



# The Vernacular Tradition

## Part 1

In African American literature, *the vernacular* refers to the church songs, blues, ballads, sermons, stories, and, in our own era, hip-hop songs that are part of the oral, not primarily the literate (or written-down) tradition of black expression. What distinguishes this body of work is its in-group and, at times, secretive, defensive, and aggressive character: it is not, generally speaking, produced for circulation beyond the black group itself (though it sometimes is bought and sold by those outside its circle). This highly charged material has been extraordinarily influential for writers of poetry, fiction, drama, and so on. What would the work of Langston Hughes, Sterling A. Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison be like without its black vernacular ingredients? What, for that matter, would the writing of Mark Twain or William Faulkner be without these same elements? Still, this vernacular material also has its own shapes, its own integrity, its own place in the black literary canon: *the literature of the vernacular*.

Defining the vernacular and delineating it as a category of African American literary studies have been difficult and controversial projects. Some critics note the vernacular's typical demarcation as a category of things that are male, attached only to lower-class groups, and otherwise simplistically expressive of a vast and

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Juke Joint, Clarksdale, Mississippi, 1939. "Musically speaking," wrote Zora Neale Hurston in an important essay of 1934, "the Jook is the most important place in America. For in its smelly, shoddy confines has been born the secular music known as blues, and on blues has been founded jazz."

complexly layered and dispersed group of people. Others warn both against the sentimentalization of a stereotyped "folk" and their "lore" and against the impulse to define black people and their literature solely in terms of the production of unconscious but somehow definitive work from the bottom of the social hierarchy. With these critiques often come warnings against forming too easy an idea about the shape and direction of African American literary history. Most emphatic is the argument against a "modernist" view that would posit an almost sacred set of foundational vernacular texts by "black and unknown bards" (to borrow James Weldon Johnson's ringing phrase) leading to ever more complex works by higher and higher artists marching into the future. Is contemporary music really more "progressive" or "complex" than the work of Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson, or Louis Armstrong?

And yet even after these questions and criticisms have been raised, somehow such distinctive forms as church songs, blues, tall tales, work songs, games, jokes, dozens, and rap songs—along with myriad other such forms, past and present—persist among African Americans, as they have for decades. They are, as a Langston Hughes poem announces, *still here*. Indeed, the vernacular is not a body of quaint, folksy items. It is not an exclusive male province. Nor is it associated with a particular level of society or with a particular historical era. It is neither long ago, far away, nor fading. Instead, the vernacular encompasses vigorous, dynamic processes of expression, past and present. It makes up a rich storehouse of materials wherein the values, styles, and character types of black American life are reflected in language that is highly energized and often marvelously eloquent.

Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison have argued that vernacular art accounts, to a large degree, for the black American's legacy of self-awareness and endurance. For black performers and listeners (as well as readers) it has often served the classic function of teaching as it delights. Refusing to subscribe wholly to the white American's ethos and worldview, African Americans expressed in these vernacular forms their own ways of seeing the world, its history, and its meanings. The vernacular comprises, Ellison said, nothing less than another instance of humanity's "triumph over chaos." In it experiences of the past are remembered and evaluated; through it African Americans attempt to humanize an often harsh world, and to do so with honesty, with toughness, and often with humor.

### THE VERNACULAR: A BRIEF HISTORY

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century observers, black and white, recorded their fascination with these black oral forms. Thomas Jefferson, for example, observed that musically the slaves "are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time." Nearly fifty years later, a Mississippi planter used conventionally racialized language to inform Frederick Law Olmstead that "niggers is allers good singers nat'rally. I reckon they got better lungs than white folks, they hev such powerful voices." Frederick Douglass took pains in each of his autobiographies to define the meaning of the songs of slaves. He points out, for instance, that those who hear the music as evidence that the slaves are happy with their station in life miss the slave songs' deeper, troubled moanings and meanings. By the end of the nineteenth century, some black writers were declaring these forms evi-

dence of special "Negro genius," a keystone proof of black contribution to world culture and of black readiness for full U.S. citizenship.

