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"I Put the Tale Back Where I Found It": Feeling the Past Through "the Warmth of the Human Voice"

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"I Put the Tale Back Where I Found It": Feeling the Past Through "the Warmth of the Human Voice"

Daryl Cumber Dance

In this article, I examine my revelations and growth related to folk culture and literature connected to the African American community. I borrow from and play on the Sudanese formulaic ending for the folktale; it seemed to me appropriate—even obligatory—that "I put the tale back where I found it." This maxim is symbolic, reflecting what I find one of the most characteristic elements of Black folklore—that is, the focus on the group, the community, in terms of the source of the historical situation of the tale; the moral lesson; the content, style, and delivery; and the tale's approval and maintenance. In the Black community, an item of folklore will not be admitted or even listened to if it does not reveal the unique characteristics of African materials that some may call soul, others spirit, still others style, sometimes even rhythm. Through examples, I explore these characteristics of story, which extend beyond traditional tales to contemporary media, including television and music.

When Shuckin' and Jivin', my first collection of folklore, came out in 1978, I was delighted to learn that the dean of American folklore, Richard Dorson, had written a two-page review in The New Republic. Despite the accolades that Dorson generously heaped on my collection of African American folklore, the major point that he wanted to make was that the book provided "irrefutable [...] evidence for the non-African character of the folktales told today by Afro-Americans" (34; my emphasis). Thus, despite the fact that, as he admitted, I had not dealt with the issue of origins, I was drawn into that "debate." The fact is that I was (and still am) more concerned about the text of the tale and the function of the tale in the community than I was about what often is the impossible task of proving where the tale first arose.

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Well, I wish to look at the opposing side of that debate and focus on the obvious African influences. Despite the fact that the origins of the folklore have not been the focus of my research or the goals of my study, the collections that I have compiled do attest to "the presence of Africa" in the folklore. And if I may borrow from and play on the Sudanese formulaic ending for the folktale, it seems to me appropriate—even obligatory—that "I put the tale back where I found it" (B. Cendrars, qtd. in Feldmann 12). I find myself attracted to this maxim, not merely because it allows me to make an important and symbolic acknowledgment, but also because it reflects what I find to be one of the most characteristic elements of Black folklore—and that is the focus on the group, the community, in terms of the source of the historical situation of the tale; the moral lesson; the content, style, and delivery; and the approval and maintenance of the tale. For, in the Black community, an item of folklore will not be admitted or even listened to if it does not reveal the unique characteristics of African materials that some may call soul, others spirit, still others style, sometimes even rhythm. It is an indefinable thing, but it is easily identifiable by those who know it, and it is impossible to recognize by those who do not. It is like the Tao—those who know what it is do not tell, and those who tell do not know. And even more to the point is the popular conundrum in the Black community: If you have to ask, you will not understand.

I must admit that I am merely in the process of recognizing and understanding the historic African community of which the material that I have always known is a part. I might find such a confession a little embarrassing if I did not have such great company. This void in my awareness is typical of the condition of Blacks in the diaspora. I grew up familiar with a whole body of folk materials upon which I never reflected. I enjoyed them and responded to them but did not find much incentive to value them through the education that I received and in the culture to which I was trained to aspire. Much later in my life, when I began to read Black American literature, I discovered that these were not just tales that we enjoyed in Charles City, Virginia, but that this was material that had influenced a large body of literature. Again, I must confess that I did not even then comprehend the broader community from which these materials sprang. At one point, I participated in a conference in Kingston, Jamaica, and I was surprised to observe the similarities between the materials I collected in the states and the tales I was hearing there. The "discovery" of Africa was to come later, and, of course, despite my efforts, it is only just beginning. And yet, the fact is that it does not require the reading of extensive volumes to make that discovery—the awareness may suddenly and dramatically be impressed when one hears an African tale, reads an African novel, listens to an African song. All that it takes is suggested in this Yoruba verse cited in an essay by Gale Jackson: "Speak to me so that I may speak to you. By our voices we recognize each other in the darkness" (11). Thus, I had but to hear the voice—and immediately it was familiar. Mine was the experience, of course, of countless people of African heritage.
who have found that, in the words of Joseph E. Holloway, when Africans congre-
gate, they "'know' each other in spite of varying historical circumstances" (222).

