

**AESTHETIC RE-CREATION AND REGENERATION IN
AFRICAN AMERICAN STORYTELLING:
THE WORKS OF TORRENCE,
GOSS AND ALSTON**

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ABSTRACT

From the animal and trickster tales told by enslaved Africans in America to current education and performance based storytelling by contemporary African American storytellers, this study traces the aesthetics and epistemologies of the collaborative African diasporic oral expressive traditions. Through systematic analysis based on data derived from bibliographic and archival sources, interviews, and participant observation, it delineates the progression of the repertoire and content of Blackstorytelling through the lives and works of national and internationally known storytellers, Jackie Torrence, Linda Goss and Charlotte Blake Alston. Its theoretical framework is inspired by Kariamu Welsh Asante's aesthetic senses coupled with pertinent ideas of other scholars in the field. The study demonstrates the existence of significant evidence of cultural preservation and artistic re-interpretation of the African aesthetic in Blackstorytelling. The genre comprises both traditional and contemporary expressions of African American culture. As such, it is a major component of the universal African oral continuum.

Dedicated To:

The Frink and Reed families, for never-ending inspiration.

My African American storytelling family.

In Memory of:

Captain Neal Frink, my father, who always encouraged education.

Dwight D. Reed, Sr., my husband, who always supported everything I tried.

Yvette Kinyozi Smalls, my friend who believed in the vision.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the art of African American storytelling in its historical and contemporary contexts. Special attention is paid to the genre's antecedents and practitioners in continental Africa. We begin with a consideration of African spoken arts, particularly the traditions of the *jali/jalimuso* or *griot*. The roles and mission of these artists are multifaceted. They function as storyteller, oral historian, genealogist, advisor, spokesperson, diplomat, interpreter, translator, musician, teacher, exhorter, praise-singer, witness and warrior (Hale, 1998). Their orality or orature has impacted the lives of the community and influenced a network of complex and social relationships. Witness the way Niane (1965) describes the *griot*:

Formerly 'griots' were the counsellors of kings, they conserved the constitutions of kingdoms by memory work alone; each princely family had its griot appointed to preserve tradition; it was from among the griots that kings used to choose the tutors for young princes. In the very hierarchical society of Africa before colonization,,the griot appears as one of the most important of this society, because it is he who, for want of archives, records the customs, traditions and governmental principles of kings. (p. vii)

A useful discussion of the genre in its new American context appears in Abarry's (1990) article "The African-American Legacy in American Literature". Abarry (1990) emphasizes that the beginning of literary creations by Africans in America is of course, orature. Orature, as a body of work, employs many forms, e.g, "spirituals, the blues, and

the work songs, to the sermons, proverbs, and tales” (p. 380). The spirituals, also known as “Negro spirituals”, are of special importance. According to Abarry, (1990)

These special songs have always held importance, especially during periods of enslavement, persecution, or hardship, for they provide ecstatic visions of an alternate world of solace and hope. The spirituals also have functioned as an efficient system of communication, bearing concealed messages of inspiration, insult, or revolt as well as instructions and directions for escape and freedom of enslaved or persecuted Africans in America. (p. 380)

Similarly, according to Abarry (1990), the folktales incorporate “symbolic and allegorical materials” that are expressed artistically and with intensity. Folklorist, Richard Dorson (1956) acknowledges the character and importance of African American folktales when he states

One of the memorable bequests by the Negro to American civilization is his rich and diverse store of folktales...Storytelling did not and never will die... Only the Negro, as a distinct element of the English-speaking population maintained a full-blown storytelling tradition. (p. 12)

The orature, or oral literary forms created during the period of enslavement have affected *all* Americans. The emotional experiences expressed through these literary forms have influenced the vision, creativity and writings of contemporary African Americans (Abarry, 1990; Asante, 1997)

Expressive culture of enslaved African Americans including songs, riddles, games and tales established a cultural, psychical and spiritual community with Africa as well as demonstrated an independent creativity (Holloway, 1990; Joyner, 1984; Levine, 1977). The conscious, contemporary African American storyteller has assumed and continues many of the roles in the tradition of the jali/jalimuso. From the unique African American tradition of “field hollers’ to “playing the dozens” to “history raps” the African American

storyteller's role in contemporary society is relevant. Conscious contemporary African American storytellers embody a shared ideology that privileges African American culture, documents the history and lived experiences of African Americans and unveils the distinctive essence or spirit of African American people.

The three storytellers that I have chosen to focus on in this study, Jackie Torrence, Linda Goss and Charlotte Blake Alston represent three currents of African American storytelling tradition in America: 1) our roots from the continent of Africa and the period of enslavement in America; 2) revolution, self-empowerment and identity and 3) an expansion and elevation of the storytellers' role in the community. Distinct in its demarcation, the genre is culturally inclusive in its continuous flow of energy, ideas and passion. These perspectives designate markers on a continuum of African oral expression.

Statement of the Problem

Considerable and significant research has been devoted to storytelling and African American storytelling in the Americas (Levine, 1977; Joyner, 1984; Courlander, 1976; Blassingame, 1972; Hill, 1998; Brennan, 2003; Dance, 1978, 2002; Jones and Hawes, 1972; Dorson, 1956, 1967; Prahlad 20006; Abrahams, 1985; Parsons, 1923; Faulkner, 1993; Botkin, 1945). These works document and depict the genre's importance and viability in the African American community.

But only a few focus on the life and work of the artists of African American descent who have dedicated their lives and livelihoods to perpetuating African oral traditions. These storytellers perform and conduct workshops both individually and as a group in venues across the nation, including Alaska and Hawaii. They have represented

the craft and the tradition in various European and African countries. The context of their performances include universities, colleges, elementary, middle and high schools, public and private libraries and museums. They also perform at historical societies, prisons, churches, festivals, forums, educational conferences; on radio and television pod-casting meetings, symphonic halls, botanical gardens, bookstores and at shopping malls. They officiate also in rituals and ceremonies such as weddings, naming, family reunions, funerals, political rallies, Kwanzaa, Juneteenth, Christmas, Halloween, birthday parties, baby showers and bachelor parties. Contemporary African American storytellers continue and expand the role and function of their predecessors in the Americas. They tend to articulate an African world view and provide a “psychological release from the inhibitions of their society” (Levine, 1977, p. 102). They also offer a counter-narrative to oppression and negative images of African Americans projected in mainstream society.

African culture, as Karenga (1980) asserts, identifies, honors and informs the world of “our self-conception and contribution to the forward flow of human history” (p. 18). Predictably, stories told by enslaved African Americans had “cultural meaning for the slaves who told them and the slave who heard them” (Joyner, 1984, p. 172). Therefore, examining the stories and the performances would reveal “their continuity with Africa and their creativity in America, their themes and their functions” (Joyner, 1984, p. 172). Dickson (1960) supports this argument when he claims that

a study of their [enslaved African Americans] folk expression can do a good deal more than to supplement evidence from other sources. Black Southern folklore did not, after all, consist of memoirs of daily life in bondage, But as artistically conceived expression which was communicated within a group sharing common beliefs and experiences... The kinds of things that black folk artists created did not so much recount everyday life as to describe, through the use of shared symbols, the world view of those in slavery; that is, to set forth that basic set of values and beliefs according to which black

Southerners would interpret and respond to a wide range of everyday experiences. (pp. 418-419)

Linda James Myers (1987) expands this meaning in her essay “The Deep Structure of Culture: Relevance of Traditional African Culture in Contemporary Life”, she asserts that

The outward physical manifestations of culture and its artifacts (i.e. specific languages, specific knowledge of tribal origins, customs, and rituals, African socioeconomic organization, and so on) are amenable to change and/or destruction. (p. 74)

The ‘change’ articulated by Myers’ may be argued as an evolutionary process. African American folk narrative has been influenced by several social and political movements including abolition, emancipation, The Black Arts Movement, Civil Rights, Black Power, women’s liberation and the antiwar movement. In addition, re-orientation or negotiation of identity, (e.g. African to colored to Negro to Black to African American) has been a determining factor on the character and form of African American narrative. A continued legacy of racism and negative images by the mass media and mainstream popular culture also contribute to modification of the narrative (Prahlad, 2005). Given these potent forces of “change” contemporary African American storytellers build on, but blend traditional narrative forms.

As Jarmon (2003) contends

The evolutionary quality of black folk narrative—influenced by time-depth, localization, and fictionalization—also influences narrative genre, yielding genres as myth, folktale, legend, proverbs, riddle, joke, sermon, prayer and even lyrics, formal or standardized boundaries may not always hold. (p.xxxvii)

And Van Sertima (1976) also asserts that “our history...lies in voices, oral treasures, conversations, talking books” (p. 123). Therefore the voice or perspective of the contemporary African American storyteller must be heard.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study of African American storytellers is threefold. First, it seeks to highlight the lives of three prominent African American women who have made memorable contributions to contemporary storytelling in America. Second, recent Eurocentric scholarship has failed to properly address the precedence of African American storytellers and consequently, Blackstorytelling in America. By continuing to analyze the aesthetic qualities of artistic works by African Americans using Eurocentric paradigms, the failure to completely understand and explicate the cultural and political roots that have shaped and configured the themes, values, and perspectives of beauty and goodness of Blackstorytelling will continue (Abarry, 1992). An African centered analysis is needed to fully reveal the totality of the African American storytelling experience.

One crucial attribute of the oral expressions of African Americans that has been overlooked by Eurocentric scholars is the spiritual component of the performed word (Davis, 1985; Lewis, 1999; Richards, 1980; Jarmon, 2003). African centered scholars refer to this transformative word-force as Nommo-the “generative and productive power of the spoken word” (Asante, 1987, p. 17.) As contemporary African American storytellers call forth Nommo to explain, teach and interpret the values and mores of African peoples and their culture, a dynamic based on a common heritage, shared identity, unified struggles, lived experiences and an inviolable sacredness is created (Edwards, 2009). This dynamic, also known as spirit, according to Richards [Ani] (1990),

cannot be quantified, measured, explained by or reduced to neat, rational conceptual categories as European thought demands. Spirit is ethereal. It is neither “touched” nor “moved”, “seen” nor “felt’ in the way that physical entities are touched, moved seen and felt. These characteristics make it ill-suited to the mode of European academia and to written expression. (p. 3)

However, contemporary African American storytellers find spirit to be an impelling and motivating force in their work. Hooper-Lansana, (2007) a member of *In the Spirit*, a storytelling performance duo, believes that

[T]he pivotal power of spirit is demonstrated in the stories we tell and how we tell them. This manifests itself in our individual practice and in the collective community of NABS (National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc.) and its affiliates. (p. 38)

Thirdly, this work will provide a voice for the African American storyteller from the perspective of the African American storyteller.. Grounded in their communal values and dedicated to the mission of perpetuating the African Oral tradition, through tales, songs, raps with and without the accompaniment of instruments, the “story” of the African American storyteller has yet to be fully told.

Methodology

The conceptual framework for this dissertation is African centered. As defined by Keto (1989), an African centered perspective posits “Africa as a geographical and cultural starting base in the study of peoples of African descent” (p. 1.). More specifically, Keto (1989) explains

The African centered perspective accomplishes two things. First, it begins with Africa as the historical core from which to build the narrative and analysis of, the experiences of peoples of African descent on their continents, their significant regional groupings and their related but diversifying cultures. Second, it seeks to interpret and understand global events by fusing into other general values from the ‘East’ and ‘West’, a hierarchy of those humanistic values whose historical core is traceable, in part or in whole, to African culture. (p. 1)

This approach to African scholarship is also reflected in Asante’s (1987) discourse on Afrocentricity. This perspective places “African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior” (p. 6). An African centered

perspective requires that any scholarship should be anchored in their world view, epistemology and aesthetics. This means that the collection of the data, its organization and analytical methods are Afriocentric.

This is a critical research project as it seeks to obtain information about the development of the contemporary African American storyteller. I have done the following:

1. Gathered relevant information about the topic including print materials, articles from web sources, radio, television and podcast interviews and audio and video presentations of the three tellers.
2. Studied print, audio and video interviews by journalists, librarians, storytellers, arts administrators and others of the three tellers.
3. Observed live storytelling presentations of Linda Goss and Charlotte Blake Alston and viewed video presentations of Jackie Torrence.
4. Selected, organized and construed meaning from the material collected, drew conclusions and created a comprehensive narrative.

Aesthetic Foundations

The African oral tradition “preserves history and entertains in African culture” (Welsh-Asante, 1985, p. 73). Conscious, contemporary African American storytellers continue in this tradition. African American storytellers incorporate the symbols, images, language and history of Africa in their stories. They also create stories that portray the struggles of the African American community, political and social issues and employ liberatory language that express agency of the people. The entertainment value is embedded in the creativity, skill and level of sophistication of the artist. But the audience

will experience an aesthetic experience summoned from the shared beliefs and views of the African community.

Kariamuwelsh Asante's contribution to the study of the African aesthetic provides an invaluable foundation for analysis. "Spirit, rhythm and creativity are the key criteria in discussion any aesthetic for African people" (Welsh-Asante, 1993, p.4). According to Welsh Asante (1993) these three elements originate from "epic memory (Welsh Asante, 1985), or sense of ancestorism (Thompson, 1975) or race memory (Larry Neal, 1972)" p. 4).

She furthers this discourse with a delineation of seven aesthetic senses "*polyrhythm, polycentrism, curvilinear, dimensional, epic memory, repetition*" and "*holism*" (Welsh-Asante, 1983, p. 74). These seven aesthetic senses are instructive as we examine the narratives and performances of these three tellers. Five of these have been employed as a basis of analysis.

Polyrhythm

In performance mode the storyteller creates a rhythm with the meter of the words and sounds. Storyteller Onawumi Jean Moss tells us that rhythms are created by the "rise and fall of the voice; the cadence, the holler, the beat, the way we push the air up and under the words" (Reed, 2007, p. 23). Effective African American oratory is measured by "[H]ow well a speaker can regulate his flow of words with the proper pauses" becomes a standard in the African American community for African American audiences (Asante, 1987, p. 38).

Rhythm in storytelling is also created by another aesthetic sense, *repetition*. The repetition of familiar phrases, symbols and the dynamic of call and response builds

images that gives the story” balance and regularity similar to the structure of rhythmic beats in a musical performance” (Okpewho, 1972, p. 224). This word-force has an emotional and physical impact on the audience that stimulates physical movement (hand-clapping, body movement back and forth or right and left to the rhythm) or affirmations (Ashé, Amen, truth, tell it).

As Senegalese poet, Léopold Senghor argues Rhythm is the architecture of being, the inner dynamic that gives form, the pure expression of the life force. Rhythm is the vibratory shock, the force which through our sense, grips us at the root of our being. It is expressed through corporeal and sensual means; through lines, surfaces, colours, and volumes in architecture, sculpture or painting; through accents in poetry and music, through movements in the dance. But, doing this, rhythm turns all these concrete things toward the light of the spirit. In the degree to which rhythm sensuously embodied, it illuminates the spirit. (quoted in Jahn, 1961, p. 164)

A skilled storyteller recognizes the rhythm in the structure of the story; the narrative rhythm, and utilizes it to progress the story. Narrative rhythms in storytelling are also attained through alliteration, rhyme, onomatopoeia and instruments. In his essay, “Polyrhythms and Syncopated Rhythms Within The Trinidad Narrative”, Kevin Kelly (2012) argues that although the word ‘polyrhythm’ originated as a musical term, any acknowledgement of Caribbean thought “would also be an acknowledgement that the same trends and rhythms that permeate one genre permeate all genres” (p. 57). In the Caribbean, polyrhythms are created by an instrument, usually a steel drum and counterpoint, created by the voice. Kelly (2012) stated that in the Caribbean, “there are many different simultaneously occurring contrasting rhythms, including colonizer versus colonized, black versus brown versus white, patriarchal versus matriarchal, etc.” (p. 57).

In many stories, African American storytellers characterize the voice, tempo and rhythms of the antebellum farmers, plantations owners and patrollers while

counterpointing with the voice of the enslaved African. Highly skilled African storytellers are capable of creating a dialogic tension with oppositional voices in performance mode that address the cultural and political hegemony prevalent in mainstream society. From the anger of frightened school children participating in civil rights marches or integrating segregated schools to brave, proud and determined Civil War soldiers, our rhythms of resistance to oppression are palpable (hooks, 1995, Johnson, 2006).

Curvilinear

Although stories differ in setting, plot, theme and characters, nearly every story begins in harmony, progresses to conflict and finally a resolution is found and harmony is re-established. This simple structure as such, would evince a curvilinear nature in storytelling.

However, in Blackstorytelling, formal or informal, the discourse among and between people of African descent incorporates the creative ability of indirection. Herskovits (1941) is confident that the technique of indirection “must be looked on as immediately descended from the African scene” (p. 158) and must be considered a survival skill. Young (1978) defines indirection as the

capacity for presenting, mentioning, or alluding to matters in a roundabout way; either by touching on them obliquely, metaphorically, and unspecifically; by implication, allusion, or analogy; or by the formalization or ritualization of discourse. Indirect discourse is subtle, suggestive, or circuitous, rather than bold or direct (p. 51).

Indirection by a speaker is commonly referred to as “beating around the bush’ but according to Garner (1994) requires great skill in the use of “innuendoes, insinuations, inferences, implications, and suggestions to make a point” (p. 82).

Another component of the curvilinear aesthetic in storytelling is digression. Okpewho (1992) explains that in the oral performance there are two types of digressions—external and internal (p. 96). When the storyteller pauses or departs from the story to address an object or person at the scene of the performance, such as an accompanist or audience member, it is an external digression; a digression that is “prompted by an element outside the subject of performance” (p. 96).

An internal digression occurs when the teller is inspired or motivated to comment or explain briefly a social or political issue confronting the community. Okpewho (1992) stresses that “[I]nternal digressions are generally useful for expatiating on a detail that the performer feels may not be immediately clear to the audience, or for throwing light on aspects of morality or social history” (p. 97). African American storytellers render current social and political commentary in performance mode that is relevant to their local communities and the collective struggle.

Further, Hamlet (1998) suggested, the use of indirection as well as other components of the curvilinear aesthetic may be “irritating” to audience members who are not members of the cultural community (p. 101), or understand the cultural dynamics of the community. As indirection depends upon the shared knowledge of a community, it has proven to be an essential characteristic in the verbal artistry of African Americans.

Dimensionality

Storytellers often begin their performance with a formulaic phrase or ritual opening alerting or preparing the audience for a special experience (Abarry, 1999). This alert signals to the audience that for the duration of the performance they will be a part of a communal experience, and time and space will be suspended. Together with the

storyteller, they will experience a transcendent reality that defies physical boundaries and physical dimensions. Often this opening has an ontological aspect with an elaborate invocation or salute to the ancestors, divinities or important figures in the collective history of the community. Okpewho (1992) refers to this opening as the “opening glee” (p. 270).

However, this phenomenon has also been observed by Connelly (1986) in the performance of an Arab epic, the *Sirat Bari Hilal*, which opens with an invocation to God, the Prophet and the collective Arab nation:

The Merciful One did not create the likes of Muhammad
The Prophet of Right Guidance came to us in all peace
God bless you, O banner of Right Guidance
O light of the eyes, O purity of the Merciful One. (p. 37)

According to Beissinger, Tylus and Wofford (1999) the performers of this epic and keepers of this tradition are “hereditary, professional epic-singers of the Nile Delta region” (p. 157). Their primary occupations are blacksmithing and epic singing.

Continuing this tradition of “preparing the audience for a special experience”, Augusta Baker, pioneering children’s librarian and storyteller at the New York Public Library, always lit a candle at the beginning of her storytelling sessions (“Augusta Baker”, 2006, Baker & Green, 1987). Before lighting the candle, Baker (Baker & Green, 1987) would tell the audience, “Once the candle is lit, no one speaks but the storyteller” (p. 87). The candle remained lit throughout the performance and before the candle was extinguished, children were allowed to make a wish (Baker & Green, 1997). Again, the storyteller for the duration of the time spent with the audience, suspends time and space and present reality and transports the audience to a past, present or future not defined, but experienced by the senses.

Notably, two very distinct stylistic qualities prevalent in African and African American oral expression that impact the senses are tonality and ideophones. Both of these techniques are dependent on sound. The use of pitch, volume, cadence and vocal inflection give the same sounds different meanings (Montilus; 1989, Smitherman; 1977; Johnson, 1999). Many languages in sub-Saharan Africa are tonal languages and Johnson (1999) suggests that “tone in African American language may possibly show a retention from African languages” (p. 51).

An ideophone as defined by Noss (2004), is a “vivid representation of an idea in sound” and is “very prominent in African language use” (p. 180). Noss (2004) posits,

Ideophones...represent the full range of sensual experience including sound, sight, smell, taste, and feeling. Not only do they imitate noises (onomatopoeia), They also express action and motion: they portray color, odor and texture; and they reveal manner, intensity and emotion. (p. 180)

In his study of the Gbya people of the Republic of Cameroon and the Central African Republic, Noss (1979) establishes ideophones as the most important aesthetic principle in the oral performance of the Gbayan folktale (p. 75). He suggests that the ideophone in the purest sense is “imagery” (p. 75). African American storytellers retain this aesthetic principle in performance. You can hear the *creeaak* of a squeaky door or feel the *whoosh* of a cold and lonely wind on your shoulders or experience the swift movement *pyuum* of a frightened child running from an adversary.

As well, the textured nuances of speech, the descriptive language, imagery and indirect manner of speaking brings a dimensionality to African American storytelling that is distinctive. In Zora Neale Hurston’s (1981) “The Characteristics of Negro Expression”, she argues that the African American’s greatest contribution to the English language has been “(1) the use of metaphor and simile; (2) the use of the double descriptive; (3) the use

of verbal nouns” (p. 51). As an example of metaphor, Hurston (1981 uses the term “mule blood” p. (51) for molasses. In the story “Br’er Rabbit and the Little Brown Jug” Torrance (1994) uses the term “fox blood” (p. 46) for molasses. African American storytellers use metaphors endemic to their environment and community.

Epic Memory

In Welsh Asante’s (1985) model, memory is the ontological aspect of the African aesthetic. A shared cultural consciousness bestows an ontological connectivity to a community. In an African communicative event, when a libation is performed, a “door is opened for the ancestors” to be present. This also breaks down temporal barriers, so that as Mbiti (1989) suggests, “helps humankind to maintain spiritual links with the unborn, the dead, divinities, the Supreme Being (God) and Nature” (as cited in Abarry, 1994, p. 86).

The epic memory sense afford the storyteller an artistic matrix from which he or she can retrieve a memory and as Welsh Asante (1992) teaches, delivers the “pathos, feeling, and experience” (p. 80) of the story without telling a linear version of the story. Because memory evokes emotion and spirit, storytellers employ epic memory through the use of images, symbols, songs and proverbs to not only establish a rapport with the audience, but provide as Sekoni (1990) describes a “cognitive and emotive” satisfaction (p. 141). Aspects of this phenomenon have been discussed by Abarry in his *MPAI: Libation Oratory* (Abarry, 1993).

However, there is a third dimension of fulfillment attained through the praxis of evoking epic memory, the spiritual dimension. Welsh Asante (1992) states that “it is the conscious and subconscious calling upon the ancestors, gods, mind, to permit the flow of

energy so that the artists can create” (p. 80). In her workshops on storytelling, Charlotte Blake Alston, often expresses this concept as “the story comes through us, not from us” (Alston, 1992) as a conscious acknowledgment of the flow of creative energy emanating from the legacy of the ancestors and also the historical and contemporary on-going struggle of African people in America.

