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FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY

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СОДРЖИНА CONTENTS

Јазик

- Сашка Јовановска, Натка Алаџозовска**
ЗАСТАПЕНОСТ НА ГРАМАТИЧКИТЕ ФОРМИ ВО
УЧЕБНИКОТ WELCOME 2 ОД ЕЛИЗАБЕТ ГРЕЈ И
ВИРѢИНИЈА ЕВАНС
Sashka Jovanovska, Natka Jankova Alagjovska
REPRESENTATION OF GRAMMAR FORMS IN THE
TEXTBOOK WELCOME 2 BY ELIZABETH GRAY
AND VIRGINIA EVANS 9
- Марица Тасевска**
ТРИТЕ ФАЗИ НА ЈАЗИЧНИОТ ИЗРАЗ
Marica Tasevska
THREE PHASES OF LANGUAGE EXPRESSION 19

Култура

- Марија Леонтиќ**
ПРИДОНЕСОТ НА АРИФ СТАРОВА ЗА ПРОНАОЃАЊЕТО И
ПРЕВЕДУВАЊЕТО НА БИТОЛСКИТЕ СИЦИЛИИ ОД
ОСМАНЛИСКИОТ ПЕРИОД
Marija Leontik
THE CONTRIBUTION OF ARIF STAROVA FOR FINDING AND
TRANSLATING THE BITOLA'S OTTOMAN REGISTERS
FROM THE OTTOMAN PERIOD 29
- Tatjana Vukelic**
BLACK VERNACULAR TRADITION AND FOLKLORE 45

Книжевност

- Весна Кожинкова**
БАЛКАНСКИОТ И МАКЕДОНСКИОТ ХРОНОТОП
ВО СОВРЕМЕНАТА ПОСТКОЛОНИЈАЛНА КРИТИКА
Vesna Kozhinkova
THE BALKAN AND MACEDONIAN CHRONOTOPE
IN MODERN POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM 57
- Natalija Pop-Zarjeva, Krste Plev**
COLERIDGE: THE WORLD AND THE MORAL OF
THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER 69



Фатмине Вејсели

УЛОГАТА НА СЕСТРАТА ВО СЕМЕЈНОТО РИВАЛСТВО ВО
ДРАМАТА ЧИСТИЛИШТЕ ВО ИНГОЛШТАД
ОД МАРИЛУИЗЕ ФЛАЈСЕР

Fatmire Vejseli

THE ROLE OF THE SISTER IN THE FAMILY RIVALRY IN
THE DRAMA PURGATORY IN INGOLSTADT

BY MARILUISE FLEISER..... 79

Мерал Шехаби-Весели, Лулјета Адили-Челику, Фатмине Вејсели

КНИЖЕВНОТО ТВОРЕШТВО НА РУМИ КАКО ИНТЕРТЕКСТ
НА ПОЕЗИЈАТА НА ФРАШЕРИ

Meral Shehabi-Veseli, Luljeta Adili-Cheliku, Fatmire Vejseli

RUMI'S LITERARY WORKS AS AN INTERTEXT

OF FRASHER'S POEMS..... 89

BLACK VERNACULAR TRADITION AND FOLKLORE

Tatjana Vukelic¹

¹Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka, 51000 Rijeka
tvukelic@ffri.uniri.hr

Abstract: The word “vernacular” is a term often used in discussions about African American cultural heritage and tradition to refer to various expressions that are not exclusively literary, written or published. It refers to forms such as sacred songs, prayers and sermons, work songs, secular rhymes and songs, blues, jazz, and narrative stories of different kinds. It also includes dances, wordless musical performances, stage shows, and visual art forms. By including “the vernacular” in a discussion of African American literature, critics like Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nelly McKay stress the importance of these forms to better understanding of the African American literature, tradition, history, and heritage. Although there are many literary expressions as part of the vernacular tradition, a *stagolee* is the impulse that can be seen in every aspect of African American culture.

