



How the African American Storyteller Impacts the Black Family and Society

Curriculum Unit 90.04.05
by Barbara P. Moss

Purpose

This curriculum unit has been prepared for use during Black History Month. The population targeted is a predominantly Black and Hispanic group of sixth graders who have a limited background in Black History. The unit is intended to familiarize students with Black writers-storytellers, their works and the impact that their works have left on the Black family and society.

Objectives

1. Increase student awareness as to the emergence of the Black storyteller.
2. Increase student awareness as to why Blacks write.
3. Increase student awareness as to who some of the Black storytellers are and their work.
4. Increase student awareness as to how the Black storyteller has left and is continuing to leave indelible prints on the Black family and society.

Introduction

The Black oral heritage is alive and growing among people of African blood, whose ancestors presumably originated storytelling with the creation of civilization in Africa, and among other ethnic groups as well. Calls for storytellers are crisscrossing the nation and much of the world. Who are these storytellers and what kinds of stories are they telling?

Those persons who have mastered the spoken word are forming and adapting stories that reach hearts and

minds of listeners in many ways.

In the United States, the AfricanAmerican storyteller will sometimes create new words and phrases to get a point across. Many times, the AfricanAmerican storyteller will use dialect to preserve the authenticity of a particular story.

Black storytelling is an art which has been mastered by many for generations.

Emergence of the Black Writer StoryTeller

The Black writerstoryteller emerged during slavery. As with other aspects of their verbal art, slaves established in their tales important points of continuity with their African past. This is not to say that slave tales in the United States were necessarily African. Scholars will need more complete indices of African tale types and motifs than now exist before they can determine the origin of slave tales with any definitiveness. Comparison of slave tales with those guides to African tales that do exist reveals that a significant number were brought directly from Africa; a roughly similar percentage were tales common in both Africa and Europe, so that, while slaves may have brought the tale type with them, its place in their lore could well have been reinforced by their contact with whites and another group of tales were learned in the New World both through Euro-American influence and through independent creation.

The extended debate concerning the exact point of origin of these tales has taken precedence over analysis of their meaning and function. Cultural continuities with Africa were not dependent upon importation and perpetuation of specific folk tales in their pristine form. It was in the place that tales occupied in the lives of the slaves, the meaning slaves derived from the, and the ways in which slaves used them culturally and physically that the clearest resemblances with their African past could be found. Thus, although Africans brought to the New World were inevitably influenced by the tales they found there and frequently adopted white tale plots, motifs, and character, what is more important is not the mere fact of these borrowings but their nature. AfroAmerican slaves did not borrow indiscriminately from the whites among whom they lived. A careful study of their folk lore reveals that they tended to be most influenced by those patterns of Euro-American tales which in terms of functional meaning and aesthetic appeal had the greatest similarity to the tales with deep roots in their ancestral homeland. Regardless of where slave tales came from, the essential point is that, with respect to language, delivery of characterization, and plot, slaves quickly made them their own and through them revealed much about themselves and their world. ¹

Slave tales were almost totally devoid of cosmological myths which attempt to render factual accounts of all natural and divine phenomena. Something approaching myths of this nature, which Malinowski has defined as characterized by "a retrospective, ever present, live actuality," did of course exist among antebellum slaves, but they were confined almost exclusively to the slaves' sacred songs and sermons; they played little or no role in oral tales. The closest the slaves came to these myths was in their creation legends, which paralleled many of the creation stories of nineteenth century colonized, christianized Africans. Some of these were clearly influenced by the ubiquitous AngloAmerican myths which insisted that blackness resulted from Gods curse on Cain or Ham. ²

Another story citing creation of blackness is reported to have taken place in Tarboro, North Carolina in 1828. The story appeared in the *Free Press* and it stated that the devil tried to emulate God's creation of Adam. He

had no clay so he got mud from the swamp. He used thick curly moss for hair. When he looked at his creation he was disgusted with the outcome. He kicked it on the shins and hit it on the nose, and this supposedly accounts for the physical attributes of the black race. Still another version states that the devil became so furious at an ape who refused to answer any of his questions that he turns him into a black man. In 1878 an elderly former slave in Louisiana accounted for the preeminence of West Europeans by explaining that after God had created all the peoples of the world—Negroes, Chinese, Indians, and so on—He exhausted the mound of earth He was using and so seized a butterfly and an ant, creating a Frenchman out of the former and an Englishman out of the latter. The importance of these white stories is obvious, and its a mistake to assume that the slaves took them literally. There are indications that the Blacks telling them frequently were aware of their original source. “En dat’s how de w’ite man dun ‘count fo’ de niggah bein’ on Arth,” a Black story teller concluded in one such story. ³