Moreover, as further indication of an ontological connectivity, according to Thomas and Luneau (1975), “the power of the word sacralizes objects (magic), persons (initiation), animals (sacrifices), and nature (purification)...Through the dialogue with the spiritual power, language leads to the core of the sacred” (p. 56).

Repetition

Repetition is one of the core characteristics of the performed word in African cultures including African American storytelling. For storytellers it has both utilitarian and aesthetic value (Okpewho, 1992). In Blackstorytelling, Reed (2007) believes that repetition “brings clarity to the moment, confirms understanding, gives emotion to or intensifies the endeavor and transmits a determinate idea or concept” (p. 41).

During a storytelling performance, if a phrase, line or gesture is repeated by the storyteller systematically, the audience will associate with that phrase, line or gesture and repeat it with the storyteller at the appropriate time. The repetition places significant emphasis on certain elements of the story and becomes a mnemonic technique. In the story poem, “I’m A Baltimore African Talkin’ Drum”, Stanley “Bunjo” Butler (2006) declares his identity and affirms his responsibilities as a storyteller:

Everywhere I go-o
People want to know
Who you are
Where you come from

This is what I tell them
I tell them loud and clear

I'm a Baltimore African Talkin' Drum
Cause that's the way they do it
Where my people come from
Where my people come from

I'm a CULTURE BRINGER
PRAISE SINGER
GENEALOGIST too
Cause that's what an African
Talkin' Drum do

Everywhere I go-o
People want to know
Who you are
Where you come from
This is what I tell them
I tell them loud and clear
I'm a Baltimore African Talkin' Drum
Cause that's the way they do it
Where my people come from
Where my people come from

I'm a HISTORIAN
Educator
And INTERPRETER too
Cause that's what an African Talkin' Drum do

Everywhere I go-o
People want to know
Who you are
Where you come from
This is what I tell them
I tell them loud and clear
I'm a Baltimore African Talkin' Drum
Cause that's the way they do it
Where my people come from
Where my people come from

I play KORA
DJEMBE
SHEKERE
And BALAPHONE too
Cause that's what an African Talkin' Drum do

Everywhere I go-o
People want to know
Who you are
Where you come from
This is what I tell them
I tell them loud and clear
I'm a Baltimore African Talkin' Drum
Cause that's the way they do it
Where my people come from
Where my people come from

I bring STORIES
GAMES
RIDDLES
SONGS
And PROVERBS too
Cause that's what an African Talkin' Drum do

Everywhere I go-o
People want to know
Who you are
Where you come from
This is what I tell them
I tell them loud and clear
I 'm a Baltimore African Talkin' Drum
Cause that's the way they do it
Where my people come from
Where my people come from

I MEDIATE
TRANSLATE
COMPOSE and ADVISE
I'm a WARRIOR strong
A SPOKESPERSON too
Cause that's what an African Talkin' Drum do ("I'm a Baltimore African Talkin'
Drum", pp. 117-119).

In performance, the audience connects to Brother Butler's proud assertion of his identity as a "Baltimore African Talkin' drum" through rhyme and repetition. They relate to his unification with Africa and Baltimore; the depiction of his duties and activities and the social forces that bind him to those responsibilities, e.g. "that's the way they do

it/Where my people come from” (p. 117). The lyrical style of this story poem is quite effective and therefore is affirmed by the audience/community by joining Brother Butler in the chorus.

Recognizing that storytelling is a communicative event, as well as a communalistic, organic process, the storyteller expects responses from the audience and at times will elicit those responses. This immediate and interactive process is commonly referred to as call and response in African orality (Okpewho, 1992). Call and response, definitely African derived, is also found in African American sacred and secular settings (Hamlett, 1998, Smitherman, 1977, Harrison, 1972).

Smitherman (1997) contends that there are non-verbal responses in the communication process of call and response. She considers physical responses such as waving a hand or hands in the air, nodding or shaking the head, clapping, jumping up and down (out of your seat), hitting back of chair (wall, etc.) or a raised, clenched fist (black power sign) all valid responses (p. 106).

Significantly, storytellers employ call and response as a repetitive expressive style. It brings the audience into the experience of the story, builds a relationship with the audience and ensures that the message or moral of the story is not lost in the emotionalism of the moment. As Blackstorytelling is instructive as well as informative, call and response combined with rhythm and repetition becomes a powerful mnemonic device. Audience members of all ages will walk away repeating the call and response section of the story, thus prompting them to remember the essence of the story.

Limitations of Study

Limitations to this study include:

1. It is based solely on the life and works of female artists. We are fully aware of the existence of male storytellers in the African American community and they are discussed in relation to the informants and Blackstorytelling.
2. Given the nascent academic approach to the topic and the interviews of the previous research on the topic, this study may be considered to be highly exploratory.

Definition of Terms

The African World View

According to Richards [Ani] (1980), “[W]orld-view refers to the way in which a people make sense of their surroundings; make sense of life and of the universe” (p. 4). She states that “ethos and world-view are intimately related” and that both “refer to essential aspects of human group experience” (p. 2). World view and culture are both by-products of culture, and “both help to create culture” (p. 3).

Blackstorytelling

Blackstorytelling is a communicative event that provides, transmits and reflects upon images, symbols and mythofoms that appeal to the consciousness of African American people. The stories should offer motivation, encouragement and sustenance and resound with the agency, energy, vitality, spirit and sacrifice of those that have come before us. Blackstorytelling is an exemplification of *Nommo*, the generative, productive and creative power of the spoken word (Jahn, 1961; Hurston, 1972; Barrett, 1974; Richards, 1989; Asante, 1987).

A distinction between Blackstorytelling and other storytelling traditions, is that it was and is continually being forged, honed and shaped by the conditions of oppression and resistance to oppression that brought it forth. Blackstorytelling shares a common African ancestry with other African diasporic storytelling traditions, but the social, political and economic characteristics of the African American experience shapes the content and style. Blackstorytelling is an unbroken connection to The Negritude Movement, The Harlem Renaissance, The Black Arts Movement, tales told on the plantations, and songs sung on the ships, Blackstorytelling holds its place and position in a legacy of Black expressiveness. These are also reflected in Welsh-Asante's (1993) conceptualization of the Nzuri model in African aesthetics.

Griot/Griotte

There are many theories surrounding the etymology of the word griot and the feminine form *griotte*. Moreover, the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) gives the following definition of griot: “a member of a class of traveling poets, musicians, entertainers in North and West Africa, whose duties include the recitation of tribal and family histories; an oral folk-historian or village story-teller; a praise singer” (griot, *n.* 1989). Geographically, the term griot or griotte is used by European scholars to describe the person who performs or performed a variety of functions, i.e. historian, genealogist, adviser to nobility, entertainer, messenger, praise singer and negotiator among the Mande peoples of West Africa. The heartland of the Mande Diaspora covers the western third of Africa's northern savanna and coastal forests. With the publication of *Roots* in 1976 by Alex Haley, the term griot was disseminated across the African Diaspora and was

embraced by many communities in the Caribbean and in the United States as a positive and esteemed position in the culture.

Jali/jalimuso (p. jalolu) or Jeli/jelimuso (p. jeliw)

A term used to describe men or women in the Mande (or Manding) world who practice the art of *jaliyaa*, the profession of the *jalolu* or *jeliw*. As stated previously, *jeliw* fulfill a variety of roles, and is a messenger of good and bad news whether birth, baptism, naming ceremony wedding, fêtes, meeting, death or war (M’Bow, 2007). The Jeli Fa-Digi Sisòkò tells us that it is the Kuyate matriarch, Tumu Maniya, who delivers the news of the Son-Jara’s (Sundiata’s) birth to the king, his father (Johnson, 1992). Johnson, in his notes refers to her as “the female bard” (Johnson, 1992, p. 49). Janson (2002) contends that is the *jaloolu* [Janson’s spelling] who proclaim identity of a person at a certain location or position in life, i.e. birth, naming ceremonies, initiations, marriage ceremonies, death and funerals. The jali or *jeli* play the 21-stringed kora, xhalam, ngoni, balafon, kontingo, or simbingo, according to their ethnic group. The instrument of the *jalimuso* or *jelimuso* is the newo, neo, nege, karinya or karinyan, a tubular piece of metal, usually iron, that is struck with a metal stick. *Jalimuso* primarily sing at ceremonies or in the marketplace and rarely conduct ceremonies or recite the longer epics of their male counterparts.

Organization of Chapters

For clarity and better comprehension, this dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter One is introductory; it defines the problem of study, its significance, the definition of the methodology and aesthetic foundations. Chapter Two discusses the literature review, articles and books pertinent to African and African American oratory

and contemporary storytelling. Chapters three, four and five discuss the lives and contributions to Blackstorytelling by Jackie Torrence, Linda Goss and Charlotte Blake Alston respectively. Chapter six summarizes this study, provides a conclusion and offers recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Upon a review of the literature, I encountered the paucity of research on contemporary African American storytellers or storytelling in the United States or the public performance of African American stories by African Americans. The majority of the research that has been conducted presented a Eurocentric analysis to the subject matter. The research criteria in this study has therefore been broadened to include: 1) oral narrative performance in the African American culture, 2) articles or books referring to oral narrative performance in other cultures including the United States and countries in Africa and 3) contemporary storytelling and storyteller.

Oral Narrative Performance in African American Culture

Definitions of the phrase “oral narrative” vary from academic discipline to academic discipline. But most would agree that with the definition given by Cancel (2004) in *African Folklore an Encyclopedia*, “a story or narrative that is spoken rather than written or read” (p. 313). Okpewho (1992) states that it “[oral narratives] give primary emphasis to the medium of expression of this form of art, which is word of mouth” (p. 163).

Black folk narrative influences and crosses many established Western genres. It includes myths, folktales, proverbs, riddles, jokes, sermons, prayers and lyrics. It is evolutionary and holds the authority of truth (Jarmon, 2003). It is also described as orature, “the comprehensive body of oral discourse on every subject and in every genre

of expression produced by people of African descent. It includes sermons, lectures, raps, the dozens, poetry, and humor” (Asante, 1987, p. 84).

Janice D. Hamlet’s (1998) essay *Understanding African American Oratory Manifestations of Nommo*, expands the meaning of the genre when she delineates ten characteristics of African American oratory, “rhythm as a framework of mentality, soundin out as a verbal artifact, repetition for intensification, stylin as a quality of oration, lyrical approach to language, improvisational delivery, historical perspective, use of indirection to make a point, reliance on mythoforms’ and a “call-and-response pattern of participatory communication” (p. 93).

In the same spirit, Harrison (1972) in *The Drama of Nommo* identifies the African aesthetic in the African American lived experience-music, family, entertainment, sex, work, dress, folklore, drama, literature, and the church. Quoting the German ethnologists Janheinz Jahn (1961), Harrison affirms that African thought...perceives the world in terms of a force field. Founded on Bantu philosophy, Jahn (1961) posited four categories:

Muntu - all human beings, spirits, certain trees, and God; only this category is endowed with intelligence;
Kintu – things and objects such as plants, animals, minerals and unnamed babies;
Hantu – time and place;
Kuntu – the modality of image, or rather the context from which an image is borne. (p. xx)

Harrison (1972) explains that “[M]untu has sole possession of the civilizing essence, Nommo, in the power of the Word-spoken or gesticulated...activates all forces...in a manner that establishes concreteness of experience. Reality” (p. xx).

Harrison (1972) tells us that in storytelling, if a storyteller evokes Nommo, the story becomes ritual

urged toward the most potent imagery that can be conjured through modal rhythm of sounds, i.e., the synthesizing of seemingly unrelated sounds, i.e., the synthesizing of seemingly unrelated sounds introduced into the storytelling context, and a generous amount of gesture. Storytelling is not a passive event, it is actively conjured. Unlike the Western fairy tale, it is not designed to transport our sensibilities beyond the realities of natural existence...the story teaches how to deal with existing forces by creating a mode which demonstrates man's potency in relationship to what might have been considered overwhelming odds. The story-teller exacts the issuance of Nommo that will bring imagery to its most powerful focus of harmonized forces; thus style and performance are most powerful focus of harmonized forces; thus style and performance are most important in order to suspend the disbelief of the listener. Sounds and gestures are incremental effects that heighten the power of the word: if a story is far out of scale with human capacity to merit credibility, the invocative magic of the storyteller may still move the audience to slap five on his palm, having gotten a witness, which affirms the authenticity of the story. (pp. 38-39)

Harrison (1972) employs the Black church and in particular, the Black Baptist Church, as a model to illustrate rhythm and repetition

[T]he Preacher's word-magic is all-powerful. Its mystical force is immediate and compelling. His exaction of repetition to establish the correct rhythm manipulates words into concrete images which induce a spirituality into the congregation/community that no other storyteller can match...the imperative focus of the Word is abetted through repetitive phrases which produce the appropriate rhythms for the mode. (pp. 44-45)

He continues:

[R]epetition is a device of most black narratives..." and "is used to reaffirm the dramatic pulse of the statement. The repeated phrase may issue from words or gestures...(T)he image is also given a unity through the progression of repeated phrases...repetition tends to revitalize rhythms, thus adding to the intensity of the word's force. (p. 46)

Throughout *The Drama of Nommo*, Harrison (1972) reminds the reader of a powerful, spiritual generative force that not only permeates all things Black, but is in rhythm with the life forces of earth and the ancestors,

African American folklorist, Gerald Davis (1985) in *I Got the Word in Me and I can Sing It, You Know: a Study of the Performed African-American Sermon* briefly

discusses aesthetics in a narrative performance within the framework of an African American sermon performance. Davis (1985) argues that there are three units within the African American performing context, 1) performer, 2) audience and 3) performing mode. The performing mode is achieved when “both ‘performer’ and ‘audience’ are actively locked into a dynamic exchange, the audience compels the performer to acknowledge the most appropriate characteristics of the genre system” (p. 26). The energy of the audience propels the performer to an idealization of the art form. Davis (1985) claims that “the demands of the African-American audience for virtuosity and dynamic invention in the performance of a recognized form precludes the performer’s adherence to the static reproduction of familiar and popular forms” (p. 26). The African American performer is therefore compelled to elevate her artistry to satisfy the requirements of the audience.

Oral Narrative Performance in Other Cultures

Hunter’s (1996) article “Transformation in African Verbal Art: Voice, Speech, Language,” provides an excellent commentary on the expressive style among the Hausa, primarily through Yoruba sacred stories. Hunter (1996) states

Verbal artists take ordinary language and craft it, manipulates it, and transform it to create extraordinary language that appeals to the senses and to the emotions. This transformed language in turn has the potential to effect a change, a transformation that can take a variety of forms. One way artists do this is by modifying the voice, for instance by going to extremes of pitch or loudness, by muffling or masking the voice, or by replacing the voice by a drum or other instrument. (p. 178)

Hunter (1996) recognizes Nketis’s (1971) examples of other voice modifications or “phonological style markers” (p. 178) -lispings or nasalization. Hunter (1996) argues

that the voice modifications employed by verbal artists creates a metalanguage, thus contributing to the “enormous power of verbal art” (p. 178).

Hunter’s (1996) discussion on metalanguage is particularly engaging. Quoting Gates (1988) and Pelton (1980), she acknowledges a “complementary conclusion” (p. 181) by these scholars. Gates’ (1988) examination of the trickster figure in Yoruba and African American tradition reveals the

separate but related trickster figures serve in their respective traditions as points of conscious articulation of language traditions aware of themselves as traditions, complete with a history, patterns of development and revision, and internal principles of patterning and organization. There is a meta-discourse, a discourse about itself. (p. 181)

Pelton argues that this metalanguage “shapes culture...ties cosmic process to personal history, empowers divination to change boundaries into horizons and reveals the passages to the sacred embedded in daily life” (p. 181).

Hunter (1996) gives an important proverb from the Hausa – “Magana ba iko, maganar banza (speech without power is worthless)” (p. 185). Storytellers among the Hausa “are viewed as simultaneously commandeering control and being beyond or exempt from control” (p. 185). She concludes:

When language is transformed to deep, metaphorical, poetic, sacred, ritual language—when it becomes metalanguage, critical language—the artist executes the ultimate aesthetic transformation. The product is a powerful work of art, the result of the power of the artist and the power of transformation, and with the power to transform. (p. 189)

Hunter’s (1996) article is useful and contributes to the discussion of the mechanics of storytelling, i.e. linguistics, vocalization, sound modification, sound symbolism etc. She recognizes and acknowledges the empowerment that encompasses

verbal artistry but does not give consideration to the audience, an important contributor to that power.

Friedl (1975), commenting on her anthropological work in Iran, reveals that the storyteller or narrator is “culture’s instrument” and one “ who recognizes points of conflicts, morals, problems, etc., within his culture and seeks to express them through his tales” (p. 128). Friedl (1975) also reveals a consciousness of the performer that is rarely recognized or discussed. In this performance consciousness, storytellers employ a multifunctional discourse. The storyteller is able to traverse social and political boundaries and comment, within the context of the story, on topics that would not be discussed in public discourse.

To emphasize, Friedl (1975) states

...the middle aged, male Middle-eastern narrator can let the hero in his tale describe a beautiful lady in detail from head to toe, while he never would dream of doing so in public otherwise. Advisers to a chief might-in the tales of a particular narrator-be stereotyped as dumb, conspiratory villains yet the narrator himself and his fellows actually display nothing but respect and reverence for such advisers in their behavior. Challenged in the relaxed privacy of a long standard trusting relationship, they will, however, well admit their actual distaste for such advisers, quite in accordance with the tales. (p. 129)

Friedl (1975) acknowledges that “anthropologically and sociological oriented folklorists focus their studies on the “interrelationship between folktales and society” (p. 127). This school of folklorists argues that the storyteller is an exponent of her cultural and social environment “who communicates with his audience through a tale on the basis of shared socio-cultural norms and expectations...[T]he shared cultural background is a prerequisite for a successful storytelling event” (p. 127). If the storyteller and audience do not share similar cultural norms or historical backgrounds, “the tales told by the one can be expected to ‘mean’ different things to the other. At worse, they will be

incomprehensible or distasteful, at least, they will constitute an intellectual challenge to the audience; the tale has to be reinterpreted, since...the narrator's world is not the audience's" (p. 127). A profound analysis that has implications for contemporary storytelling in America.

Peek's (1978) article, "The Power of Words in African Verbal Arts" is an outstanding study of verbal artistry in African societies. He attempts an emic approach in his investigation as he asks the question ... "how can one study verbal art without first understanding what the act of speaking, let alone creating orally, means to the community one is studying?" (p. 20) Peek conducted ethnohistorical fieldwork among the Isoko of Southern Nigeria. His article, however, encompasses attitudes and practices of speech from Morocco to South Africa to St. Vincent in the Caribbean. Peek (1981) suggests that [T]he ability to speak well is accorded great value in many oral cultures, but the intensity and breadth of this value's expression in many African cultures deserves special note" (p. 22). Quoting Uchendu (1965):

The Igbo of southeastern Nigeria say that when individuals appear before the High God to announce what they will do when born into this world, 'most Igbo predict long life, intelligence, wealth, (and) 'having mouth', that is the power of oratory and wisdom. (p. 22)

Peek (1981) observes that among the Isoko, great respect is accorded a "man of words", the one who can speak well, deeply, coolly and effectively (p. 22). Conversely there is tremendous disrespect for one who cannot speak well. A devastating criticism of an adult is to say that he talks "anyhow" or that he speaks like a "small boy" (p. 22). This is a serious censure of an individual and is an indication that this person has not attained full membership in the community.

An interesting observation by Peek (1981) is the agreements or “affirming vocal presence” of a response or “consent and elaboration from elders during a spokesman’s narration of clan history” (p. 24). He noted that he did not understand the use of this “noise” or that it was a method of maintaining community involvement. Perhaps Peek has never observed an African American communicative event with a “call-and-response pattern of participatory communication” (Hamlet, 1998, p. 93).

To emphasize an ontological significance of speech in African societies, Peek acknowledges the divine origin of some verbal art forms. If an artist learns a verse from a master artist within the community, the verse “may have otherworldly origins”, e.g. ancestors, nature spirits or spirit messengers (Peek, 1981, p. 30). He resolves that “[V]irtually all tradition is from the ancestors and spiritual guardians of a community” (p. 30). Through performance, the artist-dancer, singer, storyteller, drummer-manifest the creative expression of the particular art form. This concept is verbalized in the language used to describe the creation of verbal art. In the former Dahomey, now the Republic of Benin, “one who originates a song is said to give it birth-*ahajito*, ‘song-give-birth-person’” (Herskovits, 1958, p. 58).

In his conclusion, Peek (1981) urges further research on the creation of verbal art, the primacy of speech and the power of words in African societies (p. 42). He believes the importance placed on “speaking and the imagery used to characterize speech and verbal art in so many African cultures” is not a coincidence (p. 42). He recognizes, if not truly understands, that words used by the Mande, Limba and Dogon peoples, for example, are not intended to be descriptive or a referent. The *power* of the spoken word brings forth the forces of life.

Coe, Aiken and Palmer's (2006) article "Once Upon a Time: Ancestors and the Evolutionary Significance of Stories" identifies ways in which traditional stories "are designed" to transmit moral values supporting social behavior (p. 23). To support this argument, they 1) contrast stories with news accounts; 2) identify how traditional stories encourage social behavior; 3) define and discuss the fantastic aspect of traditional stories; 4) discuss the difference between fantastic stories and religious stories and 5) provide examples of the influence of traditional stories on the social behavior of direct descendants (p. 23). Accordingly they posit that the stories told by parents and grandparents to their offspring "leads to the existence of distant descendants without implying a conscious desire to do so" (p. 22). They refer to this storytelling strategy as "descendant-leaving strategy" (p. 22) or a connection to the ancestors.

Coe et al. (2006) defines traditional stories as "those stories that have been inherited in a form of cultural transmission from one's ancestors, generally through one's parents and/or grandparents" (p. 28). They claim that although the storyteller may add contemporary artifacts or details, the essential message of the story must be preserved. In some societies, if the story is considered sacred, it must be repeated precisely or the storyteller will suffer criticism (p. 28).

Therefore they argue, the aim of traditional stories "seems to be to provide the same behavioural response as the story elicited in the past" (p. 30). Calame-Griaule's (1986) observation of Dogon narrative, "every narrative is a pretext for a lesson in social ethics...It is the story's most obvious feature" is quoted to support the argument (p. 30).

The representation of cultures provided by Coe et al. are broad, including Native Americans, Indian, Ecuadorian, Australian Aboriginal peoples, East African and the

Dogon from Mali. They readily acknowledge that their hypotheses of the “descendant-leaving success of ancestors” (p. 36) cannot be tested directly, but evidence of the same story still in existence for centuries “demonstrates that it did not prevent the leaving of descendants” (p. 36).

The argument for the transmission of traditional stories from generation to generation providing a connection to the ancestors to their descendants is an important contribution to the field of evolutionary psychology. This study by Coe et al. expands the scope and breadth of the utility of storytelling.

Joseph Daniel Sobol (1999), current Coordinator of the Graduate Program in Storytelling at East Tennessee State University, has published *The Storytellers' Journey: An American Revival*, constructed from his dissertation completed at Northwestern University. Clearly written from an insider's perspective (Sobol identifies himself as a storyteller), Sobol (1999) addresses issues of community, a revivalist movement in storytelling in the United States, the storytelling festival as ritual and a depiction of the archetype of a storyteller.

