

INTRODUCTION

SOME FEATURES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ORAL ART

It goes without saying that the nature of a society influences all of its art forms. African-American oral literature (or orature), certainly one of the most fascinating of the black arts, reflects many of the brutal experiences of a life lived in race-stressed America. But what is most remarkable about this literature is its transformational powers—that it so often takes a painful experience, works it through the magic machinery of an inventive imagination, and, still keeping before us the original pain, carries us gently to the point of laughter. Take the following joke in the form of a traffic sign:

Welcome to
Muleshoe, Mississippi
Speed Limit 35
Niggers 90

Or that other well-known sign, which says:

Nigger, read and run
If you can't read,
run anyway

Or the one about a black man arrested for running a red light, and he says to the judge:

Your Honor, I saw all the white folks
driving on the green,
so I figured the red
was for us colored folks!

It is this ironic humor, so richly illustrated in the blues, that brings a triumphant brightness and joy to balance a life weighted with pain. And while the printed page cannot hope to reproduce with any fullness an oral art where the word gains dimension through setting and drama, it nevertheless can increase appreciation for the creative skills alive and laughing in that art.

African-American orature may conveniently be divided into two broad categories—the traditional and the modern. By *traditional* is meant those forms

that have been recognized and studied for decades, while the *modern* would embrace those forms that, while they may indeed be as old as some of the traditional, attracted the attention of scholars and were made available in print mostly in the past four decades. The *traditional* would include, for instance, a wide variety of songs, tales and jokes: religious songs such as spirituals, sermons, gospel and shouts; secular songs such as blues, ballads and work songs (cotton-picking songs, lumbering and rowing songs, railroad songs, field cries and hollers, prison camp and chain gang songs); creation myths and explanatory tales; tales of human heroes, such as the John and Ole Massa cycle, and of their analogues in the animal world, such as the Brer Rabbit cycle; and proverbs, superstitions and medicinal recipes. The *modern* would include such forms as children's rhymes and game songs; rapping, signifying and jive (talking shit, talking trash); boasts and threats; dozens (known to the younger generations as sounding, screaming, ranking, woofing, capping, hiking, joning, snapping); toasts (extended verse narratives) such as "The Signifying Monkey," "Stagger Lee," "Shine and the Sinking of the Titanic," "Honky-Tonk Bud," "Dolemite," "Pete Revere," "Mexicali Rose," "Death Row" and "Doriella DuFontaine"); and jokes and parodies, including preacher jokes and inter-ethnic humor.

Clearly, the traditional and modern forms overlap. For instance, new work songs, ballads, sermons and gospel continue to be created, while many children's rhymes are much older than the recent surge of scholarly interest in them. To that extent, the two categories are artificial; and yet it is true that in the main, the forms listed as modern, plus some variants of the traditional, were, for a variety of historical reasons, not widely discussed until the 1960s. The aim of this collection is to make available to the general reader a sampling of the major modern forms.

Perhaps it should be pointed out that many of the features of African-American oral art under consideration are not necessarily unique to it but are present in varying combinations and intensities in oral arts the world over.

African-American oral literature is *drama*, and players, audience and setting are crucial to the total experience. The different oral forms presented here are but different scenes of the same drama, scenes that sometimes overlap and merge, at other times remain distinct—but always, in any moment of the drama, the *word* is the power. The players are actors, conscious of the effect they are having on the audience, and responding to the audience's applause or ridicule (especially in contest situations, such as boasts, threats and dozens). Implicit always in performer-audience interaction is the call-and-response or leader-choral antiphony, which is one of the central features of the oral art of African peoples as a whole, and a dimension difficult to recreate in print.

In its language and imagery, African-American folk poetry is characterized by *virtuosity*. It is unsurpassed in its use of rhetorical devices, including punning, alliteration and assonance, parallel phrasing, internal rhymes and end rhymes, full rhymes and half rhymes, stock phrases and formulas, all suffused

with a general playfulness and wit. Eighteenth-century English critic Samuel Johnson might just as well have been speaking of African-American oral poetry when he said of certain English poets of the previous century that they delighted in combining “dissimilar images” and discovering “occult resemblances in things apparently unlike.” In this folk poetry, dissimilar images are combined harmoniously, not “yoked by violence together” as Johnson judged them to be in the poetry he was discussing. African-American wit brings together in easy union what Johnson called “strength of thought” and “happiness of language” (S. Johnson 470). An enormous tragi-comic intelligence with a highly developed auditory capacity is at work in the best of this poetry. In its conscious artistry and technical sophistication, its manipulation of language with happy results, its freshness of imagery and mellifluousness of movement, and in its whole and successful devotion to *sound*, African-American oral poetry at its best ranks with the great poetries of the world.

Empowered by their heritage of West African languages, African Americans have bent, stretched, broken, melted down and reshaped the English language, forging for their imagination a malleable instrument capable of carrying their own version of the world.

That instrument is a language of many names. For years it was denigrated as patois, dialect, broken English, bad English, street language, street talk or slang, until gradually it came into its own as Black English, African-American vernacular, African-American language or Ebonics. These transitions parallel the many names of the People themselves over the years, from names of abuse to names of recognition and respect: darky, nigger, nigra, African, Colored, Negro, Black, Afro-American, People of African Descent, People of Color, African American.