Perhaps more typical, and certainly more original, were stories which had God begin His creation with the black race. In one version the original colored peoples discovered a body of water that had the power of washing away their dark skin color. Those who reached the water first came out pure white; as the supply was used up the skin color remained darker until the last to reach it were able to dip in only their palms and the soles of their feet. The assumption of a black creation allowed slaves to stand the white creation myths on their heads. In 1859 Harden E. Taliaferro a white Baptist preacher, recalled the teachers of Charles Gentry, a black slave in the rural North Carolina country in which he grew up in the 1820’s. According to Rev. Gentry, the first men—Adam, Cain, Abel, and Seth were all black—“jet black.” ⁴

Although slave tales included nothing approaching the intricate genealogies and historical narratives common in the African oral tradition, they did contain a historical dimension. The tales slaves related to one another were not confined to fictionalized stories, Richard Dorson notes that American Blacks and Whites related local tradition, family history and personal experiences with as much gusto as any folk tale and sometimes these localized and personalized narratives prove to be folk tales in disguise. Henry W. Ravenel’s childhood recollections of life on his father’s plantation which was inhabited by 200 slaves were vivid ones. He remembered stories that were told by some of the old Blacks. The old timers were natives of Africa and would tell stories of the old country. They told of elephants as big as houses and snakes as big as a person’s body.

It was not uncommon for slaves to refer to their African root among themselves. “Whilst us was all awukin away at house and yard job’s de old folkses would tell us’ bout times ‘fore us were borned.” Paul Smith related as a preface to an elaborate story of how red ships were used to capture Africans. Luke Dixon who was born a slave in 1855 in Virginia remembers how slaves were herded into the ship and sold. The slaves that were left bound until the ship could come back for them died.

Shack Thomas, was born a slave in Florida in 1834. He described how his father would spend hours at night telling him and his brothers about his capture in Africa and his experiences as a slave in America. Africans fore bears were often referred to with affection and pride.

Africanborn slaves were associated with conjure and magical powers as exemplified in the frequently told stories of Africans who put up with the treatment accorded to them by whites in America as long as they could and then simply rose up and flew back to Africa. In some versions they delayed their escape until they could teach their Americanborn relatives and friends the power of flight as well. After relating such a story James Moore of Georgia added: “From duh things I see myself blieb dat dey could do dis.”

While the testimony of some former slaves indicates a detailed knowledge of the customs, religions, garb, and

food of their African ancestor, for the most part memories of Africa became confined to stories of capture and of the Middle Passage.

Slave versions of history, like all slave tales, were enhanced by the manner of their delivery. The oral inventiveness of good storytellers, who appear to have been relatively uncommon in black culture, was a source of delight and stimulation to their audiences. Their narratives were interlarded with chants, mimicry, rhymes, and songs. They talked animatedly, especially in the dialogues and changed the voice to represent the different animals. Nothing was too difficult for a storyteller to represent: the chanting sermon of a black preacher and the responses of his entire congregation, the sounds of a railway engine, the cries of barnyard animals, the eerie moans of spectral beings, all formed an integral part of black tales.

Many times through an entire performance the audience would comment, correct, laugh, respond, making the folktale as much of a communal experience as the spiritual or the sermon. ⁵

The storytellers who were able to most effectively spread the word had the ability to “talk dat talk” and “walk dat walk.” In other words they were able to grab the imagination of the listener and hold on to it for as long as they could, conjuring up images of the good and the bad, the weak and the strong, and the trickster and the fool.

The storyteller today goes by many names. Today they are called preachers, healers, teachers, comedians, blues singers, poets, dancers, rappers, liars, painters and historians. To hear a story teller is to hear the drum, the heartbeat of Africa. To see them tell a story is to experience highlights of African ritual, at its best, a total theatrical performance. ⁶

Why Do Blacks Write?

From slavery to the present time, Blacks have written out of a need to be heard. Blacks have written out of the need to be understood or just express their feelings about situations and issues. Some Blacks have written about their disappointments, while others have written about happy times—births, weddings, baptisms or any celebration which there is or was a coming together of Blacks in mass. Some situations and circumstances prompted literary explosions of feelings and emotions which eventually became best sellers and even movies.

The African storyteller began communicating thoughts and ideas as far back as slavery. The slaves communicated their thoughts and ideas many times through song. One can readily understand how a slave who had to work from approximately 4 o'clock in the morning until it became too dark for them to see, would have a story to tell. One can also understand how a slave who worked from four in the morning and was given only fifteen minutes at noon to swallow his or her cold bacon for lunch would have a story to tell. It is also understandable that a slave who went to work at four in the morning, was given ten or fifteen minutes for lunch and was made to work until the middle of the night when the moon was full, would have a story to tell.