Sobol (1999) argues that in the 1970s and 1980s in the United States, a revitalization movement occurred, known as the storytelling revival. This cultural revival occurred as a reaction to several cultural stressors, e.g. cultural turbulence of the sixties, ...the shift from extended to nuclear families; increased social mobility, leading to a decline in local, regional, and ethnic particularity; and the growing dominance of electronic media and the consequent decline in the cultural value of the spoken and written word. (p. 9)

Applying Joseph Campbell's (1988) functional determinations of myth as an analysis for his study, Sobol (1999) believes that myth “provides a fulcrum for instinctive or systematic critiques of mass culture” (p. 16).

According to Sobol (1999), the epicenter of the storytelling revival in the United States is Jonesborough, Tennessee, a small town in the Appalachian Mountains in the northeast region of the state. In the early 1970's the Jonesborough Civic Trust, searching for events that would attract tourists to the town, approved an idea by one of its members, Jimmy Neil Smith. Smith proposed the idea of a storytelling festival, suggesting October, 1973 as the date of the event (pp. 19-20). Having found no evidence of a similar event in the United States, the festival was named the National Storytelling Festival (pp. 77-78). In 1975, the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS) was founded by Jimmy Neil Smith and also headquartered in Jonesborough, TN. In 1994, the name was shortened to the National Storytelling Association (NSA) (p. 3).

Initially, the storytelling revival born in Jonesborough was culturally and geographically based and appeared to be "pushing southern" (p. 162). Members of the first board of directors of NAPPS were regional. Six of the artistic organizers of the group were from Tennessee, one from Alabama and one from Kentucky (p. 160). Only one member was African American, Harriette Allen Insignares. For several years the festival "featured mainly tellers from within about a hundred-mile radius, several more from within two to five hundred miles, and, to add variety and prestige, a few who were funded to travel from outside the region" (p. 159). It is from this social and political milieu that Sobol (1999) draws his image of the archetypal storyteller. He frames his narrative with the "language and process of ritual, myth, and archetypal imagery" (p. 13). He professes that his introductory accounts of this storytelling revival

poses an image of storytellers in their imagined or theoretical glory; traces a cultural theogony, a succession myth in which technological descendants

usurp a sacred prerogative, and finally announces (albeit here in suitably qualified, intellectually balanced tones) a return of the vanquished to a new phase of power. (p. 13)

Sobol (1999) readily admits the element of myth in his concept of a storytelling revival, but cautions that for the participants of the myth, “myth is not untruth...but a story, which *in the telling*, acts to align the worlds of imagination and emotion with the world of social action and so shapes our human world” (p.11, emphasis original).

In a Hesiod authoritative voice, the “cultural theogony” referred to by Sobol (1999) is a listing of twelve tellers, two of whom are African American, Jackie Torrence and Diane Ferlatte (p. 4). The 1994 and 1997 editions of the NAPPS/NSA professional storytelling directory lists “nearly six hundred storytellers in forty-five states and the District of Columbia...Canada, the Caribbean, England, Ireland, France, Australia, Israel and several African countries” (p. 3). Among the six hundred members of NAPPS, Sobol (1999) estimates between twenty and fifty to be “headliners”; storytellers capable of drawing “substantial audiences in well-publicized performances beyond their local or regional bases” (p.4). This designation also implies a substantial income for these tellers. But it is only twelve that he elevates to deific status in the myth realm of the storytelling revival movement. This cultural and ideological hegemony was soon to be challenged.

According to Sobol (1999), vibrant regional storytelling communities formed and grew; alternate models of community (p. 154). The more influential were the Boston, Massachusetts-Providence, Rhode Island community and Nevada City, California. Some festivals grew out of these communities; the Corn Island Festival in Louisville, Kentucky, and the St. Louis Storytelling Festival in St. Louis, Missouri. Germane to this study is Sobol’s (1999) acknowledgment of the National Association of Black Storytellers,

(NABS) and discussion of the National Black Storytelling Festival, now In the *Tradition*...National Black Storytelling Festival and Conference.

Continuing the narrative of myth making, Sobol (1999) states “NABS was founded in 1982 as an ethnic counterpart to NAPPS” (p. 183). Actually the organization was founded in Philadelphia in 1984 as the Association of Black Storytellers and the first festival was in Baltimore, Maryland in 1983 (History, n.d.). Further discussion of the creation of this organization is developed in Chapter 4 of this work.

However, he was accurate in his assertion that African American storytellers “felt the need for a festival and an organization that would focus on their own traditions and provide a vehicle for showcasing and developing the full range of African American storytelling aesthetics” (Sobol, 1989, p. 183). Sobol (1989) a frequent participant at the National Association of Black Storytellers Festival and Conference, observes

With more workshops, less distinction between featured and nonfeatured tellers, more open story-swaps, and open-ended sessions called “Love Circles,” which can feature drumming, dancing, singing, and even prayer, the Black Storytelling Festival cultivates some of the inclusive aspects of a storytelling Conference while maintaining an improvisatory tone that is distinctively a cultural style. (p. 183)

He characterizes statements by Dr. David Anderson, at a panel discussion in 1996 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania as “political” and notes that such discussions would not be welcome at NSA events (p. 183). Dr. Anderson’s statements were an eloquent expression of the orature of African American storytellers:

Blackstorytelling (one word) is that body of traditional stories, and stories new as today, that informs and energies the African American struggle to preserve and perpetuate the humanity of African American people. *Blackstorytelling* (one word) is an emerging concept, a tool for those who wish to both critique and praise African American culture. (p. 184, original emphasis)

I argue that Dr. Anderson's statements were not a "polemic"(p.184) as described by Sobol, but a definition and defining moment in the ideology of the organization and in the continuum of the African oral tradition. The statement distinctly delimits storytelling for African Americans by an African American scholar. This is an effective position to examine Blackstorytelling.

Sobol's analysis is not atypical of administrators, organizers, story enthusiasts and many European scholars. Their ideology is situated in Eurocentric thought and does not place African American cultural rituals nor the African oral tradition in the center of their analysis or study.

I turn now to three articles concerning organized storytelling events and contemporary storytellers. Robert Georges and Kay Stone, leading scholars in storytelling research are the authors of the first two articles and the third is authored by Linda Pershing, a professor of folklore and feminist theory at the State University of New York at Albany.

Georges (1969) addresses the approach of academic research in story from a historical perspective emphasizing that a multidisciplinary pursuit has been led by folklorists and anthropologists. Folklorists, led by their nineteenth-century predecessors, have continued to pursue a historical perspective and adhere to the cross-cultural approach. He argues that folklorists, especially the Euro-American folklorists, are overly concerned with the "identification and classification of tale types and motifs and their preference for extensive as opposed to intensive studies" (p. 314). Anthropologists prefer to examine stories from a functionalist orientation and the relationship of stories to the

“social structure or the behavioristic implications of story content for members of individual cultures” (p. 314).

Georges (1969) calls for bold new research methods in story research as

Those phenomena that investigators isolate and identify as stories (folktales, tales, oral narratives, traditional narratives) can no longer be regarded as surviving or traditional linguistic entities, nor can the primary objectives of researches interested in such phenomena continue to be to collect and study texts. (p. 316)

To this end, Georges (1969) proposes an entirely new concept in the study of story and storytelling events; “a holistic rather than an atomistic concept...” (p. 317). He offers 1) a set of postulates in which the various aspects of storytelling events and the interrelationships among them are described; 2) a model with diagrams representing the interrelationships; and 3) comparative and contrastive studies of prevailing notions about stories and storytelling with the new model.

Stone (1997) addresses the social identity of storytellers as constructed from their participation in organized storytelling events and communicated through “vocational narratives” (p.234). Vocational narratives a term acquired from the research of Joseph Sobol are the formative stories “that mark the stages” of a storytellers “conscious development as performers” (p. 234). Her essay and collection of vocational narratives are based on her participation in a weekend retreat/workshop sponsored by the Storyteller’s School of Toronto, letters and oral communication with storytellers.

Stone(1997) addresses several problematic issues surrounding the profession of storytelling, 1) artistic development; 2) storytellers as narrators; and 3) financial stability. In the conclusion, she states“...despite the problems and challenges...the number of people who identify themselves as tellers continues to rise steadily” (p. 240). Motivated

by the research and studies of Robert Georges and Robert Adams, Stone (1997) purports “that organized storytelling offers a rich field of inquiry for narrative scholars” (p. 240).

Pershing (1996) has centered her essay on African American female storytellers as participants at a contemporary storytelling festival in Tarrytown, New York and the total contributions of women as organizers and performers to this festival. Pershing (1996) states that her data was collected from her attendance at the Pinkster Festivals from 1992 through 1995. Empirical data was gathered by observing the storytelling performances, analyzing and comparing the themes in the stories. She examines the role specifically of women storytellers and contextualizes their participation, leadership and repertoire from the socio-cultural construct of gender. In this context the women tellers “assume the prestigious role of the African griot or oral historian, whose responsibilities include educating their people about the past and orally maintaining and interpreting the cultural records of the community” (p.61). Also significant is her suggestion for feminist scholars that these women tellers have assumed authoritative voice through their “creation of public performances that comment on social injustice through the choice of their stories” p.61). Pershing (1996) observes however, that the female storytellers use their authority and influence not to publicly articulate gender relations and leadership roles of African American women in celebrating or designing the Pinkster Festival, but in addressing racial issues. One of the prevalent encoded themes in their narratives as observed by Pershing (1996) is “don’t trust the seemingly good intentions of (white) people, for to do so is to put oneself in a position of vulnerability and potentially, danger” p. (60).

Georges' (1996) and Stone's (1997) articles are instructive in the necessity of expanded research in the field of storytelling. Georges' (1996) dynamic schema for a communicative event has become the model for further study by many folklorists.

Sw. Anand Prahlad (2005), editor of a special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* entitled "African Folklore: History and Challenges" has also called for scholarship that will evolve ideological, methodological, and analytical tools that deal adequately with changing social realities. Although his examination of current scholarly research did not identify storytelling, he does acknowledge oral tradition as an analytic tool that deal adequately with changing social realities. Although his examination of current scholarly research did not identify storytelling, he does acknowledge oral tradition as an analytic tool:

The field of history perhaps has the most dominant influence on studies of Africana folklore beginning in the 1960's and extending up to the present moment. The recognition that traditional methodologies were insufficient for producing histories representative of all groups of Americans led to the inclusion of oral traditions and folklore in the portrayal and analysis of specific periods in American history. (p. 26)

Prahlad (2005) acknowledges the marginalization of certain groups in folklore studies and in particular Africana folklore studies. He states

The term 'folk' insinuates a closeness to oral traditional behaviors more distinct from the mainstream, and for that reason the term became an implicit marker of 'Negro-ness', 'African American-ness' or 'blackness'. (p. 12)

He maintains that general statements about Africana folklore is a defect of "colonial discourse" (p. 11) and is misrepresentative. Therefore, he suggests quantitative research methodologies to provide relevance to the field:

to assert that a tale or a folk belief has currency among Africana people and then to draw various conclusions based on these materials has limited value to scholars in psychology, history, education,, or other disciplines in which scholars are

concerned with Africana people... to assert that the tale is known by a specific percent of people in a particular region, to identify the attitudes those people toward it...and to propose a theoretical analysis of the tale's function and meanings relative to those particulars would be of larger benefit. (p. 11)

Contemporary Storytelling

Hinton (2001), in her Masters thesis, *The Art of Storytelling in America*, brings focus to issues concerning contemporary storytellers and storytelling in America. Her historical analysis covers a twenty-five year perspective and includes:

- a definition of a storyteller
- types of stories being told
- storytelling as an art form
- storytelling festivals
- storytelling organizations
- storytelling beyond organized festivals
- copyright
- funding sources
- dynamics of the 'Renaissance'. (pp. 4,7,12,41,49)

Hinton's (2001) analysis contends that the "current storytelling growth trend as a revival or renaissance" is misleading as 1) the art form never completely flattened and 2) this current trend is not the first "storytelling resurgence in America" (p. 9). She argues that the term *revival* is "journalistic hype and marketing propaganda" (p. 9). This statement is supported by a quote from Joe Wilson, former Director of the National Council on Traditional Arts. He believes that the increase in storytelling activity is "an extension of its constant growth rather than a rebirth. It never died out...so it never needed to be reborn" (p. 10).

Accordingly, she specifically challenges the presumptuousness of the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee in its assumption that it solely revived an interest in the art form and influenced the creation of festivals, guilds and associations

across America. She offers, “[T]o presume that a single organization could affect such change may be a bit ill-conceived” (p. 6).

Hinton’s (2001) historical analysis of the art of storytelling in America, though limited in scope and breadth, provides a glimpse into the contemporary storytelling community in 20th century America, controversies surrounding the community and “the structures that have grown up and around the art” (p. 2). Several prominent storytellers and scholars were quoted, but only one was African American, Adora Dupree from Tennessee.

In the article “Who Owns the Story?”, an excerpt from Welch’s 2006 dissertation *Authenticity, Authority, Markers and Meanings: US/UK English-Speaking Professional Storytellers Examined*, the concepts of ownership and entitlement of a story are examined. An ethnographic approach was applied with sixty-eight professional storytellers interviewed, among them, folklorists or academics in ethnography.

The concept of ownership of a particular story has been a delicate issue within the storytelling community for decades. As early as the 1900’s, folklore studies regarded individuals as the “owner” of a particular story or narrative (p.2). But as Welch (2006) asserts, “(I)n the storytelling profession, ownership is generally used as a synonym for the right to tell a story” (p.2). Telling another storytellers personal story is usually considered bad behavior, if not taboo from a professional storyteller’s perspective, “unless permission has been given by the person to whom the story ‘really happened’ and in some cases negotiation made regarding use of first person” (p.5).

But the issue of cultural ownership invites even more debate and is problematic. Welch’s (2006) explication of the topic:

Cultural ownership refers to the perceived prerogative of an individual to tell a story by virtue of being a member of the distinctive group that produced it. The entitlement to tell a story via cultural ownership stems from participating in the tale's ethnicity, religion, description of life experience, occupational depiction, or other factors that have actual boundaries. (p.6)

Thus, according to Welch (2006) "most tellers would not put themselves in the position of telling stories from a culture not their own to any audience they considered more knowledgeable about that culture than themselves" (p.7). Three factors are considered in the assessment of cultural knowledge: 1) birth inheritance or bloodline; 2) artistic authority-an authority acquired through research and/or performance and 3) cultural inheritance-a tradition or culture one has experienced from birth (p.7).

The storytellers interviewed agreed that *respect* was also a key component in the consideration of telling a story outside one's culture. For professional storytellers, the word respect has at least four strands of meaning: "1) not telling the story; 2) researching to ensure accuracy; 3) passing it on (by telling it); and telling with participants understanding" (p.7).

These concepts, definitions and postulates appear to come from the dominant culture and are rationalizations for what a Native American teller describes as,

co-opting culture. What I generally see is people who pick up the trappings: the sweet grass, the stories, maybe even the songs, the richness of Native cultures, without delving into the reasons for the need o stories, songs, ceremonies, prayers said in a certain way...Native people have lost so much, gone through so much, that the ceremonies and stories are a medicine to use to balance the pain and losses,not just of the past, but now. Many people want the glamour o the rituals without knowing why they are so necessary; they want the surface of "Indianness" but not the reality.

I believe any person can examine another culture with respect and openness, can tell the stories, sing the songs. But you call regalia a costume and every skin in the place will know you are calling a holler a canyon" (p.7).

Welch (2006) quotes a code of ethics from Mooney and Holt's (2005) *The Storytelling Guide* asserting it is the only code "storytellers tend to reference" (p. 15):

1. Stories are to share and tell. While we encourage the art of sharing stories, we want to encourage respect in our community. You deserve respect. Respect others.
2. A storyteller's personal, family, and original stories are her/his copyrighted property. It is unethical and illegal to tell another person's original, personal and/or family stories without permission of the author/storyteller.
3. Folklore and folktales are owned by the public, but a specific version told by an individual teller or found in collection is the author's or teller's copyrighted property.
4. Published literary tales and poetry are copyrighted material. (If you record an original story you need to get permission and pay the author.)
5. When telling anywhere, it is common courtesy to credit the source of your story.
6. Pass stories, share stories, and encourage respect within the storytelling community. (p. 15)

Welch's (2006) examination of the "ownership" of stories, cultural and personal, although constrained within the context of Native American culture and Native American stories, is a huge contribution to the study of contemporary storytelling in America. Among the sixty-eight interviewees, four were African American and two of the interviewees asked to remain anonymous. A study, more inclusive of other cultures and world views, would have presented a counter balance to this work.

Edwards' (2009) dissertation *African American Storytelling: Collective Memory, Creative Resistance, and Personal Transformation* is an ethnographic and phenomenological study with the members of an African American storytelling organization, The Blackstorytelling League of Rochester (BLR) in Rochester, New York. According to Edwards (2009), the BLR

was founded in 1993 with the stated purposes of advancing the art of storytelling, transmitting accurate knowledge and histories of African American culture, acknowledging kinship to African culture, counteracting the exploitation of African American culture, and connecting contemporary experiences to African and African American history. (p. 7)

Edwards (2009) explores storytelling themes among the participants and their function within the community, the research required in preparation for a performance, and the community building among storytellers who are committed to their craft (pp. 35-45). She argues that African American storytelling gives agency and voice to the teller, and provides a counter narrative to societies' prevailing narrative. Through the artistic process of creating and performing these narratives, the storytellers experience a personal transformation of identity and purpose.

Interestingly, throughout the study, Edwards (2009) speaks of the "paucity of literature" or the lack of scholarly research on African American storytelling (pp. 18-42). This study has relevance to the current study due to the current and historical analysis of contemporary African American storytellers, experiences of the individual tellers and their audiences and the personal and social identity of the teller.

Brian Strum's (1999) article *The Enchanted Imagination: Storytelling's Power to Entrance Listeners* examines a phenomenon in storytelling that is rarely considered in academic research-an altered state of consciousness by the listener. This theory is drawn from Strum's personal experience as a storyteller and case study interviews. Strum identifies this altered state of consciousness as a "storytelling trance" (p. 2). The conceptual framework for his study was based on theories from multiple disciplines. Among them were cognitive science, communication, rhetorical studies, folklore, hypnosis and religious studies. But the principal theories of his study were based in

elements of response criticism, consciousness and its states and systems theory. He adopts a constructivist approach in his research that posits “organisms construct the universe in which they live based on cultural, environmental, and personal perceptions” (p. 3).

Borrowing from the research of Charles T. Tart (1975) Strum (1999) developed two concepts of consciousness 1) a baseline state of consciousness which is a basic awareness and 2) a discrete altered state of consciousness that occurs when something occurs to destabilize the baseline. At this point, the “consciousness proceeds through a transitional period in which the psychological structures of consciousness are reshuffled, and an altered state may result” (p. 3).

Strum (1999) attended eight storytelling events and interviewed twenty-two listener/participants, ranging in age eight to the elderly. As a participant observer, he looked for any physiological indications of an altered state of consciousness, elements of the storytelling performance (i.e. rhythm, facial expressions, etc) and story content and style.

Strum (1999) engaged the participants in general conversation about the storytelling performance, but also asked specific questions such as

1. Did you have a favorite story of the ones you just heard? What did you like about it and why?
2. Did it make you feel any particular way?
3. Were you doing anything (in your mind) while listening to the story?
4. Is there a particular storyteller or storytelling style that appeals to you more than others? Why? How would you characterize this style?
5. When you are having the experience of [substitute participant’s words here; for example, “being transfixed,” or “being transported”], an you describe how it felt? What is it that helps this happen? Is there more than one thing?

The results of the analysis of the interviews and participant observation data

indicated that the listeners did experience a different state of consciousness during the storytelling performance. Participants described this process as “falling” or “slipping” or “being transported” or some other form of physical movement (p. 5-6). After this initial phase, participants described the experience as “went with the flow”, “was absorbed,” “in sync with the experience,” “that magic circle that’s cast around,” and “transfixed in listening to the story” (p. 6).

From an analysis of the listeners’ description of the storytelling trance experience, Strum (1999) distinguished six categories:

1. Realism: the sense that the story environment or characters are real or alive; some listeners felt that they became the characters
2. Lack of awareness: of surroundings or other mental processes
3. Engaged receptive channels:
 - visual (both physical watching and mental visualization)
 - auditory (both physical hearing and mental “chatter”)
 - kinesthetic
 - emotional
4. Control: of the experience by the listener, or someone or something else
5. “Placeness”: the sense that the listener “goes somewhere (often “into”) another space
6. Time distortion; the sense that subjective time moves at a different speed than objective, clock time (p.6)

Accordingly, several influences on a listener’s state of consciousness inhibit or increase the likelihood of a storytelling trance occurring during a storytelling performance. Positive influences include: style, a sense of safety or comfort (both physical and emotional), content, familiarity of the story, the listener’s expectations being met or personal preference being matched, the storyteller’s creativity and ability to perform, rhythm and humor. Influences that decrease the likelihood of a storytelling trance experience reported by the participants include visual, auditory, kinesthetic, technical, durational and rhythmic distractions. Examples of these distractions include,

watching other objects in the room, “screaming babies”, “mistakes in speech”, the temperature in the room, the length of the story, or a break in the rhythmic flow of the story.

Interestingly, a version of this study was published in 2002 in *Storytelling: Interdisciplinary & Intercultural Perspectives*, edited by M. Blayer and M. Sanchez, a compilation of papers presented at the 1999 International Conference on Storytelling. In this version, Strum (2002) takes the reader through seven stages of a storylistening experience:

- Stage 1-The teller and listener are on equal footing and interact equally; the listener is experiencing a normal state of consciousness and attentive awareness; the listener is experiencing a quotidian reality
- Stage 2-The teller begins to introduce her story; by bringing up or speaking the idea of a story, she is in essence bringing it into existence, an example of the concept of Nommo; the story is still an external entity, not yet shared, but anticipated; the listeners begin to realize that this is something special and requires their undivided attention; the listeners’ focus is on the teller; a bond is being formed between teller and listener
- Stage 3-The teller and listener grow closer, melding the bond; the storyteller begins to enter the story; she forms mental images that she will share with her listeners; she forms a bond with the story
- Stage 4-The bond continues between teller and listener; the story unfolds and the listeners are being drawn in to the story; the importance of the story has increased and a communal bond begins to form between the listeners; the listeners are creating their own story based on the text presented by the teller; the stories are interrelated and influenced by the ongoing experience; there is a sense of a cocreated experience similar to the interrelation posited by Georges (1969)
- Stage 5-This is the climatic stage of the altered state of consciousness; both teller and listeners lose themselves in the story and live its reality; the teller has full command of the story and the event as she guides the imagery of the listeners; often at the point the teller is in an altered state of consciousness
- Stage 6- As the climax of the altered state of consciousness passes and the story winds down, the teller emerges from the story world enough to begin the process of bringing the listeners back to a conscious state; usually the teller slows the pacing of the story and changes the pitch and tone of her voice; the story’s power fades and the sense of the story moves from the present to the past and memory; boundaries are broken

Stage 7-This stage is similar to stage two as the teller maintains her link with the audience as they all withdraw from the story; this is the moment for a closing formulae, the time Augusta Baker would blow out her candle; the special space co-inhabited by teller and listener no longer exists but an experienced teller holds on to the listeners a moment longer to be sure they have returned to the quotidian realm of conversation (stage one). (pp.18-20)

Strum (1999), an Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina is also a storyteller and acknowledges this perspective in his research. He claims to have witnessed listeners enter the storylistening trance and has had the experience himself. His research inquiry is a phenomenological approach to the study of storytelling and story listening. This study opens several areas for further study and possible understandings for the term “the power of storytelling”.