Keywords: *black literature, black vernacular tradition, folklore, New Negro, African American, black discourse*

Introduction

The foundation of Black literary tradition and culture lies in the expressive manifestations that trace their roots in Africa and assimilating with American and European indigenous traditions. According to Webster’s second edition dictionary, the term ‘vernacular’ comes from the Latin – “*vernaculus*: born in one’s house, native, from *verna*, a slave born in his master’s house, a native” – and counts among its meanings the following: (1) “belonging to, developed in, and spoken or used by the people of a particular place, region, or country; native, indigenous... (2) characteristic of a locality; local” (Webster’s dictionary, p. 2114). The vernacular comprises linguistic elements from African languages, Black English, Creole, Pidgin English, and other various dialects. The forms include oral epics, folktales, the dozens, signifying, sermons, improvisations, line dances, ring shouts, and music genres such as spirituals, gospel, blues, jazz, rap, hip-hop, and more. The vernacular may be defined as expression that springs from the creative interaction between the received or learned traditions and that which is locally invented, “made in America” (Gates Jr., McKay, 2004, p. 6).

How would the works of the artistic ambassadors of Black literary tradition such as Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison or Zora Neale Hurston be like without vernacular elements? How could have Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, or Maya Angelou produced such masterpieces without vernacular elements involved? These prominent authors managed to achieve brilliant writing techniques derived from Black vernacular tradition and deeply incorporate them into the African American literary tradition.

Another very important aspect of Black vernacular tradition is Black vernacular language. According to William Labov and his three years of study research in the National Science Foundation, and published in 1985, Black vernacular language “is a healthy, living form of language which shows the signs of people developing their own grammar, and one which manifests various linguistic signs of separate development” (Gates Jr., 1988, p. x). There are many varieties of English language, and there are also many labels for African American English. To name just a few: Negro English, Black folk dialect, Black Street speech, Black English, Black Vernacular English, African American Vernacular English. These labels have changed significantly over the years, but they are fundamentally used for the same discourse. The issue of Black (Vernacular) English and its varieties is a separate topic for a new research paper.

The Black vernacular tradition speaks for itself since slavery period in which vernacular expression was one of the strongest media for Black people fighting for freedom and racial justice. The oral vernacular tradition served as a strength to enslaved African people giving them hope to build their own community, to stay alive, to communicate during hard work, and at the same time to send messages of resistance to the oppression. Black vernacular expression is a rare body of artistic expression. Formal literary tradition and vernacular tradition are two parallel discourses. In *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) Gates’s most influential book, the author explores both African and African American vernacular forms in order “to show how the vernacular informs and becomes the foundation for formal Black literature” (Gates, 1988, p. xxii). Signifying Monkey is fictional narrative hero who defends and stands for the principles of African American vernacular discourse. Signifying Monkey tales are narrative poems usually performed by men in any given situation and place, from bars to street corners with an aim to convey traditional postulates and conventions of Black vernacular discourse. As for the content, they concentrate on three main animal characters: the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant. Amiri Baraka in *Blues People* (1963) says, “That it was the history of the Afro-American people as text, as tale, as story, as exposition, narrative, or what have you, that the music was the score, the actually expressed creative orchestration, reflection, of Afro-American life, our words, the libretto, to those actual, lived lives. That the music was an orchestrated, vocalized, hummed, chanted, blown, beaten, scatted, corollary confirmation of the history” (Baraka, 1963, p. ix-x). In a stunning memoir of Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* first published in 1969, she recalls of a mentor who told her

“to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations” (Angelou, 2002, p. 54).

The History of the Black Vernacular

Violently and brutally abducted from their homeland, the black Africans, those who survived the atrocities of “Middle Passage”¹ on their way to the New World, managed to carry only one baggage with them – their cultural tradition. The European slave traders believed that the traumatic “Middle Passage” would create a “*tabula rasa* of consciousness”² in the Africans, and that they would import “a clean slate” on which they would be able to imprint their own culture, language, belief, and tradition. On the contrary, the Africans did not forget their history, tradition, legacy, music, their myths, their expressive structures, and their forms of performance. The Black vernacular tradition stands as the hallmark of the immense cultural tradition trying to retain difference from the American mainstream discourse. The myth of Stagolee³, a murder ballad, and a symbol for an impulse to challenge authorities who intend to oppress African American freedom was born long time ago. Stagolee’s characteristics were also seen in the works and actions of African American freedom activists and artists such as Ida B. Wells, Malcolm X, Miles Davis, Martin Luther King Jr., Spike Lee, and many others.