Many Black writers approach their work with a zeal and sense of urgency that would make one wonder, “Will you be around next year?” Some Black writers feel they are obligated to “tell it like it is,” or to at least express another point of view.

There are some African-American writers who have approached their literary wonder or disaster with

resentment, bitterness and even anger.

For some Black writers/storytellers, life's experiences have left them with memories that only death can erase. Many times these kinds of memories are the ones that we read about or sing. These writers/storytellers sing what I will call the "I have something important to say" song. Some of the storytellers that fall into this category are Winnie Mandela, William H. Wiggins, Jr., and Kathryn L. Morgan to mention a few.

Black song had many functions both in Africa and America. In Africa, songs, tales, proverbs and verbal games served the dual purpose of not only preserving communal values and solidarity but also providing occasions for the individual to transcend, at least symbolically, the inevitable restriction of his environment and society by permitting him to express deeply held feelings which ordinarily could not be verbalized.

Among a number of African peoples, for example, periods were set aside when the inhabitants were encouraged to gather together and through the medium of song, dance and tales to openly express their feelings about each other and their leaders. William Bosman, the Dutch traveler and official who lived in Africa from 1688 to 1702, described a ceremony which he had twice witnessed on the Gold Coast as being a procession preceded by a Feast of Eight Days, accompanied with all manner of singing, skipping, dancing, mirth, and jollity. Mockery or lampooning was allowed and scandal so highly exalted, that they could sing of all the faults, villainies and frauds of their superiors as well as inferiors without punishment, or so much as the least interruption. More than two hundred years later the English anthropologist R. S. Rattray witnessed this same annual eight-day Apo ceremony. All around him the Ashanti freely chanted some of their normally repressed feelings.

In the custom of *bo akutia* the Ashanti practiced an ingenious vituperation in which a person brought a friend to the home of a chief or some other official who had offended him but of whom he was afraid. In the presence of this personage the aggrieved individual pretended to have an altercation with his friend whom he verbally assailed and abused freely. Once he had relieved himself of his pent-up feelings in the hearing of the person against whom they were really intended, the brief ritual ended with no overt acknowledgment by any of the parties involved of what had actually taken place.

In the days of their kings, the Dahomeans too, had annual rites in which the subjects were encouraged to invent songs and parables mocking their rulers and reciting the injustices they had suffered. They possessed numerous additional outlets as well. Melville and Frances Herskovits witnessed the monthly social dance known as *avogan* in which the residents of a given quarter of the city of Abomey satirized those of another section. Crowds would gather to watch the display and the dancing, but most of all to listen to the songs and to laugh at the ridicule to which are held those who have offended members of the quarter giving the dance. Names are not usually mentioned.

The psychological release these practices afforded seems to have been well understood. An Ashanti high priest explains that everyone has a *sunsum* (soul) that may get hurt or knocked about or become sick, and make the body ill. Very often poor health is caused by the evil and the hate that another has in his head against another, or of something that person has done to you, and that, too causes your *sunsum* to fret and become sick. Our fathers knew this to be the case, and so they ordained a time, once every year, when every man, woman, and slave, should have freedom to speak out just what was in their head, to tell their neighbors just what they thought of them, and of their actions, and not to only their neighbors, but also the King or Chief. When a man spoke freely, he would feel his *sunsum* cool and be quieted and the *sunsum* of the other person would be quieted also. Utilization of verbal art for this purpose was widespread throughout Africa and was not confined to those ceremonial occasions when one could directly state one's feelings. Through innuendo,

metaphor, and circumlocution the Ashanti, Dahomeans, Chopi, Ibo, Ewe, Yoruba, Junkun, Bashi, Tiv, Hausa, and other African peoples could utilize their songs as outlets for individual release without disturbing communal solidarity.

The exact meaning of many of the songs that slaves sang were difficult to decipher and may be only a compilation of nonsense verses, but we should not come to this conclusion too easily as contemporary whites would do. Slaves frequently sang songs about each other which were incomprehensible to whites.

The slaves used the subtitles of their songs to comment on the whites around them in other forms of expression. Harriette Brent Jacobs recorded that during the Christmas season slaves ridiculed stingy whites by singing “Poor Massa, so dey say; Down in de heel, so dey say; got no money so day say” and so on. ⁸

According to William H. Wiggins, Jr., in African American culture, the black preacher is the master. His verbal art covers African American communal life like the brier patch did Brer Rabbit. And, like Brer Rabbit, their favorite trickster hero, African Americans have instinctively sought protection and reassurance from a hostile world and uncertain life in the myriad stories told by their ministers. The black preacher comforts bereaved families with pleasant anecdotes about the deceased family member. He also affirms those same families happiness and pride at weddings, anniversaries, baptisms, picnics, and countless other occasions of celebrations with remarks that also include well told jokes. The black preacher inspires his congregation to challenge the racial prejudice that they encounter everyday with a series of dramatically retold biblical stories. This verbal thicket is the first line of cultural defense against the racial and human problems of life for many African Americans.