As seen in the previous pages, the Literature Review provides an expansive examination of studies and theoretical perspectives in storytelling in diverse cultures in the United States and other countries. But it reveals the lack of adequate studies reflected through the values and aesthetics of African American storytelling. I noted that many of the works that deal with the subject tend to be approached from an Eurocentric perspective. The research criteria in this study were then broadened to embrace multiple sources: narrative performance in other cultures, including the United States and Africa, and the perception of storytelling and storytellers in contemporary times. Studies of the verbal arts in African countries has been prolific in academia for decades. This provides the researcher with a foundation for analysis of the verbal art form in the diaspora. However, the inclusion of African American storytellers and African American storytelling is insufficient as a qualitative or quantitative measure in the majority of these studies. This position is supported by the observations and research of Prahlad (2005) and

Edwards (2009). The discernible lack of a rudimentary knowledge of the artistic and cultural achievements of these artists is unmistakable. The primary research has focused on storytelling and storytellers in mainstream culture.

Studies by African-centered scholars that will counter the scholarship that Blackstorytelling is a divagation of mainstream storytelling is necessary. Researching the lives of the storytellers within their own social, historical, and cultural contexts is an essential component to the scholarship.

In Chapter 3, I will begin the examination of African American storytellers with an outstanding storyteller and pioneer in contemporary storytelling, Jackie Torrence. Torrence's persistence and the belief in her art form to educate and transform her listeners, propelled her to the heights of the storytelling world and garnered the respect of all who heard her tell her stories.

CHAPTER 3

JACKIE TORRENCE

Biography

The gentle, irrefutable force of storytelling power that was known as Jackie Torrence was born Jacqueline LaVonia Carson Seals Torrence, February 12, 1944, in Chicago, Illinois. Jackie's early childhood years was spent with her maternal grandparents James and Ola Carson of Second Creek, North Carolina. Her great-grandfather, Samuel Mitchell Carson was born enslaved but became a freed man in 1869 (Torrence, 1994, p. 27). He was given fifty acres of land, started a family and later a school for African American children in the area. Samuel Carson became a preacher and spiritual advisor to a settlement that came to be known as Carson Town (Torrence, 1994, p. 27).

Jackie's extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, great aunts and great uncles was a family of storytellers. Her mother, Mae Troy Carson told her daughter family stories of her childhood and youth; growing up with twelve siblings; moving to Chicago after graduation to hide her pregnancy from her family; deciding not to give her newborn to one of her sisters; moving back to North Carolina on the request of another sister and the subsequent disapproval of her mother, Jackie's grandmother.

But it was James Carson, patriarch and master storyteller, who first transported Jackie into the world of "[A]ll the creatures in the Big Wood—Br'er Possum, Br'er Bear, Br'er Coon, Br'er Wolf, and Br'er Rabbit" (Torrence, 1994, p. 36). She returned to this world faithfully, throughout her lifetime and mesmerized her audiences with the journey.

James Carson also gave his granddaughter a sense of self, an impressive respect for history and pride in the accomplishments of her forefathers. She reflects:

I remember that I came from proud people, people who made a difference in the world a long time ago. My ancestors would not be pleased if I were satisfied with not being all that I can be. (Torrence, 1994, p. 28)

In childhood, Jackie had a speech impediment, and not many people outside of her immediate family could understand her. Classmates laughed whenever she dared to speak in class. Many days Jackie came home with a tear stained face.

In fifth-grade, Ms. Pauline Pharr asked her students to write a scary story for Halloween and read it to the class. Terrified by the thought of reading to the class, Jackie began crying. Ms. Pharr came over to her and Jackie explained her dilemma. Ms. Pharr told Jackie that if she wrote a good story she would read it to the class. She wrote a story about Mr. Henry and his mule on a cold winter's night. Ms. Pharr read it to the class and Jackie received an "A" for the assignment (Torrence, 1998, p. 192). Ms. Pharr had encouraged a creative talent in Jackie's ability to write. But according to Jackie, she unearthed much more; "[She] changed my feelings about myself, and my new-found talent lessened my classmates' ridicule of me" (Torrence, 1998, p. 97). Jackie's healing began with that story.

Jackie continued to develop this story in the sixth and seventh grades and as an adult, the story became a permanent part of her storytelling repertoire as "Elvira and Henry" (Torrence, 1998, p. 194). In ninth-grade, at Price High School, Jackie met Ms. Abna Aggrey Lancaster, an English teacher and "an incredible storehouse of Afro-American literature" (Baum, "One of the Great storytellers of Our Time"} who would tell you that "she never taught school, she taught students" (Lanker and Summers, 1989, p. 125).

Ms. Lancaster tutored Jackie daily, even on weekends. She gave her lessons on grooming for the stage, encouraged and elevated her self-esteem. Emboldened by the newly found confidence, Jackie began reading scripture at school assemblies, an undertaking not dreamed of years earlier. According to Jackie, Ms. Lancaster taught her that:

Everybody can find their own place of happiness. Yes, you are born in this world to carry a burden, everybody has a burden, but carry it proudly, 'cause if you look over there, somebody's got one much bigger than yours. (Torrence, 1998, p. 14)

Jackie Torrence matriculated at Livingstone College, a private historically Black Institution in Salisbury, North Carolina. She became involved in collegial activities and joined the college's drama club, the Julia B. Duncan Players. She starred in the school's production of Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* ("Jackie Torrence", 1992). One of Jackie's professors at Livingstone College was the African American folklorist, J. Mason Brewer. Professor Brewer taught at Livingston College from 1959-1969. During his tenure there, he published *Worser Days and Better Times: The Folklore of the North Carolina Negro* (1965) and the influential *American Negro Folklore* (1968), thus preserving African American folktales that may have been lost and ensuring academic relevance in the study of African American folklore. Professor Brewer regularly lectured on and told Br'er Rabbit stories and other folktales he had collected (private communication, Beverly Burnett).

Jackie met and subsequently married a ministerial student attending Hood Theological Seminary, a college adjacent to the Livingstone College campus. From this union with Reverend Seals, one child was born, a daughter, Lori. Jackie traveled with her husband for eight years to small churches throughout the southern states and even

Oklahoma. The marriage did not last forever, and Jackie needed to find employment to support herself and her child. She left Lori with her mother in the town of granite Quarry and moved forty-six minutes north to the city of High Point, North Carolina. She was hired as an uncertified reference librarian by the public library system of High Point, North Carolina for approximately \$200.00 a month (“Jackie Torrence”, 2006).

On a snowy day in 1972, the “staff storyteller”, a Children’s Librarian did not come to work and the Library Director asked Jackie to entertain the children who had come to the library. Jackie decided to tell a story from Richard Chase’s *Grandfather Tales: American English Folk Tales* (1948). This choice was not by chance.

Jackie had attended the Monroe Street School, a segregated elementary school for African American students in Salisbury, North Carolina. The Librarian, Mrs. Corrine Thomas, read a story once a month from a special book that she carried in a sack. All the students, including Jackie recognized the book but never knew the title (Torrance, 1998, p. 48). The stories Mrs. Thomas read were from the Jack Tale cycle of stories associated with the inhabitants of Beech Mountain, North Carolina and collected by Richard Chase. The tales migrated to the Appalachian Mountains from England and became a part of a strong oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation. “Jack and the Beanstalk” and “Jack the Giant Killer” are examples of two of the more popular tales from that tradition.

As a child, Jackie never knew that the Jack tales Mrs. Corrine Thomas read to her African American students were not African American folktales. Mrs. Thomas provided a story world, a cosmos that would resonant with the sensibilities and the experiences of elementary school children who had relatively little contact with or participation in a

racially integrated society. “We thought that Jack’s father and Jack’s mother and Jack’s brothers were all black. Mrs. Corrine Thomas read that into them” (Torrance, 1998, p. 48).

Jackie remembered those story experiences shared in a small segregated elementary school, and vowed that if she ever became a storyteller, the Jack tales would be the first stories she would tell (Torrance, 1948, p. 48).

Jackie’s talent and gift for storytelling was recognized and rewarded by requests from parents to entertain their children at birthday parties. The extra income from storytelling allowed Jackie to pay bills and feed and clothe her child. “Storytelling meant that I didn’t have to go on welfare or food stamps. In the beginning, I worked for anything. If someone had \$5.00 to pay, I’d go. If they had \$2.00 to pay or even a box of canned food...I’d go. I’d go because I didn’t want to beg, I wanted to be independent and take care of myself and my child” (Whited, 1995, p. 5).

As more offers to perform were presented Jackie made a propitious decision to leave the library system and become a full-time professional storyteller. It was not an easy calling—not at first. Once, facing eviction, Jackie was hired to entertain a group of children at a ski lodge for a weekend. She was paid \$400.00 which paid her rent and bought groceries. “Every time it got a little scary, things just fell into place” (Ryan, 1988, p. 14).

In 1975, Jimmy Neil Smith, founder of the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS), now the International Storytelling Center, (ISC) invited Jackie to perform at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. According to the ISC’s website, the National Storytelling Festival has an annual average attendance of 10,000 (International Storytelling Center,

“A Fact Sheet”). From this appearance at the National Storytelling Festival, Jackie booked fifty more storytelling performances. Jackie was one of the very few African American storytellers regularly invited to perform in Jonesborough for many years.

Jackie’s career soared throughout the 1970’s, 1980’s and 1990’s. Audiences welcomed her in forty-seven states in the United States. She performed in Canada, Guam, Sweden, England and Mexico. “When I started really making money I was doing 600 performances a year. At one point I was earning \$100,000.00 a year—and that was without an agent. I was paying my bills, and my taxes and for an education for my daughter. And, it was storytelling that made it possible” (Whited, 1995, p. 5). Jackie also made several appearances on television, *Late Night with David Letterman*, *CBS Sunday Morning with Charles Kuralt* and co-hosted a Halloween special, *The Teller and the Tales*, with Sally Struthers (Romero, 2004). According to Ramirez (1980) in 1980 Jackie’s performances were usually booked a year and a half in advance. She sometimes performed “five times a day and sixty times in two weeks: (p. A1).

Jackie kept up this frenzied pace of performing, recording and traveling until the early 1990’s when she began to have health problems. In 1993, she became dependent on a wheelchair due to a worsening arthritic condition. She continued to perform, usually scheduling six to eight performances a month. Over the next five years, her health problems escalated, even suffering a stroke, and in June 1998, “she was hospitalized for Pickwickian Syndrome, a relatively rare, serious condition involving congestive heart failure, high blood pressure, diabetes, respiratory and pulmonary complications, weight control problems and distressed or nonfunctional muscles and bones’ (Jackie Torrence, 2006).

Jackie remained in the hospital until October, 1998 undergoing an extensive therapeutic regimen including oxygen treatment, physical therapy and weight reduction, losing 150 pounds. Jackie's health insurance as well as her personal funds were depleted. The storytelling community-storytellers and fans-came to her assistance with financial and emotional support.

In 2000, Jackie was admitted to the Brightmoor Nursing Home in Salisbury, North Carolina. After friends and representatives of regional storytelling organizations visited Jackie at Brightmoor. The reports of her condition and the conditions of the facility were disappointing and unsatisfactory:

The stench of waste, patients wandering the halls, wheelchairs everywhere, an absence of therapy and a despair that was almost palpable. Jackie's treatment seemed to consist of sedation...On oxygen, she stood and walked with difficulty and could cross a room (when awake) without assistance (Carden. 2000).

But her storytelling family continued to visit and her health improved. Jackie checked herself out of Brightmoor and returned to her home in Salisbury. She was living alone however, and friends were concerned. In September, 2000, storyteller Milbre Burch sent the following message by email. Regional storytelling groups forwarded it to their members:

Live-in Storytelling Apprentice Wanted by Jackie Torrence

Effective Immediately

Apprenticeship position available for 3-12 month ongoing cycles with storytelling Superstar Jackie Torrence.

Torrence is an award-winning author, performer, recording and teaching artist. Home-bound due to chronic illness, she is seeking storytelling students as live-in companion during a mutually agreed-upon period of three to twelve months each.

Requirements: Computer savvy with IMAC and Internet; some administrative skills as needed; proficient in healthy meal-planning and production; intelligent,

compassionate and personable with a good sense of boundaries; must have a passion for storytelling and a willingness to work within a flexible schedule.

Note: Although this is not a health-care provider position, experience in care-giving would be a plus. There may be times when the apprentice will need to help advocate for the artist in dealing with her health-care providers.

Applicants must supply a one-page letter of intent, indicating availability with proposed “start” and “end” dates and furnish both character references and storytelling work references.

Cost: This volunteer position would exchange daily cooking, light administrative and computer work, and a wealth of hours in the presence of one of America’s most beloved storytellers for room and board during the apprenticeship.

Accommodations: Single room and private bath with full kitchen and some common Space privileges. Rent and utilities covered, but apprentice must supply a phone card for long distance charges.

Please, only serious inquiries for apprenticeship of three months and more.

To apply, email one-page letter of intent plus two character references and two storytelling work references (names, street address, telephone number and email address) to both Diane Ferlatte (Diane@...) and Milbre Burch (kindcrone@...). (Netstorytelling, Burch, 2000).

An apprentice/companion was found to assist Jackie for several weeks. But ultimately, the arrangement did not work out.

In early Fall, 2004, Jackie was approached yet again by the organizers of the International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough, Tennessee to perform at the National Storytelling Festival, the largest storytelling festival in North America. Although, this was an honor for and to Jackie, she had trepidations and concerns. Due to health issues, special travel arrangements would have to be considered. The audience at Jonesborough is one of the most discerning storytelling audiences in the country and Jackie had not performed in Jonesborough in years. She wondered about her repertoire.

Friend, and fellow storyteller, Diane Ferlatte agreed to accompany and assist Jackie in her last trip to and performance in Jonesborough. Ferlatte flew from Oakland, California and rented a van with special accommodations for Jackie and her wheelchair and drove to Jonesborough, Tennessee (Dane Ferlatte, personal communication). Jackie's name did not appear on the printed program, but rumor spread among the storytellers and attendees of her presence at the Festival. Seats and standing room under the huge tent filled up.

Jackie Torrence, one of America's most beloved storytellers, had not performed at the National Storytelling Festival since 1998, and those in attendance would not be denied this moment (Library of Congress, American Folklife Center). According to Ferlatte, Jackie was very nervous about this performance and began questioning the decision to perform and also the choice of stories for this audience. Ferlatte assured her the audience would accept and love any story she chose to tell, because they just wanted to see her. Jackie asked Ferlatte to accompany her on stage. Ferlatte reluctantly agreed. Festival attendees welcomed Jackie Torrence for her last public performance with thunderous applause and a palpable show of love and support. Jackie's fears and trepidation disappeared and she once again transformed into the storyteller, bellowed and respected by her peers and audiences alike. Ferlatte quietly stepped back and off the stage and Jackie thanked the audience for their expressions of support throughout her illness (Diane Ferlatte, personal communication). Jackie told the tales she knew and loved best. She mesmerized them with tales of her childhood, growing up in North Carolina with her grandparents and extended family.

On Tuesday, November 30, 2004, Jackie Torrence suffered a heart attack in her home in Salisbury, North Carolina. Her obituary in the Salisbury Post stated that she “was writing a blues song for friends she had toured with in London” (Post: “Friends Will Gather to Celebrate the Life of Jackie Torrence”).

Jackie Torrence found personal and artistic power in the stories she told. She was empowered by the strength and endurance of her family and extended family, the symbolism of the characters created by her African and African American ancestors, the characteristics of their expressions the tone and emotion of the language and the support of the world wide community that recognized and celebrated her gifts.

Jackie leaves this standard for storytellers:

The last thing I’d like to tell storytellers is: be careful what you tell people. Be careful of the stories you tell and the thoughts you relate to your listeners. The Bible says, ‘God hath made the word, therefore the word was sacred.’ He passed the word on to us. We are carrying a sacred trust and we must be aware that when we decide to change a story a story--make it silly or break it up or change a classic—we must be aware of what we’re doing. These stories teach lessons to children and adults. Don’t fool with the lessons. (Whited, 1999, p. 5)

Context of Performance

The title of Torrence’s (1994) first book, *The Importance of Pot Liquor* is a symbolic representation of the value and belief system of African Americans during the period of enslavement and into the twenty-first century. She builds a conceptual framework for her stories based on the analogy of pot liquor—the seasoned liquid derived from cooking turnip, mustard or collard greens. The pot liquor was not discarded and became a key ingredient in other dishes that provided sustenance for the enslaved men, women and children on the farms/plantations. According to Torrence (1994) pot liquor was administered for illnesses and “could warm the very center of one’s being” (p. 11).

Torrence's (1994) summation of the events and circumstances that contributed to her development as a person and a storyteller are analogous with the development of pot liquor:

Upon close examination of the product-me-I find I developed life like the pot liquor. A mixture of heritage and birthrights, difficulties and good fortune, a little bit of that and mostly whatever is my combination. (p. 11)

The Importance of Pot Liquor contains twelve stories, ten of which were told to her by her grandfather, James Carson or her aunts and uncles. All ten stories are animal tales--Br'er Rabbit or Br'er Possum stories—the stories that became Jackie Torrence's trademark.

In her biographical sketch for *I Dream a World: A Portrait of Black Women Who Changed America*, (Lanker, 1999) the companion volume to an exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. in 1989, Torrence defends her selection

If it had not been for storytelling, the black family would not have survived. It was the responsibility of the Uncle Remus types to transfer philosophies, attitudes, values and advice, by way of storytelling using creatures in the woods as symbols. (p. 125)

As many performers, Torrence desired to “make an entrance” as she came on stage; she wanted to enter onto and into the arena of storytelling with presence and power, but always as a lady. Torrence (1998) recounts in *Jackie Tales: The Magic of Creating Stories and the Art of Telling Them*, “I like to walk on stage, you know, I like to swing my dress out when I sit down like my Aunt Sally” (p. 14). As her weight increased and her illness progressed, she was confined to a wheel chair and could no longer make that walk. But it did not diminish or decrease the power of her storytelling.

Torrence always summoned the memories and spirits of family ancestors and often acknowledged them before beginning a story, e.g. “my grandfather, my

grandmother, Uncle James, Uncle Fred”. She instructs tellers to use family memories, “(Y)es, tiny, tiny bits of truth and familiar things make a family story real. If the grandpa in your story has a walking cane, you can make that cane magic” (p. 175).

In the story “Aunt Sally and Uncle Fifth”, Torrence (1998) pays homage to two of her relatives/ancestors, Sally and John Wilson. She begins the story with a declaration of love for Aunt Sally and physically describes Aunt Sally for her audience:

I loved Aunt Sally. Aunt Sally was a fat woman. I loved Aunt Sally ‘cause she was a golden brown all over. Her color was smooth, like hot chocolate with cream in it. And her skin was soft, it always had a little shine to it, as I remember. (original emphasis). (p. 175)

But Torrence (1998) also admired the way Aunt Sally moved, “when she walked she had a little jiggle. I used to walk behind her and watch that and think about it. Wouldn’t it be nice if I could jiggle like that?” (p. 175).

Torrence (1998) tells the story from the perspective of a child’s memory with a child’s sense of wonder and innocence, “She always wore low-cut dresses. And so a lot of her popped out, you know, and I liked that too. I could just see myself with all of that jiggling up in front of me and behind me too” (p. 175). As an adult, she is consciously aware of the proscribed behavior and dress of women in that small community.

In a curvilinear and indirect manner, Torrence (1998) tells the audience how Mr. Wilson becomes her Uncle Fifth. Aunt Sally’s choice of fragrance was vanilla flavoring. Therefore, Torrence (1998) chose to wear it also because it “smelled just liked a pound cake. And it makes your mouth water. I don’t care how old or how young you are, that first smell of that pound cake, if it’s made right, it’s gonna make you salivate” (p. 176). She douses herself with the vanilla flavoring and is attacked by gnats, flies and bees before her Grandma catches her and asks for an explanation. After the four year old

storyteller, Torrence (1998) tries to explain, her Grandma tells her, “Aunt Sally just uses a little bit behind the ear. She don’t draw gnats and flies and bees like this” (p. 178). The adult storyteller, Torrence (1998) leans forward and tells the audience, “[N]ooo, she didn’t. She drew *men*” (p. 178). Torrence’s (1998) physical move toward the audience, conspiratorial tone and emphasis on the words “no” and “men” invites the audience into the story and reveals another layer of personality to Aunt Sally and an issue that was discussed in whispers in the community, “Aunt Sally had five husbands. She was married *five* times” (p. 178). Torrence (1998) continues in a conspiratorial tone:

At first I didn’t know that this man had a name, but I would hear people whisper, you know. When you’re little you can get around, hear lots of things. I would hear them say, ‘Here comes Miss Sally and that fifth husband of hers,’ Or ‘Here comes Miss Sally’s fifth husband.’ So I heard the word ‘fifth’ all the time. So I called him Uncle Fifth. (p. 178)

She loved both her Aunt Sally and Uncle Fifth and she continued her unadulterated admiration of Aunt Sally, despite the consequences. Torrence (1978) attended church with her Grandma, Grandpa, Aunt Sally and Uncle Fifth and as common in African American churches, members usually claimed particular pews to sit in,

We’d go to church and Aunt Sally would walk in, with me behind her trying to walk just like her, and she’d pull into the pew. Uncle Fifth would sit on the end, she’d sit beside him, and I’d sit beside her and Grandma, Pa always sat up front. Somebody would come over and say, ‘Hello, Miss Sally, My, that’s a *fine* brooch you’ve got on’. And Aunt Sally would know what they were looking at. She always wore long sleeves ‘cause she had big arms. She’d take that fan out of her sleeve, open it up and say, ‘Well, *thank you*, Mr. Jones. *For recognizing my brooch.*’ And my grandmother would say, “Do Jesus”. (original emphasis, p. 179)

This incident inspired interesting conversation at home. Grandma told Grandpa “[T]hat Sister of yours is an out-and-out *huzzy*’ (Torrence, 1978, p. 180). Of course the four year old Torrence (1978) wanted to be a huzzy also, “I’d practice, Huzzy! Huzzy!

Huzzy!” (p. 180). Eventually Grandma washed her mouth out with soap. Torrence (1998) ends the story appropriately with “Didn’t stop me, though” (p. 180).

Major Contributions to Blackstorytelling

On a continuum of Blackstorytelling, post 1960’s and 1970’s social and political struggles and attempts by the education community to divert a true formation of Black identity with multicultural literature, Torrence brought an authenticity and credibility to the art form that audiences could not deny. With faithful adherence to an African American vernacular, Torrence manifested the spirit of her characters in personal stories and folktales.

According to folklorist Elliott Oring (1986), four major contexts are employed by folklorists in analysis and interpretation of folk narrative and the individuals who tell them: “cultural context, the social context, the individual context and the comparative context” (p. 135). Oring (1986) explains that the cultural context “encapsules the system of ideas, symbols, and behaviors of the group in which particular folk narratives are found” (p. 135). Torrence intuitively and intrinsically understood the ideas, symbols and behavior of her people and their environment.. Torrence also understood the position and power these stories held in a Black ethos. She knew as Hurston (1982) stated “[T]he rabbit, the bear, the lion, the buzzard, the fox are culture heroes from the animal world. The rabbit is far in the lead of all the other” (p. 57).