While it is quite clear that a number of oral items to be experienced in the Amer-
icas are clear variants of African materials and might be designated direct surviv-
vials, it seems to me important to emphasize from the beginning that what we are
concerned about when we talk about the presence of Africa in the Americas is
something much broader than that. I think that Lawrence Levine is quite to the
point for us today when he writes,

Culture is not a fixed condition but a process: the product of interaction between the
past and present. Its toughness and resiliency are determined not by a cultural ability
to withstand change, which indeed may be a sign of stagnation not life, but by its abil-
ity to react creatively and responsively to the realities of a new situation. The ques-
tion, as VèVè Clarke [...] put it, is not one of survivals but of transformations. (5)

Henry Louis Gates Jr. illustrates just that in The Signifying Monkey as he details
the transformation of the African trickster Esu-Elegbara into the American
Signifying Monkey. Obviously, there is no question that there were also transfor-
mations of European items, but it is important to note that those items characteristi-
cally took on decidedly African traits thereafter. African Americans embraced ev-
everything from Christianity and hymns and burial practices to carnivals and country
music, and they transformed them into expressions that reflect a philosophy of life
that emphasizes force vitale, which focuses on community, uses repetition and call
and response and improvisation, prioritizes ritual, prefers dissonance to asso-
nance, cherishes celebration, and in effect reflects the presence of Africa. This
transformation has often caused no small amount of distress to White Americans,
such as the missionaries whose response to slave worship services was cited by Jo-
seph E. Holloway: Those missionaries were alarmed by the slaves' music, which
they described as "short scraps of disjointed affirmations [...] lengthened out with
long repetitious choruses" (197). They also declared,

The public worship of God should be conducted with reverence and stillness on the part
of the congregation; nor should the minister—whatever may have been the previous
habits and training of the people—encourage demonstrations of approbation or disap-
probation, or exclamations, or response, or noise, or outeries of any kind during the
progress of divine worship; nor boisterous singing immediately at its close. These
practices prevail over large portions of the southern country, and are not confined to one
denomination, but appear to some extent in all. I cannot think them beneficial. (197)

Clearly, some of the history, meaning, and significance of some of the Africanisms
may be lost to Blacks in the diaspora today, a fact reinforced in Paule Marshall's
Praisesong for the Widow, Earl Lovelace’s The Dragon Can’t Dance, and a whole host of other literary works. All too often for us, all that remains is, as Paule Marshall’s Avey reflects, “the essence of something rather than the thing itself […] a few names […] they could no longer even pronounce properly, […] the shadowy forms of long-ago dances. […] The bare bones. The burnt-out ends” (240). And yet, Avey discovers that such survivals can lead her into the circle that represents the unity of the African world.

The major goal of Avey’s journey in Praisesong reflects an essential function of the folklore of Africa. Avey comes to the realization that the many rituals in her life “had reached back beyond her life […] to join [her] to the vast unknown lineage that had made [her] being possible” (137), and she recognizes her obligation to testify wherever she goes, to religiously pass on the story of her ancestor’s historical experience, especially to the young people, who must know their past to understand their future. Avey’s recognition is clearly the traditional African one, echoing the griot Mamadou Kouyaté of Sundiata, who acclaims, “we griots are depositaries of the knowledge of the past. But whoever knows the history of a country can read its future” (41).

The importance of the griot as conservator of history in traditional African society is reflected in the popularity in the Americas of the “man of words,” the storyteller, the singer, the rapper. Most popular forms of folklore among Blacks in the Americas may be viewed as individual and community histories, from the spirituals and the blues to the toasts and the raps. In veiled lyrics and with an intensity of feelings that no written word could express, generations of singers of spirituals have recounted the reality of the slaves’ experiences, their pain and suffering, their bitterness and despair, their hopes and dreams, their sense of themselves as chosen people, their determined quest for freedom, their recognition of the hypocrisy and transgressions of society. Whatever lies and distortions recorded histories may perpetuate, they can never silence the revisionist messages of the spirituals that have persistently echoed through the ages, continuing to inspire and sustain oppressed people here and elsewhere—Black, Brown, and White—in their struggles even unto the present day.