The black preacher continually sows three types of narrative seeds in order to keep his oral edge impenetrable. First, there are personal narratives; these are stories that the black preacher fashions out of his own life. In many ways these stories are a variant of their testimonies that members of his congregation give during the Wednesday night prayer service. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Reverend Jesse Jackson have been skilled sowers of this narrative seed. Dr. King referred on several occasions to the frustration he experienced while attempting to explain to his daughter Yolanda reasons why she could not attend Atlanta’s Fun Town amusement park. By the same token, Reverend Jackson cast some of the same narrative seeds during his address to the 1988 Democratic National Convention. In an attempt to inspire poor blacks to vote, Reverend Jackson returned again and again to the refrain: “I understand when ... ” Between each repetition he would tell his audience of his own personal encounters with poverty, hunger, despair, and the like.

Biblical stories are the second type of narrative seed sown by black preachers. Just as lawyers must learn the legal statues of the states in which they practice, and actors must memorize their scripts before stepping on the stage or going before a movie or television camera, so, too, must the black preacher master the Bible from cover to cover or “from Genesis to Revelation” as his congregation would say. The more familiar they become with the word the better they are at improvising, weaving a biblical character, familiar verse, and or story into their sermons. James Weldon Johnson captured the poetry eloquence of these stories in *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927), a collection of seven poems based on the black preachers dramatic retelling of such well known biblical stories as “The Prodigal Son” and “The Creation.” The Late Reverend C. L. Franklin, Father of Aretha Franklin, was a master teller of these types of tales.

Jokes are the third type of narrative sown by black preachers. Humor has always been a cultural element in the African American religious experience. Young black preachers are reminded of this fact by their elders who on occasion admonish them that it is just as important to make the people laugh as it is to make them cry.

Ossie Davis who is a very well known playwright harvested some of the fruits from this verbal bush in order to write his popular Broadway musical, *Purlie Victorious* in 1963. The Reverend Ralph David Abernathy was a master teller of humorous tales or jokes. During the civil rights era he consistently demonstrated that narrative gift of being able to select and tell a joke that would lower the fears or raise the courage of the nonviolent demonstrators. Reverend Abernathy's humorous depictions of "Miss Ann" and "Mr. Charlie," African American folk designations of white women and white men, energized many meetings and marches of their civil rights movement.

The continuing fascination and enjoyment that many African Americans derived from listening to their pastors tell these types of stories is an irrefutable affirmation of the fact that the masses of black people are stuck as tightly to their storytelling black preachers as Brer Rabbit was to the Tar Baby.

Black Writers Storytellers and Their Works

Dr. Martin Luther King

The Late Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a tender and gentle man who fought endlessly for the simple recognition of human dignity. Aside from being an apostle of nonviolence, he was a drum major who believed in freedom and justice for all. ³

Dr. King was an articulate and eloquent storyteller. One story that he told extremely well was that of Mrs. Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the Jim Crow section of the bus. The event took place December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama. Mrs. Rosa Parks, an attractive Negro seamstress boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus to return home after her work day at Montgomery Fair— of Montgomery, Alabama's leading department stores. Mrs. Parks worked long hours on her feet and upon boarding the bus, she plopped her tired body in the first seat behind the section reserved for whites. The driver of the bus ordered her and three other blacks to move to the back of the bus in order to make room for white passengers. Mrs. Parks did not move, but the other three blacks quickly moved. Mrs. Parks was arrested and after word of her arrest reached the masses of blacks, it was agreed that blacks should boycott the buses. The black people in Montgomery, Alabama worked together. The buses were boycotted. Dr. Martin Luther King, Dr. Ralph David Abernathy, and other concerned citizens led a nonviolent, peaceful, and successful boycott. Dr. King stated that the method to boycott was used to give birth to justice and freedom and to urge men to comply with the law of the land.

Maya Angelous

Maya Angelou, another eloquent storyteller writer grew up in Arkansas and California during the 1920's and 1930's. Maya has written of how different her education was from that of her white classmates. She states that past participles were learned by all in the classroom, but in the street and at home, the blacks learned to drop s's from plurals and suffixes from past tense verbs. At school during a given situation students might respond with "that's not unusual," but street language, meeting the same situation, "It be's that way

sometimes” was very easily said.