Their version of the world may be glimpsed from the folklore in the various modes they have employed in amplifying reality, for instance through wild exaggeration and hyperbole, through the use of complex inversions or flipped polarities, and through the use of words traditionally regarded as obscene and banished from polite discourse in American society.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is the polished mirror into which the black imagination gazes with every other rhyme, laughing as it sees itself refracted and distorted in a phantasmagorical kaleidoscope. The language of hyperbole amplifies reality by carrying us beyond the boundaries of rational thought, past the limits of the real into the surreal, into a universe in which possibilities are infinite, probabilities unlimited. The images it brings back from that universe are literally far-fetched, unexpected, wild, extraordinary. Their impact is *surprise*, a function of their freshness and power. Hyperbole is perhaps best exemplified in the dozens:

Your mama's hair is so short she could stand on her head
and her hair wouldn't touch the ground.

Your mama is lower than whale shit—and that's at the
bottom of the ocean.

Your father is so low he has to look up to tie his shoes.

You're so low down you need an umbrella to protect yourself
from ant piss.

These images defy rational understanding and a square, sane conception of space; but they convey, in no uncertain terms, the absolute absence of height. Hyperbole makes extraordinary demands on the imagination: the lines start here, and before you know it they are out there, way out, pushed to their extremest possibility, beyond earth-sense into rare cosmic time-space:

Your hair is so bad you need to carry a gun just to comb it.

Your mama's so ugly she has to sneak up on a glass to get a
drink of water.

Your mother's so old, when God said "Let there be light" she
jumped and cut it on.

You so ugly you scare yourself.

Hyperbole makes its innocent first appearance in the schoolyard:

You're so stupid you failed lunch.

Your breath is so bad it smells like elephant breath.

Your father is so poor he can't even pay attention.

Then it stretches and deepens with the years:

Your mother is so skinny she swallowed a pea and swore she
was pregnant.

Nigger, you'd rather run through hell in gasoline-soaked
drawers than mess with me.

You would rather let a four hundred pound gorilla suck your
dick in a telephone booth than fuck with me.

These images are not surreal in the conventional sense, for they are ultimately anchored in reality. They are vivid and concrete, drawing their strength from all five primary faculties—the sensory, visual, auditory, olfactory and gustatory—and often making their impact on several senses at once:

Your mother is like a cup of coffee: hot, black, and ready to
be creamed.

Your house is so cold the roaches fart snowballs.

Nigger, keep messin' with me and I'll slap the cowboy pee
out of you.

Mess with me and I'll stick my foot so far up your ass when
you brush your teeth you'll shine my shoe.

The images manage to capture essential relationships, whether natural/eternal conditions (“the lion stuck on the monkey *like stink on shit*”) or historical ones (“Stack stuck on Jesse *like a German on a Jew*”).

Inversion

The amplification of reality through *flipped polarities* or *inversion* is well illustrated in such words as *bad, terrible, evil, wicked, mean*:

He had a little boy who was born to be the baddest mother-
fucker on land or sea
And the little boy's name was Stagger Lee.

Not a simple inversion whereby the word takes on the opposite of its conventional meaning, but a complex process whereby it carries simultaneously the conventional meaning and its opposite, with a decided stress on the opposite. Thus, a *bad* man (such as Stagger Lee) is bad in some *good* sense: he is a man of *ability* (power, strength, virtue [Latin *virtus* = strength]), and that ability resides in his talent for badness. If there is one thing he is *good* at, one field of human activity in which he excels, in which his true genius is capable of fulfilling itself, it is in badness, meanness, terribleness, evilness, wickedness. In these realms he is a true champion, and like any true champion (or hero) he exacts a tribute of admiration and awe. To call him by his true name (bad) is therefore to praise him, for he is a person of extraordinary capacity (for badness), and we respect and fear people of extraordinary capacity. This is why “He’s a bad motherfucker” is a praise and “I’m a mean motherfucker” is a boast, each implying a warning and a threat—that you know better than to mess with me/him.

A further consideration is that the world of the slave, ex-slave or oppressed is so terrible, wicked, mean, you have to be equally so just to make it. In such a Darwinian jungle it is the *bad motherfucker* who can be counted on to survive. This is probably what Robert Hayden meant by his play on the word *mean* in his great poem “Runagate Runagate.” History’s most intrepid liberator carried two pistols, and she didn’t carry them for decoration. She would shoot the hapless fugitive who proved too tired or timid to keep moving on. Yes, Harriet Tubman was one mean sister. She *means* to be free, that’s why she’s so *mean*. She had to be mean to get hers, and just as mean to help others get theirs. No wonder in nineteen excursions she never lost a passenger. “Mean mean mean to be free” (Hayden 77).