The griot Mamadou says something else that is important in our consideration today. He declares,

Other peoples use writing to record the past, but this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past any more, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice. With them everybody thinks he knows, whereas learning should be a secret. The prophets did not write and their words have been all the more vivid as a result. What paltry learning is that which is congealed in dumb books. (41; my emphases)

Important here is an emphasis on the oral transmission of history and the signifying tradition, which are both so significant in all African cultures. Indeed, the
trickster hero, so popular in African tradition, has remained the most popular of all heroes in Black American folklore and life. Susan Feldmann notes that "the pervasive theme of African folktales is the victory of cunning over force. [...] cunning is the prime virtue of the African hero" (13–14), and that has remained true of the hero among Blacks in the Americas from slavery until the present time.

Perhaps no item of African folk culture survives in a more uncorrupted form than those trickster animal heroes, especially Anancy and Hare, the latter of whom is more commonly known as Brer Rabbit in the United States. Like their African counterparts, these little animals are forever involved in conflicts with larger animals, where they use any means possible to attempt to defeat their bigger, dull-witted opponents. While a number of the African tales, such as the Tar Baby tale, continue unaltered in the New World, in other tales new motifs may be introduced, but the character of the animals and the nature of the conflicts remain true to their source.

Unquestionably, one reason for the continuing popularity of these tales is that they spoke so directly to the slave experience of the dispersed African—focusing as they did on a powerless creature without weapons to protect himself against other stronger beings, who must rely on his wit and cunning to obtain those material goods and privileges usually denied the slaves, such as competing with stronger rivals for the lady of his choice and continually winning the best food. That Brer Rabbit and Anancy might have achieved these ends through underhanded, unsportsmanlike, immoral methods was not important to the slave. That they bucked the system and often won gave the slaves immeasurable psychological pleasure. These comic tales express extreme aggression and vengefulness, as you can see in this typical and popular tale that I collected in Jamaica:

One time you have this Brer Anancy and Brer Dawg. [...] the two of dem trying to outwit each oder. So Brer Anancy cooking a pot now; so Brer Anancy say, "Quick, Dawg, go inna di pot, and mek I show you how dis ting work, man." Brer Dawg say, "You tink you can outwit me, Anancy, you go inna di pot firs', man."
Brer Anancy jump inna di pot first because di water cool; it nuh start bwoil up yet. Brer Anancy: "When I knock, you open it." When Brer Anancy feel di water start boil, you know: [dramatizing Anancy reaching up, knocking on pot] "Bum, bum, bum!" Him jump out a di ting: "Yes, man, nice, nice, nice! Is you time now, Brer Dawg."

Brer Dawg jump in. Hear him nuh: "Cork di pot, man." When Anancy fire start tek him now, him say: [dramatizing Dog frantically knocking on pot] "Bum, bum, bum!" Hear Brer Anancy now, "No, man, not time yet. I stay in dere longer dan that."
"Bum, boom, boom, boom!" "Not time yet. I stay dere longer dan dat." "Bum, boom, boon, boom!" Hear dis knocking. Hear Brer Anancy: "Yes, man, dat is di game, you don' come out until teeth skin and batti shoot." [Bottom pushes out—this will indicate that he is dead.] (Dance, Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans 13–14)
Of course, as you know, Anansy and Brer Rabbit are not always victorious. One of the best-known tales of their defeat is the popular tale of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby, though in certain versions, Brer Rabbit is able to pull victory out of that defeat. In the tale that I collected in Virginia, the initial trapping of Brer Rabbit has to do with the quest for water, as is the case in some of the African variants that I have read. In this tale, though, after he is stuck to Tar Baby by his head, hands, and feet and his enemies are celebrating his defeat, he says,

“Well, I tell you what you do. You throw me in the briar patch, because I don’t like briar patches. You just throw me in the briar patch and you’ll have me—then you kin keep me forever.”

So then they took him and threw him in the briar patch, and he say, “O-o-oh!” when he got in the briar patch. “O-O-OH! This is where I was born and raised—right in the briar patch!”

