, this is the essence of American culture.” Zora Neale Hurston put a fine point on this process when she wrote, “everything that [the African American] touches is reinterpreted for his own use” (Tatar 2018, lxix quoting Hurston 1995).

In locating the origins of Signifying and other foundational Africanisms in Black American vernaculars, I have focused primarily on the oral arts traditions of peoples living along the Guinea coast of West Africa, namely the Ewe of southeastern Ghana and their neighbors, the Akan, Fon, and Yoruba peoples. In present-day political boundaries, these ethnic groups and related sub-groups inhabit areas from eastern Nigeria to the Ivory Coast. As we know, West Africa was a major disembarkation point for diasporic Africans in North America. My relatively few references to the Angola-Congo communities of western central Africa—also a major disembarkation point for diasporic Africans—implies only that my area of expertise covers those African societies further to the west.

West African oral arts traditions are grounded in a profoundly religious world view and philosophy. Indeed, religion permeates all aspects of life in traditional West African societies (Ferguson 1983, 242). Religion is, therefore, at once social, communal, and political. It is no wonder, as Herskovits observed, that religion is one of the most “recognizable Africanisms in the New World (1941, 294). While there are differences in worship practices and ontological structures throughout West Africa, (e.g., names of gods, origin mythologies, human-to-divine relationships), there are shared core religious beliefs and philosophical orientations. Held in common is a highly religious and communal view of the world, one in which societal relationships are maintained, not only with fellow human beings, but also with departed ancestors, gods, and other divine entities. This epistemological framework has been described by Ghanaian drummer and musicologist William Amoaku as a “unitary” or “all-encompassing” view of the world in which the sacred and secular domains intermingle (1985, 36). Among the key foundational cultural epistemes that emerge from this world view are a cyclical, rather than linear conceptualization of time, a strong sense of communitarianism and social reciprocity, and most germanely, the reification of the spoken word.

A cyclical (as opposed to linear) orientation towards time in West Africa binds the past and the present, and the spiritual and mundane levels of existence together. The West African proverb *Sankofa* encapsulates this cyclical time orientation. In its most distilled translation, the proverb means that the past informs the present (Pennington 1990, 136). This concept influences how West African oral arts practitioners think about their craft and their individual creativity in relation to community members, both living and dead. Another interpretation of *Sankofa*, “don’t forget the back without which there is no front,” implies respect, remembering, and passing on what has been taught by elders and departed ancestors. The Ewe of Ghana have a concept called “the mother principle,” in which displays of creative genius and virtuosity in performance are tempered by what has come before. But this respect for tradition does not imply stasis or invariance in patterns of oral arts performance. Creativity, personal style, innovation, and improvisation are integral to the continuance of West African dance, drumming, storytelling, and song practice, keeping these cultural forms continually vital and relevant. Closely aligned with Amiri Baraka’s “changing same” theory on continuity and change in Black American vernacular traditions, the mother principle has guided African Americans down the centuries in creating new cultural forms out of the old.

With her eye always on Africinity, Geneva Smitherman (2000, 215–16) translates a West African “all-encompassing” world view to mean “something like a sacred-secular continuum” in Black American communication patterns and vernacular expressions. Baraka has similarly asserted that “something African” became African American and that something sacred is “always at the root in Black art, the worship of spirit—or at least the summoning of or by such force” (1968, 207). Hence, the sacred-secular continuum explains the dual function of spirituals in antebellum America as expressions of spiritual *and* secular emancipation. It explains why plantation hands did not confine their sacred songs to the ring shout “steal away” religious gatherings but also sang these songs as they worked in the fields, shucked corn, and rowed their “massas” around the coastal waterways of the south. The sacred-secular continuum also infuses the African American Tricksters High John the Conqueror and Brer Rabbit with both profane and spiritual attributes in equal measure.

As I have maintained throughout my study, Black American vernaculars have been utilized as expressions of both spiritual and physical emancipation. These vernaculars have served as creative outlets for “getting ovuh” oppression and racism in America (Smitherman 2000, 199). Particularly germane to this liberatory function is the verbal art of Signifying. This rhetorical device survived the Middle Passage and infused Black communication patterns and vernacular arts, since the “giddy-up” with wit and humor, double meaning, indirection, veiled (and not so veiled) poetic insult, mimicry, revision (troping), competitive boasting and toasting, and social commentary and criticisms, making them powerful expressions of commentary, protest, and change.