Criticized by, as Oliver (2004) described them, “modern critics” (p.3) for telling the Uncle Remus tales recorded by Joel Chandler Harris, Torrence (1983) responded in *The Horn Book Magazine*

As a teaching tool, the tales implied great morals when the [en]slaved outsmarted the master. They were warning devices and were used as signals to those who were hiding- needing information about people who could and would help. Why

do we resent them now? The fact that the tales came from the evil days of slavery could be a major reason. We also seem to be uncomfortable with the dialect and. With their overall ideals. Whatever the reason, we are making a grave mistake. These stories are important to the black as well as to the white heritage of America. (p. 281)

“Modern critics” failed to realize nor comprehend that Torrence did *not* tell the stories collected by Joel Chandler Harris, but the stories told to her by her family and extended family; the stories told by her ancestors. Torrence told the stories that empowered, inspired and instructed. Torrence rightfully claimed, “I know stories Uncle Remus never heard of” (Smith, 1988, p. 4). Because she chose to continue this legacy, a new generation of African American storytellers were empowered and inspired to tell these stories, unabashedly, unashamedly and proudly.

There have been significant studies by linguists and psychologists on gestures and or gestures that exhibit images. Outstanding scholars in this field are David McNeill (1992, 2000, 2005) and Justine Cassell (1994a, 1994b, 2009a, 2009b). The studies and experiments conducted by these scholars and others are germane to the present study for several reasons: 1) the research conducted considered of participants “narrating” or “storytelling” McNeill, 1992, p. 184); 2) McNeill (1992) codified the gestures and created categories that are considered the authority in the field and are therefore employed by other scholars and 3) any observation or description of Torrence’s performance (including her own description) include her use of gestures or facial expressions (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 2000).

Niesink (n.d.) in his paper “Gestures in the Storytelling Domain” explicates the four types of gestures:

- Iconic gestures depict a characteristic of the actual object, person, action or

event being described. Examples include an upward movement of the hand accompanied by the words ‘he climbed up the tree’

- Metaphoric gestures describe abstract concepts and relations...the gesture depicts the metaphor of the concept or relation. Examples would include depicting a group by moving both hands in a ball shape, or progress by moving the hands around each other in a circular fashion
- Deictic gestures are pointing gestures. They might point to real objects or persons, but quite often they point to entities in the imaginary world of the scene that is being described
- Beat gestures are generally small, short movements which are used to emphasize certain parts of speech, or sometimes just as a filler, where no other gestures can be used. An example could also be the gestures people make when they can’t think of a word. (p. 1)

The research conducted by McNeill (1992, 2005), Cassell (1994a, 1994b, 2009a, 2009b) and Niesink (n.d.) did not include professional storytellers, individuals who practice the art form as a livelihood and who may tell the same story differently fifty times a year. But Torrence (1998) in her book, *Jackie Tales, The Magic of Creating Stories and the Art of Telling Them*, Torrence gives instructions to the reader/teller throughout the text on the use of gesture and facial expressions in her story:

A lot of things that you speak about, like love and hate, that’s all abstract. Children don’t have the experience to really understand those feelings. So you must show them in your face. You have to make big expressions, you have to use big gestures. (p. 19)

In the story ”Aunt Sally and Uncle Fifth”, when Torrence introduces her beloved Aunt Sally with a physical description. Aunt Sally had long, black, coarse hair that she kept in a bun on the back of her head. “But when she’d untie it, it would say, ‘*Pooooof!*’ and hair (**both hands way up and out**) was all over the place” (Torrence, 1998, p. 175). This gesture would be described as an iconic gesture, because it refers to Aunt Sally’s hair. The word “poof” accompanying the action indicates movement and creates an image for the audience; an ideophone.

In the video “Elements of Literature: Second Course: Jackie Torrence: A

Trickster Tale”, Torrence Torrence relates to the audience Br’er Rabbit’s instructions to his children, “Little rabbits, when you’re outside playing, keep your ears open, your eyes wide open and keep your feet ready to move” (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2000). When Torrence speaks the phrase “keep your ears “open”, she places her right hand near her ear and executes a forward sweeping motion toward the camera. This is a metaphoric gesture indicating that the rabbits must listen intently for any sound that may indicate danger. Metaphoric gestures shape an idea that is being explained. McNeill (1992) explains that the metaphoric gesture

“presents an image of the invisible-an image of an abstraction. The gesture depicts a concrete metaphor for a concept, a visual and kinesic image that we feel is, in some fashion, similar to the concept. (p. 14)

In the story “The Hairy Man”, Wiley, the protagonist, is instructed by his mother to take a jar of strawberry jam to his Granny’s house. Wiley’s mother suggests that he take a short cut through the swamp. Wiley is surprised at the suggestion because he has always been instructed *not* to enter the swamp, the home of the Hairy Man, who would chase him, catch him and eat him up. Wiley’s mother tells him “You can go in that swamp and come out that swamp. Nobody will bother you if you do exactly what I say” (p. 207). She shows him a glass of milk and tells him it is magic. “If you should go in the swamp, and the Hairy Man should get to chasing you, this **(point)** glass of milk will tell me. It will turn red” (p. 208). The instruction to point to the imaginary glass of milk is a classic deictic gesture.

In addition, the beat gesture is so named because it looks like someone beating time. It may have no meaning at all. “The hand moves along with the rhythmical pulsation of speech (although the synchrony is not absolute perfect)”. McNeill, 1992, p.

15). In the short video “Storyteller”, by Carl Hersh (n.d.), as Torrence tells the story, “Elvira and Henry” before a group of children at her feet, her hands are in constant motion. It appears as if she is conducting an orchestra. The beat gesture is a small gesture, “a simple flick of the hand or fingers, up and down, or back and forth” (McNeill, 1992, p. 15). It is seemingly insignificant. But beat gestures usually signify a transition in the story or discourse; “marking the introduction of a new character, summarizing the action, introducing new themes, etc” (McNeill, 1992, p. 15). In the story, “Elvira and Henry”, Elvira and Henry are the main characters. In the written version, when Torrence (1998) introduces another character, she describes him for her audience as a “very, very, handsomely dressed gentleman in a black silk suit, long black leather boots, and a fancy frock tail coat. There was only one thing wrong. He didn’t have a head” (pp. 198-199). In the video, Torrence says, “There is only one thing wrong with the man”. She moves her head back slightly, lifts her right hand with index finger pointed up in a quick motion and says, “He didn’t have a head”. Her voice inflection changes. A change in pitch and tone in a storytellers voice is customary when a transition occurs. Attentive listeners are cognizant of the change and recognize it as a cue for transition.

Torrence’s ability to engage, even mesmerize audiences with her voice, facial expressions, gestures and body movements all contributed to the rhythm of the performance and was central to the artistic success of her presentation. Harold Scheub (1998) whose primary research has been with storytellers from rural South Africa, insists that “[T]he storyteller uses her body, the music of the language, and the audience in such a way that they provide an artistic-not a realistic-framework for the communication of the word” (p. 21)

Correspondingly, Davis (1998) enjoins “everybody, everywhere” to listen to Torrence tell a story and to watch

Her face—especially the eyes, keep your eye on those eyes—her hands, her voice, her body itself, pregnant with the story she is telling—all are one. I’ve never seen so close an identification between the art and the artist in my life. (p. 10)

Torrence was empowered by the stories she told because she was in control. “I find power in anything I control, I tell stories. I control them and I find power in them” (Patton, 1998, p. 2). She, like her ancestors and the African American storytellers who came before her, were in control of the cultural and political context of the stories. They found a nexus of spirituality in that power and shared with their audience. Perhaps Torrence found the answer to Toni Cade Bambara’s query, “I am trying to find out not only how a word gains its meaning but how a word gains its power” (Salaam, 2009, p. 59).

This then is the delineation of Jackie Torrence’s life as a celebrated storyteller. It is replete with evidence of the preservation and perpetuation of the folktales and oral narratives of enslaved Africans and their descendants. Her dedication to the orature of her family, ancestors and her cultural community throughout her lifetime was a testament to the power of *nommo*. Because she consciously and unconsciously recognized this word magic, despite the dominant ideology, her prodigious gifts were revealed. And one of those gifts was to bring the story alive. In his introduction to Torrence’s (1998) book *Jackie Tales: The Magic of Creating Stories and the Art of Telling Them*, Ossie Davis, an admitted fan of Torrence said

A story is a living, breathing thing, and it requires, if not love, at least some of your personal attention... You can’t leave the care and feeding of stories to Jackie alone. You’ve got to pitch in too, and pay attention! Or the stories will

die. And according to Zora, if our stories die, we will die. (p. 11)

In a contemporary history of Blackstorytelling, Jackie Torrence and her repertoire represents the cultural connectivity to the genesis of African American storytelling. These stories contribute to the research of enslaved Africans and their response and resistance to enslavement. As primary source material, they are as significant as the slave narratives collected by early anthropologists, folklorists and writers of the Works Progress Administration. Torrence's animal tales and some of the ghost stories told to her by her grandfather would certainly qualify as source material either in two categories identified by Asante and Abarry (1996), "lost" or "undeciphered" (p.1) Her legacy as a storyteller ensured that these stories were found and that they would not die.

In Chapter 4, we will examine the contributions and achievement of Linda Goss, and determine the way her artistic ideology was informed by the social, cultural and political movements of the sixties.

CHAPTER 4

LINDA GOSS

Biography

Linda McNear Goss firmly believes that Blackstoytelling has been a call and a calling, an opportunity and an imperative for her life's work. Exemplifying her favorite gospel children's song "This Little Light of Mine", Reed (2007) describes Goss as "a burning torch of wisdom, games, prophecy, songs, rhyme, revolution, history, literature, folktales, ritual and sermons" (p. 23).

Goss was born near the Great Smoky Mountains in the aluminum smelting town of Alcoa (Aluminum Company of America), Tennessee, to Willie Louise McNear and Willie Murphy McNear, Jr. She was born in the family's home on Bell Street, as was common to segregated communities in the South. Goss informs, "Blount County's hospital started in 1947, but Mama didn't like hospitals, and most of the black people were born at home anyway..." (Kelley, 2011, p. 121). Goss' mother graduated from Knoxville College and became a distinguished elementary school teacher in the segregated school system in Alcoa. She taught for forty years and received the Governor's award for Outstanding Teacher of the year during her service to the children of that community (L. Goss, Personal communication, Spring, 1998).

Goss' father, as did many of the African American men who were recruited from the surrounding states, worked in one of the aluminum plants. Linda's father worked in the North Plant, the largest manufacturing plant in the world in the 1920's and 30's. Her grandfather, Granddaddy Murphy, originally from Alabama, worked in the "Pot" room where they mixed caustic chemicals with bauxite ore and heated it to extreme

temperatures to obtain the aluminum. “The men that worked in the ‘Pot’ room, when they retired, could barely walk. It is said that a white substance oozed from their pores” (L.Goss, personal communication, Spring, 1997). L. Goss shared that Granddaddy Murphy wore a suit and tie to work every day. It was years before she knew that Granddaddy Murphy worked as a janitor in the “Pot” room (personal communication, Spring, 1997).

Granddaddy Murphy was the storyteller in the family and an inspiration to Goss. He introduced Goss to Br’er Rabbit and other animal characters such as possums, skunks and frogs. Granddaddy Murphy also provided the initiation for Goss’s respect and keen cognitive attentiveness to folklore. Or as Zora Neale Hurston (1991) describes it, “the boiled down juice of human living” (p. 182). Goss explains “My granddaddy used to talk about all kinds of things black folk used to do back then, like washing their hair with dish water” (Reed & Brown, 1977, p.1).

Willie Murphy McNear, steeped in the traditions and ritual of the African American community, led his household in diligent observations of folk belief, such as never raising an umbrella in the house, or never ever placing certain objects on the table and *always* having a male enter your household on the first day of the year.

Goss’ greatest influences in her young life were the church, the school and her home life. This community felt like “one big family “ to her (Kelley, 2011, p. 126). She was raised in the St. Paul A. M. E. church. The African Methodist Episcopal church was founded by Richard Allen and other Black Methodist congregations in the mid-Atlantic area (Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church). It’s history is unique in that it was the agency of African Americans in their quest to worship freely and to reject “the

negative theological interpretations which rendered persons of African descent second class citizens” (Official Website African Methodist Episcopal Church). In 1794 the Bethel A. M. E. church held dedication services at the corner of 6th and Lombard in Philadelphia, PA. with Richard Allen as its pastor. Goss was taught the history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the contributions of Richard Allen in Sunday School and continued her research when she arrived in Philadelphia.

She attended the Charles M. Hall School, a segregated school with grades first through twelfth grade. She opted to stay at this school even after representatives from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) encouraged her parents to allow her to be a member of a group of African American students to integrate the Alcoa High School. As her parents grappled with the decision, Goss was decisive, “I’m going to stay at my school, because Hall School is *my* (original emphasis) school! (Kelley, 2011, p. 126). Goss had attended Charles M. Hall for her entire life and although she realized the importance of desegregation, she feared the possible consequences. She relates, “It’s where Mama was and where I had been all of my life...I thought at the time of all we had to give up, and I didn’t want Mama to lose her job—I was afraid she wasn’t going to have a job (Kelley, 2011, p. 127).

Students in Goss’ senior class was asked by their teacher, Mr. Wilfred Warren to survey members of their community on the process of registering to vote and to encourage them to participate in the voting process. Goss, at this time, was not eligible to vote, because she had not reached the age of eighteen. Her participation in this project broadened Goss’ perspective of the insular world she inhabited and impacted her

understanding of the value of stories of her people. When she was interviewed by New York storyteller, Linda Humes in 2008 for Story Corps, she recounted the experience:

I remember one woman I interviewed, and she was in her nineties and she would she was ancient, and her hair was just beautiful and white...and she told me she had never voted in her life and that she did not intend to vote, that she didn't see any point in it. She was from further down South where she had been treated so cruelly and she didn't think it was going to matter. Some people told me that in Alabama they were forced to count things to register, charged fees, and and threatened...I later realized that oral history is very valuable. People's stories are very valuable—these stories you're never going to see in a history book (Kelley, 2011, p. 128).

Goss heard the poems of Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson recited in her home by her mother and in church by members of this segregated community. She was as familiar with these authors as she was with Br'er Rabbit and she considered them all family.

Goss never forgot these teachings or discounted them as invaluable when she left Tennessee. She considered the totality of the experiences in this community as beneficial and treasured heirlooms in her cache of African American folklore. She would return to these memories for inspiration and guidance throughout her career.

Goss matriculated at Howard University during a period of heightened political and creative consciousness for Africans in America—the sixties and the Black Arts Movement. Inspired and influenced by teachers and professors such as Ted (Theodis) Shine, playwright and television scriptwriter, Owen Dodson, poet, novelist and playwright Paul Carter Harrison, playwright and theater theorist and the novelists, critics, musicians, poets and playwrights that regularly visited the campus, Linda was energized by the intellectual, political and cultural experiences at Howard University. She states, “There was such a creative energy in the air. Ishamel Reed, Quincy Troupe, Amiri

Baraka, Don L. Lee (Haki Madubuti), Ted Jones, Sonia Sanchez, Sarah Fabio Webster, Kristin Hunter and Ossie Davis were there. I wanted to be a part of this” (Reed, 2007, p. 23).

In March of 1968, Goss participated in a student led sit-in at Howard University. The students occupied the administration building and demanded that the curriculum emphasize African American history and culture and that the University be more closely linked with the community. “This successful demonstration sparked sit-ins and protests at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s) across the nation and is considered a milestone in the history and struggle for African American higher education” (Reed, 2007, p. 23).

According to Reed and Brown (1977), Goss began telling stories at the student center on Howard University’s campus, The Punch Out. “I would tell stories there about growing up in Tennessee about the homemade liquor everybody called ‘Splo’. I guess that was short for explosion. They put everything in it” (p. 1). Goss also performed with Howard University’s renowned, student-managed Theater Noir aka Theater Black aka WATTSA (We Ain’t Taking this Stuff Anymore).

This period of artistic development for Africans in America was a reclamation of art and culture. It was a desire, as Larry Neal (1977) stated for ‘self-determination and nationhood” (p. 277). This energy and spirit propelled Goss and other artists to construct and examine a critical methodology that would not only serve their artistic talents but the Black community as well, a Black Aesthetic. In an interview with Kelly (2001), Goss recounts

I always tell people I was born in the civil rights era and into the Civil Rights Movement. When I went to college I was highly influenced by the Black Arts

Movement and the Black Power Movement and I've always considered myself An activist. I've always used storytelling to promote justice and human rights. (p. 127)

In March of 1969, Linda McNear eloped and married Clayton Goss, a playwright.

During this period Clay Goss was the playwright-in-residence at the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Howard University. According to Shannon (2006) the Institute's

primary mission was to support scholarship on African American culture. The Institute quickly became a think tank that attracted artist activists such as Andrew Billingsley, John O. Killens, Haki Madhubuti and Sterling Brown. The group agreed to support the documentation and preservation of work by artists, scholars and intellectuals of color. (p. 188)

So when Dr. Stephen Henderson said to Clay Goss one day, "We need some storytelling. Where are the storytellers?" (Kelly, 2011, p. 134). Clay Goss told him that his wife Linda was a storyteller. Goss did a storytelling performance for the Institute or the Arts and Humanities that became her senior final project and the beginning of her professional storytelling career (Kelley, 2011, p.134).

Upon graduating from Howard University, Goss taught for one year at the prestigious Duke Ellington High School for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. She continued to build her career as a storyteller by creating fliers, telling friends, networking with other artists, and informing anyone and everyone about this art form that was her passion and would become her life's work (Reed & Brown, 1977, p.4). In this early period of her career, Goss performed at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library with poet and literary critic, Sterling A. Brown. "It was only my fourth or fifth storytelling performance. During that time, people weren't doing much storytelling. They were doing poetry and monologues" (Reed & Brown, 1977, p. 4).

In July of 1975, Goss, her husband Clay and their oldest child, Aisha Goss moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Goss continued to tell stories and build relationships with community organizations. But it was a fortuitous meeting in 1974 at the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival (formerly the Festival of American Folklife) with Mary Carter Smith, a storyteller from Baltimore, Maryland that shifted the storytelling cosmos and adjusted the continuum of Blackstorytelling in the United States. She recounts their first encounter

I had not met another storyteller until I met Mary... The first time I met Mary, we were at the Smithsonian American Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C around 1974. We really did not have an opportunity to talk. We were both featured storytellers. (Reed & Brown, 1997, p. 4)

Goss and Smith would continue to meet at storytelling venues and Goss shared her vision with Smith of a storytelling festival with other African American storytellers telling stories from an African American cultural tradition. She and Smith met again at the Tenth Annual National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. They were also featured storytellers at this festival (Reed & Brown, 1997, p.4; Sobol, 1999, p. 182). As cited earlier, the National Storytelling Festival is one of the largest storytelling festivals in the United States, and in the early years of this festival, very few African American storytellers were invited to perform. Attendance by African Americans was low. Goss had this observation

One day while walking through the crowds noticing that there were not that many of us, we seemed to have been thinking the same thing at the same time. We just broke out in laughter. It was a vision that we knew would be a reality. It just had to be. And then it was. (Reed & Brown, p. 4)

At the 30th National Festival of Black Storytelling in Baltimore, Maryland, Goss addressed the audience and retold this story or as she chose to describe it, "the myth". She emphasized that this was the vision of two African American storytellers, she and Mary

Carter Smith. But the vision needed an “action plan” and the two tellers was no time in implementing their vision. (Goss, 2012).

Smith returned to Baltimore, contacted and introduced the idea to members of the community including the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority. The first “In the Tradition...” National Festival of Black Storytelling was held November 18-19, 1983 at the McKeldin Center on the campus of Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. The second National Festival of Black Storytelling was held in November, 1984 at the Afro-American Historical Museum (now the African American Museum in Philadelphia). According to the organizations first brochure

It was here that these two visionary storytellers saw and felt the participants’ Desire and need to share, celebrate and preserve the African and African American Oral Tradition as a formal entity. They therefore invited the public to join them in formally organizing a national association. In 1984 in Philadelphia the Association of Black Storytellers was begun. (National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc., 1995)

Goss was elected the first President of the Association of Black Storytellers (now National Association of Black Storytellers) on November 10, 1984 in Philadelphia (ABS is On Its Way, 1985, p. 1). Balancing her career as a storyteller with her roles as wife, mother, author and emotional cornerstone for a national organization of artists, Goss continued to promote and elevate an art form that she felt authenticated and gave voice to the voiceless. In an interview with Debora Kodish (2013), Founder of the Philadelphia Folklore Project, Goss identifies her core storytelling philosophy:

I use my storytelling to challenge people in power, to advocate for people, and to speak out on issues. I may address large issues like racism, homophobia, anti-immigrant hysteria, or repression, or I may address ways in which large issues impact ordinary people in their everyday lives. But what storytelling does that no other art form does in that it comes alive and responds to people’s situations. (p. 40)

Goss has received numerous awards and recognitions including a designation of “Official Storyteller of Philadelphia” by Mayor Wilson Goode in 1984 (Iverem, 1986); the Zora Neale Hurston Award given by the National Association of Black Storytellers Inc. (Pritchett, 2007, p. 29), the Oracle Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Storytellers Network, (Lifetime Achievement Award Recipients, n.d.) and her name is inscribed on a chair in the auditorium of the International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough, Tennessee (Linda Goss, n.d.). She is also a recipient of the Benjamin A. Botkin Scholar Lecturer Award from the American Folk Life Center. She is listed as a folk artist with the Philadelphia Folklore Project and has received the Fellowship in Folk and Traditional Arts award from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and designation of Master artist (for working with apprentice storytellers) from the Pennsylvania Council of the Arts in 2003. In 2006 she received the Leeway Foundation Transformation Award for Women Artists (Kelley, 2011, p. 120).

She has been an artist in residence with several Philadelphia institutions, including the Rosenbach Museum, the Paul Robeson House, the Johnson House, the Village of Arts and Humanities, Celebration of Black Writing, the Philadelphia Folklore Project, Harambee Charter School and the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School.

Goss has been featured on *The Today Show*, and in national newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. She has also been featured in *Essence Magazine* and on the covers of *Learning Magazine* and *American Visions* (“About the Authors”, 1994)

Goss is considered one of the leading experts in contemporary storytelling and has co-authored and edited six books. She co-authored with her husband Clay Goss *The Baby*

Leopard: An African Folktale (1989), *Its Kwanzaa Time!* (2002) and *Jump Up and Say: A Collection of Black Stories and Storytelling* (1995). Goss also co-authored with Marion E. Barnes, *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African American Storytelling* (1989). It is considered by many African American storytellers “the Bible of black storytelling” for the variety of folktales, raps, history, commentary and lyrics that represent and preserve the oral tradition (Holley, 2014). She has an undergraduate degree from Howard University and a Masters degree from Antioch University.

Goss has continued to inspire and invigorate African American storytellers with her “Message from the Founder” emails and her commentary on the National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc. (NABS) website. One of her essays, “Response to the Travon Martin Tragedy and the Culture of Violence” actuated a national online story contest for adults and youth sponsored by NABS Inc. (Storytelling Contest, n.d.)

In November, 2008, Goss and her family suffered a devastating fire in the basement of her home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She lost many of her treasured possessions, including her books and recordings. She now resides in Baltimore, Maryland with her son Jamall and husband Clay.

Context Of Performance

Goss performs in brightly colored African laces, kente cloth, Adinkra cloth or contemporary patchwork jackets and dresses with kente trim from African American designers. She wears hats with African print or kente cloth trim. Her arms are adorned with multiple beaded bracelets from various countries in Africa. She is a shining vision of light, color and texture as she enters the performance circle, undimmed and undaunted. Her favorite color is red.

Goss rings her metal bells and calls out “Well-Oh, Well, Well”. It’s Storytelling Time”. This is her signature opening, her “opening glee”. She performs this at storytelling events, workshops and at the opening ceremonies of the “In the Tradition...”Black Storytelling Festival and Conference. It is a signal, an incitation that becomes an actuating force to arouse the listeners, or as Goss would say, “wake up the people” (Goss, 2005; Kelley, 2011, p.132).