The Black vernacular discourse began with the slave narrative and slave songs in England and America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when thousands of enslaved people, fugitive slaves, and freed men and women produced their own narratives, oral and written manifestations, and music dealing with their tragic and

¹ “Middle Passage” was a traumatic abduction of millions of Africans from their homeland to the New World. This transatlantic journey began in 1619 and lasted until the beginning of the 19th century. According to modern research, more than 12.5 million people were transported to the Americas. The forced voyage of enslaved Africans to the New World supplied slave owners and landlords with a major workforce and brought enormous profits to international traders.

² “*Tabula rasa* of consciousness” is an expression coined by 17th century English philosopher, John Locke. In his work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke stated that at birth, our mind is a *tabula rasa* that we fill with ideas and experiences through five senses. His key point is that we can only get ideas, not create them on our own, from the senses we are exposed to throughout our lives.

³ Stagolee (Stagger Lee) is the strongest American myth classified as murder ballad or work song in African American folklore. “Stag” Lee Shelton entered the Bill Curtis Saloon in St Louis. He sat near William Lyons and started talking with him. When they reached a topic of politics (they were in opposing political parties) they began hitting each other’s hats as a form of anger and retaliation. After some time, Shelton lost the derby hat, and Lyons asked him for some money to replace the lost. When Shelton refused, Lyons took Shelton’s hat and Shelton shot Lyons who only few hours after the incident died of injuries. Shelton served 14 years of a life sentence before being paroled in 1909. Just two years after being released from prison he reentered prison for petty theft. A year later he died of tuberculosis. A song about Shelton, named Stagolee, was often sang by the African Americans praising a “bad man” becoming a hero figure. It was transmitted by black workers on the shipping lines and became known as a “hero song” in the Black communities. Its varieties were released, recorded, and performed many times throughout history by various singers. The most recent version, and one of the best known is by a singer Beck, the Grateful Dead and actor Hugh Laurie.

traumatic disruption from their motherland. Furthermore, traumatic experiences of systemic dehumanization of black people in American plantation culture developed an immense discourse of oral poetry and music that was not well documented until the nineteenth century. Two hundred years or more after it was first created. African rhythms, folklore, rhetorical strategies, the trickster and badman tales, and divine African themes influenced a context for the authentic discourse to which future generations of artists, writers, critics, and scholars referred to from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century. There are no sufficient documentations of how the transmission, translation, and recuperation managed to be retained and preserved and efforts were taken to transform these unique oral, written, and body language into comprehensible messages which altogether became the legacy. Nevertheless, it is obvious that this remarkable discourse laid foundations for the expressive African American culture and literature that we consume today. Some early Black readers and critics described the slave songs and narratives as weird and wild, but creative and containing specific nature of this tradition. Many of them had no idea of how to define them. Even W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the greatest, prolific, and influential writers that black America has ever produced, called them “the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas” also describing them as “weird old songs containing strange word(s)” (Ramey, 2019, p. 5.)

Stephen Henderson and Eugene B. Redmond, the two most important literary critics in this field believe that the whole vernacular canon of Black people reflects the overall tradition of Black community and is fundamental for the African American literary discourse. Redmond writes: “From the ditties, blues, spirituals, dozens, sermons and jokes, the poet fashioned an endless stream of poetic forms and fusions” (Redmond, E. B., 1976, p. 420). According to Henderson, “an attempt should be made in which the continuity and the wholeness of the Black poetic tradition in the United States are suggested. The tradition exists on the two main levels, the written and the oral, which sometimes converge” (Henderson, 1973, p. 3).