At its deepest source in the sacred secular continuum, Signifying and, more generally, the reification of the spoken word in West African communities can be traced to two prominent West African Trickster figures: Eshu Elegbara among the Yoruba (or Legba as he is known among the Ewe and Fon) and Kwaku Ananse, the Akan Spider Trickster. As their respective origins in West African mythologies reveal, both Eshu and Kwaku Ananse are keepers and disseminators of stories. As protagonists in their own tales, they embody archetypal Trickster qualities of ambiguity and duality, which are the operative elements in Signifying rhetoric.

Anansi, Eshu, and Legba share the same impulses to help right the wrongs of our humanness, to release the powers of destruction in the world so that the human condition can be more sharply defined (Pelton 1980, 139–40). This function was not lost on Africans in the New World when they transformed their ancestral Tricksters into Brer Rabbit, and High John the Conquerer. As a sacred-secular border crosser, High John (the “hope bringer” as Hurston called him) kept his feet on the ground *and* traversed heaven and hell, outwitting the “Massa,” God, and the devil in his pursuit of salvation for himself and his community. Even Brer Rabbit, usually stuck on the Tar Baby or getting thrown in the briar patch by Brer Wolf, can be found at the secular-sacred crossroads in a role best described as a Trickster-as-spiritual/political community leader.

As master Signifiers, African American Trickster figures (almost always) outwit their adversaries through cunning, guile, and humor: the Signifying Monkey bests Lion; Brer Rabbit bests Brer Wolf,

Brer Fox, and Brer Tiger; and High John almost always wins against the “Massa” and the institution of American slavery writ large. While these stories can be seen as parables created only as a response by the powerless, we must not forget that they are rooted in ancient cultural traditions in African homelands. As Lawrence Levine (1977, 41) observes, Africans in their new, rigid, and hostile environment could not “have been expected to neglect a cycle of tales so ideally suited to their needs.”

Signifying reaches an apex in West African song practices that incorporate poetic gestures such as indirection, allusion, derision, and protest (Nketia 1986, 189–205; 223–4; Wald 2012, 144–45). Songs of this nature are an integral part of “dance dramas” in West Africa that incorporate song, drumming, dance, and dramatic confrontation. Songs of insult and criticism are at the heart of such performances and are sung to air grievances, whether against the gods, authority figures, or those individuals who have committed offences or contravened societal norms (Nketia 1986, 224). As illustrated in Chapter Six, the Anlo Ewe *halo* song duel performance tradition bears striking resemblance in form, content, and function to the African American verbal sparring game, “the dozens.” In both types of performance, it is the audience that decides which side has come up with the most creative insults, and which players and singers remain the coolest under pressure. The drama that unfolds in these performances on both continents is so that all may bear witness, calling upon the assembled community as witnesses, judges, and jury.

Signifying is part of other forms of West African orature, used in sacred rituals such as prayer and libation ceremonies honoring gods and ancestors, and in social “naming” events that frequently incorporate forms of eloquent proverbial speech. In these settings, Signified speech means that blessings and praise can easily turn to curses and criticism (Gaba 1997, 89; Atakpa 1997: 188; Anyidoho 1997, 126–129). It is no wonder, then, that antebellum expressions contained both praise and ridicule of White plantation owners, as well as searing indictments of life under enslavement: *We peel de meat, dey gib us de skin—And dat’s de way dey take us in; Dey skim the pot, dey gib us de liquor—And say dat’s good enough for [dinner].*

As in West African traditions, the lines between adult's and children's oral arts in the antebellum south were not sharply drawn. As such, the hidden meanings in antebellum lullabies, corn songs, ring plays, and "pattin juba" songs reflect life as it was observed and experienced by adults. Songs such as "Old Bill the Rolling Pin," "Hambone," "Did You Feed My Cow," "Juba," "Go to Sleepy Little Baby," and "Sold Off to Georgy" expressed the harsher realities of plantation life: hunger, sickness, family separation, punishment, and death, whether the subjects of the songs were animal or human. Freedom by means of human flight is also a common theme in antebellum ring plays and ring shouts. In "Just from the Kitchen" and "Daniel," the formation of the ring allows for call and response interactions between a lead singer and participants and the dramatic reenactment of flight (see Jones 1972, 143; Rosenbaum 1998, 122–23). In the "Flying African" tales such as "Igbo Landing" and "All God's Children" (also known as "The People Could Fly"), Africans free themselves from captivity and fly back to Africa. The enslaved men and women in these narratives are positioned as freedom fighters—agents of change from the get-go, turning slaving ships and southern plantations into sites of resistance.