In Goss’ story “The Frog Who Wanted to Be a Singer” (L. Goss & M. Barnes, 1989), she invites the audience to go “(B)ack to the motherland” and “(B)ack to the days when the animals talked” (L. Goss & C. Goss, 1947, p. 47). “Back to the motherland” is a reference to the continent of Africa and “Back to the days when the animals talked” is an acknowledgment to the book *The Days When the Animals Talked: Black American Folktales and How They Came To Be* by William J. Faulkner (1977). Thus, Goss clearly situates her story in the continuum of African diasporic orature and engenders a sacred space for storytelling. She invites her audience to experience an epic memory sense that is omnipresent.

The main character in the story is a frog who is very frustrated because he wants to sing and in the society/forest he lives in, only birds are allowed to sing:

So, for a while, the frog is cool. He’s quiet. He stays to himself and practices on his lily pad, jumping up and down, singing to himself. But one day all of this frustration begins to swell inside him. He becomes so swollen that frustration bubbles start popping from his mouth, his ears, his nose, even from his eyes, and he says to himself (in a froglike voice) “You know, I’m tired of feeling this way, I’m tired of holding all of this inside me. I’ve got talent”. (Goss & Barnes, 1989, p. 54)

A familial spirit is always present in Goss’ stories, e.g. parents, grandparents, extended family and fictive kinships. So it is natural for frog to seek the guidance of his

parents first. Frog's parents are concerned about his ambitions, but they encourage him by telling him they are behind him "one hundred percent". If that's what you want to be, then go right ahead. You'll make us very proud." (Goss & Barnes, 1989, p. 54).

Frog is more confident now and decides to share his desire with friends. His friends, however are not as encouraging as frog's parents, "Frogs don't sing in this place. You'd better keep your big mouth shut. They laugh at the frog, so he jumps back over to his lily pad" (Goss & Barnes, 1989, p. 54).

Not discouraged by his friend's reaction, Frog decides to visit the birds to discuss the possibility of singing with them. Frog said

"I would like to become a part of your group". "That's wonderful, says the head bird. "Yes, wonderful," echo the other birds. "Frog, you may help us carry our worms," said the head bird. (Goss & Barnes, 1989, p. 54)

Frog explains to the birds that he would like to sing. The birds find the idea ridiculous and throws the frog out of their house.

Frog returns home sad, but not discouraged. He practices and practices his singing. He realizes that although the birds "sing every Friday night at the Big Time Weekly Concert" (p. 55), they do not control the venue. It is the Fox that is in charge of the venue. Frog goes to see Brother Fox who is quite busy and does not have much time for Frog. Frog quickly explains that he wants to be in the concert on Friday night:

"Quick, quick, what do you want do?" "I want to sing," says the frog
"Sing? Get out of here, quick, quick, quick!" Please, Brother Fox, Please give me a chance". (Goss & Barnes, 1989, p. 55)

Brother Fox relents and agrees to give Frog a chance, saying "Maybe I could use you. Why don't you show up Friday, at eight o'clock sharp, okay?" (Goss & Barnes, 1989, p. 55).

The character of the fox is usually represented in folk narratives as sly, guileful or cunning. So Brother Fox informs all the animals of the forest of Frog's plans and they agree to bring a "little present" (p. 55) for Frog's singing debut.

Friday night arrives and Frog is very nervous. Brother Fox introduces him and the animals applaud. He takes the microphone, "For-for-for my first number, I-I-I-I" (p. 50). Before he could finish the sentence, the animals begin to throw fruit at him, call him names and yell "Boo! Boo! Get off the stage" (Goss & Barnes, 1989, p.56).

Brother Fox introduces the next act, the birds,

"The audience claps loudly. The birds fly onto the stage, their heads held high. Their wings slowly strike a stiff, hypnotic pose, as if they were statues. They chirp, tweet, and whistle, causing the audience to fall into a soft, peaceful nod." (Goss & Barnes, 1989, p. 56)

Frog confronts Brother Fox and accuses him of trying to embarrass him and make him look like a fool. Fox replies, "Leave me alone. If you want to go back out there and make a fool of yourself, go right ahead" (Goss & Barnes, 1989, p. 57).

Frog takes the stage, shaking but determined. "I came here to sing a song tonight, and that's what I'm going to do" (p. 52). Goss (1989) tells her audience that Frog begins to sing in the style

We call boogie-woogie, the frog begins to 'do his thing':
DOOBA DOOBA DOOBA DOOBA DOOBA DOOBA DOOBA DOOBA
DOOBA DOOBA DOOBA DOOBA DOOBA DOOBA DOOBA DOOBA.
(p. 57)

The frog mimics playing a bass fiddle. The animals responds to this new style of music by jumping up and moving in ways they never have. The elephant flings his hips from side to side, doing a dance, we now call the "bump". The lion moves his body in a dance we now call the "twist". The giraffe is doing the "jerk". "The hyenas do the

‘slop’ and the fox does the ‘mashed potato’” (Goss, 1989, p.57). The birds decide they want to join in and they become back up singers for the frog.

The forest has been transformed by the music of frog. Brother Fox calls him a genius. From that night on, Frog is welcomed to sing every Friday night at the big concert. Goss ends her story with acknowledgment of her grandfather, “(A)nd as my granddaddy used to say, that is how rhythm and blues was born” (Goss, 1989, p.58).

The characters in “The Frog Who Wanted to Be a Singer” are anthropomorphic, a common literary device in storytelling. The frog represents a person, who by logic and societal norms should not be allowed to sing professionally. When given an opportunity to sing, he is not very good. But he is encouraged by family and continues to practice. He is determined and tired of being pushed around and thwarted by the existing power structure. He seizes his opportunity, hops on stage and tells the audience, “I don’t care if you are asleep. I’m gonna wake you up. I came here to sing a song tonight, and that’s what I’m going to do” (Goss, 1989, p. 57). Frog refines the art form and introduces an entirely new musical style, rhythm and blues.

Goss’ creative energy also expands to poetry. Her first poem was published in *We Speak as Liberators: Young Black Poets; An Anthology Edited with an Introduction by Orde Cooms* in 1970. The title of the poem was “Revolution Man Black”. Goss continues to write poetry in the form of the African praise poem.

Praise poetry on the African continent is another oral art form, like storytelling, that is actuated by performance. Praise poems must be recited and heard in order to have their intended effect (Finnegan, 1970; Gleason, 1980; Okpewho, 1992). From the *apaae*

of the Akan to the *salima* of the Dagomba of Northern Ghana, to the *lithoko* of the Basotho people of Lesotho, to the famous praise poetry of the Yoruba in Nigeria, Benin and Brazil, the *oriki*, to the *ibisigo*, the royal court poetry of the Kingdom of Rawanda, the *tige* among the Dogon and *majamu* among the Malinke and Bambara, African praise poetry has developed in the majority of African traditional societies. (Asuro & M-minibo, 2014; Boadi, 1989; Belcher, 1999; Mokitimi, 2004; Owomoyela, O., 1979).

Praise poetry as a literary form, has survived urbanization and modernity among the Xhosa in South Africa (*izibongo*) to emerge on a world stage. In Pretoria, South Africa on May 10, 1994 at the Inauguration of Nelson Mandela, Zolani Mkiva, a young *imbongi* (praise poet), nephew and son of *iimbongi*, performed a poem in honor of the historical occasion and in praise of Nelson Mandela (Opland, J. 2004).

Praise names are the basis of formal praise poetry (Finnegan, 1970). In the societies that value and practice this ritual, a child is given a praise name at birth that provides a social identity, i.e. your family, community, clan, ancestors or special circumstances of your birth. As the child grows and develops character or special qualities, more praise names are added. These names are bestowed by drummers, professional praise singers or the community itself (Barber, 2004; Finnegan, 1970). But it is to the royal and aristocratic that the most elaborate, formalized praises are composed and performed. One of the praise names for Shaka, ruler of the Zulu nation is “The Ever-ready-to-meet-any-challenge” (Finnegan, 1970, p. 111). Lines from another poem describe him as:

The young viper grows as it sits,
Always in a great rage
With a shield on its knees.

He who while devouring some devoured others

And as he devoured others he devoured some more;

He who while devouring some devoured others

And as he devoured others he devoured some more;

He who while devouring some devoured others

And as he devoured others he devoured some more; (Stuart and Cope, 1968, n. p.)

The Malinke epic *Sunjata* (French, Sundiata) has many variants and the story is told wherever the Mande languages are spoken, e.g. Mali, the Gambia, Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast and Mauritania (Johnson, 1992, p.1). This historical figure has hundreds of praise names. Among them are “Sorcerer-Seizing-Sorcerer”, “Simbon, Master-of-the-Bush” and “Master and Warrior Master” (Johnson, 1992, pp. 20, 55, 62). But perhaps, his most memorable name is “The Lion King”. Johnson (1992) offers a possible etiological basis for the name:

Some lengthen the vowel of Son (Sun), thus Soon (Suun), and claim that it is a contraction of Son-Jara’s mother’s name. Sogolon (Sungulun). Here again we observe a common naming custom in Mali, that of prefixing one’s own name with one’s mother’s name...Jata is almost always considered to mean ‘lion’. (pp. 102-103)

African praise poetry is employed to celebrate outstanding qualities and achievements of the powerful, but it can be used to expose the guilty and to scorn and ridicule. Note the examples given by Pongweni (2004)

A notoriously licentious chief of the Bomvana clan was ‘praised’ with the lines: “Below the rocks it is very dreadful to behold/For there are the handsome and their concubines”. (p. 358)

and this “praise poem” created for the Prince of Wales when he visited the Zulu in 1925

Ah! Britain! Great Britain! She sent us the Bible, and the barrels of brandy; She sent us the breechloader, she sent us the cannon; O, Roaring Britain! Which must

we embrace?. (p. 358)

The previous examples are also evidence of the various themes in praise poetry. As a functional art form, some of the themes that are addressed in praise poetry are animals, plants, farming implements, self-praise, ancestors, personal relationships, status within the community, military exploits, divining bones and even the “word” itself (Gleason, 1980; Finnegan, 1970)

Similar oral aesthetic elements in storytelling are also employed in the performance of praise poems. These include repetition, symbolism, imagery, metaphor, call and response, the use of ideophones and rhythm. Professional praise singers as professional storytellers are usually accompanied by a musical instrument such as the drum. Gleason (1980) relates that “Where there are drums, praise-epithets may be expressed on them” (p. xx). She continues

Among the Kele all men have a drum-name by which they may be summoned across distances. A man’s drum-name will include an expression of personality, like “spitting cobra whose virulence never abates,” followed by the most characteristic part of his father’s drum-name and, finally, by the drum-name not of her village. (p. xxi).

As there is general agreement among scholars in this discipline that praise poetry is intended for recitation, sound, and how it is created becomes an important element in the delivery and composition of praise poems. Okpewho (1992) explains that the appeal of sound can be so strong that a premium is placed on it in performance. Therefore, performers will sometimes use “nonsense” words or other kinds of sounds to heighten the performance. Finnegan (1970) supports this claim when she states

The use of ideophones and interjections in praise poetry is another way in which its poetic quality can be enhanced. In Southern Sotho...the interjections *hele* (expressing surprising), *he* (of a wish), or *pe* (a recognition of something overlooked) are frequently used to convey emotion. Ideophones too can add to

the descriptive quality and vivid conciseness: *qephe*, for instance, conveys a sound picture of the last drop of milk during milking, occurring in such a line as “There is not even the sound of the last drop, there is no milk”. (p. 132)

Consequently, praise poetry is often performed in higher tones and the pace is faster than storytelling. As the poem progresses and excitement builds, gestures are made to accentuate the words. If there is no musical accompaniment, the praise poem is semi-chanted and the performer creates a rhythm and occasionally a counter rhythm with body movements, e.g. head, shoulders, arms etc. Rhythm, pace, delivery, figurative expressions, the penetrating incisiveness of the performers’ words all contribute to the effectiveness and the power of praise.

We have discussed the various themes encountered in praise poetry. However, Okpewho (1992) maintains that the overarching theme of praise poetry is love. He posits that “both sentiments are fundamentally based in a feeling of admiration for a person or an object” (p. 142). With the exception of the praise poetry that decries and exposes the behavior of the powerful, Okpewho’s position is logical. Certainly, as we examine one of the praise poems by Linda Goss (1989) this position should be considered.

The title of her work is “Song for My Mother, Prayer for My Father (A Praise Song)”.

My mother was no Harriet Tubman,
My father was no Martin Luther King.

She was a mother to ten sisters and brothers.
She was a mother to my brother and me.
She was a wife and friend to my father.
She was a teacher for the whole community.

(5)

My mother was no Harriet Tubman,
My father was no Martin Luther King.

He had no time for fun and foolishness.

He had no time, sometimes, to take a rest. (10)
He has to time to complain or weep.
He was a storyteller who rocked me to sleep.

My mother was no Harriet Tubman,
My father was no Martin Luther King.

Yet she was a midwife to my aunt Sally. (15)
He was a preacher to Little Willie Jones.

She was a mother who cared and who suffered.
He was a father, Black and strong.
She was a mother who kept the light burning
So her lost children could find the way home. (20)
He was a father who kept the fires warming
So his little children would never be cold.

You won't find them in the history pages.
Yet they have lived down through the ages.
There will be no "TV Special." (25)
There is no Mother's Day card. There is no Father's Day card.
About the people I'm speaking of.
About the people who've been through it all.

They've lost babies in the womb.
They've lost babies to the hanging tree. (30)
They've lost babies to the battlefields.
They've lost babies to drugs and pills.

Yet they gave birth to the Harriet Tubmans.
Yet they gave birth to the Martin Luther Kings.
Yes, they gave birth to the Langston Hugheses. (35)
Yes, they gave birth to kings and queens.

THIS IS A SONG FOR MY MOTHER.
THIS IS A SONG FOR MY FATHER.

Oh, Black women of Ethiopia.
Black father of Nelson Mandela. (40)
Black mother of Emmett Till.
Black men down in Brazil---

We hear your story, we feel your pain.
We see the blood pouring like rain.
And if thy will be done (45)
To South Africa, FREEDOM WILL COME!

THIS IS A PRAYER FOR MY MOTHER.
THIS IS A PRAYER FOR MY FATHER.

Calling all people in North America.
Calling all people in Northern Ireland. (50)
Calling all people in the Himalayas.
Calling all people down under in Australia.

Calling all people in the Soviet Union.
Calling all people in the People's Republic.
Calling all people in the Middle East. (55)
Let's come together for World Peace.

ALL SHALL NOT BE LOST
IF WE SAVE OURSELVES FROM NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST.

THIS IS A PRAYER FOR MY MOTHER.
THIS IS A PRAYER FOR MY FATHER. (60)
AND FOR ALL LIVING CREATURES
AROUND THE WORLD (pp.288-290).

Goss opens her praise poem announcing that her biological mother and father were no Harriet Tubman, or Martin Luther King, iconic figures in the pantheon of African American world view. Upon making this statement, she immediately recounts the maternal and paternal characteristics of her parents that are valued in the Black community. Repetition of the lines "My mother was no Harriet Tubman, My father was no Martin Luther King", is a form of alliteration. Repetition and alliteration gives movement to the poem, creates rhythm and in performance, builds energy. By repeating the lines, referencing Tubman and King, she is symbolically comparing and contrasting the great works of the well know historical figures with the communal works of those who inherited the responsibility of nurturing and protecting.

In line 23, she begins to shift from a personal conceptualization to a universal Black conceptualization of parenthood. Beginning with line 29, the tone of her voice changes, as does her gesticulations. She rocks back and forth or from side to side. Stress

is placed on the word “babies” and on the last words of lines 29-32. She continues in this manner through lines 33-36 with stress on the word “birth”. There is a musicality to her tone and cadence. Lines 37 and 38 are pronounced loudly with a slightly slower cadence and every word is stressed. Lines 39-44 are slower with a different intonation. Goss is making supplication, invoking the spirits/ancestors. This is a transition phase of the poem. The words “Freedom will come” in line 46 is exclaimed loudly with much emotion. In lines 47-48, Goss’ praises for Black mothers and Black fathers are now prayers for them. These lines are a plea and an acknowledgement of their struggle and pain. Goss begins to call on people around the world in lines 49-55; people who have also experienced struggle and strife. She asks that humanity save itself from the ultimate annihilation, “nuclear holocaust”. Goss concludes the praise poem/song with the declaration that this is a “prayer for my Mother”, “prayer for my Father”, but are the prayers for mothers and fathers everywhere? The very last statement reflects an African world view that acknowledges the spirit of “all living creatures” and that they also be remembered in prayer.

Major Contributions To Black Storytelling

According to Kodish (2013), in one of the footnotes of her article “Cultivating Folk Arts and Social Change”, Goss was “discouraged in her attempt to enroll in a graduate program in folklore” (p. 450, note 13). However, given her keen intellect, her passion for the lore of African Americans and her indefatigable desire for storytellers to share myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, teases, taunts, play party games, folk belief, folk art and any form of lore of the collective identity of African Americans, Goss

has encouraged and inspired hundreds of storytellers to pursue the art form as a vocation and ultimately a career.

To illustrate, Goss (2006) defines and characterizes herself and other storytellers in the essay “Storytelling-The Call and Response of Life”

I’ve been telling my tales and singing my songs for a very long time. I’ve been a word spreader since I could talk. But I was called to become a professional weaver of fantasy and gatekeeper of history about twenty-five years ago... When one is called by a divine or unknown spirit to do something positive in this world, the response has to be a sincere affirmation... We storytellers are yarn spinners dream wishers. Yet we don’t live in a dream world. All of our stories are not fairy tales. We are aware of the troubles in the world and we know that we have to do more than just talk about them... (p. 63)

As noted earlier, Goss is the co-founder of the National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc. (NABS). Goss and Smith founded this organization with the intent to provide a platform for African American storytellers to tell their stories (Reed & Brown, 1997) and for “the rich heritage of the African Oral Tradition to be shared and preserved” (History, n.d.). With her guidance and stewardship, the organization has developed social media presence, including Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest. NABS, Inc partnered with Caldwell’s Leadership Solutions to offer members a series of Leadership Training Webinars and electronic Fireside Chats with Linda Goss (V. F. Legaux, personal communication, June 14, 2014). Through the Fireside Chats, Goss was able to articulate her wisdom, her sagacious understanding of the value of story and the necessity of preserving these stories.

Goss is the co-editor of *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African American Storytelling* (1989). As an anthology, this book is a seminal work. Not since *The Book of Negro Folklore* by Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes, published in 1958, has there been a comprehensive work of “black vernacular culture” (Gates, 1989, p. 19). In the

preface of the book, Goss (1989) explains that the anthology combines the work of scholars and

revivalist storytellers who tell stories they have learned through research and collecting, traditional storytellers who tell stories from their family and backgrounds and experiences, and literary writers whose works reflect the language, rhythm, and other elements of African and African-American storytelling. (p. 13)

The book covers the breadth and depth of Blackstorytelling, including animal tales, fables, sermons, ghost stories, historical stories and raps in the Black storytelling tradition. Contributors include Paul Laurence Dunbar, John Henrik Clarke, Jackie Torrence, Molefi Kete Asante, Arthur Fauset, Edward Robinson, Reverend C. L. Franklin, Jamal Koram, Ruby Dee, Beverly Robinson, J. Mason Brewer, J. California Cooper and Mary Carter Smith.

Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African American Storytelling (1989) has been used as a textbook for storytelling and folklore classes nationally. A search on the Online Computer Library Center's (OCLC) WorldCat, an online catalog of public and academic libraries across the world, reveals holding for 825 libraries. I found a copy on the shelf of Balme Library at the University of Ghana in Accra.

Goss' performative moment is the ringing of her cowbells as she enters the arena or circle of storytelling. It is at this moment, Goss is the most tangible connection to a griotte or jalimuso. She summons the spirits of storytelling with authority, sovereignty and as witness. Goss accompanies the ringing of her bells with a call or holler reminiscent of the arabbers (tradition African American street vendors) of Baltimore and formerly Philadelphia and New York City. Goss performs this call or holler at *every* performance or presentation. But when she cries out "Well-Oh Well, Well, Well" at the

“In the Tradition...” National Festival of Black Storytelling and Conference, at the Opening Ceremony, it is truly a call to the initiated and the faithful. The audience waits for this ritual and they truly understand it is the opening/beginning of this yearly event where they can experience what anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) describes as “*communitas*”; an intense spirit of community.

Linda Goss’ greatest contribution to Blackstorytelling is that she is *the story*; from her brightly colored African and African American inspired clothing and jewelry, to her love and respect for the African and African American oral tradition, to her nurturing, generous spirit and character, to her prodigious memory for historical events and her ability to negotiate issues in a holistic manner.

The essence and spirit of Linda Goss has become symbolic with the way “in which the creative form-giving process” of Blackstorytelling is effectuated (Jahn, 1961, p. 174). African American storytellers identify, connect, respect and relate to her and the work she has accomplished and continues. Her achievements and influence are far-reaching and appreciated. As such, she is lovingly and reverently referred to as Mama Linda Goss. Her position on the continuum of Blackstorytelling is prominent. Her light has illuminated a pathway for a generation of future African American storytellers.

In the foregoing pages, an attempt was made to describe the life of Linda Goss and the context of her performance. Goss’ professional and personal maturation and political consciousness developed during a period of reaffirmation to our Africaness and to social justice ideals, the sixties. Her fidelity to the intention of creating and disseminating knowledge in the interest and image of African American people has been unwavering. Goss continues in this vein by communicating with storytellers by webinar

and periodical mass emails to the membership of the National Association of Black Storytellers. She maintains her position on the board of Directors of the National Association of Black Storytellers and is actively involved in the direction and programming of the organization. She chose storytelling (or as she might say, storytelling chose her) as the vehicle by which she would achieve her goals.

In the next chapter, Chapter 5, I will examine the life, work and achievement of Charlotte Blake Alston, an artist of rare ability and talent, who represents the evolution of Blackstorytelling.

CHAPTER 5

CHARLOTTE BLAKE ALSTON

Biography

Charlotte Blake Alston was born in the South Philadelphia community of Pennsylvania to John Edward Blake, Sr. and Carrie Collins Blake. She is the third child of five siblings.

Charlotte was exposed to a Black literary and musical culture by her parents and community that shaped and formed her sensibilities and commitment as an artist. In an interview with Eric Wolf (2013), she describes her family as a “musical family. “My mother was a church organist. My mother brought the piano teacher to the house. So half of Mr. Robert’s [piano teacher] income came from the Blake family.” (Wolf, 2013). Alston and her siblings participated in choirs and family programs, usually organized by her mother (Wolf, 2013).

Because of her father’s love and passion for language and literature, Alston was introduced to the works of James Weldon Johnson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar. At the age of six years old, John Blake, Sr. gave his daughter *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1913). He chose poems for her to memorize and wrote monologues for her to recite at church banquets, teas and special community events (Arts in Play, p.2; Wolf, 2013).

Alston attended the David Landreth Elementary School, located in the Point Breeze neighborhood of Philadelphia until mid-year 6th grade. Because of her exceptional grades and aptitude, the administration decided that she should matriculate at

Julia R. Masterman Laboratory and Demonstration School several miles from her home. Alston quickly adjusted to the new school, but was disappointed there would not be a sixth grade graduation, since at that time, Masterman was an elementary and middle school and graduation was not held until ninth grade. Alston was quite disappointed at this mid-year transfer because her older sister had received the highest and most prestigious award given to a sixth grade student at the Landreth Elementary School Elementary School, the American Legion Award. The Blake siblings were quite competitive and Alston also expected to receive this award. It was a great disappointment in a young life. (Mettler & Mettler, 2014).