Maya’s *Week End Glory* is a very interesting account of a black woman who works all week in a factory, but on weekends she goes out on the town. People talk about her and speculate. The woman in question feels people who ridicule her should watch her on Saturday night if they want to learn to live life right. She said he life “ain’t heaven,” “but it sho ain’t hell.” She says she isn’t on top, but that’s fine with her because if she’s able to work and “get paid right” and have luck to be black on Saturday night—she’s sitting on top of the world. ¹¹

James Baldwin

James Baldwin was a brilliant storyteller who excelled in spite of a cruel, overbearing father, bullying Harlem schoolmates, and a white society that had no appreciation for a wiryframed Black boy with distinctly African features.

Baldwin is famous for *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, which is a poignant account of the Atlanta child murders. *Blues for Mister Charlie* and *Another Country* are also superb works of this talented storyteller.

Blues for Mister Charlie is a play based on the case of Emmett Till—the Black teenager who was murdered in Mississippi in 1955. The murderer was acquitted. His brother who helped him commit the crime, later became a deputy sheriff in Rulesville, Mississippi. After his acquittal, he recounted facts of the murder to William Bradford Huie, who wrote it all down in an article called “Wolf Whistle.”

Winnie Mandela

Winnie Mandela and her husband, Nelson, have become living symbols of protest against the apartheid government of South Africa. She was separated for more than twenty years from her husband because of his imprisonment during most of their marriage.

In 1969, Winnie and twentyone women and men were arrested under the Terrorism Act. She was held in solitary confinement for sixteen months. After her release she wrote her account of *Solitary Confinement*.

Winnie Mandela stated that at the time of her arrest she had just seen a heart specialist. The security branch was aware of this condition and she feels they arrested her in hopes that her condition would worsen in prison, and that whatever happened could be attributed to natural causes.

In the beginning, the cell in which she was held was so small that if she stretched her hands she touched both walls. She could barely exercise. The only thing she had in the cell was a plastic bottle with about five glasses of water, a homemade sanitary bucket, three blankets and a sisal mat.

Winnie felt that being held without the ability to communicate was one of the cruelest things one human being could do to another. She was transferred to the condemned cell after being held for one week. The condemned cell means a cell that holds prisoners who are going to be executed. In the condemned cell, there were two grille doors besides the prison door. To this day, she remembers that bunch of keys clicking, the

noise that they would deliberately make in the stillness and solitude of a prison life, she actually felt they were hitting the inner core of her soul.

The lights were never switched off, and she had a floodlight night and day. She lost track of time. Her meals were always brought in by the same wardress who would turn the sanitary bucket upside down, place the food on it, and kick it into the cell.

Adjusting to solitary confinement was difficult. Many times she felt that she was talking with her children. She actually conducted conversations as if they were in the cell with her.

Keeping her sanity was difficult. There was absolutely nothing to do, so she began to look for ants. Ants and flies became company for her. When Winnie was given anything, it was a Bible. One day a Swanipole threw a Bible at her face and told her to "Pray so that your God can get you out of this cell."

The Swanipole was the one who murdered a lot of her people while they were incarcerated. He was the horror of Pretoria Central. Winnie was interrogated day and night for seven days and seven nights. When the guards changed teams, Swanipole rubbed his hands and said he was waiting for the moment when they would break her completely.

By the time they interrogated her, they knew everything. There was nothing they didn't know. The Swanipole managed to break a few of those who were interrogated before her.

The human body devises its own defensive mechanisms. Winnie began to have fainting spells. This was the only time she got relief from the interrogation.

She needed medical attention as she had begun to urinate blood. Her body was stiff and swollen like a balloon, but did not stop the interrogators. They continued to harass her.

Winnie Mandela became a hardened woman as a result of her brutal treatment. She feels the security branch is responsible for her being the soldier at heart that she is today.

Jackie "Moms" Mabley

The role of black comedians as storytellers in fostering and reflecting a sense of community is well illustrated in the career of Jackie "Moms" Mabley which spanned most of this century. Born Loretta Mary Aiken in North Carolina around the turn of the century, Moms Mabley began her career at the age of fourteen as a performer on the black vaudeville circuit. In 1923 she went to Harlem, where she appeared for several years at Connie's Inn and then spent the remainder of the 1920's and the following decades touring Negro theaters in black urban centers. In the late 1950's and 1960's she was at the peak of her career; a career which despite performances at Playboy Clubs and on televisions, was still largely confined to black audiences. The extent of her popularity in the black community can be gauged by the fact that during the 1960's seventeen albums of her comedy routines were recorded and at least two of them sold more than a million copies each. Bill Cosby has testified that as a youngster in Philadelphia he went to the Uptown Theatre to see Moms Mabley whenever he could afford it, sometimes sitting through four shows: "It was over for me the minute she ambled on stage in her chic, early American castoff outfit. When she started talking about her young men, I knew she was peeping at me, but I was cool. Then she would go into that weird 'Moms Shuffle' and that was it. I was here

forever.”