Harriet Tubman is a *bad motherfucker*. She is the “bad nigger” of tradition who “don’t take no stuff off of no white folks.” The “bad nigger” was a slave rebel and outlaw, a challenger against the white man’s dominance who swears, as in the words of the spiritual:

*And before I’d be a slave
I’ll be buried in my grave.*

The “bad nigger” was “bad” by white (conventional) definition, “good” by black definition. Early commentators on African-American folklore recognized this fracture in sensibility and usage. For example, H. C. Brearley, in a pivotal 1939 essay titled “Ba-ad Nigger,” has this to say:

In all folktales the daredevil is a constantly recurring character. . . . In many Negro communities, however, this emphasis upon heroic deviltry is so marked that the very word *bad* often loses its original significance and may be used as an epithet of honor. . . . In some parts of the South, however, there is a change in pronunciation to indicate whether or not the word carries approval. If the speaker wishes to use the term with the ordinary connotation, he pronounces it after the manner of Webster. But if he is describing a local hero, he calls him “ba-ad.” The more he prolongs the *a* the greater his homage. (Brearley 580)

Alan Dundes amplifies the point in a 1973 footnote to Brearley:

The point is that being labeled “bad” by Southern white plantation owners in the sense of being dangerous, obstreperous, and the like indicated to black people that the individual in question was unwilling to submit passively to the oppression of slavery. Thus “bad niggers” were Negroes who were willing to fight the system. “Bad” didn’t mean evil at all. . . . Thus the whites’ meant-to-be-insulting epithet of “bad nigger” became virtually a badge of honor in the black community. If the white slaveowners deemed one a “bad nigger,” that was high praise indeed. (Dundes 581)

The “bad nigger,” says Daryl Dance, “is and always has been *bad* (that is, villainous) to whites because he violates their laws and he violates their moral codes. He is *ba-ad* (that is, heroic) to the Black people who relish his exploits for exactly the same reasons” (Dance, *Shuckin’ and Jivin’* 224). She describes the “bad nigger,” then and now, as

characterized by [his] absolute rejection of established authority figures—Ole Massa, the sheriff, the judge[—]and his assertion of his own power and authority. . . . [His goal is] to attack and destroy all that [white authority] holds dear, including its work ethics, its political principles, its moral values. (Dance, *Long Gone* 143, 144, 145)

Elijah Muhammad and his Black Muslims sum it up in one axiom: “The white man’s heaven is the black man’s hell” (Marvin X 115).

Two black psychiatrists, William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, who studied the matter in depth, have called the “bad nigger” “the measure of manhood for all black men”:

The man who fought when threatened and lived to tell the tale became . . . a man among men . . . a man who held his manhood dear, and though his life was likely to be brief had laid hold of the essential task of men and particularly black men—survival and opposition to the foe. (Grier and Cobbs, *Black Rage* 123–124)

Ominously, Grier and Cobbs echo James Baldwin’s dictum, that “every black man harbors a potential bad nigger [Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas] inside him” (Grier and Cobbs, *Black Rage* 55).

Fighting the system takes many forms—violent, non-violent; active resistance, passive resistance; physical, verbal, psychological, intellectual resistance. Always, resistance entails danger and demands extraordinary boldness and cunning. And the heroes have not all left the black earth; the “bad niggers” are everywhere still. Virtually every African-American leader down the ages (and, in the broadest sense, every black striver and achiever) may be styled a “bad nigger,” one with potential made real. To achieve or lead, in these circumstances, is to wrestle the lion’s paws and tear victory from its jaws. Among historical figures, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, Cinque of the *Amistad*, and, in South America and the Caribbean, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Dessalines, Christophe, Clairvaux, Macandal, the Maroons, the heroes of Palmares and all other slave rebels and conspirators—these are the archetypal “bad niggers.” Add to these the active resisters—Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, W. E. B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Adam Clayton Powell, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), H. Rap Brown, Mary McLeod Bethune, Fannie Lou Hamer, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, Louis Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson, Randall Robinson—these are some of the “baddest niggers” that ever walked. And this is just a sampling.¹

The “bad niggers” are role models for the evolution not only of individual manhoods but of the *communal manhood*. In his 1965 funeral oration, Ossie Davis said of Malcolm X: “Malcolm was our manhood, our living, black manhood! This was his meaning to his people” (Davis, “Our Shining Black Prince”). Malcolm spoke the truth that all too many dared not speak. Through his words and acts the community lived.

The community identifies with the “bad niggers” (romanticizes them, as always with heroes), appropriating their badness, boldness, meanness that is their strength. Thus would poet Sonia Sanchez boast in her book title, *We a BaddDDD People*, articulating the collective self-definition: that We, as a

People, are “bad”—mean, wicked, tough, resilient, beautiful, indestructible. Our collective strengths are welded into that single word. Every good thing we ever did, that is, everything we’ve ever done, sleepwalkingly or by conscious choice, which has worked to our advantage, is “ba-ad,” is what makes us one tough mean motherfucker of a nation of people. We in our terribleness. “Our terribleness,” writes Amiri Baraka, “is our survival as beautiful beings, any where.”

To be bad is one level
But to be terrible, is to be
badder dan nat.

(Baraka, *Terribleness* n.p.)

And we ain’t about to disappear. Nah! “Ain’t gonna give up on nothin’” (Baraka). *We are a ba-ad [great] people!*