Displays of Signifying in the antebellum era revealed the ironies and hypocrisy embedded in White relationships with Blacks and Black culture. White plantation owners encouraged, admired, and even participated in Black performance, yet regarded their practitioners as primitive. This paradoxical relationship was epitomized by White actors impersonating Blacks in exaggerated, stereotyped parodies of Black performance on the minstrelsy stage. Whether or not Whites were aware of the potent messages of resistance in Black song and dance, Blacks took every opportunity to Signify on their "massas." In what became known as the "cakewalk," Black dancers parodied (troped) the European dance styles of southern Whites. As a freed woman put it, "*we used to mock 'em, every step*" (Stearns & Stearns 1968, 22). When the cakewalk was imitated by Whites in blackface in minstrel shows, they were, in effect, capitalizing on a form of self-mockery.

The improvisatory and Signifying skills exhibited by lead singers in sacred and secular plantation performance settings elevated singers and song composers to positions of leadership, prestige, and power. These same rhetorical skills were passed on to the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century balladeers who performed

dramatic recitations of long epic toasts. These “toast-tellers” captivated their audiences with exploits of the all-knowing, omnipotent “bad-men” Trickster heroes like Stagolee, Shine, and the Signifying Monkey, and the equally supernatural strength of the working-class hero, John Henry. In so doing, the toast-teller personified the “self-empowerment dreams of his (sometimes her) Black audience and symbolize[d] for them triumph and accomplishment against the odds” (Smitherman 2000, 275).

Just as the ability to eloquently Signify elevates the status of the Black vernacular artist, Signifying has a role in contemporary daily Black life. Black “talk” draws on one’s ability to use verbal wit, skill, humor, and mental acuity to gain status and “rep” in the Black community. As Black language and education writer Carol Lee explains, because Signifying is so valued and widely practiced among Black youth, it is a highly effective tool for teaching bilingual competency schools. The Black adolescent who cannot Signify “has no status and no style, is a kind of outsider who is incapable of participating in social conversation” (Lee 1993, 11). As I have illustrated, Signifying speech can be harnessed for students and/or adult family members to write, recite, rap, or sing their own narratives through the blues, rap, and spoken word poetry. As students learn to use Standard English, they should also learn that Black English is not “wrong.” Through sharing personal narratives and hearing and reading Black speech patterns in vernacular arts, all students can gain the perspective that there is more than one way to talk, learning that there is beauty, poetry, and power in the way that Black speech flows in all forms of Black vernacular and everyday speech.

As a natural evolution of the dozens and toast traditions, the Trickster has resurfaced in the swagger and braggadocio of the contemporary rap artist and spoken word poet. These hip hop generation griots, like their forebears, build on the African American tradition of reporting on current events and “telling it like it is.” Hip hop’s fifth element enshrines hip hop within the griot tradition: the knowledge of one’s history and oneself and always in relationship to community. For hip hop educator and scholar Bettina Love, “hip-hop’s foundation is embedded in the act of critically reading one’s reality—community—to understand oppression and domination to create counter narratives of love, pain, pleasure, and activism” (2018, 40).

Blues and jazz music emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time when African Americans had their hopes “stayed on freedom” while coming to grips with the post-Reconstruction segregation laws intended to keep them in their place. While the blues expresses secular complaints, longings, and desires, it flows from the same historical experience as the spiritual. Like their antebellum predecessors, blues musicians used the rhetorical, Signifying devices such as masking and indirection to create counter-stories and responses to racism. Even when singing of personal pain, joy, or sorrow, bluesmen and women have always expressed the collective consciousness, attitudes, and experiences of the African American community.

While most often regarded as secular expressions, blues and jazz have their place on the sacred-secular continuum. In these musical forms, the spoken word reigns supreme, and divine Tricksters continue to play their roles as guardians at the crossroads of the sacred and secular worlds. Contrary to Christianized notions of the blues as the “devil’s music,” the blues musician stands with Eshu Elegbara at the intersection of divine, mundane, and historical truth. It is Eshu Elegbara who, above all, inhabits the duality of good and evil forces in the world.