Early African American writers in the United States such as Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, David Walker, Maria Stewart, and ultimately Frederick Douglass discussed with the whites through their writings about the atrocities of slavery and dehumanizing treatment they were going through. They appealed mostly to the traditional Christian gospel as the most universal discourse of that period. Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) is the first African American work of literature in which Wheatley spoke of the matters of spirituality and inequality among black and white people. Wheatley was an integrated individual, the one with her own culture and expression. She emphasizes the problem of color as a barrier for Black people to reach spiritual heights and invites white readers to reject the prejudice and allow African Americans to rise socially, spiritually, and politically. In her poem *On Being Brought from Africa to America* (1773), she writes:

“Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
Their color is a diabolic die.
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,⁴
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train” (Wilkinson, 2000, p. 14)

When Olaudah Equiano or Gustavo Vassa, the author of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavo Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789), an imported slave, a writer and abolitionist, arrived in America he was torn away from his homeland in the province of Benin. After surviving the horror of the “Middle Passage” as millions of Africans before they were sold into slavery he wrote: “Might not an African ask you – Learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?” (Gates & McKay, 2004, p. 153). Equiano’s slave narrative was so richly structured that it was considered the prototype of the nineteenth century slave narrative. His texts served to many ex-slaves’ authors as a model for inspiration and imitation. His remarkable form of narrative devices and his detailed descriptions of his slavery accounts captured the reader’s attention than any Black writer before 1789.

The New Negro (1925), *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931), and *The Negro Caravan* (1941) are the earliest anthologies of Black literature which represent Black vernacular forms, Black songs, and folktales. Each anthology offered the way to the Black writers to the realization of their artistic discourse relying mostly on the vernacular elements.

The African American authors of the 1920s and 1930s such as Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and many others found their artistic inspiration in vernacular discourse – from spirituals, gospel, ballads, sermons and prayers, and work songs to folktales and blues. Despite the enormous outpouring of creativity during 1920s and 1930s, Black culture, art, and writing declined significantly due to the Great Depression in the US. African American intellectuals of that period called for more political and social engagement than artistic expression of the New Negroes.⁵ The horrors of slavery and traumatic

⁴ The Book of Genesis (4.1-15). Cain is said to have been “marked” by God because he murdered his brother Abel because God accepted Abel’s sacrifice but rejected Cain’s. Some readers of the Bible thought that Cain became the first murderer and the first black man.

⁵ The term “New Negro” entered the American mainstream thinking in the 1920s, the period of the Jazz Age and Harlem Renaissance. It was discovered and defined by the white intellectuals who portrayed a Black person as a primary product of the cultural, social, and political changes in American society. The term comprises racial and stereotypical foundations of the white world’s image of a Negro man in Harlem in the 1920s. The term also refers to the cultural rebellion and conservatism of the American society and politics of that era. It was a period when Black artists, writers, critics, and scholars became aware of the tectonic changes in the American society and developed this growing awareness for deep and root changes in the Black community. The rise of respectable group of Negro writers and scholars earned them considerable and historical recognition.

Alain Locke, a Distinguished Professor at Howard University, argued that social equality would result from the recognition of the “New Negro” as an artist class. ...it seems that the interest in the cultural

experiences of segregation, lynching, racial discrimination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued to reside in the works of Black writers. The most influential proponents of this period and their achievements laid the foundations for many masterpieces that came after.

In the following decades, from 1930s to 1960s, Richard Wright, Ann Petry, James Baldwin, Margaret Walker, Ralph Ellison, and many others debated vigorously on serious issues of racial inequality, political and social disparities between the Blacks and the Whites, voting disenfranchisement, discontentment, and rage. The situation provoked the authors of that period to make a serious turn in their literary expressions concentrating more on social and political situation in the US than on the vernacular tradition. That was a time of very intense rage against the systemic racism, and the authors were speaking and writing directly to their intended audiences about the psychological traumas of a Black man as well as about the sociological issues of Black life in America.

The rage of Black writers continued during 1960s and 1970s, and riots in the literary world erupted on the streets, too. The Black Arts Movement reflected many new insights about the vernacular tradition. The radical experimentalism of a period rediscovered a new group of writers who shifted again their artistic attention to the vernacular, especially blues. Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Albert Murray, Lawrence Levine, Huston A. Baker Jr., and many others laid foundation for diverse styles and subjects that the authors of contemporary literature continued to multiply and flourish. In the late 1970s, Albert Murray, African American essayist, literary and music critic, and novelist coined a term “vernacular imperative” for writers, and he said that “all writers must be thoroughly knowledgeable of the local materials surrounding them (what else could they write about with true authority?) as well as of the artistic traditions for transforming those materials – the vernacular – into the silver and gold of personalized modern artistic expression” (Gates & McKay, 2004, p. 5).