We must bear in mind, of course, that history is one thing, folklore another. Each reflects the other in part, diverging at critical points. But whether in history or folklore, there are at least two traditions of the “bad nigger,” one positive, the other conditional, problematic or downright negative. In his masterly study of pan-African cultural resistance, retention and transformation, *From Trickster to Badman* (1989), African-American folklorist John W. Roberts does not speak explicitly of a “positive” and a “negative” tradition, but the division is implicit in his analysis. Roberts prefers the term “bad nigger” for the rebels and outlaws of slave days, and “badman” for those of post-Reconstruction life and lore (Railroad Bill, John Hardy, Harry Duncan, Devil Winston and others, all historical persons to begin with). But the distinction he attempts to make between the two groups of rebels is difficult to sustain, as we shall see later. In any case, Roberts recognizes that rebels of both periods constituted one-man striking forces targeted at slavery, or at white violence, legal injustice and economic strangulation. White people feared and reviled these rebels, but black people relished and revered them. They were heroes, the community’s champions, the avengers of black wrong. The slave community could not celebrate them openly, but the free black community of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries celebrated them in numerous ballads and stories. However, as the Ku Klux Klan vigilantes of post-Reconstruction, who had evolved from the “patterollers” of slave days, now merged with “legal” police forces, north and south, into a powerful modern twentieth-century law enforcement system “geared toward the protection of white interests in the society,” the “badman” hero’s acts of legal or economic reprisal, especially when carried out in white communities, became increasingly difficult and then virtually impossible (Roberts 171–173, 198).

Turned back at the white gates, the “badmen” turned on their own communities. Predictably, their formerly whole-hearted adoration became mixed and ambivalent. They continued to be admired as defiers of white law and confronters of white authority, especially as represented by the ubiquitous and brutal police. And they continued to be celebrated, now less frequently in bal-

lads than in the new-found narrative verse form, the toast. But because they now preyed mostly on fellow-victims, they were also feared and hated.

Whether in lore (Stagger Lee, Dolemite, Boothill McCoy) or in real life, the “badmen” who terrorize the black community, robbing and killing, together with their close cousins the pimps, hustlers, dope peddlers and other predators who specialize in corrupting the young—these constitute the negative half of the “bad nigger” tradition. In other words, not every “bad nigger” is *good* for the community. Not every defier of white law is a promoter of black interests. In the final analysis, neither Stagger Lee with all his strength and fearlessness, nor the hustlers and pimps with all their style and cool, could provide a usable model for black manhood or black achievement. Instead, they represent instances of misdirection and perversion of historically positive, creative black energies. Only if they undergo the transfiguration of a Malcolm X, *who was one of them*, could they be honored alongside a Nat Turner, a Harriet Tubman or a Martin Luther King.

But, to return to the phonetics of the term, Brearley was certainly right about “a change in pronunciation” when “bad” means “good.” *Tonality*, carried over from West African languages, has been recognized as one of the distinguishing features of African-American speech. As Molefi Asante pointed out,

African-Americans mean something precise by their pitch, as in speaking such words as *Jesus, man, say*. Vocal color plays a vital role for the black public speaker, particularly the preacher, who utilizes various intonations and inflections to modify or amplify specific ideas, concepts, or emotions. (Asante 25)

Sonia Sanchez intended by her orthography to capture the tone or vocal color, to marry the meaning to the sound of *bad*—a brave effort in a long tradition of contractions, elisions and contortions of the written word, all aimed at replicating the sound of black speech on flat, two-dimensional paper. At its beginnings, that effort gave birth to the grotesqueries of nineteenth-century Southern “plantation dialect,” an unreadable travesty of black speech invented and popularized by white minstrelsy, by white novelists and poets such as William Gilmore Simms, Thomas Nelson Page, George Washington Cable and Irwin Russell, and by white collector of black folklore Joel Chandler Harris in his Uncle Remus tales:

“Tu’n me loose, fo’ I kick de natchul stuffin’ out’n you,” sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, but de Tar-Baby, she ain’t sayin’ nothin’. She des hilt on, en den Brer Rabbit lose de use er his feet in de same way.

(Harris 7)

It alluz sets me laughin’, when I happens to be roun’,
To see a lot ob gemmen come a-fishin’ from de town!
Dey waits tell arter bre’kfus ’fore dey ebber makes a start,
An’ den you sees ’em comin’ in a leetle Jarsey kyart.

(Russell 25)

“Laud, marster, hit’s so long ago, I’d a’most forgit all about it, ef I hedn’ been wid him ever sence he wuz born. Ez ’tis, I remembers it jes’ likr ’twuz yistiddy. Yo’ know Marse Chan an’ me—we wuz boys togerr. I wuz older’n he wuz, jes’ de same ez he wuz whiter’n me.

(Page 4)

The soul of dialect is *cacography*, the deliberate misspelling of words for comic effect, which is the written equivalent of the malapropism. Mel Watkins, connoisseur of the unerring eye and ear for the comical, ranks cacography “even lower” than the pun, which Europeans have traditionally regarded as the lowest form of humor (Watkins 60).

African-American writers of the nineteenth century were well aware of the malice behind dialect. Dialect represented for them a dilemma: they couldn’t work with it, and they couldn’t work without it. They needed to be able to transcribe black speech, to capture black thought in its own words. But this powerful convention overflowing with negative stereotypes was already established for such transcriptions, and African-American writers found no way to break out of the cage. Frances Harper, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, James Corrothers, James Edwin Campbell, Paul Laurence Dunbar and others appropriated “dialect” and sought to turn it to positive account. They wrestled with it, attempting to subdue and refine it, to purge it of the white derision and black self-abnegation that oozed from its every pore. But it was a losing battle. Their renditions of black speech remained, to the end, hardly distinguishable from those of their white predecessors or contemporaries:

So nex’ mawnin’ atter breakfus’ Mars Jeems sont fer de ober-seah, en ax’ ’im fer ter gib ’count er his styoa’dship. Ole Nick tol’ Mars Jeems how much wuk be’n done, en got de books en showed ’im how much money be’n save’. Den Mars Jeems ax’ ’im how de darkies be’n behabin’.