The creative impulses in jazz are equally generated by the Signifying power of the spoken word. Signifying surfaces in the improvisational “cutting sessions” where musicians battle to outdo one another through musical troping, riffing off one another in a game of musical one-upmanship. Like a game of the dozens, musicians out-best each other in displays of improvisational brilliance. The jazz stage recalls the call and response interactions of the antebellum ring plays and shouts, and the all-important component of community participation. In the jazz “ring,” musicians engage in “apart playing,” that is, the musicians take turns to “show their stuff” while audience members play a vital role as witnesses, judges, and jury. After all, it is the *people* who ultimately decide the success of jazz performance in community. Always present in the ring, Eshu is the muse for the jazz musician-turned-Trickster who continually strives to “make it new,” to speak “new words,” and to disclose “deep grammar” through the language of jazz (Pavlić 2004, 71). Eshu has been around a long time and understands the importance of tradition and the standards of musicianship set by the community; he is



the “little man behind the stove,” the one who “knows the *music*, and the *tradition*, and the standards of *musicianship* required for whatever you set out to perform” (Gates 1988, 64).<sup>226</sup>

In the 1940’s, Duke Ellington said that Black music is more than an “American idiom” created for the purpose of entertainment and dance. Rather, Black music has always been about the freedom to express through music what could not be said openly (Alper, 2011). Through Ellington’s political lens we see the revolutionary aspect of jazz and the role of the jazz musician-as-Trickster. Like bebop pianist Thelonius Monk (another jazz revolutionary) said, jazz is “*about freedom—more than that is complicated.*” This was the concept with which my colleagues and I approached our *Jazz and Freedom* residency, allowing students to find the freedom to “make it new” through painting, scatting, drumming, and blowing their “horns” (recorders). In learning about Black America’s gift to the world—a music called jazz—students also learned about some of the hardships that early jazz musicians faced in a society that loved their music but not the color of their skin.

### Conclusion

My pedagogy of potlikker is not intended as a prescriptive curriculum guide but rather as a road map to understanding the cultural legacy that is the Black vernacular arts in the United States. This legacy, with its roots in African orality, includes the capacity of Black vernaculars to teach accurate stories about Black America’s struggles, as well as its triumphs in gaining human and civil rights from the antebellum period to the present. While I do not suggest that students require instruction on every cultural, historical, and/or socio-political aspect of these traditions, I do maintain that Black vernacular narratives can serve as a guide for how we, as teachers, think about our African American students’ culture and history, as well as the history of institutionalized racism in the United States.

In the current climate of racial divisiveness in our country, critical race theory in education has become a political “hot button issue,” revealing that many Americans do not want the truth of systemic

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<sup>226</sup> Gates quoting Ellison, “The Little Man at the Chehaw Station,” in: *The American Scholar* (Winter, 1977–78): 26.

racism in America to be taught in schools. As I see it, however, educators have been teaching critical race theory in schools for decades without a name for it, until now. For many of us, critical race theory is essentially about teaching United States history accurately. We celebrate Black achievement in every domain of public life: in the arts and sciences, in government and politics, law, education, business, and sports. We also teach about Black America's freedom fighters such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks, and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. The very reason we honor these African American heroes because they devoted their lives to fighting systemic racism in the United States. Call it critical race theory or accurate history, the counternarratives to the celebratory, color-blind narratives about race in America must be told. As I stated at the beginning of this thesis, Black history *is* America's history, and Black America's struggles for equality and justice reflect a nation's struggles against itself, against its own ideals that proclaim freedom and justice for all.

As I have gathered the potlikker narratives for this thesis, I have been alarmed at the relevance that the antebellum era stories and songs have to our nation's current social and political climate. For example, the protest "patteroller" songs "Run [Brother] Run" and "Old Bill Rolling Pin" harken back to the antebellum days when enslaved Blacks were patrolled by White plantation guards ("patterollers") who could kill with impunity. As Henry Louis Gates has just recently reminded us, the acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2013 for the murder of Trayvon Martin ignited the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>227</sup> Only when George Floyd's life was snuffed out by White police officer Derek Chauvin on camera for the world to see, and Ahmaud Arbery was literally chased down and killed by White neighborhood vigilantes, does it seem that America has finally taken notice. However, for many

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<sup>227</sup> For the story of how Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi started the Black Lives Matter movement after Trayvon Martin's death in 2013, see Charles Blow's 2020 op-ed article, "Trayvon Martin is Still Making America Face Its Original Sin," with video featuring Barack Obama, the Rev. Al Sharpton and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/03/learning/film-club-trayvon-martin-is-still-making-america-confront-its-original-sin.html>. See also: <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>.