In the decades following the Black Arts Movement there was an extraordinary display of talent and artistic genius that brought African American literature to new heights. Modern Black writers demonstrated a willingness to write about any theme they wished, but at the same time continued to incorporate in their works folklore, vernacular expression, history, and individual expressions. The rise of Black Studies programs brought forth prominent authors such as Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Ishmael Reed, John Edgar Wideman, and many other highly educated intellectuals. Black women writers rose significantly at the contemporary literary stage in 1980s, a trend reaching its peak when Toni Morrison, as the first and currently only African American writer, earned the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993. In one of the numerous interviews, Morrison said: “I would like to write novels that were unmistakably mine, but nevertheless fit first into African American traditions and second of all, this whole thing called literature” (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 45).

expression of Negro life ... heralds an almost revolutionary reevaluation of the Negro,” he wrote in 1927 (Osofsky, 1965, pp. 229-231).

Contemporary Black literature continues to exhume and to examine the past, the history, and the tradition. The scars of traumatic history have not healed yet and the “revisioning history”, a term that became popular in the 1970s and 1980s was a way out for Black writers and their pursuit for proliferation of Black aesthetics. The intensity and sharpness, purposeful aims, and serious responsibility, just to name a few, describe the characteristics of a Black writer. Kenneth W. Warren, an American academic and professor of American and African American literatures at the University of Chicago, argues in his study *What Was African American Literature?* (2011) that the circumstances that produced a body of recognizably African American literature have changed irrevocably and goes so far as to suggest that they changed long ago, more than a half-century prior to his study. His argument presumes that African American literature can be treated as a historical designation (Warren, 2010, pp. 739-42).

African American folklore

Zora Neale Hurston referred to African American folklore as being the “boiled-down juice of human living” (Hurston, 1995, p. 875). Hurston argued that folklore is the art of self-discovery and the first creative art of people, shaping and rationalizing the natural laws they found around them. Hurston believed that it was the folklore of African Americans that engaged narrative prose and other black literary art genres and forms emerged that are characterized by a “long and complicated story with a smashing climax” (Ogunleye, 1997, pp. 436).

African American folklore is a historical heritage of Africans brought to the new continent and it comprises a network of meanings, values, and recognizable discourses which contain wisdom, problem solving expressions, prophecy, moralizing, and humor. The strongest legacy it conveys resides in the power to openly express the social, cultural, and historical issues of the past centuries. There are numerous publications about African American folklore by a great amount of authors often referring to the essence of the traditional folklore in terms of racism, deceptive presentations, and making profit. For instance, Walt Disney reaped millions by capitalizing on African American folklore in his movie “Song of the South,” not to mention the untold millions his company acquired by allegedly displacing black families and swindling land from poor and uneducated African American property owners (Ogunleye, 1997, pp. 437). The writings of Roger D. Abrahams, Daryl C. Dance, and John W. Roberts openly ridicule the oral African American tradition and folklore presenting Black people and their tradition as morally inferior, highly negative, and obscure.

Roger D. Abrahams, one of the first folklorists who studied the language and performance of African Americans as reflected in folk songs, proverbs, and folklore and literature. From the early 1970s Abrahams shared the argument that all “Europeans must share the stage with other worldviews and, that educational measures must be

taken to provide all Americans with a greater understanding of African American culture” (Ogunleye, 1997, pp. 438). He argued that African American people, their literature, culture, and folklore suffered terrible dysfunctions and traumas. His goal was to get the White people in America to a deeper and better understanding of African American discourse, but his writings and publications did not correspond to the positive attitudes about African American tradition that he was trying to convey. Abrahams books *Deep Down in the Jungle* (1970) and *Positively Black* (1970) reveal his positive attitudes of African American culture being changed and indulged into insults, defamations, and negative allusions. In his stories, he insisted on the issues of sex mythology during *Ma'afa*.⁶ Abrahams referred to African American women as extremely immoral, unattractive animals, and sexual beasts whose “libidos of the buxom black mummies” (Abrahams, 1970) cannot satisfy even a Black man. He continued with his defamations of African American priests and pastors portraying them as extremely negative in the sexual context and greedy for money from female parishioners. So, instead of presenting his readers with the real and truthful legacy of African American folklore and culture, Abrahams provided the most obscure and obscene stories one can find nowadays.