(Chesnutt 93)

I has hyeahd o’ people dancin’ an’ I’s hyeahd o’ people singin’.
An’ I’s been ’roun’ lots of othahs dat could keep de banjo ringin’;
But of all de whistlin’ da’kies dat have lived an’ died since Ham,
De whistlin’ est I evah seed was ol’ Ike Bate’s Sam.

(Dunbar 156)

It was this failure to subdue and transform conventional dialect that in 1922 moved James Weldon Johnson, the ablest black critic of his day, to pronounce the doom of dialect, which he said “has only two main stops, humor and pathos,” and is incapable of expressing the full height and breadth and depth of authentic black thought and feeling. Johnson, also a gifted poet, had written many dialect poems and experienced firsthand the limitations of dialect. What the African-American writer needed, he concluded, was

to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation. He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allow of the widest range of subjects and the widest scope of treatment. (J. W. Johnson 41–42)

Johnson's call went largely unheeded. Black writers continued toiling in the coils of dialect deep into the twentieth century, and it nearly strangled them. As late as 1937 the great folklorist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston, at the noontide of her career, could write:

“Ah kin be some trouble when Ah take uh notion. . . . Ah'm uh bitch's baby round lady people.”

“Ah's much ruther see all dat than to hear 'bout it. Come on less go see whut he gointuh do 'bout dis town.” (Hurston 33)

The same year, Richard Wright, a powerful new voice at the beginning of a great career, wrote:

Awright, Ma, Ahll take the boat back. Hows tha? Wan me t take it back? . . . Whut yuh so scared fer? Ain nobody gonna see yuh wid it. All yuh gotta do is git in n make fer the hills n make fer em quick. Ef Ah hadnt stole tha boat yuh all woulda had t stay here till the watah washed yuh erway. (Wright, “Down by the Riverside” 59)

Neither passage is any great improvement over black Chesnutt or white Russell. Hurston and Wright continued rendering black voices in this vein well into the 1940s and 1950s; but, happily, running alongside them were some bolder and more successful experiments at capturing the black voice along the lines Johnson advocated. While reiterating his judgment of plantation dialect in 1931, Johnson had also heralded *a new Northern, urban black language* just then sweeping over the horizon—“not the dialect of the comic minstrel tradition or of the sentimental plantation tradition [but] the common, racy, living, authentic speech of the Negro in certain phases of real life” (J. W. Johnson 4). The prophet of this new day, the master of *light touch*, who was forging a language that worked more by idiomatic suggestion and impressionism than by wholesale orthographic conversion or phonetic transcription—who, in other words, was reaching for “a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without”—was Langston Hughes, closely seconded by Sterling Brown:

For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
(L. Hughes, *Collected Poems* 30)

Tell all my mourners
To mourn in red
Cause there ain't no sense
In my bein' dead.
(L. Hughes, *Collected Poems* 250)

Honey
When de man
Calls out de las' train
You're gonna ride,
Tell him howdy.

Gather up yo' basket
An' yo' knittin' an' yo' things,
An' go on up an' visit
Wid frien' Jesus for a spell.
(S. Brown 48)

Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred? . . .

What did I say?

Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away!

Hey, pop!

Re-bop!

Mop!

Y-e-a-h!

(L. Hughes, *Collected Poems* 388)

The deft, masterly touch, unmatched by their contemporaries, is a major part of the poetic legacy of Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown. Black poets of the 1960s and 1970s, the next great period of ebullience, appropriated part of that legacy. They too attempt to express the racial spirit, “the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought” by “symbols from within.” But because their times were different, and the mission of their generation demanded a loud, combative, iconoclastic voice, it was perhaps to be expected that their experi-

ments in orthography as well as verse form would go to such extremes, paralleling the idiosyncratic excesses of Anglo-American poets of their day:

some
 times
 i turn a corner
of my mind
 & u be there
 looooooking
 at me.
& smilen.
 yo / far / away / smile.
 & I mooove
to u.
 & the day is not any day. & yes ter day
is looNNg
 gooNNe.
 (Sanchez, *I've Been a Woman* 24)

he didn't say
wear yr / blackness in
outer garments
& blk / slogans fr / the top 10.

he was fr a long
line of super-cools,
 doo-rag lovers &
 revolutionary pimps.
u are playing that
high-yellow game in blackface
minus the straighthair.

(Madhubuti)

The above samples, from Harris and Chesnutt to Hurston and Madhubuti, represent two centuries of experiment in setting down in writing a brand of English constructed on the structural grid, grammar and syntax of West African languages (Wolof, Akan, Hausa, Yoruba, Lingala, Igbo, etc.). The black (twentieth) century of experimentation differed from the white (nineteenth), but on the whole, it was no resounding success either. Each transcript is different; each writer does his own thing. It might be one of the tasks of the twenty-first century to standardize the African-American language or Ebonics in written form. The “standard” form of any language—standard English, standard French, standard Japanese, standard Ebonics—is simply the totality of grammar, syntax, spelling, punctuation, pronunciation and meaning that is “voted correct” by the elite speakers of that language, the holders and exercisers of political and economic power. The “standard” is only one of the several versions or

dialects of a language, but it is privileged by the power elite as the official dialect in which government, education and business are conducted. But having a “standard” never did scuttle experimentation or innovation in language, whether by elite or non-elite speakers or writers; the “non-standard” dialects continue to flourish and to feed and be fed by the “standard” dialect. And given the ancient, pervasive heritage of experimentation and improvisation in the music, rhetoric, lyric poetry and fictional narrative traditions of pan-African peoples, there is no reason at all to fear that the linguistic vehicle, in this case Ebonics, might suffer from standardization.