The appeal of Mabley’s humor was precisely its degree of folkishness. Her antique clothing, her easy manner, her sense of kinship with her audiences by her references to them as her “children” her lack of pretentiousness, the easy familiarity of—her language, her movements, her dialogue, were at the core of her vast popularity. Sitting on a chair on stage, she would often begin her routine saying confidentially and conversationally, “I got somethin’ to tell you!” In most of her appearances she lost no time establishing bonds of identity with her listeners. “Thank you, thank you, children, and home folks, and kin folks,” she greeted an audience in Washington, D.C., assuring them, “I’m telling you I’m glad to be at home. And I had my first real meal in months [laughter]. My niece cooked me some hog mawwws [laughter], and some cracklin’ corn bread [laughter], and a few greens on the side [laughter]. Thank the Lord I’m talking to people that know what I’m talking about [prolonged laughter and applause]. Traditional foods were often the vehicle she chose to create an air of community and familiarity. She told a Philadelphia audience that her folks down South had sent her something during hog killing time: “They shipped me some of that meat, you understand what I meean. They shipped me some of them back bones with a whole lot of meat on it. Not like these neck bones you get up here. When they say neck bone, they mean neck bones.”

Recognition was the focal point of Moms Mabley’s humor. Many of her jokes were familiar. In her routines a widow again reminds those who criticize her for having a fifteenyearold child when her husband has been dead for twenty years that “He’s dead, I ain’t.” A southern sheriff again assures his black prisoner, “I’m gonna get you a good lawyer and see that you get a fair trial. And then I’m gonna hang you.” A black customer demonstrates his prowess with a switch blade knife peeling and coring an apple in mid air forcing a southern white gas station attendant to treat him with respect and call him “mister.” An old lady (in this case Moms Mabley herself) again responds to the question of what denomination she wants her stamps or traveler’s checks in by saying, “Baptist.” An expectant Negro voter in the South is again confronted with a “literacy test” consisting of a headline in a Chinese newspaper. As important as the retelling of traditional jokes was, the familiarity of Moms Mabley’s humor consisted not in its material—ulk of which was original and topical— in its style and intent. Her jokes were her own, but the contours of her humor were so traditional that it was probably indistinguishable from folk humor to her audiences.

Moms Mabley dealt with her audiences not as a professional entertainer but as a member of their community. Her audiences responded as participants laughing, commenting, urging her on to speak for them all in cathartic, integrative ritual of laughter. ¹⁴

Black WriterStoryteller Impacts on the Black Family and Society

The Black writerstoryteller has impacted the Black family and society in a number of ways. The Black writer’s works have served as a source of entertainment. Many Blacks have gotten into serious comedy. Others have made it big in the field of music as rappers. Rapping is a way of spreading the word or telling a story. In the late 1980’s, rappers dominated the music scene. One rapper told a story this way: I’m a storytellerWith a story to tellI can tell ‘em loudI can tell ‘em wellI don’t need a microphone where I talkI don’t need a chair and etc. Rappers appeal to almost all age groups—ially young people. Most rappers do tell stories through rapping. Heavy D and the Boys, MC Hammer and Kwame are some rappers that most young people enjoy listening to.

Black families tend to get together just to listen to their favorite song stylist or just watch their favorite

comedian on TV. Prince, Miki Howard, Mariah Carey, and Inner City are Black storytellers. They are singers and they appeal to most audiences—Black and white. When Mariah Carey sings “Vision of Love” swaying or finger tapping immediately begin. Her songs have that kind of effect. Prince tells his stories not only through his music, but also by the way that he moves on stage. Janet Jackson is another song stylist who tells many love stories through her music. Micki Howard’s “Rap on Your Window Pane” is a good love story told musically.

Bill Cosby, Arsenio Hall and Oprah Winfrey are entertainers who impact not only the Black family, but whites as well. They are not “traditional” storytellers, but their messages and delivery is indicative of the impact they’re having on society—no one wants to miss their TV appearance or movie when such is the case.