Americans, including myself, the convictions and prison sentences for the perpetrators of these killings do not atone for centuries of African Americans being killed by White men just for being Black.<sup>228</sup>

Antebellum Trickster tales also have bearing on current events. While Brer Rabbit usually manages to “slip the trap” of Tar Baby and the briar patch, he doesn’t always come out on top. Recalling Simon Brown’s rendition of “Brer Rabbit’s Protest Meeting,” Brer Rabbit and his “short tail” companions petition God for longer tails, but the larger and more numerous long-tailed animals won’t even allow the matter to come to a vote. This tale reads like historical fiction considering that after the 2020 presidential election supporters of former President Donald Trump attempted to halt the electoral college vote certification (in favor of Biden) through a violent insurrection at the Washington, D.C. capitol on January 6, 2021, and that Republicans are currently obstructing voting rights legislation. Still, there is hope. In “Brer Tiger and the Big Wind,” Brer Rabbit and other creatures of the forest joined forces and tied Brer Tiger to a tree, an act which freed them from the tiger’s tyranny, allowing all the forest creatures to enjoy the delicious fruits from a pear tree.

Before beginning research for this thesis, I was not always aware of the hidden, Signified meanings in some of the antebellum vernacular pastimes that I taught in my classrooms. This is particularly true for the songs and ring plays that I sourced from music curriculum textbooks and other publications intended for wide public consumption. In teaching the ring plays, I introduced students to the fundamentals of Black performance in the ring: being a leader or “caller” in the center, showing one’s “motion” (improvising dance moves), returning to the circle to respond to a new leader, and supporting one’s classmates with handclapping, “stepping it down,” and singing. Integral to the ring play is the enjoyment of the dance, the social interactions, and the acting out of life’s “little dramas” (Jones & Hawes 1972, xv). In this regard, my students learned the “step it down” moves in “Way Down Yonder” as a social ring play in the “school yard,” not as a protestation of enslaved labor in the “brickyard.” My students never flew with their “freedom food” in “Just from the Kitchen;” they simply enjoyed the

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<sup>228</sup> In 2021 Derek Chauvin was sentenced to 22.5 years in prison for the murder of George Floyd; the three men involved in Ahmaud Arbery’s murder were given mandatory life sentences.

freedom of flight in the ring. In playing “Little Sally Walker,” my students sat in their “saucers,” wiped the tears from their eyes, let their backbones “slip,” and “showed their motion” in the center of the ring, unaware of the song’s subtext—White women’s feelings of guilt over Black men getting lynched on their behalf.

This gulf between the teaching of these Black vernaculars as social entertainments and the historical underpinning for these songs should not be ignored. Nevertheless, while I maintain that the facts about the Black Holocaust should not be hidden or mitigated in school curriculum, we must carefully consider the ways in which the hard facts embedded in Black vernaculars are shared. If I were to teach the hidden narratives in the ring plays above, how would I teach them and at what age levels? Having students playact enslaved labor in “Way Down Yonder” or imagine themselves as “freed slaves” while playing “Just from the Kitchen” runs the risk of minimizing the trials of the plantation hands who originated the material, not to mention the risk of children getting the wrong message from the exercises. I believe that the historical truths embedded in these ring plays and other Black vernaculars can be taught if careful consideration is given to the age-appropriateness of the material. Thus, while the subject of lynching embedded in songs such as “Little Sally Walker” and Billie Holiday’s jazz song “Strange Fruit” is likely too sensitive for children in the primary grades, these songs could certainly be taught at the middle school and high school level as part of a social studies curricula that provides students with a full and complete understanding of US history.

In Chapter One, I delved into the Teaching Tolerance podcast conversation *Teaching Hard History in the Elementary Classroom: American Slavery* (Jeffries, 2019). I am in alignment with the overall sentiment expressed by the podcast’s participants. Namely, that students in the upper elementary grades are “ready for it,” that is, they are ready to learn about American enslavement as the starting place for understanding systemic racism in the United States. As podcast director Hasan Kwame Jeffries framed it, children “encounter slavery in one form or another as soon as they begin school,” yet it is easy for educators to focus on “heroes and avoid teaching oppression” (Jeffries, 2019).