But, to return to the word. Pronunciation is not the only link of the word *bad* with the ancestral African source. In his essay, Brearley puts forth the commendably bold proposition that

this use of *bad* as a term of admiration is quite likely an importation from Africa, for [Melville J.] Herskovits has found a similar terminology among the blacks of the Surinam district of Dutch Guiana, among the Negroes of the West Indies, and among the natives of the province of Dahomey in West Africa. (Brearley 580)

But Herskovits, who was co-pilot with Lorenzo D. Turner in the study of Africanisms in the Americas, responded that in his findings

the use of the word “bad” by Negroes—e.g., “ugly” in Guiana, or *malin*, in Haiti—is much more an expression of admiration for cleverness in a contest of wits than it is for deviltry in action. (Herskovits, Letter 350)

He goes on to say that the “heroic outlaw” of African-American folklore is *not* “a survival of an African tradition”:

The African outlaw is a phenomenon whom I, at least, have never come upon, either in my own field research, or during my reading in literature. (Herskovits, Letter 350)

Herskovits has a point, but Brearley is actually closer to the mark. The “heroic outlaw” of African-American folklore may not indeed be an African import, at least not in his fully finished form; however, the *language* of his praises certainly is.

In his work previously cited, John W. Roberts has plausibly demonstrated the process whereby the “badman” or outlaw folk hero emerged in the 1890s under pressure of post-Reconstruction violence and economic deprivation, shedding the mask of the “trickster” hero whose own evolutionary trail led through human and animal trickster figures of slavery days all the way back to the African homeland. Roberts acknowledges the earlier “bad nigger” of slavery days but then, unaccountably, seeks to divorce him from the “badman” of post-Reconstruction life and lore:

While a black character-type referred to as the “bad nigger” has existed in American society since the days of slavery, whether these figures served as prototypes for badmen heroes in African American folk tradition is certainly debatable. (Roberts 176)

Roberts scolds those scholars who use the terms “bad nigger” and “badman” interchangeably; however, the distinction he seeks to draw proves rather slippery. He bases his distinction on the following grounds: (a) that unlike the “badmen” of a later era, the “bad niggers” of slave days were not celebrated in songs and tales in their day; (b) that their “flagrant disregard for the masters’ rules constantly threaten[ed] to bring the masters’ power down on the entire community”; and (c) that they were “as likely to unleash their fury and violence on their defenseless fellow sufferers as on the masters” (Roberts 176).

But nothing in their circumstances made the “bad niggers” any more likely than the “badmen” and “oulaws” to prey on their fellow blacks. And except for reprisals following such large-scale assaults as Nat Turner’s revolt, there is no evidence of whites punishing the entire slave community for the actions of one “bad nigger.” On the other hand, the very possibility of reprisals should explain why the exploits of “bad niggers” went unsung. We need only recall Harriet Jacobs’s account of the scale and savagery of the white backlash following Nat Turner’s revolt:

Everywhere men, women and children were whipped till the blood stood in puddles at their feet. Some received five hundred lashes. . . . The dwellings of the colored people . . . were robbed of clothing and everything else the marauders thought worth carrying away. All day long these unfeeling wretches went round, like a troop of demons, terrifying and tormenting the helpless . . . the most shocking outrages were committed with perfect impunity. (Jacobs 393, 396)

Who in those circumstances could weave garlands of song for Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser or Denmark Vesey? A laurel for Jack Bowler or Peter Poyas? Or a wreath for the many who “died silent”?

In any case, Roberts follows the progress of “bad niggers” from slavery to freedom, right into the 1890s, when the “badman” is supposed to have emerged. Going by his record, the drama does not change. The actions of the emerging “badman” look suspiciously like those of the “bad nigger” before him, and the white reaction doesn’t look too different either. As always, the charge is “‘putting on airs,’ ‘sauciness,’ ‘impudence,’ ‘disrespect,’ ‘insubordination,’ ‘contradicting whites and violating social custom.’” And the response: “acts of violence,” “the ‘breaking’ of recalcitrant ‘bad niggers’”—this time through the chain gang and convict lease system of forced labor (Roberts 178). The “bad nigger’s” mantle seems to fit the “badman” (Railroad Bill, Harry Duncan, Devil

Winston, et al.) rather nicely. If Roberts is unable to sustain the distinction between “bad nigger” and “badman,” it is probably because it is *a distinction without a difference*. (A far more useful distinction is the one Roberts makes between the “badman” of the toasts and of the late-nineteenth-century ballads. We shall consider that distinction later.)