Then he ran on down through the briars. (Dance, Shuckin' and Jivin' 195)

The Jamaican version of this tale is a study in adaptations that are made as tales are transformed to reflect the environment and the unique situations of the storytellers. Here it becomes the tar banana tree, as a trap is set to ensnare Anancy as he is stealing bananas. Anancy is caught, but he fools Brer Nanny Goat into pulling him off the tar banana tree; then when Brer Nanny Goat gets stuck, Anancy starts beating him for stealing from the tree and convinces everybody that Brer Nanny Goat is the real “tief.” This tale is also an etiological tale that, like the African prototype, explains how animals got their characteristics, as you can see from the ending of the Jamaican tale:

The Boss come now and say [to Brer Nanny Goat], “Yes, so you did a teif my banana all this good while!” Anancy hit him wid di whip now. So [Brer Nanny Goat] say, “Brer-bre-bre ...!” (“Brer Anancy,” him trying to say). So from that day deh until now them say ram goat say, “Brer-bre-bre!” you know, that kind of sound deh. (Dance, Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans 27)

The continuing popularity of the trickster was impressed upon me in 1984 as I witnessed folk responses to the escape of six condemned criminals from the death row of the Mecklenburg Correctional Center. Whatever else they thought of those villains and their dastardly deeds, the folk poets sang paens to their cunning in masterminding such a spectacular escape from a prison acclaimed for its security and pulling it off with such style. The escapees ingeniously took full control of the death row section of the prison and tricked the authorities into providing them with a van and opening the gates for them to drive off unmolested—even after prison of-
ficials had received virtual blueprints of the escape plans beforehand. One inmate, Joseph Jones, recorded their exploits thusly:

Late one night in the heat of May
Six brave comrades made their getaway.
No doubt they had a master plan
They used their minds to escape from the man.
(qtd. in Dance, Long Gone 147)

Another inmate, Harry Seigler, focusing on the reputed masterminds of the escape, the Briley brothers, writes,

When the Brileys escaped,
they did it with style and simple grace.
[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]
I was there the night the man was fooled
And the brothers took flight.
The man told everyone they had a bomb,
But if he told it right, you know he fell for an old move, a dance and a song.
Now if you are at the bar buying drinks
Get a bottle of the best grapes
And lift your glass to the brothers and
the night of the Great Escape.
(qtd. in Dance, Long Gone 147)

Let me share another type of tale with echoes of Africa—this one collected in Jamaica. I summarize portions since it is a rather long tale. A mother sends her two daughters, one a kind person and the other a mean-hearted person, to the bush to get her some ackees. When the girls are coming home with the ackees, a voice from Dry River says to each girl,

If you nuh gi me one ackee you nah pass yah.
If you nuh gi me one ackee you nah pass yah.
If you nuh gi me one ackee you nah pass yah.
Dry River da go come down and wash you weh.

The kind-hearted girl gives one of her ackees; the mean-hearted one would not give any. The voice at the River says,

If you nuh gi me one ackee you nah pass yah.
If you nuh gi me one ackee you nah pass yah.
If you nuh gi me one ackee you nah pass yah.
Dry River da go come down and wash you weh.

The kind-hearted sister says to her mean sister:

Gi 'im one, Nora, gi 'im one.
Gi 'im one, Nora, gi 'im one.
Gi 'im one, Nora, gi 'im one.
Mind Dry River go come down and wash you weh.

The mean-hearted girl continues to refuse to share her ackees, despite her sister's pleas and Dry River's commands. Finally, the storyteller relates,

She gone down the river.
So that is the end of a mean-hearted person. Just share what you have. You have a basket of ackee, and a voice say give one, a powerful voice more than yours, say “gi mi one,” give it. You wait until the river wash you weh before you could able to give it? Well, the river get all. And she lose her life. (Dance, Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans 105-06)

Again one recognizes the familiar. First there is the traditional African use of the tale to instruct, reinforced in the ending that moralizes, and then, of course, the typical incorporation of songs into tales. I collected the tale in Jamaica, but again, recognizing obvious African influences, I put the tale back where I found it.