Redd Foxx, Dick Gregory and Eddie Murphy are humorous storytellers but for people who are more intellectually inclined, Kathryn L. Morgan who was one of the first African-American women to receive her Ph.D. in folklore provides entertainment at that level. She is currently associate professor of history at Swarthmore College. She is the author of *Children of Strangers*. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was a Nobel Peace Prize winner falls into the same category as Kathryn Morgan. He is the author of *Strength to Love, Why We Can’t Wait* and *Stride Toward Freedom*.

Jack and Rosa Maddox, a slave couple who managed to stay together despite hardships had their life story recorded by the Federal Writers’ Project between 1934 and 1941.

Society has also been impacted by stories from Pearl Primus who is very well known. Some of her works are *Hard Times Blues* and *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*. Yolanda D. King, daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr., is an actress, producer and director. Yolanda, along with Attallah Shabazz, daughter of Malcolm X are founders of Nucleus, a theatrical touring company which performs “Stepping into Tomorrow.” Zora Neal Harston contributed much to society. She was a folklorist, novelist, anthropologist, and celebrated daughter of the Harlem Renaissance. Some of her works are: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mules and Men*. Nikki Giovanni, Houston Baker, Jr., J. Mason Brewer, Oscar Brown, Jr., and Tejumola F. Ologboni who is one of the “biggest liars” in the country are just a few Black writers/storytellers. Our society is much richer as a result of their contributions.

Lesson Plans (1)

Week 1 February 4, 1991 February 8, 1991

Monday—Tuesday—Wednesday

Objective Introduce students to the emergence of the Black writer/storyteller

Procedure Have students define storyteller.

Have students try to imagine what it would be like to be a storyteller during slavery.

Have students draw and color pictures of Black storytellers.

Have students write stories that slaves probably would have told during slavery.

Students should read orally and discuss the emergence of the Black writer/storyteller

Thursday Review Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday discussions.

Friday Quiz (sample)

1. What is a storyteller?
2. When did the Black writer/storyteller emerge? Who was Henry W. Ravenel?
4. Shack Thomas was ———.
5. Today's storyteller has a number of names. What are they? Give one example of each.

Lesson Plans (2)

Week 2—February 11, 1991–February 15, 1991

Monday—Tuesday—Wednesday

Objective *Introduce students to reasons why Blacks write.*

Procedure *Have students envision themselves as slaves being mistreated.*

Have students envision being sold as slaves and separated from their parents.

Have students tell what they think it was like to ride the bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1952.

Have students write a skit for a family of 10 living in a four room house with dad being ill and mom being the only breadwinner.

Have students cite reasons that would make poor Blacks feel the need to put their feelings in print. Have students read orally the reasons why Blacks write. Break into small groups for discussion. After discussion, bring the most important reasons for Blacks writing to the whole class and the class can discuss the issues at hand.

Thursday Students should be encouraged to write out feelings that emanated from Monday–Tuesday and Wednesday's assignments.

Friday Students should be assigned *The Bluest Eye* to read and tell why they feel the author Toni Morrison wrote the book.

Fun Activities and Homework Assignments

Vocabulary Define or Identify

1. Martin Luther King
2. song
3. Maya Angelou

4. rapper
5. preacher
6. griot
7. liar
8. slavery
- 9 . *The Color Purple*
10. Jesse Jackson
11. poetry
12. Winnie Mandela
13. historian
14. comedian
15. theatrical
16. trickster
17. perpetuate
18. itinerant
19. Sanniquellie, Liberia
20. indigenous
21. revered
22. virtuosity
23. 'chillun'
24. characterizations
25. inherit
26. 'dat'
27. Yolanda King
28. Nelson Mandela
29. mimicry
30. eerie
31. folktale
32. conjure
33. enhance
34. narrative
35. myth
36. antebellum
37. spiritual
38. congregation
39. sermon
40. chant
41. folklore
42. image
43. storyteller
44. ubiquitous
45. phenomena
46. aesthetic
47. Shack Thomas
48. Luke Dixon
49. motifs

50. pristine

* 51. Vocabulary words can also be used for spelling assignments

*Students can and should do reports on famous Black people. Some suggestions of people to be reported on are the following:

1. Toni Morrison—author of *Beloved*
2. Jean Toomer—author of *Cane*
3. *Color Purple*— Alice Walker
4. James Baldwin—author of *Go Tell It On The Mountain*
5. Maya Angelou—author of *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*
6. Gloria Naylor—author of *The Women of Brewster Place*
7. Winnie Mandela—author of *Struggle Is My life*
8. Nia Damali—author of *Golden Names for an African People*
9. Linda Goss—author of *I Cannot Tell a Lie Peach Cobbler Pie*
10. Nikki Giovanni—author of *Don't Have a Baby till You Read This*

*Almost all students enjoy listening to stories read to them by their teacher. An excellent time to do this is immediately after lunch. Using *Talk That Talk*, by Linda Goss and Marian Barnes, the following are excellent stories to read to children. (All authors are Black.)