To return to the central issue: the African-American “badman” or “bad nigger” had no African antecedents because his circumstances had no ancient African parallels. *The “badman” or “bad nigger” was born in America; however, the language of his recognition and adulation was made in Africa.*

While noting the common root of “badman” and “bad nigger” in the inversion of the word *bad*, Roberts dismisses Brearley’s hypothesis of African origins as “improbable,” adding that “it is unlikely that the inverted meaning of ‘bad’ found in black usage occurred in Africa” (Roberts 180). But the fact is that it did and does occur. Far from improbable or unlikely, the complex inversions of such terms as *bad*, *evil*, *terrible*, *wicked* and *mean* do indeed have their parallels in West African languages, especially in informal praises, boasts and jokes. These usages survived the Middle Passage and came to embrace all of the daredevils, rebels and outlaws (whether historical or fictional) of the black experience in the Americas.

For the West African provenance of *bad* as a term of admiration, let us begin with linguist David Dalby’s list of Africanisms in American English:

bad (esp. in the emphatic form *baad*), as used in the sense of “very good, extremely good”; similarly *mean*, as used in the sense of “satisfying, fine, attractive”; and *wicked*, as used in the sense of “excellent, capable.” Cf. frequent use of negative terms (often pronounced emphatically) to describe positive extremes in African languages, e.g., Mandingo (Bambara) *a ka nyi ko-jugu*, “it’s very good” (literally, “it is good badly”), or Mandingo (Gambia) *a nyi-nata jaw-ke*, “she is very beautiful” (lit. “she is beautiful wickedly”); similarly black West African English (Sierra Leone) *i gud baad*, “it’s very good.” (Dalby 177)

These Mandingo usages are duplicated in the language of the Igbo (Ibo) people of southeastern Nigeria, as in the statement:

O-mara nkirinka mma: She is a woman of extraordinary beauty (*lit.* she is raggedly beautiful).

Or in the following praise names:

Uhoro/Aghugho: Hip, street-smart, clever guy (*lit.* trickster, artful dodger, slippery fish)

Ihe Ojo-o Eji Ose Eri: Man of Power, Supreme, Indomitable (*lit.* evil thing that must be eaten with hot pepper)

Afo Ojo-o: Man of War, Captain Guts, Commander-in-Chief
(*lit.* bad belly) (Echewa 203)

Anu Ojo-o: Tough Guy, Clever Woman, “Thick Madam” (*lit.*
evil animal)

Ototo-o/Nta Muu-Muu: His Majesty, His Awesomeness, the
Lord of Power (*lit.* monster, ogre, bogeyman) (Echewa
203)

Ofia Nsii: Evil Forest (*lit.* poison forest); the awesome
Masked Guardian of the Nation, representative of Divine
Power (as in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* 85–89)

Equivalent usages exist in other West African languages.

Obscenity

Now let us consider those words traditionally regarded as vulgar and obscene: *shit, ass, fuck, motherfucker*, etc. These words perform a critical function in the staging of the drama of modern African-American folklore, and to exclude them is to shut off part of the tradition’s life-giving oxygen. Whereas the flipping of such terms as *bad, terrible, evil, wicked* and *mean* involves the simultaneous inversion and retention of meaning, the obscene and vulgar words carry with them a complex of meanings: each is capable of carrying (sometimes simultaneously) the conventional meaning, usually negative; an opposite meaning, which is positive; a neutral meaning; and a variety of meanings with varying degrees of negative, positive and neutral, plus a range of emotions and attitudes. Again, meaning is sometimes dependent on *tone* and *inflection*. Consider the following examples where the word is used either for primal naming or as an intensifier:

Take your <i>fuckin</i> hands off me!	<i>Negative</i> : anger
Don’t <i>fuck</i> with me!	<i>Negative</i> : anger
What the <i>shit</i> / What the <i>fuck</i> you think you doing?	<i>Negative</i> : anger
Up against the wall, <i>mother- fucker!</i>	<i>Negative</i> : anger, contempt, hate
Run, <i>motherfucker</i> , run!	<i>Positive</i> : affection—a nine-year-old to his playmate at stickball <i>Negative</i> : same child to same play- mate (anger and frustration at losing) <i>Neutral</i> : football coach to player

Soon as I get my <i>shit</i> together	<i>Neutral:</i> <i>my shit</i> is my belongings, my act, plan, show, program (cf. Yoruba: <i>kpanti</i> [<i>lit.</i> trash] = my belongings) <i>Negative:</i> self-deprecation—I who have nothing to speak of, I and my raggedy-assed possessions, not worth a damn
That brother's got his <i>shit</i> together!	<i>Positive:</i> admiration—he is smart, well organized, knows what he's doing, what he's talking about; he's in full control
Nigger, you ain't <i>shit</i> !	<i>Negative:</i> anger, contempt, defiance—you're nothing, worse than nothing, beneath contempt, and if you don't think so just fool with me, I'll crack your skull, nigger!
It don't mean <i>shit</i>	<i>Neutral:</i> it's nothing, it's unimportant, nothing to worry yourself about; don't lose any sleep over it

In their close study of the varied meanings of the word *motherfucker*, Nathan and Joanne Kantrowitz write:

Used alone, as in “He’s a motherfucker,” the word never has a specific meaning, but depends on inflection, facial expression, gesture, and context to express extreme distaste or extreme admiration. Syllable stress controls the amount of emotional “charge” or “voltage.” When used alone, the degree of stress on the first or third syllable is an index of the emotion—the heavier the stress, the more emotion. Emphasis on the first syllable is usually complimentary; on the third, it expresses contempt, anger or hostility. Thus, in context, the term expresses the highest praise—“Is he smart?” “He’s a MOtherfucker”—or conversely, the deepest disdain—“Is he a deadbeat?” “He’s a motherFUcker.” (Kantrowitz and Kantrowitz 350)

They then proceed to list and demonstrate fourteen adjectives (*good, bad, sweet, fine, rotten, stupid, phoney, dirty, stinking, jive, jazzy, mean, rough, tough*—there are more!) that when hooked with *motherfucker*, and again depending on tone, inflection and context, will produce a vast array of nuanced meanings (Kantrowitz and Kantrowitz 350–352).