Let me share with you one of my favorite tales from Shuckin' and Jivin':

On the side of a mountain once, the Lord summoned three people to help him with a project, one being a Black man, one being an Italian, and the other Jewish. And the Lord said, “I am simply looking for people to follow simple directions.” And He said, “I simply want the three of you to go out and bring me back a stone, or as much stone as you’d like.” And so the Black man, thinking that it was a timed thing, rushed right back with a pebble. The Italian took a couple of hours, and finally he came back with a wheelbarrow piled with crushed stone. And they waited until midnight. Finally they heard a rumbling. And the Jew was shoving a mountain. So the Lord in his patience blessed the stones and said, “These stones I will now turn into bread.” Well, the Black man had a biscuit. The Italian had a wheelbarrow filled with loaves of bread. And the Jew had a bakery, of course.

So the next day, the Lord said, “Same gentlemen, same assignment. Go out and fetch stones.” Well, the Black man was extremely happy for a second chance. So sometime later that evening, the Italian was the first one back, with his same wheelbarrow filled with stones. And the Jew took very long to come, but here he is with his mountain. And they waited until midnight. The Black man didn’t show … Two A.M. … Three A.M. … Four A.M. … Well, just about dawn they heard a rumbling sound. And a whole avalanche of mountains and boulders—just everything—was being
hurled at the Lord. And finally the Lord said, “Upon these rocks I’ll build my
church.”

And the Black man said, “I be damned if you will. You gon’ make bread today!”

(9–10)

Again, I have no indication that this tale has ever had a currency in Africa, but
the voice is familiar. First of all, like much African folklore, this piece uses para-
ble, metaphor, indirection to present the tale. Second, it is like African oral and
written literature, which, according to Lemuel Johnson, “furnish[es] critical mate-
rials that Africans use to explain the continent and its complexities to themselves
and to the rest of the globe” (7).

This tale clearly explains a great deal about the history and the economic situa-
tion of the Black man in the American system. It is important to note a critical par-
enthetical statement that the storyteller makes that calls to mind a whole body of
similar folktales. When the Lord first orders the men to get stones, the storyteller
notes, “And so the Black man, thinking that it was a timed thing, rushed right back
with a pebble.” “Thinking that it was a timed thing” calls to mind a whole body of
Black tales dealing with the Black man’s slowness, lateness, procrastination, in
which he is punished because he is late. Everything from his color to his hair to his
economic condition is the result in some of these tales of his being late. Thus, any-
one who is familiar with those tales would think that it would be in his best interest
to rush to get back before the Italian and the Jew. Here, of course, the opposite situ-
aton obtains: The Black man suffers because he rushed.

Indeed, this tale illustrates the constant paradox of the Black man’s experience
in America as recorded in these tales—the Negro cannot win! If the Black man
rushes, as he does in this tale, cognizant of how often he is punished for being late,
he ends up with a biscuit, whereas the Italian and the Jew get several loaves and a
bakery, respectively. If the Black man struggles, as the others did to earn the re-
wards that they received, the rules of the game are changed, and he still gets noth-
ing. It is quite clear to a Black audience who hears this tale that it does not matter
whether the Negro is slow or fast, industrious or lazy; the Lord (who represents the
American economic system) is inevitably going to modify the rules so that, what-
ever that Negro does, he is never going to get more than a biscuit. The ending humo-
rously but forcefully reflects a growing militancy in the character of the Black
man, who throughout the tale, without question, indeed with great enthusiasm, at-
ttempts to follow the rules and compete as others do in the system, until the point at
which he demands that he be rewarded for his efforts in the same way that others
are. He has no appreciation for the meaningless “honors” that Blacks have histori-
cally seen as a hypocritical substitute for economic rewards, and thus he vocifer-
ously exclaims, when God offers him the “honor” of having his rocks serve as a
foundation for a church that He will build, “I be damned if you will. You gon’ make
bread today!”
The tale is also an etiological tale, a form popular in Africa, but among African Americans etiological tales do not deal as often with the way that man and animals developed certain characteristics as they signify on American racism. These tales often purport to explain why the Black man is Black, why his hair is kinky, why he must remain a poor laborer in a rich society; but what they truly are, are veiled satires of racist American values, prejudices, stereotyping, hypocrisy, and institutions. Although I did not so much recognize it when I collected this tale, I realize now that, again, I must put this tale back where I found it.