Early landmark anthologies of black literature, *The New Negro* (1925), *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931), and *The Negro Caravan* (1941), included careful discussions of black songs and stories; *Caravan* presented vernacular texts as forms to be enjoyed and studied both as art and as part of the usually unseen historical record. These books opened the way to the realization that black writers, most obviously poets, were sometimes strongly influenced by vernacular forms. Certain Negro writers of the 1920s and 1930s (and their literary offspring of later decades) consciously sought to draw artistic power from the vernacular into their writing. In some cases—one thinks of works by Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Zora Neale Hurston as examples—writers celebrated such forms as blues and sermons and tried to capture them on the page with as little intrusion as possible.

By the late 1930s, however, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and other African American writers who were close students of the black vernacular warned against the sentimentalization of "the folk" and declared the writer's responsibility to do what they saw Eliot, Stein, and Joyce (along with Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and Duke Ellington) doing in their art: to capture the note and trick of the vernacular at the same time that he or she transformed it into something new by drawing on artistic sources and traditions beyond the vernacular. These writers warned too against the danger of winning audiences for black writing with the "easy tears" of a simplified black folklore at the expense of political engagement. What Ellison in particular advocated was a literature as conscious of the best new thinking in political science and modern writing as it was of the ways of Brer Rabbit and the down-home blues. Sounding a similar note in the late 1970s, Albert Murray pronounced what he termed (with a reference to literary critic Kenneth Burke) the "vernacular imperative" for writers: all writers, said Murray, 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.

The Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s reflected many of these controversies and convictions about the vernacular. It was a period of the rediscovery of Hurston, who was widely celebrated by the rising new group of feminist writers as well as by various factions of the male-centered black aesthetic group. At the same time, it was a period of rediscovery of Wright and Hughes, whose radical politics and celebration of the potential within black working-class communities were widely heralded and imitated. More than ever there was a general sense of black vernacular expression as something of current value not just among working classes but throughout the African American "nation." Such students of black speech and story as Roger Abrahams, John Szwed, and Geneva Smitherman helped define the peculiarities of black vernacular expression and noted its relation to black oral forms throughout the Americas and in Africa. By the 1980s and 1990s, many scholars and writers recognized the black vernacular as an enormously rich and various source. Key analytical books by Lawrence Levine, Sterling Stuckey, Albert Murray, Ralph Ellison, Houston A. Baker Jr., Henry Louis Gates Jr., Cheryl Wall, and others paved the way

for the ongoing contemporary analysis of the forms as sources for historical and critical insight and also as wellsprings for the writer. In the first years of the twenty-first century, scholars across the disciplines, including Farah Jasmine Griffin, Brent Hayes Edwards, Fred Moten, Adam Bradley, Kobena Mercer, Greg Tate, Robin D. G. Kelley, Michael Veal, Lawrence P. Jackson, George E. Lewis, and Daphne Brooks, have charted new directions in black American vernacular studies.