Daryl C. Dance, Professor Emerita of English at the University of Richmond, is a towering figure on African American folk culture and tradition. Her major work, *From My People: 400 Years of African American Folklore* (2003) is a landmark collection of African American folklore materials of incomparable historical value. Just as Abrahams, Dance's collection of tales about Black people contains obscene, immoral, and sexually perverted scenes which deeply devalue African American people and their culture. Her attitudes are even more perplexing since Professor Emerita, Daryl C. Dance is an African American woman. In her book *Shuckin' and Jivin'* (1978) she argues that she provides “insight into the spirit loves and hates, joys and sorrows, values and concerns of African American life” (Dance, 1978, p. xvii). At the same time, she also admits that it contains “obscene, crudely bitter, sardonic, and sick tales” (Dance, 1978, p. xix). Molefi Kete Asante, the leading theorist and scholar of African American tradition and culture who established the world's first doctoral program in Black Studies in 1988 at Temple University, Philadelphia, argued in his book *The Afrocentric Idea* (1987) that Dance acquired biases, stereotypical misinterpretations, and distorted images of the Western world. Asante wrote: “When I call for Afrocentricity, I am...calling for a new historiography founded on African aspiration, visions, and concepts” Asante (1987, p. 1). He called on African people from all over the world from the United States to France, Brazil, and Kenya to readopt traditional languages, names, religions, rituals, and dress (Kendi, 2018, p. 543).

⁶ *Ma'afa* is a Swahili word used to refer to four centuries long enslavement and killing of millions of African people by white people, the Europeans, the North Americans, and other slave traders. It is a term similar to the word *Holocaust* that is used for mass killings of Jews by the Nazis. *Ma'afa* is sometimes called *African Holocaust*.

John W. Roberts, Professor Emeritus of English at Ohio State University who specializes in African American folklore, also mocks the oral vernacular tradition and folklore of African American people. Roberts's academic hypocrisy, biased, and superficial presentation of African American life and culture persuade his readers that the enslaved Africans brought with them antisocial behavior, distorted minds, negative psyche, and dysfunctional lifestyle of the African jungle. He reports that "African American folklore is nothing more than a literary collection of enslaved Africans' animalistic responses to dehumanizing conditions" (Roberts, 1989, p. 35). He blames oppressive African governments, the lack of food, and the system of enslavement for the adverse life conditions they were going through in the United States. He explains that these are the reasons for their hostile behavior in the community which result in stealing, cheating, lying, and treachery. Roberts (Roberts, 1989) argues that there is nothing heroic and moral about African American folklore and narrative prose animal characters such as Signifying Monkey, Brer Rabbit, Jack, or Shine since they represent immoral figures, badmen, and tricksters. He also believes that their egocentric and immoral behavior took precedence over the ideal moral behavior that is supposed to be lived America, the only culture that is ordered, moral, and responsible.

Conclusion

Abrahams, Dance, and Roberts developed the myth of morally, physically, and intellectually inferior African Americans. Their false theories and dissenting opinions perpetuate the negative concept of the other cultural community. Such irrational propaganda and genocidal approach against African American community causes irrational fear rather than the reflection of a magnificent, specific, and unique normative tradition of creative expression. The tendency to ignore specific cultural tradition and folklore results in adherence to perfidious approach towards African American tradition and folklore. Although some folklorists find African American cultural tradition unappealing, shallow, and vulgar the Africans' cultural and historical heritage enriched the American cultural scene beyond any means. African American vernacular tradition and folklore is a continuous process of creative cultural production, carefully preserved and developed through history. African American narrative tradition and folklore is not a myth, but rather a real symbol based on experiences and challenges of Black people throughout four hundred years of enslavement and systemic racism.

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