The word *nigger* itself, considered a true obscenity by many, is used in its conventional meanings (negative, or neutral) by both blacks and whites; but in addition, it is used by blacks to convey the absolute in positive meanings—as a term of affection between relatives and friends, and of tenderness between lovers. Claude Brown has called it “the most soulful word in the world,” a word with “many shades of meaning [and] a unique sentiment . . . exemplified in the frequent—and perhaps even excessive—usage of the term to denote either fondness or hostility” (C. Brown 232):

Lord, how can one <i>nigger</i> be so hard to please?	<i>Positive:</i> affection, puzzlement, resignation
<i>Nigger</i> , you gonna be the death o’ me!	<i>Negative:</i> exasperation
He’s my <i>nigger</i>	<i>Positive:</i> affection; he’s my best friend (Woman: he’s my man) (C. Brown 232)

Or, as one fond father said to his young son, “You my nigger if you don’t get no bigger” (McPherson 8).

That these words carry such a burden of complex meanings does not make them any more acceptable in polite company. Quite often they are used deliberately to shock, to register alienation and iconoclasm. Indeed, part of their power, and their virtually limitless potential for generating humor in this literature, comes from the electrifying contact between their rough and ready vulgarity and the smooth, polite fictive milieus in which they are so frequently detonated. A fine example from our text (“Bad Manners”) is the putatively polite setting of the classroom in which Little Johnny knocks his cookies and milk to the floor and says to the teacher: “I don’t want none of that shit!” The teacher goes into culture shock. More shaken by the language than the act of disobedience itself, she sends for Johnny’s mother, who merely compounds her shock by declaring: “If he don’t want none, fuck him!” Then there’s Little Willie (“Correct English”), who refuses to use the polite term “rectum” to indicate what part of the man’s anatomy collided with the truck: “Rectum, my ass! He damn near killed the motherfucker!”

As with the milking of new meanings from old English words through complex inversions, the obscene and vulgar words so common in African-American popular discourse turn out, upon examination, to be common West African usages greatly intensified and molded into jagged, combative formations in the fiery crucibles of the diaspora. Again, examples abound in the language of the Igbo, in their living speech as well as in transliterations by their novelists. In Igbo popular discourse as well as in the formal rhetoric, scatological and sexual references are employed with astonishing frequency, in a casual, unself-conscious manner carrying neither *inhibition* nor *prurience*, and with an equivalent complexity of attitudes and emotions as in African-American

popular discourse. There are dialectal and regional variations, certainly, but the phenomenon itself is universal in Igboland.

A few samples from daily usage:

Ri-e nshi! / Ri-e shi! / Ra-a shi! / Ra-a nsi!: Eat shit!

Rigbu-e onwe gi na nshi!: Go to hell! / Go jump in the lake!
(*lit.* eat yourself to death with shit!)

I-n'eri nshi!: You're a stupid idiot! / You're full of shit!
(*lit.* you eat shit)

A-rasila-m nsi!: Don't insult me! / Don't give me that shit!
(*lit.* don't eat that shit near me / don't eat shit in my presence)

O-na ara-ta nsi ike: He/she is a goddam fool / is brash, rude, insolent, full of himself, thinks she is clever (*lit.* he/she eats shit a lot)

Nsi adighi gi na-afo: You're a weakling (*lit.* you don't have shit in your stomach = there's no strength in you. *Compare Ebonics:* you can't do nothin'! / you can't do shit! / you ain't got shit! / you ain't shit!)

Nsi adighi-m na-afo: I feel weak, I don't have an ounce of strength (*lit.* I don't have shit in my stomach = I'm very hungry, I haven't had a thing to eat)

In the deep exchange and synthesis of language and culture-ways that took place among stranger-Africans thrown together in the Americas, it is not too difficult to imagine how the Igbo *nsi*, *nshi* or *shi*, which just happens to coincide in both sound and meaning with the English *shit*, might have become a staple of African-American speech, serving both for common discourse and for vituperation.

Closely allied to *shit* is *ass*. These two words rank ahead of all others as the omnibus word, the word-of-all-works in all Ebonics. *Get your ass over here. Set your black ass down. I'ma beat your ass. Being Captain's good, while it lasts / But if you can't swim, that's your ass. Money good but money don't last / Shine gotta save his own black ass. When I get through with your goddam face / They're going to kick your damn ass out of the monkey race. If you'll let me get my left nut out of the sand / I'll fight your ass like a natural man / I'll fight your big ass as best I could. They drug his ass out of the sun and laid him in the shade / The animals walked by and viewed his ass like GIs on parade.*

This usage is almost certainly of Igbo origin; if not exclusively so, at least one of its roots is traceable to the peculiar dialect of the Niger Delta Igbo of Ndoki, Akwete, Opobo and Bonny. Instead of the personal pronoun *mu* (I, me),