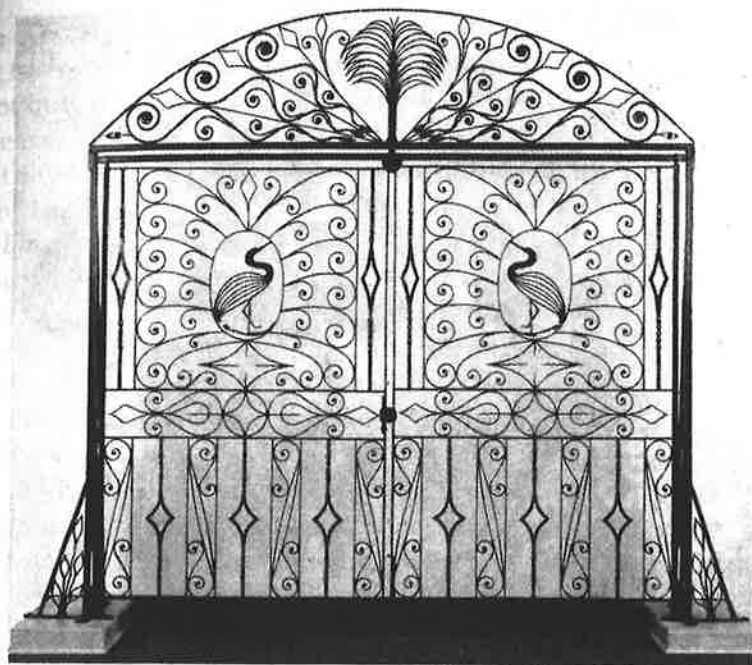
In the first decades of the twenty-first century, *all* of these vernacular forms continued to exist and, in some cases, to multiply and flourish. On a given weekend in New York City, for example, one might choose to hear live performances of blues, jazz, and gospel as well as several contemporary forms related to R&B. As hip-hop culture has continued to increase in commercial value and worldwide visibility, one wonders how much black vernacular remains. But this is always a key question for students of these forms. How to evaluate a creolized form once it hits the marketplace, once the marketers have, in Langston Hughes's phrase, "taken our blues and gone?" How to separate and celebrate the superb fire and ice of hip-hop at its best from the bland imitations and marketeering hoaxes? With this is the mystery that for all the tawdry caprice and relentlessness of the marketplace, somehow the impulse to create vernacular forms that are fresh, independently produced, and recognizably black has persisted.

### DEFINING THE VERNACULAR

What is the vernacular? According to *Webster's* second edition, the term 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." In the context of American art, 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." This definition, derived from Ralph Ellison and American cultural historian John A. Kouwenhoven, sees Manhattan's skyscrapers as well as Appalachian quilts as vernacular because they use modern techniques and forms (machines, factory-made materials, etc.) along with what Ellison calls the play-it-by-ear methods and local products that give American forms their distinctive resonances and power. What, then, is the African American vernacular? It consists of forms sacred—songs, prayers, and sermons—and secular—work songs, secular rhymes and songs, blues, jazz, and stories of many kinds. It also consists of dances, wordless musical performances, stage shows, and visual art forms of many sorts.

As Houston A. Baker Jr. noted, the word *vernacular* as a cultural term has been used most frequently to describe developments in the world of architecture. In contrast to the exalted, refined, or learned styles of designing buildings, the vernacular in architecture refers both to local styles by builders unaware of or unconcerned with developments beyond their particular province and to works by inspired, cosmopolitan architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, a careful student of architecture as a worldwide enterprise and of the latest technologies but also one who wanted his buildings custom-made for their surroundings.