All of my life, it seems that, especially when I was collecting for Shuckin' and Jivin', I heard the dozens, those verbal duels in rhymed couplets, usually directed toward the opponent's mother's sexual looseness or some other family member's sexual practices, including incest, homosexuality, incompetence, while at the same time praising one's own physical and sexual superiority. Again, this practice, with precisely the characteristics that we recognize here, was noted in West Africa as early as 1856 by the Reverend Leighton Wilson, who observed that, in West Africa, "more fights are occasioned among boys by hearing something said in disparagement of their mothers than all other causes put together" (quoted in Levine 351). Furthermore, there are some characteristics of the dozens in the exchange between Sundiata and his enemy Soumaoro before they enter battle:

"Then, yam, I will eat you."
"I am the poisonous mushroom that makes the fearless vomit."
"As for me, I am the ravenous cock, the poison does not matter to me."
"Behave yourself, little boy, or you will burn your foot, for I am the red-hot cinder."
"But me, I am the rain that extinguishes the cinder; I am the boisterous torrent that will carry you off." (60)

And the exchange goes on and on. Other studies note specific lines from various African groups that include the same kinds of obscene insults collected in America. Nor do these differ from similar practices in the West Indies, such as tracing matches in Jamaica and picong in Trinidad. When I included a section on the dozens in Shuckin' and Jivin', I said nothing about Africa, but now I know it is time to put the dozens back where I found them.

The line that Henry Louis Gates Jr. traces from the African god Esu-Elegbara to the Signifying Monkey surely encompasses a number of additional manifestations of trickster heroes in the United States, including Brer Rabbit, Anansi, Shine, and other heroes of the toast. That similar figures continue to have an appeal to young Blacks was reinforced for me a few years ago when the television show In Living Color debuted. My then-teenaged daughter taped a segment of the show, which she and her friends watched over and over again with apparently increasing pleasure. I mean, they absolutely cracked up over it—almost literally rolling on the floor and
repeating key lines, such as “Homey don’t play dat!” provoking another loud response from their group. What was it about this skit “Homey, the Clown,” I wondered, that appealed so much to this group of middle-class sophisticated teens and young adults? I sat down and watched it again with her, looking more closely at this piece to which I had never really paid close attention. In the episode, a middle-class Black mother hires Homey to entertain her spoiled and pampered child and his friends. They cannot wait to hit Homey in the face with a pie, see him slip on a banana peel, and, as Homey cynically notes, see him degrade himself to give the children “a couple of cheap laughs.” Instead, Homey slaps the kids around and slams the pie in one’s face, demanding, “Now, how you feel about yo’self?” He reminds them, “Homey may be a clown, but he don’t make a fool out of hiself.”

As the skit progresses, we realize that Homey is not in a clown suit because he wants to be—he is forced to do so as a condition for his prison release program. In the meantime, he uses this clown persona to abuse the children and steal money from them but also, presumably, to teach them a lesson in survival, which he illustrates with a prepared series of sketches, showing him going into a restaurant, Chez Whitey, and being hassled, as always, by “the Man.” Homey promptly curses “the Man” out and threatens him in language too obscene to quote here—but “Monsieur Snowflake” still does not understand, and so Homey has to carry out his threat and kick his butt. After relating this narrative, Homey asks the children what they have learned, and, wiser now, they intone, “Homey don’t play dat.” Then he leads them in reciting the following jingle: “Homey the clown / Don’t mess around. / Even though the man / Try to keep him down. / One day Homey will break all the chains, / Den he’ll fly away. / But until that day / Homey don’t play.”

As I attempted to analyze the response that I had witnessed to this skit, I realized how little had changed—somehow I thought the experiences of these young people had been so different from mine and those of my parents and grandparents—and even their own less-fortunate contemporaries in the ghettos and the prisons—but these privileged Black youngsters were responding to Homey exactly as their forefathers and scores of other Blacks had responded to the Slave John, Brer Rabbit, Anansi, Shine, and a host of other similar figures whom one immediately sees reflected in Homey, figures who were forced into demeaning situations from which they attempted to wrestle some shred of dignity, steal some reward, get some revenge.