1. AfricanAmerican History Rap
2. Boogah Man
3. Bush Got Ears
4. CindyEllie, a Modern Fairy Tale
5. The Frog Who Wanted To Be A Singer
6. Harriet Tubman
7. How the Slaves Helped Each Other
8. How the Snake Got His Rattles
9. Pizza, Pizza DaddyO
10. Why the Rabbit Is Alert

*The use of a diorama during Black History Month is another fun thing for students to do. Dioramas are scenic representations in which sculptured figures and lifelike details are displayed usually in miniature so as to blend indistinguishably with a realistic painted background.

*Students should know as much as possible about their background and heritage. Tracing one's family tree or genealogy as it is called is another extremely interesting activity for students.

*Murals of famous Blacks can be done for the classroom or to be displayed in the library. The murals might depict the onset of the art of storytelling from slavery to the present time beginning with the communication back and forth between slaves as they worked in the fields.

*Students can write stories telling why they feel celebrating Black History Month is important. An incentive to

have students put forth maximum effort is that the best stories will be published in the school newspaper.

*Posters, flyers, pictures and even student made commercials can be made and placed at different locations in the school, designating February 1, 1991 as Martin Luther King Day as a kick off to Black History Month. On Martin Luther King Day any and all activities should be about Martin Luther King or the person chosen for the day.

*Boys can be encouraged to make up raps about one of their heroes. Girls can be encouraged to listen and respond by making up a rap about one of their heroines. The best boy rapper and the best girl will receive a gift certificate to McDonald's.

*Using *Talk That Talk* as a text during Black History Month, a select number of students can be chosen to read and comment on the following:

1. *Don't Have a Baby till You Read This* —Nikki Giovanni
2. *The Violence of Desperate Men* —Martin Luther King
3. *An Old Woman Remembers* —Sterling Brown
4. *Song for My Mother, Prayer for My Father* —Linda Goss

*Unscramble the following words:

1. elprPu roloc eth
2. stisnaiorh
3. thmy
4. onit cager ong
5. alir
6. acjonsk
7. stkertric
8. ktlofeal
9. 'adt'
10. utlapiirs
11. imyrcim
12. milyaf erte
13. nonsef nmaleda
14. gson
15. perarp
16. yteoreltsl

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Angelou, Maya. *The Heart of a Woman*, New York: Bantam Books, 1982. (Maya Angelou's metamorphosis from a night club singer to a storyteller)

Baldwin, James. *Blues For Mister Charlie*, New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1964. (A play based in part on the murder of Emmett Till)

Barnes, Marian E. and Linda Goss. *Talk That Talk*, New York: Simon & Schuster Touchstone, 1989. (Informative account of slavery as it happened.)

Bennett, Lerone, Jr. *Before the Mayflower A History of Black America*, Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company Incorporated, 1969.

Darden, Norma Jean and Carole. *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine*, New York: Fawcett Crest Printing, 1980. (A delightful cook book by two sisters featuring soul foodssome that go as far back as slavery.)

Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll Jordan Roll*, New York: Random House, 1976. (An informative account of slavery at all levels.)

Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. (African-American folk tales from slavery to freedom.)

Meltzer, Milton. *A History in Their Own Words: The Black Americans*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984. (Experiences of some well known Blacks and how the experiences helped to shape history.)

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1982. (A touching account of a young black girl who was raped and impregnated by her father but who overcame in spite of.)

Magazine

Joseph Louw, "I've Been to the Mountain Top," Life Magazine, Vol. 64, No. 15, Time Incorporated, April 1968. (An interesting account of Martin Luther King'-s last days.)

Notes

1. Levine, Lawrence, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977. p. 83.
2. Ibid., p. 84.
3. Ibid., p. 84.
4. Ibid., p. 85.
5. Ibid., p. 89.

6. Barnes, Marian E. and Linda Goss, *Talk That Talk*, Simon and Schuster Touchstone, New York, 1989. p. 10.
7. Bennett, Lerone, Jr., *Before the Mayflower*, Johnson Publishing Company, Incorporated, Chicago, 1969. p. 33.
8. Levine ... p. 11.
9. Barnes, and Goss ... p. 209-210.
10. Meltzer, Milton, *A History In Their Own Words: The Black Americans*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1984. p. 246.
11. Barnes, and Goss ... p. 465.
12. Baldwin, James, *Blues For Mister Charlie* , Dell Publishing Company Incorporated, New York, 1964. p. 5.
13. Barnes, and Goss ... p. 164.
14. Levine ... p. 362.

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