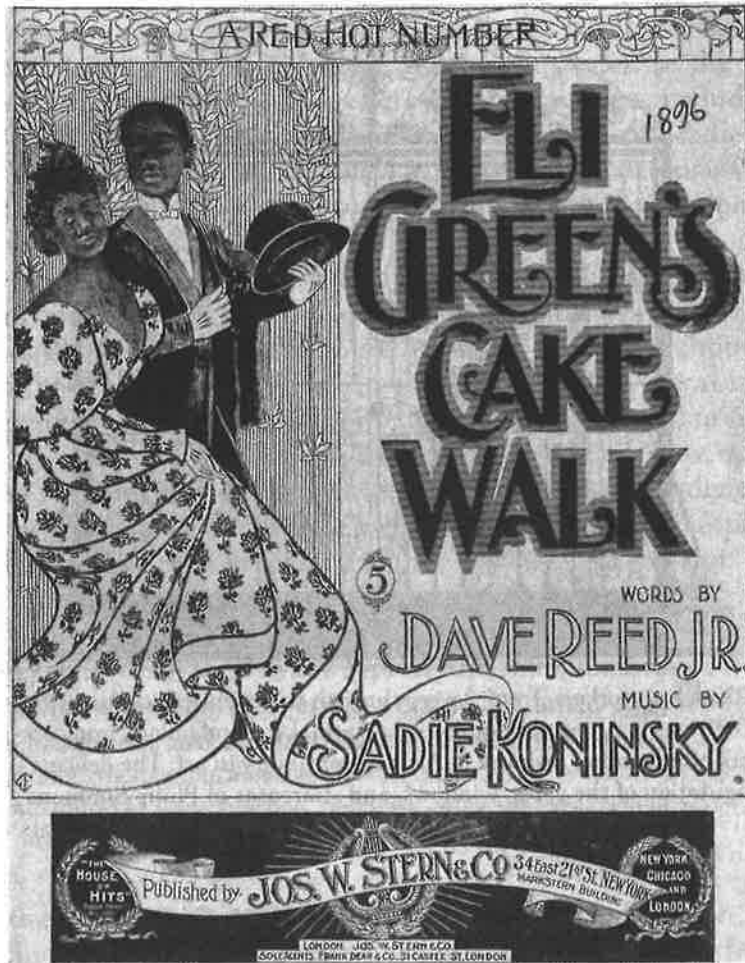




Black ironworkers, from slavery through the twentieth century, left their mark. Along with quilters, basketmakers, and tailors, ironworkers offer another instance of African continuity in art. The delicate figuration of the gates, windows, and staircases of Philip Simmons (1912–2009) have made him one of the most celebrated iron artists in American history.

This example from architecture is relevant insofar as the makers of black vernacular art used the American language and everything at their disposal to make art that paid a minimum of attention to the Thou-shalt-nots of the academy or the arbiters of high style. Coming from the bottom of the American social ladder, blacks have been relatively free from scrutiny by the official cultural monitors. As a group they tended to care little about such opinions; what the black social dance called the Black Bottom looked like to the proctors at the local ballet class (be they white or black) was of little interest to them. Thus it is no surprise that the black inventors of this rich array of definitively American forms have had such a potent impact on America's cultural life and history. Consider, for example, the world-wide impact of the social dances called the cake-walk (with its strong impulses to parody) and the Lindy-Hop (the aerial dance taking its name from Charles Lindberg's daring nonstop airplane voyage from New York to Paris, 1927).

The forms included here are varied and resist aesthetic generalizations. One is drawn nonetheless to parts of Zora Neale Hurston's wonderful catalog of the "Characteristics of Negro Expression": "angularity," "asymmetry," a tendency toward "mimicry" and the "will to adorn." In addition, the forms share traits that reflect their African background: call-response patterns of many kinds; group creation; and a poly-rhythmically percussive, dance-beat orientation not only in musical forms but in the rhythm of a line, tale, or rhyme. It is not surprising that improvisation is a highly prized aspect of vernacular performance. Here too one finds European, Euro-American, and American Indian forms reshaped to African American purposes and



At the end of the nineteenth century, the black dance called the cakewalk, with its strong elements of parody, found its way to New York stage shows and became a citywide and then a national dance craze.

sensibilities. For example, like black folktales, tales from Europe often lack clear delineations of sacred and profane, good and evil, righteous punishers and righteously punished. Similarly, the blues offer few such consolations, solutions, or even scapegoats. At times what seems revealed is the starkness of a life that is real, that is tough, and that must be confronted without the convenience of formulaic dodges or wishful escapes. Even the spirituals admit that "I've been 'buked and I've been scorned, I've been talked about, / Sure as you're born." And the church songs involve—along with the yearning for heaven's peace—confrontation with real troubles of the world and the will to do something about them.

One of the most compelling efforts at generalization about African American aesthetics is drawn by Henry Louis Gates Jr. from the vernacular itself. Drawing on linguistic research by Geneva Smitherman and others, Gates has defined *signifying*—the often competitively figurative, subversively parodying speech of tales and of less formalized talk as well as of various forms of music—as an impulse that operates not only between contesting tale tellers but between writers (and painters, and dancers, etc.) as well. According to this view, Toni Morrison signifies on writers who precede her by revising their conceptions of character and scene, for example, or per-

haps she even signifies on aspects of the novelistic tradition itself. In Gates's complex formulations about how African Americans create, the vernacular meets not only formal art but the world of scholarly criticism as well.