Would Homey, with his mask that both reveals and conceals, with his rhymes that combine historical information and contemporary advice, with his cunning that allows him to outwit the establishment and the naive children—would Homey be recognizable to an African audience? Yes, I think they would recognize the voice in the dark. So, Damon Wayans, put Homey back where you found him.2

Young rappers believed that they had created a new form when they started rapping in the Bronx and Harlem in the late 1970s, but Harry Allen cites a description
of patting juba from around 1850 from Eileen Southern’s *The Music of Black America* that gives the lie to that misconception:

The young, brown-skinned woman stood in the middle of the group, patting out a beat on the ground with her feet, at the same time beating out a rhythm on her chest and legs with her hands. People crowded closer, caught by the quiet, distinct, funky sound. Suddenly she began to rhyme, fast and furiously. As people listened, swayed and swung to the beat, she shot poetic insults at friends nearby, to their chagrin and the crowd’s delight. She rhymed about her experience, things that both she and her audience had seen and experienced. She kept that same funky rhythm as the dancing crowd went crazy with loud screams and shouts. (78)

It was some time after the new rap craze hit that unhip folks like me heard singers brag about their style, class, hipness, and beat, with lines such as the following, from the pioneering female rap group Sequence: “Say I’m bold as ice / and twice as nice” (“Funk You Up,” 1979).3

I do not mean to detract from the originality of contemporary rappers, but have we not heard that braggadocio in the *Sundiata*; have we not heard those rhyming couplets in the toast? Have we not heard those formulaic lines in Black folk poetry from time immemorial? And, certainly, there is nothing new in the rappers’ masked language, their use of voice as an instrument, their commentary on social and political and economic problems, their embodiment of history, their incorporation of music, their focus on community, their efforts to instruct and entertain, and so on and so on.

How applicable to contemporary rappers is the description of the griot in the introduction to the *Sundiata*: “He [... ] is a master of circumlocution, he speaks in archaic formulas, or else he turns facts into amusing legends for the public, which legends have, however, a secret sense which the vulgar little suspects” (viii)? And how similar are both of these to the Jamaican toaster, the Jamaican dub poet, the Trinidadian Calypsonian, the Jamaican and the American Deejay, the West Indian Rapso poets, and the Pan poets?4 Maybe there is some modern technology that allows a new manipulation of sound and results in practices that require new terms, such as scratching and sampling, and maybe these new artists are attired in designer tennis shoes, Timberland boots, leather jackets, gold chains, pants that fall below the hipline … whatever new that may be said to set this new rapping apart; but even those modern accoutrements have a number of parallels in traditional performances.

And, of course, even the term rap for comparable forms is not new. Indeed, modern-day rapping is but a new expression of a tradition that has the influence of Africa strongly imprinted on it. Let me make it clear that I do not attempt to ignore the negative aspects of rap, and I am as much appalled as anyone else at the machismo, the misogyny, the obscenity, and the fatalism that all too often characterize some rap—and a number of other folk forms as well. But it is important to consider
Houston Baker’s assertion that “rap exists as poetry for the next society because it is so hip to the hype of our now and murderous age” (189) and John Edgar Wideman’s declaration that “[r]ap burst forth precisely where it did, when it did because that is where the long, long night of poverty and discrimination, of violent marginality remained a hurting truth nobody else was telling. That is where the creative energies of a subject people were being choked and channeled into self-destruction” (vii–viii).

Whether one attends a rap session, a blues performance, a storytelling session, a church service, or any other kind of oral performance, one will witness one other notable presence of Africa in the Americas. The performer will not consider his performance successful unless he and his audience become one. He will exhort them to respond to him, to repeat lyrics after him, to clap with him, to pat their feet with him, to enter the rhythms with him, to testify, to enter into the performance. For in a very real sense in the Afrocentric community, performance is a community’s remembering, celebrating, performing, with each individual expressing a shared history, culture, experience. As Ralph Ellison put it, “We tell ourselves our individual stories so as to become aware of our general story” (quoted in Gates and Davis, The Slave Narrative xxiii).

I share with you one final narrative from Shuckin’ and Jivin’, which I believe reinforces what I have been attempting to say about the presence of Africa in the material that I have collected in the Americas in terms of purpose, content, structure, tone, and rhythm.