Alston returned to her neighborhood to attend the South Philadelphia HS, the alma mater of both her parents, and was very active in her school community. She participated in three sports, volleyball, basketball and tennis and was captain of the girls basketball team in the eleventh and twelfth grades. She also served as a student aide in the library (The Southern Keepsake, 1966). Despite the subversive efforts of the school counselor, who counseled all the college bound African American students to find jobs to help their parents and reiterated how rigorous college courses would be for them, Alston was accepted to college at the age of sixteen (Mettler & Mettler, 2014).

She attended Cheyney State College, now Cheyney University, an historically Black college (HBCU) west of Philadelphia. Alston continued to distinguish herself as a school and community leader, playing three varsity sports, sports editor of the newspaper, serving as a member of the Women's Athletic Board, speech writer for the President of the Student Government Association and assisting with freshman orientation. She graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education.

In 1972, Alston married Fred Alston, a bassoonist in the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra and moved to Trenton, NJ. One son was born to this union, Jeffrey Alston. The Alstons separated after several years and Charlotte returned to Philadelphia with her young son and secured a position as Education Director of the University of Pennsylvania Children's Center.

In 1977, Alston auditioned and was accepted into the Freedom Theatre Performing Arts Training Program. Freedom Theater, the internationally acclaimed African American theatre company is located on the corner of Broad and Master Streets. Williams-Witherspoon (2006) in *The Secret Messages in African American Theatre: Hidden Meanings Embedded in Public Discourse*, states that the building is the former home of the "19th century famed Philadelphia actor Edwin Forest" (p. 122). Alston has often commented publicly on the important role, Freedom Theater and its founder and director, John E. Allen, Jr and Robert E. Leslie, Jr. played in her development and commitment as an artist. "I still carry John Allen on one shoulder and my father on the other". (Conversation with storytellers from Keepers of the Culture, Inc., n.d.)

As Freedom Theatre began in 1966 "as a cultural element of the Black people's Unity Movement at the Church of the Advocate" (Blockson, 2000, p.157), Williams-Witherspoon (2006) asserts that there is a "connection that theater and the Black church share as social ritual" (p.134). The young actors interviewed from Freedom Theatre by Williams-Witherspoon (2006) characterized their experience as a "'movement' rather than as an actor's workshop or mere job" and John Allen was the "'movements' spiritual 'guru'" (p. 134). The actors, including Alston, developed a filial respect for John Allen for the advice, guidance, support and energy he provided to them and Freedom Theatre.

Lenny Daniels, one of the actors interviewed by Williams- Witherspoon (2006) stated that John Allen was a “parent to us. He’d come back stage before a play opened and he’d always tell us to ‘kill [the audience] in the first act, bury them in the second act and resurrect them in the third act” (p. 134).

Williams-Witherspoon (2006) describes Freedom Theatre as an example of the “DuBoisian model of art production (i.e. for the community, by the community, in the community)”, yet historically tied to “African ‘Kuntu principals of theater”” (p. 119). The potency and spiritual form generated in performance mode in the productions at Freedom Theatre, unquestionably positions it along the African Continuum.

In the Spring of 1980, Alston endured a two day interview process at the prestigious Friends Select School, a Quaker School in Center City Philadelphia. Several considerations intersected Alston’s cognitive process surrounding this school and the possibility of teaching there. Although members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) originally owned enslaved Africans, they later became very vocal in their anti-slavery sentiments and active in their involvement in the abolition movement.

Alston was offered and accepted a teaching position at the Friends’ Select School and would enroll her son in the second grade. On the evening of the Faculty/Trustee Dinner a required event for faculty, Alston walked in the cafeteria to discover that all the “people sitting down, being served, except three, were white. All of the people doing the serving, except for three work-study students, were members of the maintenance and cafeteria staff, all of whom were Black” (Just Stories Video, 2012).

Annoyed by this situation, Alston approached the Headmaster the next day to

express her observations of and concerns for this inequitable display of privilege and power. She suggested that the format of the dinner be changed to a buffet, and participants would be able to serve themselves. The Headmaster's response was that he would consider the idea. Alston told him that she understood that the Faculty/Trustee Dinner was a mandatory event for faculty, but if the format did not change, she would attend, but she would "take my place, as I saw it dictated in that circumstance. I would put on an apron, and I will serve" (Just Stories video, 2012).

The following year, the format of the dinner had not changed, but the Headmaster gave Alston the option to not attend. At the end of the day, as her colleagues offered parting remarks, "See you tonight", Alston's remarks were "No you won't. I won't be coming". (Just Stories Video, 2012). They were eager to know how she had avoided a mandatory appearance. She explained the situation and the responses were "Never thought of that. Never noticed it" (Just Stories Video, 2012).

Alston and her Lower School colleagues formed an Ad Hoc Committee to examine issues that were "invisible" to the larger school community but sustained in the school culture. One issue was the manner in which white children addressed African American adults in the school who were not teachers or administrators. Alston states

From the time we have set foot on this soil, in our country, referring to African Americans adults as children has been the ultimate expression of disrespect. It's demeaning. It's dehumanizing. It's dismissive. In our community, you do not address an adult by their first name unless they have given you permission to do so. And even then, it is preceded by a title. It's Miss Susan or it's Mr. Jeff. (Just Stories Video, 2012)

The Committee decided that they would meet with the Board of Trustees to address these and other concerns that were having a potential negative impact on the adults and children in the Friends Select Community. Alston's credentials were

questioned by one member of the Board who actually asked her “What is your experience in these sorts of issues? What qualifications do you bring to discussions of racial equity and parity and respect?” (Just Stories Video, 2012) Alston recounted her pre-Friends Select teaching experience and then reminded the trustee that she was indeed African American. The trustees’ response was “Well, this is one of those things that you don’t think about until someone brings it up and you really don’t think about until somebody brings it up again” (Just Stories Video, 2012).

It was not enough insult, Alston believed, that this impervious attitude and insensibility to the prejudice and institutional racism that Africans Americans encountered daily, it was as if “We are not credible enough witnesses for our own experience” (Just Stories Video, 2012).

The detrimental impact of the inherent practices and beliefs of the power structure of the school became clear and evident when her son, a second grade student in the school, came into her classroom and asked a question about her assistant. Her assistant was an older white female.

But her son referred to the older white adult as the teacher. Alston explained to her son that she was the teacher. “Uh, uhh. You couldn’t be”, was his reply. (Just Stories Video, 2012).

The members of the Ad Hoc Committee were persistent in their efforts and continued to examine and expose this “cloak of invisibility”. They created platforms for discussions to acknowledge the marginalization and prejudice in the school environment.

The school eventually began to host an annual job fair for people of color; created a multi-cultural committee that looked at all aspects of the school community; created

racial awareness seminars and began to focus on the “importance of every person in that community being acknowledged, recognized, heard and respected” (Just Stories Video, 2012).

At the end of the 1989-90 school year, after seventeen years of teaching, Alston decided to leave a very secure position to pursue storytelling as a profession. This decision, at age 41 was not made hastily. After a very successful Lower School assembly program, where Alston told the story *Who's in Rabbit House? A Maasi Tale*, a retelling of a traditional folktale by Verna Aardema (1992), Alston began to rethink and explore the potentiality of storytelling (Jaynes & Kodish, 1994).

Alston had attended several storytelling programs sponsored by Patchwork, a Philadelphia storytelling group. At one of these programs she saw Robin Moore, a local and regional teller. She experienced for the first time, as an audience member what Strum (1999) identifies as a “storylistening trance” (p. 2). As previously mentioned, “storylisteningtrance” as an altered state of consciousness; whereby the story listener experiences “the story with remarkable immediacy, engaging in the story’s plot and with the story’s characters” (p. 2). Singular storytellers are able to transport their listeners through time and space.

Also, in 1984, at the suggestion of a former Freedom Theater colleague, Alston attended the Second Annual Festival of Black Storytelling at the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum (now the African American Museum in Philadelphia), in Philadelphia and witnessed professional tellers, such as Brother Blue (Dr. Hugh Morgan Hill), Mary Carter Smith and Linda Goss. At this festival, Alston experienced African

American tellers telling from the African tradition. In the *Philadelphia Daily News*, Linda Goss, one of the organizers of this Festival, described the dynamics of this style of telling:

Whenever the storytellers feel the spirit, they get up. They dance. They sing. They chant. They start talking. It has movement. Most people see storytelling as just somebody reading a book or standing still and talking. But the African tradition demands much more. The spirit of the drum, the animation, the hand movements, the eyes. And also the call-and-response. It's meant to draw people in, gather the them together. (Seymour, 1984, p. 70)

These and other experiences, along with the encouragement of friends, family and members of the arts community, Alston took a leap of faith. She performed locally at libraries, museums and even an event at Fred's Foreign Car Showroom, for little or no compensation or sometimes, just lunch. "Every time I would get to the end of a financial rope, some door would open and I walked into it" (Conversation with Alston, n.d.).

One of those doors opened in 1991, when Alston signed with Class Acts Arts (formerly, Five Corners Music), a national artist management agency in the Washington, D.C. area. Founded by Busy Graham, an arts educator, in 1985, Class Act Arts was one of the most respected arts organizations in the mid-Atlantic region" ("Busy Graham" n.d.).

Joining the artist roster of Class Act Arts gave Alston a national visibility and the opportunity to present and showcase at the International Performing Arts for Youth (IPAY) and the Association of Performing Arts Performers (APAP) conferences. IPAY and APAP are membership organizations comprised of presenters, agents, managers and senior management from arts centers across the United States. APAP convenes an international conference with representatives from the United States and thirty other

countries yearly. “(APAP | NYC”, n.d.)

From appearances at these showcases and aggressive marketing by the management of Class Acts Arts, Alston’s bookings for storytelling events skyrocketed and she began to travel nationally and internationally nine or ten months of the year. In the month of February, one year, the month African American History is celebrated, Alston had forty-two bookings (Conversation with Alston, n.d.). “I prayed that I would have a net [if I fell], I found a catapult” (Conversation with Alston, n.d.)

Alston continued to search for and include stories and songs from the African and African American traditions in her repertoire. She included traditional instruments such as the djembe, mbira and shekere and the African talking drum, also known as the dundun in the Yoruba language, in her performances. But her artist spirit and perhaps the spirits of the jali ancestors, sought and found more.

Alston had acquired a kora in Dakar, Senegal, a twenty-one stringed instrument played by the *jeliw* of the Mande Diaspora. It stood in her living room for years, until Alston decided to find a teacher. In 1999, “Charlotte began studying the kora and the West African history-telling traditions of Senegal, Mali, Guinea and Guinea Bissau” (“Biography”, n.d.) with the Senegalese jali, Djimo Kouyate. Djimo Kouyate, 149th generation of the famed Kouyate family, one of the three founding families of *jeliw*, made his transition to be with the ancestors in 2004 (“Djimo Kouyate Memorial”, n.d.). Alston has resumed her studies with the “Malian Virtuoso Yacouba Sissoko” (“Biography”, n.d.)

Although there are several French and Canadian female kora players, Carole

Audet-Ouellet (Canada), Sister Claire Marie Ledoux (France) and Gwenaë Kerléo (France), Alston remains the only female in the United States to consistently play the kora in performance at large festivals and concert halls (Burtin, 2013).

Alston continues to expand and re-invent the professional role of a modern day jalimuso. Alston was the first storyteller to perform with the Philadelphia Orchestra on their Family and Student concert series. Since 1994, she has been the host of the orchestra's preschool concert series, "Sound All Around" ("Biography", n.d.). Alston has hosted and or performed with the Philadelphia Orchestra during their annual tribute concert to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. since the mid-nineties. Smalls (2012) reported "Charlotte Blake Alston, who is a nationally recognized storyteller and singer, reenacted Dr. King's life. After her performances, the audience gave her a standing ovation" (Philadelphia Orchestra performs annual tribute, para. 10). Alston has also been a featured narrator for several other orchestras including the Orchestra of St. Luke's, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Saint Louis Symphony, the Orpheus Chamber Ensemble and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra ("Biography", n.d.

As well as hosting, telling and narrating with orchestras, Alston has been commissioned to produce several original texts for orchestras and opera companies, including *The Carnival of the Animals*, by Saint Saens and *Scheherazade* by Korsakov ("Biography", n.d.). In 2006, she was commissioned by the Opera Company of Philadelphia to condense and create a "performance piece" that intertwined "Margaret Garner's story, composer Richard Danielpour's music, and librettist Toni Morrison's poetry in an hour- long preview of the acclaimed new opera, *Margaret Garner*".(Bolton. 2005).

In 2013, Alston was commissioned by the Singing City Choir of Philadelphia to create a full libretto, *The Children's March*, a re-telling of the children's march in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 ("Biography", n.d., "Home", n.d.). She has narrated several documentaries, including *Plenty of Good Women Dancers*, *The Peddle School*, *Crosstown* and *Safe Harbor*. Her narrative voice can also be heard at The Franklin Institute's Fels Planetarium where she narrated *Under African Skies* and *Stars of Wonder*. Alston was the first African American storyteller to perform at Carnegie Hall in New York when she began hosting "Carnegie Kids", Carnegie Hall's Preschool concert series. Since 1996, she has been a featured artist on the Carnegie Hall Family Concert Series ("Biography", n.d.).

Alston performed with her brother, "world renowned jazz violinist, John Blake, Jr and his band in *Tellin' On The Downbeat: A Program of Storytelling and Jazz*. In another program titled "Fiddlin' With Stories", Blake and her brother performed with kora and kora and violin. This program teaches and "celebrates the role of stringed instruments in African and African American culture ("Biography", n.d.). Alston has also collaborated on kora with harpist Elizabeth Hainen for Live Connections' Classic Live concert (Westley, 2014).

Alston's international performances include the first International Storytelling Field Conference in Accra, Ghana, the Second International Conference in Cape Town, South Africa, a main stage performance at the STIMMEN: Voices Festival in Basel, Switzerland and the Cape Clear Island Festival in Ireland ("Biography", n.d.).

Her awards and honors are numerous, including the first storyteller to be awarded The 1994 Pew Fellowship in the Arts, the 1997 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Artist

of the Year Award, the National Storytelling Network's Circle of Excellence Award and the Zora Neale Hurston Award, the highest award conferred by the National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc. ("Biography", n.d.). Alston has received The Spirit of the Griot Laudation Award from the Paul Robeson House in Philadelphia. She is the recipient of two honorary doctorate degrees from Seton Hill College (now Seton Hill University) and LaRoche College ("Charlotte Blake Alston", 2008, para. 9). Despite her numerous awards, honors and accomplishments, Alston is internally driven by the highest standard of her own work. She still considers herself a "storyteller-in-progress" (Alston, 2008, p.21).

I cannot help it. I am a former three-sport athlete and still think in terms of finding ways to constantly elevate my game. I still wrestle with repertoire, story content, subject matter, story crafting, artistic collaborations, commissions, study, use of instruments, lack of recordings, ad infinitum". (Alston, 2008, p. 23)

Alston (2011-2012) occasionally allows the reality of her successful career a moment, "I sit in my dressing room at Carnegie Hall and still slap myself" (p. 6). In her 2009 Zora Neale Hurston Award acceptance speech in Little Rock, Arkansas, Alston expressed not only gratitude, but a connectedness and unification to African American storytellers and the art form they convey:

I know this is not an honor that is bestowed lightly. I accept it as acknowledgement that I am walking the right path and I want you to know that just as in the old days when you represented your family every time you stepped out the door; I represent you every time I step out on a stage-but even more I try to do it every time I open my mouth-whether it is in front of a symphony orchestra or in front of emotionally wounded children or in the business meeting of a storytelling organization. I am also aware that with this honor there is expectation and responsibility. It is an expectation and responsibility that I proudly accept. (Alston, 2009)

Context Of Performance

Alston has a very strong stage presence or persona, due to her training in the theater. She walks on stage with poise and assuredness and the sound of her first words communicates a strength and dynamism that prepares the audience for an audacious encounter. The producers of the Public Broadcast System's (PBS) documentary *Safe Harbor*, a film about the Underground Railroad in northwest Pennsylvania states "[H]er strong steady voice is like a lantern in the darkness" ("Biography", n.d.) The statement by the producers is an appropriate validation of not only Alston's voice, but her artistic integrity as well. The stories she chooses to bring to the stage are always well researched and thoughtfully articulated to bring clarity, vividness and a veridical background to the characters and events.

Alston's sense of "ancestorism" is acute and stated publicly in her mission statement, "I tell stories because I have found myself in them. I tell for all those ancestors whose collective toil, tears, pain, struggles, hopes, dreams and prayers beckoned me into existence so that I might speak their stories" (Keeding, 2003, para 8).

Alston's (2000) "The Story of Anniko: A folktale from Senegal" is an adaptation of Melching's (1978) *Anniko!* The story, originally told in Wolof, was gifted to Alston by Melching during her second visit to Senegal in 1989 (Holt and Mooney, 2000, p. 158). Folktales traditionally embody the shared values and mores of a society or people and the story of Anniko reflects traditional values of the Wolof people, but contains a universal message of acceptance, change and heterogeneity.

Anniko is a child who lives in a village with her family, very happily, until an illness comes upon the village and spares no one-except Anniko. Anniko is grief stricken

and lonely but understands that she must leave the desolated village and she begins walking. She soon reaches the thick forest. “There were stories of this forest-stories of those who had entered it but had never returned” (Alston, 2000, p. 159). Alston deepens her voice and uses facial expressions and body language to convey a sense of foreboding to the audience. As Alston changes the tone and pitch of her voice, the rhythm of the story changes, slows and anticipation builds. She begins to bring the audience into the story.

Fearful. Anniko continues because she has heard stories of a village beyond the village where, “just as in Anniko’s own home, a stranger would be welcome” (Alston, 2000, p. 159). Acceptance of strangers is a strong ideal, valued by this society and therefore reiterated, affirmed and transmitted to succeeding generations through the stories.

“Anniko uttered a silent prayer before she entered that thick forest. She walked and walked, pushing aside wide leaves and long vines. She grew tired, but she continued on. Well, her prayers were answered that day, and she came to the path that would lead her to the village” (Alston, 2000. p. 159).

Anniko offers prayers to the unseen for safety and direction as she begins this arduous task. Again, through stories, another aspect of the community is revealed, a belief and acknowledgement of a deity or supreme being. As Anniko’s task is successful Alston informs the audience that “prayers were answered” affirming a personal relationship with the Supreme being for not only Anniko, but perhaps herself, as well.

As Anniko entered the village, the people came out to greet her. The people of this village all had long necks, even the babies. Anniko had never seen anything like this

before. The people of the village were surprised also, because they had never seen a person with a short neck. One of the villagers asked Anniko what she was doing in the forest alone. She explained what had happened to her, her family and her village. The Longnecks trusted her and invited her to stay (Alston, 1999, p. 160).

Hurston (1981) explains that African peoples' interpretation "of the English language is in terms of pictures" (p.49). Many storytellers use descriptive language to "paint a picture", but Alston's (2000) use of the term "Longnecks" as a proper noun and as a descriptor is, as Molefi Asante (1992) states, a "signpost" and clearly situates or locates the text as creative production on the African/African American Continuum.

Anniko quickly became involved with the activities of the village; work, play celebrations, rituals, and visits to the marketplace. Every morning Anniko crossed the village singing. In performance Alston (2000) sings with a child's voice "light and not one with the vibrato of a mature adult or trained voice" (p. 162):

Yee sin aa leen
Yee sin aa leen yen
Yewu nama deyman
Te yee sin aa leen itam
Yewu jotnaa
Yee sin aa leen
Yee sin aa leen yen (p. 160)

Anniko was singing, "I'm coming to wake you up. I'm up, a new day has begun. I'm coming to wake you also, people" (p. 160).

The Longnecks had never heard singing before and they thought this was a wonderful way to be awakened. "Soon they would not get up and go about their work until they heard Anniko's sweet song" (p. 160). This was a beautiful and special gift she had brought to the village.

But in this village, there lived an evil, jealous, small-hearted man. He did not like Anniko because she was different. One day this man told Anniko, “You do not belong here. You are different from us. You have a—short neck” (p. 160). He told Anniko she should leave to avoid bringing trouble to the village.

Anniko was hurt and began to run and soon found herself in the thick forest. Foliage was thicker and vines hung lower because the rainy season had come. Anniko was afraid and could not see where she was going. She stopped to rest and night came upon her (p. 161).

The next morning the Longnecks waited to hear Anniko’s song. But the song never came. They got up from their beds and began to ask “Where is Anniko? Have you seen Anniko?” (p. 161). When all were gathered in the center of the village, one of the elders told them that he knew someone “who might know something. Follow me” (p. 161). Soon they were at the home of the “evil, jealous, small hearted man” (p. 161) who told them “—almost with pride—how he had spared the village of problems by sending away the different one” (p. 161).

The villagers were upset and knew they had to do something to help Anniko find her way back. One of Anniko’s friends said, “Maybe we can sing as Anniko has sung to us. Maybe she will hear our voices and that will help her find her way back” (p. 161).

Song and voice is significant in African communities as it raises or calls forth spirit. Abrahams (1992) observes that enslaved Africans in the southern United States that sang together, were not just “keeping up the spirit” (p. 85), but as Douglas (as cited in Abrahams, 1992, p. 85) stated was an expression of the “value they placed on experiencing the intense moments of life together.”

”The Longnecks had never heard song before Anniko’s arrival and they had never sang themselves. But it was important to try. They agreed to sing Anniko’s name and tell her they wanted her back. They stood side by side in the center of the village and began to sing for the first time:

Anniko ni saw a ni
Anniko ni saw a ni
Anniko ni saw a ni
Wo. wo. wo chi ka nay, nay, nay
Wo. wo. wo chi ka nay, nay, nay
Hey, ho bi ci ni
Hey, ho bi ci ni

The villagers were singing “Anniko return quickly. Wo, wo, wo, we are sad without. Hey, ho, we ask you to return” (p. 161).

In performance, as Alston begins this song, she falters and is hesitant and fidgets through the first four lines but her voice gradually gets stronger (Alston, 2000, p. 162). As the villagers sing, their voices get stronger. At this juncture in the performance, Alston engages the audience by inviting them to participate. Alston (2000) tells them, “[W]ell, it was a good start, but there was something missing. It is the voices of everyone who has ever lost anyone or anything close to them. So you can help the Longnecks sing stronger by using your hands and your voices to chant Anniko’s name” (p. 162). Alston (2000) teaches the audience to clap and chant in a 4/4 rhythmic pattern, “Anniko! Anniko!, Anniko! Anniko!” (p. 162). As the audience chants, Alston sings the song stronger and faster.

By creating an alternate rhythm or polyrhythm, using repetition, with the audience, the message of the story is moved in the direction of the audience. This intensifies the emotion, brings the audience into the story and develops a shared

understanding between the teller and the audience (Okpewho, 1992, Hamlet, 1998, Reed, 2007). In performance, Alston's singing becomes a unifying element with the audience. She explains, "[N]ot only was the audience being unified with me as a storyteller who is going to take them off into a story, but also unified together as one" (Peerless, 2014, p. 401).

As the voices get stronger and stronger, the sound travels into the forest and reaches Anniko. She knew it was the Longnecks calling her home. She followed the voices until she found the path that led to the village. Everyone rejoiced at the return of their daughter and invited her to stay as longed as she wished (p. 161). The chief of the village said to all, including the small hearted man, "[It] is not the length of your neck that is important. It is the goodness of your heart" (p. 162).