This leaves us with a battery of concerns from postmodern cultural criticism: Is the idea of the vernacular "essentialist," that is, dependent on definitions of racial essences that are not knowable outside the black circle? What is *black* about the black vernacular? When is "American" culture not *black* and *vernacular*? What stake do cultural observers have in this terminology, or, for that matter, in its rejection?

This leads us further to inquire: How were this section's entries selected? Whence came these particular texts? Pouring over dozens of anthologies and collections, hymnals, songbooks, recordings, and literary works yielded texts that are not only historically representative but also distinctive and resonant with aesthetic power. One abiding problem with capturing such works is that they were not originally constructed for the printed page but for performance within complicated social and often highly ritualized settings. Nonstandard pronunciations in texts transcribed from records are generally represented with a minimum of invented spellings—the "eye dialect" so often used by American writers to designate declassé or politically disempowered groups. This effort was informed by those of writers who captured black speech by getting the rhythms right, the pauses, the special emphases and colors. But contractions and new spellings were allowed when they seemed called for.

What determines the order of the vernacular selections, genre by genre? Whenever possible, works are presented in chronological order and are clustered according to authorship. But because authorship and chronology are often unknown or ambiguous (for example, who first told the tale of the rabbit and the tar-baby?), we simply have done our best to ascertain credits and dates when they are available. In the folktales section, works are credited and dated in footnotes, but—recognizing that in this instance the "authors" are the recorders (brilliantly artistic ones though they may be) of works created incrementally by many, many voices over many, many years—they are listed not by date or writer but by subject: the animal tales precede the ones with human characters and follow a general chronological arc. Such broad thematic and timeline concerns govern all of the vernacular section's orderings—even when specific dates and authors are given. For even in the case of a Duke Ellington song or a Martin Luther King sermon/speech, for which date and author seem so specific, what we reproduce here is one particular text or version of a performance given over and over, according to changing settings and moments. And both Ellington and King draw on rich vernacular traditions (on black and unknown bards) to fashion and project their works. (In Ellington's case, the best text may be the recorded "text," with its performance by the sixteen members of his band, each of whom adds much more to the creative process than is the case with European "classical" music.) More than any other form of black literature, 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*.

Clearly, the selections here and on the StudySpace playlist are not meant to be definitive but to invite further explorations and findings. Black vernacular forms are works in progress, experiments in a still new country. They have not survived because they are perfect, polished jewels but because they are vigorous fountains of expression. Not only are they influential for

writers but they are wonderful creations on their own. In the black tradition, no forms are more quick or overflowing with black power and black meaning.

## SPIRITUALS

**N**egro spirituals are the religious songs sung by African Americans since the earliest days of slavery and first gathered in a book in 1801 by the black church leader Richard Allen. As scholars have observed, this term, whether abbreviated to *spirituals* or not, is somewhat misleading: for many black slaves, and for their offspring, the divisions between secular and sacred were not as definite as the designation *spirituals* would suggest. Certainly these religious songs were not sung only in churches or in religious ritual settings. Travelers in the Old South and slaves themselves reported that music about God and the Bible was sung during work time, play time, and rest time as well as on Sundays at praise meetings. As historian Lawrence Levine observed, for slaves the concept of the sacred signified a strong will to incorporate "within this world all the elements of the divine."

That the songs were sung not just in ritual worship but throughout the day meant that they served as powerful shields against the values of the slaveholders and their killing definitions of black humanity. For one thing, along with a sense of the slaves' personal self-worth as children of a mighty God, the spirituals offered them much-needed psychic escape from the workaday world of slavery's restrictions and cruelties. Certainly, "this world is not my home" was a steady theme in the spirituals, one that offered its singer-hearers visions of a peaceful, loving realm beyond the one in



"A Negro Camp Meeting in the South." This 1872 engraving by Solomon Eytinge depicts a church meeting held outdoors, apart from intruders. Families gathered to praise God in sermon and song and to consider their "rolling through an unfriendly world" (as one spiritual puts it) toward "a bright side, somewhere."