My stepmother told me that when her mother was comin’ 'long, all them was comin’ up, say, they wasn’t allowed to pray, and say they would git in that place where they would stay—in the lil’ cabin—they’d turn the iron pot down—turn it down, bottomwards—so the white people couldn’t hear ‘em in the house, you know. And they would sing and they would pray. They would sing and they would pray! And have that pot turned down to hoi’ the sound in—’cause if they caught ‘em prayin’ and singin’, they would whip ‘em. And say that they would turn that pot down and get in there and have a meeting, have a meeting.

So one time—they called ‘em Marster or something, my aunt say […] Marster Charles, Marster this, Marster the other. And say he came to the door—of course they had a bolt on it—and that fly open, and they all was down there prayin’ to the Lord. And he say, “What yawl doing down there? Git up from there and shet that foolishness up!” Say they was prayin’ to the Lord, you know, for deliverence—

“Yeah!” [from the audience]
And they didn’t 'low ’em to do it!
“Thank you!” [from the audience]

“Shut that fuss up! Whatcha doin’ down there? Git up from there! And go to bed so you kin git up in the mornin’ and go to work at daylight!”

Ladv, they was worried to death. […] Well, anyway, say after he left, they turned the pot back down—gon’ try it again. And say, “Don’t yawl pray so loud—Mars
Charles gon’ come down here again.” But say they prayed for dee-li-vrance, because they was under bondage.

“God delivered ’em too!” [from the audience]
Yeah, prayed for deliverance—say, “God, deliver us!”

“God deliver!” [from the audience]
Yeah, and God delivered ’em. And say colored people been prayin’ ’long down through the years when they was in slavery, you know, God was with ’em and He taught ’em how to pray.

And they say Mars Charles, or whatever he was, took the pot, took the pot, and carried it in the house, carried it somewhere, but say what was in here [indicating heart], couldn’t get it out, say they prayed together […] and they did that until this lady [Harriet Tubman] came down here and got ’em and carried ’em up North under that underpass. She say Mars Charles, he caught some of ’em and carried ’em back, but she said the majority of the slaves […] this lady got ’em from down there and carried ’em up North.

That was YEARS and YEARS ago! And I sit up there and cried ’cause I didn’t have no better sense. (184–85)

I collected this account on December 20, 1974. A group of elderly Richmonders, mostly women, sitting in a senior citizens center, joining memory to memory, adding individual patches of a shared history in which personal stories are contributed to create the group history. A group of elderly Richmonders celebrating their ancestors who maintained faith in difficult times, struggled against oppression, used their motherwit to escape the master, made that journey to freedom. A group of elderly Richmonders singing a praisesong to Harriet Tubman for her heroic efforts. An aged storyteller chronicling a history that has been passed down in her family, dynamically recounting it with all the drama and fervor of a sermon, utilizing the familiar body movements, foot patterns, arm gestures, voice intonations, like the preacher establishing a rhythm in her delivery that builds up to an emotional crescendo, evoking fervent responses from the audience. A group of elderly Richmonders of African descent, “depositories of the knowledge of the past,” rendering it in “the warmth of the human voice,” entrusting that history to me in the faith that I will respect, protect, and preserve it. In their honor, I pass on the stories wherever I go, and I am grateful for the opportunity to put the tale back where I found it.

_Daryl Cumber Dance is professor of English at the University of Richmond. Her many works include_ Shuckin’ and Jivin’: Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans (1978); Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans (1985); Long Gone: The Mecklenburg Six and the Theme of Escape in Black Folklore (1987); Fifty Honey, Hush! An Anthology of African American
Women’s Humor (1998); and From My People: 400 Years of African American Folklore (2002).

WORKS CITED


NOTES

1This article is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the East Tennessee State University Summer Storytelling Institute on July 13, 2005.

2Homey the Clown was created by Paul Mooney and played by Damon Wayans.

3I copied the cited lyrics from the radio. This hit was never recorded on a Sequence album.

4These West Indian poetic and musical forms, cousins of rap, are described in Stewart Brown, Mervyn Morris, and Gordon Rohlehr’s *Voiceprint*.