Major Contributions To Blackstorytelling

Charlotte Blake Alston wanted to pursue dance as a professional career and for years, "she thought her gift would be through dance if not music" (Meeks, 2003). But her mother, Ms. Carrie Collins Blake, could not perceive of the idea of Alston "going to New York, a city of 'sin' for a 'frivolous job' as a dancer" (Meeks, 2003).

Encouraged and nurtured by her father, John Edward Blake, Sr., her love and respect for literature grew and unfolded into a prodigious career as a woman of words. Blake's level of artistry as a storyteller is an assemblage of physical and emotion skill as well as a spiritual awareness of the traditions of the jeli, the hush harbors of the antebellum south and the Black church. She is comfortable and efficacious in presenting from any of these traditions on any stage in the world-villages in China to the prestigious Timpanogos Storytelling Festival in Orem, Utah, to the Zora Neale Hurston Concert at

the National Association of Black Storytellers Festival and Conference.

Alston performed at the historic Provincetown Playhouse in New York City in 2014. Regina Ress, an adjunct professor at New York University, asked her students to respond to the storytelling event. The following excerpts are from one of the students:

When Alston stepped onstage, I was struck immediately by her presence and ability to make me feel like she was communicating directly to me, even though I was quite a few rows back... I have an image of her eyes, moving and flashing and snapping up to lock right on me (or so it felt) as she was weaving her words and movements together on stage....that was an incredibly powerful experience. I was also struck by the audience at this performance. It was completely different than anything I had ever seen before in terms of the level of participation, engagement, and reciprocity. I sat in front of a woman who was very vocal throughout the performance, responding by saying “yes” or other one-word affirmations throughout Alston’s performance...the audience’s level engagement...made me feel like I was really sharing not just a performance, but an experience with the rest of the people in the room, including Alston herself”. (Gerhardt, 201.,pp.1-2)

The reaction by Kacie Gerhardt, a student in Ress’ “Storytelling in The Classroom” class is not an atypical reaction by an audience member to a performance by Alston, whether a recent recruit to the storytelling community or a skilled performer. I spoke with Dr. Joyce C. Duncan, a performing storyteller for over twenty-five years and a founder of the African Folk Heritage Circle, Inc. in New York City who had also attended the performance at the Provincetown Playhouse. Dr. Duncan declared, “There were many seasoned and professional storytellers in attendance and she [Alston] *held us in the palm of her hand* [emphasis added]. It was an incredible performance!” (personal communication, May, 2014).

Charlotte Blake Alston has “raised the bar’ in the areas of performance, commitment and responsibility to the art form of storytelling for all storytellers. She exhibits an earnestness in the scholarship of African and African American folktales and

songs and her dedication to storytelling organizations, has earned her the respect and esteem of her peers in the storytelling community. However, Alston proclaims the jali or jalinuso of West African as her exemplars (Keeding, 2003; Brother, Sister unite, 2001).

According to D’Jimo Kouyate, (1989) a griot from Senegal, one of the major roles of the jali before the appearance of the Europeans was to maintain “a cultural and historical past with that of the present” (p. 179). In the circle of storytelling and on the continuum of Blackstorytelling, Alston has become an exemplar.

The foregoing discussion amply recalls Amiri Baraka’s (1987) statement that art “is an expression of life” and art “expresses the values of the artist” (p. 23). Through her instrument, her voice, Alston’s vitality and life force renders the emotional peaks and valleys of each character in every story. Thus, inviting the audience to experience life through the art form. Alston’s value system, carefully wrought by her family, community and her own effort, is clearly demonstrated through her work ethic, her commitment to her craft and to the recognition of ancestorism.

As she crafts stories for children, she is always cognizant that children do not perceive the world as adults, emotionally or intellectually. She searches for the perfect word, the perfect phrase for five year olds to understand complex social issues such as injustice and discrimination.

Alston’s venues have accorded her the privilege and responsibility of speaking those stories to audiences across the globe. She is acutely aware of the social, political and spiritual forces inherent in this responsibility and the action demanded by these forces:

Storytelling has opened my ears. Storytelling has opened my eyes. Storytelling has given my heart and spirit a visible form of expression...How many moments

have there been when through your telling-your commitment to the tradition, the craft-ears have been opened, truth has been revealed, and another layer of meaning has been peeled back?...Think of the power we each hold within our hands, within our stories. (Alston, 2009)

As a contemporary African American storyteller, Alston represents an elevation of the artistry with a well-defined discernment of the roles of a twenty-first century jali/jalimuso. As Blackstorytelling continues to adapt to accommodate new struggles, new victories and new technologies, other African American storytellers will emerge to meet those challenges. Chapter 6 will provide a summary of the previous chapters, a conclusion and recommendations for further study.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The previous chapters have provided an examination of African American storytelling in the United States, the genres' antecedents in African orature and the position and prominence of contemporary African American storytellers in supporting, identifying and articulating African American culture. The cultural significations in the narratives evolved to express the changing economic, social and political climates. New artistic forms emerged that reflected new communal structures. But the intent to express the values of African American people, their families and their experiences as subjects and agents in the "context of human experience" (Asante, 2006, p.152) has never waivered. The function of the contemporary African American storyteller parallels Hale's (1998) description of the jali/jalimuso as described in Chapter 1. Contemporary African American storytellers collect oral histories from family and community members and perform stories that convey significant contributions and events of valor in the history of the United States. They sing the protest songs, the jump-rope rhymes, the spirituals. They play musical instruments. They bear witness to the violence in African American communities and to the ongoing struggle for justice.

The aesthetics senses as explicated by Kariamuwelsh Asante have been useful in formulating an analysis for aesthetic value in Blackstorytelling. Critical analysis of any African art form requires an African centered perspective (Keto, 1989, Asante, 1987, Welsh-Asante, 1993) and therefore requires a fundamental knowledge of the "symbols, history, geography, language and conceptual actions such as time, space and elements"

(Welsh-Asante, 1993, p. 9).

The Literature Review revealed the insufficiency of academic literature available on the particular topic of African American storytelling or storytellers. However, engaging a multidisciplinary approach, I reviewed articles that defined and expanded the discourse on African American oral narrative, oral narrative in other cultures and works that address contemporary issues in storytelling. A connecting thread in the articles found in the first two categories, was the discernable dynamic between performer and audience. The audience is a crucial component in the performance of oral narrative as an oral performance cannot exist without an audience (Okpewho, 1992, p. 57). The audience compels the performer to higher levels of artistry or may obligate her to observe discretion with certain stories. In either performance the performer must use symbols, imagery, role models and give examples of wisdom and strength from the culture that the audience recognizes.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5, are examinations of the lives and accomplishments of three contemporary African American storytellers whose works exemplify the principle of the African continuum and its complimentary principle, the African extension. Eugene Redmond (1994) in his essay, "Griots, Bluesicians, Dues-Payers and Pedagogues, African Americans, Autobiographical, 1960s' View of Culture Studies" tells us that within the African continuum, "African things and thoughts predominate wherever cultures of African extraction exist" (p. 122). Subsequently, the African extension principle states that "black African things, when removed from their mother-bases, undergo transmutations and cross-pollinations in multi-cultural contexts" (p. 122). These principles reinforces the Linda James Myers' statement cited in Chapter 1. If the

“physical manifestations of culture” (Myers, 1987, p. 74) change, they become as Redmond (1994) posits, an assemblage of cultures, i.e. “African Brazilian, African Canadian, African Asian, African Caribbean and African American” (p. 122). Blackstorytelling is a materialization and testament to the African American forbearers whose creativity and liberating agency determined a legacy for oral artists.

Conclusion

Linguistically, Blackstorytelling may consist of a polyglot of languages; Anglo-European, Native American, Caribbean Creole, West African and American vernacular expression. The sounds, words, tones, tempo and inflections all bestow a synchronicity to the communicative event that is constantly redefined, regenerated and recreated.

Even so, it is the imagery that provides the emotional connection to the audience. When a storyteller calls forth an image, an entire sequence or network of emotions are called forth, e.g. a beauty salon, barber shop, my first Kwanzaa celebration (Scheub, 1998, p. 23). The first African American storytellers removed or changed the brutal, spirit crushing images of their daily burdens and reinvented them; gave them meaning that was not their present reality. It was a meaning imbued with symbolization of their collective past, cultural and spiritual conscious. Welsh-Asante (1993) teaches us that through this pain and struggle, a victorious consciousness arose (p. 7). Victorious consciousness allowed for the progressive theme of the stories from animal tales and trickster tales to the John cycle of stories to songs and stories of escape and freedom.

Blackstorytelling survived after emancipation and migrated to the North, mid-West and Western states. The stories transformed into ballads, toasts, sermons, raps, story-poems and spoken word. Newly proclaimed identities were embraced, Freedman,

Colored, Negro, Black, Afro-American, African-American, and African. The stories told in the kitchenettes, rent parties, street corners and prisons, again, interpreted their reality, explained their rituals, introduced new legendary figures and recalled history. Cultural forms were created and recreated. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1989) believes that “only black music-making was as important to the culture of African Americans as has been the fine art of storytelling” (p. 17).

The expressive principles of the African aesthetic are present in the stories of the lived experiences of the hip-hop culture. In African and African diasporic cultural traditions, (re)naming or self-naming is a vital component of agency. Similar to the praise names of African cultures, “(R)appers, DJs, graffiti artists, and breakdancers all take on hip-hop names and identities that speak to their role, personal characteristics, expertise, or ‘claim to fame’” (Rose, 1994, p. 36). The scholarly works of Smitherman (1997), Thompson (1996), Roediger (1998) and Osumare (2007) have connected hip hop to the West African griot tradition. From this tradition an “accountability to community grows from a cultural dictate to comment upon one’s changing social dynamics dictated by the aesthetic itself” (Osumare, 2007, p. 27).

Rap is hip hop’s word power. Gottschild (1996) explains:

[R]ap’s form—the rhythmic base, together with the characteristic signifying, or making ironic, double-edged social and personal commentary through rhymed stanzas or couplets—is African. The concept of *Nommo*, the power of the word, is alive and well in hip hop. (p. 138)

The African American storytelling community recognizes and embraces Performance Poetry and its practitioners. Numerous national and regional poets have been invited to perform on the stage at the National Association of Black Storytellers festival and some have received the Zora Neale Hurston Award. Among them are Oscar

Brown, Jr., Sonia Sanchez, Mitch “Granddaddy Junebug” Capel, Haki Madhubuti Lamont “Napalm” Dixon and poet and playwright, John O’Neal. Williams-Witherspoon’s (2011) analysis of African American performance traditions including Performance Poetry, expresses an historic and stylistic connection to the orature of the West African griot/griotte and to the tradition of praise singers. She reminds us that

[I]n presentation, there is a necessary interplay between drums, spirituals and voices and it is incumbent on the speakers to successfully demonstrate group membership by capturing and/or replicating Ebonics or African American Vernacular English (AAVE) with all its ‘epithets, humor and irony’. (p. 204)

Blackstorytelling in its many manifestations will continue with the efforts of the National Association of Black Storytellers, the affiliate organizations and their youth groups. It will continue with the educators who introduce storytelling to students in their classrooms and libraries. It will continue with the intersection of the hip-hop culture and classroom pedagogy. But hear Dr. Kariamua Welsh-Asante (1993), “[R]edefinition and reconstruction require research, commitment and a fundamental understanding of the creative processes, historical factors and cultural legacies of Africa’ (p. 6). African American storytellers and other educators cannot allow the images of the dominant culture, nor the hues and cries of popular culture or the temptations of technology to subjugate or distort African images and symbols. We must continue to support, participate in, bear witness to and affirm other artists and art forms in the community. Because the “[A]frocentric aesthetic will have many forms, structures, perspectives and foundations (Welsh-Asante, 1993, p. 14). And most significantly, we must “keep the African in his own story” (Asante, 2006, p. 155).

May we forever work to recognize, acknowledge and create an African aesthetic that supports and sustains ourselves, our homes and our communities, that we may operate at the highest level of artistic expression. *Ashe!*

Recommendations

The storytellers presented in this study were highly motivated, creative and multitalented. They connected to their communities and to their audiences because of their commitment to the culture, their talents and skills, and social and cultural responsibilities. Because of their authenticity, each in their own time, have advanced professional storytelling and Blackstorytelling along the continuum of Black expressive arts.

However, if this innovative cultural work is to continue, storytellers, folklorists and other academicians, educational and cultural institutions must examine ways to increase awareness, advocacy, accessibility and training.

Recommendation One-Research Studies and Scholarly Advancement

A scholarly interest in storytelling has increased over the past decade as evidenced by the number of dissertations written, papers presented at the American Folklore Society's annual meeting, other professional conferences and papers published in peer reviewed journals. However, challenges to the emergence of this area as a field are still daunting. Although there are journals in other countries that focus on Africana folk tradition, such as Jamaica, there are currently none in the United States (Prahlad, 2005).

In literary analysis, storytelling is often subsumed under the theoretical discourse of folklore. Our beloved Zora Neale Hurston is still the most cited folklorist in African

American folkloristic studies, while the works of other scholars, such as James Mason Brewer, John Roberts, Gerald Davis, Lawrence Levine, Kathryn Morgan, Gladys-Marie Fry and Arthur Huff Fauset are rarely mentioned (Prahlad, 1999). Contemporary folkloristic studies should consider new folkloric forms among teenagers, and the utilization of folkloric forms, e.g. proverbs, sayings, traditional stories among African American professionals and elders.

One of the challenges in preparing this dissertation, was the absence of terminology for the methodology, concepts, techniques and level of skill or proficiency in storytelling and specifically African American storytelling. Terminology was borrowed from several artistic disciplines and African philosophical concepts. But research by Africana scholars in linguistics, dramaturgy, performance theory, folklore and storytelling would contribute to the discourse on storytelling.

Case studies of the impact of cultural heritage on the values, creative expressions, repertoire and sense of purpose of African American storytellers should be investigated. Gender specific and age specific cultural factors, e.g. language, music, print and social media, traditional male roles, traditional female roles, etc. should be considered.

Recommendation Two-In-Depth Examination of Storytelling and Storytellers in

K-12 Classrooms

The majority of studies involving storytelling in the United States and any ethnic group has consisted of storytelling in the classroom or storytelling with a specific group of children. Storyteller Linda Humes' dissertation *African American Storytellers Who Provide Culturally Relevant Education in Urban Public Schools* expands this perspective

as she examines the lived experiences of the storytellers working in the schools, their training as teaching artists and the efficacy of the students to close the achievement gap. Using Paulo Freire's conceptual lens and critical race theory, Humes also examines the pedagogy of the classroom teachers, the empowerment of the parents and the culture of the schools.

Further studies of the impact of storytelling, perhaps on a specific grade level, on the success of student learning is needed. The data collected in these studies would support not only the work of the storytellers, but influence the decision making of principals and administrators to include storytelling in the curriculum.

Recommendation Three-Create and Support Pathways for Training and Mentoring

As mentioned, African American storytellers will emerge to accept the responsibilities and continue the work of the three storytellers described in this work and others who have devoted their careers to this art form. But, how will these storytellers be identified, how will they be trained, what will be their roles in the community? Several regional African American storytelling organizations have organized or support youth programs to train young tellers and provide opportunities for them to tell. The Growing Griots Literacy Learning Program (GGLLP): A Family Literacy Program is supported by the members of the storytelling organization, the Griots' Circle of Maryland Inc. Other major sponsors include the Enoch Pratt Free Library, the Greater Baltimore Urban League the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum and the Chesapeake Employers' Insurance Company. The objectives of the twenty-five week program are to enhance skills in reading, writing, listening, public speaking, critical thinking and following directions. The programs serves students in grades sixth through eleventh and are

eligible to receive learning service hours required for graduation. Students are immersed in the history and culture of African Americans as nationally known storytelling arts performers and workshop presenters assist in the instruction. College students who are former members of the program, often return to mentor and inspire the students. The Growing Griots have performed at the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, the Maryland Library Association Conference and the American Library Association Conference, as well as local libraries in Baltimore City and Baltimore County (GGLLP Brochure, 2015). Some Growing Griots have gained sufficient skills and confidence to perform at libraries as solo performers. Founder and Director, Stanley Butler believes that “Adults need to organize our youth. It is important for adults to understand their concerns and motives and what engages them.” (private conversation). Butler and other storyteller/instructors reflect upon the African oral tradition as they consider the curriculum and activities. The students hear a professional teller tell a story or are given a traditional folktale to read. The students are then asked to retell the story employing contemporary issues and vocabulary. Proverbs, Kwanzaa, living biographies (solo performances of historical figures), song and drumming are included in presentations. Brother Butler’s aim is to create “culture bringers”.

The Kuumba Storytellers of Georgia’s youth storytelling club, the Tattle Tales, perform regularly at the Callanwolde Fine Arts Center, Atlanta, Georgia the Roswell Visitors Center, Roswell, Georgia and in libraries and churches in the Atlanta area. They also performed at Bear on the Square, a Southeast Regional Spotlight Event for Storytelling in Dahlonega, Georgia. They have performed at Tellebration, a national night of storytelling sponsored by the National Storytelling Network with three other

youth storytelling groups in the Atlanta area. The Tattle Tales meet twice a month at a local library throughout the year. They receive coaching and training by observing professional storytellers, and participating in vocal exercises, and voice training. Youth tellers are also given the opportunity to attend local and national storytelling festivals, concerts workshops and auditions. In 2014 Kuumba Storytellers of Georgia received a grant to collect stories from the Sudanese community in Carson, Georgia. Kuumba adult and youth tellers will produce a CD of selected stories and donate the proceeds to build a well for a community in the Sudan. One of the objectives of the Tattle Tales youth storytelling club is to honor the ancestors by telling their stories. Esther Culver is the director of the Tattle Tales youth storytelling club. (“Kuumba Storytellers of Georgia”, n.d.)

As regional and local storytelling organizations focus on the youth in their community, pathways for mentoring and training adults must be established. Many storytelling organizations offer training and encourage tellers of all levels to share “stories in progress” at their monthly meetings. Feedback is offered with suggestions to enhance the story and storytellers with more experience often volunteer as mentors. The National Association of Black Storytellers Festival and Conference offers workshops for tellers of all levels. As experienced tellers interact with novice tellers in meetings workshops, concerts or one-to-one mentoring, traditional values in Blackstorytelling, identity, repertoire, challenges in the day-to-day business of storytelling will be imparted.

The Internet and other digital platforms have, of course, impacted the outreach of storytelling and storytellers. Further discussion of this impact will follow. But mention here of the National Association of Black Storytellers efforts to train and mentor their

members via electronic sources is noteworthy. Through their website, the organization offers interactive training webinars with storytelling professionals, business professionals and the opportunity to chat with one of the founders, Linda Goss, on the history, development and future implications for African American storytelling. Past webinars have included “Blackstorytelling Got BASS: Birth, Arrival, Survival, Sustainability” presented by members of Keepers of the Culture, Inc., Philadelphia’s Afrocentric Storytelling Group and “Assessing the Artistic Growth and Development of the Storyteller” with Master Storyteller Charlotte Blake Alston.

Recommendation Four-Awareness and Advocacy of Blackstorytelling

In recent conversations with members of my home storytelling organization, Keepers of the Culture, Inc., Philadelphia’s Afrocentric Storytelling Group, I discovered that in social conversation, if the question arises, “What do you do (for a living)?” and the answer is “I am a storyteller”, further explanation is rarely needed. This is a huge departure and a tremendous leap from a decade ago. Professional storytellers have become involved in social and political organizations, sororities and fraternities, genealogical societies, historical societies, oral history projects, and home-schooling organizations. The increased participation in community organizations helps to build an awareness of the art form and builds audiences for venues. And of course a strong social media presence also helps to educate the audience.

African American storytellers continue to offer mutual support of each other and the projects and events of other African American storytellers. This support also offers an informal training and education for other tellers. It is imperative that African American tellers encourage tellers new to the profession to include stories of current

social justice issues. The historical stories of oppression and injustice provide a foundation for inquiry, but *a luntā continua* and so must our stories. In 2013, the National Association of Black Storytellers Inc., sponsored an online video storytelling contest in response to the Trayvon Martin tragedy and the culture of violence in the African American community.

Advocacy is awareness with an action component. After educating the audience/community, storytellers and storytelling organizations must advocate for the art form with local, state and federal agencies that define and fund the arts. Due to eight years of arduous effort and commitment, ART Force a committee of the National Storytelling Network has successfully convinced the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) to revise the National Standards Artistic Discipline List to include storytelling as a sub-discipline under Theatre Arts. Before this monumental change, storytelling was **only** listed under Folklife/Traditional Arts. The definition of a folk art by the NEA is traditions “shaped by the aesthetics and values of a shared culture and are passed from generation to generation, most often within family and community through observation, conversation, and practice” (“National Storytelling Network, n.d.). Many storytellers had difficulty meeting this definition. The addition of this new category will allow storytellers to be viable applicants to arts organizations, educational institutions and arts presenters.

Storytellers must continue to advocate for inclusion and encourage art councils to include storytellers or someone with a knowledge of storytelling on panels so the art form can be adjudicated competently.

Recommendation Five-Acceptance of and Creative Use of New Technologies

As new technologies emerge, creative energies will arise to embrace these new tools. Storytelling presentations by African American storytellers, can be found across the Internet on You Tube, websites and embedded in blogs. African American storytelling organizations and individual tellers are present on Facebook and Twitter. Social Media has given storytellers a wider audience, a world wide audience, and a larger stage in which to perform. As a result, storytelling as a profession and as an art form is gaining equal footing with other performative arts. Arts organizations are using technology in efficient ways. Young Audiences, a non-profit organization that works with educational systems and the arts community to provide arts education to children, now offers their roster of artists on their website instead of a print catalogue. Showcases and auditions for Young Audiences and other arts organizations can now be filmed or video taped and uploaded to the reviewer or other viewers on their channel. Electronic submissions have reduced costs and increased efficiency for artists and potential clients. These formats have become excellent resources for home-schoolers who may not have access to artistic performances. Educators also search Pinterest for lesson plans, crafts and activities. Storytellers have the opportunity to “pin” information and position themselves as experts in this area.

Storyteller listservs have appeared that allow spirited discussion among professionals to discuss issues pertinent to the profession, the genre and the art form. Storytell, a listserv sponsored by the National Storytelling Network, invites professional storytellers, amateur storytellers, people concerned with the history of storytelling, people who enjoy listening to stories and those who speculate about the place of storytelling in the 21st century (“Storytell: A Worldwide Online Community”).

Creative classroom teachers have always integrated multiple modes of storytelling into their classroom, e.g. oral, print, storyboards, felt boards, dramatic exercises, audio and video storytelling performances. Ware (2006) insists that classrooms that are currently “print and story rich” produce students who are able to incur “sense-making and meaning making” in multiple modes (p. 47). Sophisticated computer technology will allow students to expand these learning strategies and integrate a multilayered text of voice, images and music.

It is imperative that African American storytellers embrace, seek training for and utilize these new technologies. Communication and collaboration with storytellers in the African diaspora via the Internet will extend our knowledge of storytelling, expand our understanding of cultural values and increase the repertoire of stories by and about people of African descent.

Further explorations of Blackstorytelling and its performative dynamics in the artistic expression of African Americans is required to fully comprehend African American communication systems. African American Storytelling crosses the boundaries of gender, social class and age, but the stories come from the roots of African American culture and shared experiences (Smitherman, 1994, p.2)

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