Teaching the history of American enslavement *is* hard. It should be approached with the understanding that Black students may react to lessons about race in America with feelings of shame, anger, or sadness. Recalling 4<sup>th</sup> grade educator Marianne Dingle’s statements in *Teaching Hard History* conversation, these feelings can be counteracted with knowledge that Africans resisted and fought against slavery and sought freedom “in every place and time” (Jeffries, 2019). As I wrote in Chapter One, stories of resistance can also provide hope and a salve for White students, too, especially when they learn that Whites worked alongside Blacks to abolish slavery, sang freedom songs as they marched side by side with Blacks in the Civil Rights movement, and are doing so now in the Black Lives Matter movement. The West African proverb *Sankofa* means that we can “go back and retrieve it.” In doing so, we educators need to carefully present the hard history of the past so that we can inspire *all* students to align themselves with causes and people that demand equality for all American citizens today. The *Teaching Hard History* educators also discussed the importance of keeping an open dialogue with administrators, co-workers, and families when teaching hard history. This is no easy task, given the current political and cultural divide over critical race theory in education. But as Marianne Dingle put it, “We’ve at least got to try...If we aspire to a better world, we’ve got to trust the children with the truth.”

Extending its meaning and application as nourishment and survival for school communities, potlikker-as-narrative works towards healing schools at the heart of their curriculum—not just for African American students, but for all students and families. Writing within a theoretical framework integrating folklore, education, and narrative inquiry, Huber et al. (2013) affirm that stories help people, universally, make meaning from life experiences and serve as tools of cultural survival:

Throughout the ages and across cultures story continues to express the fundamental nature of humanity. Stories are not to be treated lightly as they both carry, and inspire, significant obligations and must be cared for as they are at the heart of how we make meaning of our experiences of the world. Indeed, “storytelling is about survival” (Huber et al., 2013, 213–214 quoting Ross 2008, 65).

I hope that I have honored Huber’s intentions by responsibly and respectfully presenting the stories in my pedagogy of potlikker. African American students have a rich cultural heritage, one that can be

traced back to a continent with diverse civilizations and peoples, languages, histories, and stories. In the United States, Africans built on that heritage and carved out a unique African American cultural identity and legacy through their vernacular arts. As these vernacular forms reveal, African Americans have never been passive victims of racism, but have used their cultural expressions as invaluable tools not only for “getting ova,” but for fighting back. As the spiritual-turned Civil Rights freedom song goes,

*The only thing we did was right,  
Was the day we started to fight,  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.*<sup>229</sup>

Charles Payne (2008, 10) has suggested that we revive the Gullah tradition of passing our African American students “over the graves of their ancestors.” This pedagogy of potlikker is my endeavor in that direction. As I stated at the outset, I hope that the “ancestors are pleased” (from King & Swartz 2018, 75).



*Sankofa*

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<sup>229</sup> “The words, ‘keep your eyes on the prize’ (replacing the more common ‘keep your hand on the plow’) came from Alice Wine, one of the first proud products of voter education schools—on Johns Island, South Carolina in 1956. The song had meaning for the sit-in students who were the first to be ‘bound in jail’ for long periods of time (Carawan & Carawan, *Sing for Freedom* 1990, 111).

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## Jazz Pioneer Book Reports, Selected Resources

### General

Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington,  
Dizzy Gillespie, Nina Simone

Hacker, Carlotta. 1997. *Great African Americans In Jazz*. New York: Crabtree Publishing Company.

Meyers, Walter Dean; illus. by Christopher Myers. 2006. *Jazz*. New York: Holiday House.

### Harlem & Sugar Hill (Harlem)

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### New Orleans

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Andrews, Troy; with Bill Taylor; illus. by Bryan Collier. 2018. *The Five O'clock Band*. New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers.

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### Individual Artist Biographies

#### Troy Andrews

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#### Louis Armstrong

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#### Lil Hardin Armstrong

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#### John Coltrane

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Duke Ellington

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Ella Fitzgerald

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Pinkney, Andrea Davis; illus. by Brian J. Pinkney. 2002. *Ella Fitzgerald: The Tale of a Vocal Virtuosa*.

Dizzy Gillespie

Winter, Jonah; illus. by Sean Qualls. *Dizzy*. New York: Arthur Levine Books, Scholastic.

Dillon, Leo & Diane. 2007. *Jazz on a Saturday Night*. New York: Blue Sky Press.

Benny Goodman

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Billie Holiday

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Melba Liston

Russell-Brown, Katheryn; illus. by Frank Morrison. 2014. *Little Melba and Her Big Trombone*. New York: Lee & Low Books.

Jelly Roll Morton

Winter, Jonah; illus. by Keith Mallett. 2015. *How Jelly Roll Morton Invented Jazz*. New York: Roaring Book Press.

Nina Simone

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Muddy Waters

Mahin, Michael; illus. by Evan Turk. 2017. *Muddy: The Story of Blues Legend Muddy Waters*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.