

2015

# Black Enough? African American Writers and the Vernacular Tradition

Molly Hiro

*University of Portland*, [hiro@up.edu](mailto:hiro@up.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://pilotscholars.up.edu/eng\\_facpubs](http://pilotscholars.up.edu/eng_facpubs)



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

---

## Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Hiro, Molly, "Black Enough? African American Writers and the Vernacular Tradition" (2015). *English Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 7.

[http://pilotscholars.up.edu/eng\\_facpubs/7](http://pilotscholars.up.edu/eng_facpubs/7)

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Pilot Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Pilot Scholars. For more information, please contact [library@up.edu](mailto:library@up.edu).

Mercy College Plenary Session  
21 November 2014  
Professor Molly Hiro  
Fulbright Scholar, University of Mysore

**ABSTRACT:** How do we define the category of African American literature? Is there some set of shared characteristics unifying texts by Black Americans from the nineteenth century to the present? One way of answering these questions is to point to the vernacular, or folk tradition of African Americans; in many Black-authored texts we find traces of the folktales, slave spirituals, and jazz and blues music that compose that tradition. Yet African American writers have had a complicated relationship to the vernacular, with some rejecting it entirely and others insisting it is just one of their influences. This paper investigates the relationship between some representative African American writers and the Black folk tradition, demonstrating how current discussions of racial authenticity—of being “black enough”—are deeply tied to this dynamic between individual and cultural inheritance.

### **Black Enough? African American Writers and the Vernacular Tradition**

Since the cultural studies revolution of the 1970s and 1980s, the canon of American literature has been exploded wide open. No longer limited to “great men” such as Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville, American literature courses now include many examples of texts by women writers and writers of color, among whom African American writers are perhaps most common. Indeed, African American studies has become a discipline of its own, with most U.S. colleges offering courses in African American literature and history, and many larger universities staffing whole departments and majors dedicated to the field. Even here in India, or at least in Mercy College’s M.A. program, African American literature is significantly represented in the American Ethnic Literature and American literature courses.

Yet just because African American literature is now institutionalized, this does not mean its definition is necessarily clear. It’s still worth stopping to ask from time to time: What is African American literature? The answer may at first seem quite simple: would not African American literature as a category be delimited to those novels, stories, poems, plays, and works of nonfiction by writers who are themselves African American? Perhaps, although defining precisely who is African American has also been controversial in the U.S., thanks to a history of racial intermixture and shifting understandings of blackness. Moreover, delimiting the field in this way leaves out some pretty fascinating and telling representations of African Americans by white authors—consider for example Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or Mark Twain’s “Nigger Jim” in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Even if we could agree on a clear definition of who, precisely, is African American and therefore delimit the field of African American literature, there might still be further narrowing to do. Indeed, most classes in or collections of African American literature in fact

choose texts not only by racial others, but also somehow about the experience of being a racial other. Another—and this is the one I will focus on today—is to root the genre of African American literature in the tradition of the African American vernacular. Applicable to any culture, the term “vernacular” refers to a folk tradition, and is frequently used in contradistinction to the more mainstream, dominant tradition. Literature of the vernacular is often oral, rather than written, and collectively authored, rather than the work of one individual. In African American literature, this term can describe texts as diverse as the spirituals, work songs, and folk tales from slavery times, as well as blues and jazz from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and hip-hop lyrics from today.

In what follows, I argue that such an association between the vernacular or folk tradition and the boundaries of African American literature has been both useful for conceiving of a unique and distinct tradition, and important for recuperating vernacular forms which were once thought of as lesser. However, what I want to argue in this paper is that any such attempt to draw more narrowly the boundaries of an identity-based genre can produce a restrictive litmus test, by which critics and readers become preoccupied with whether a text is or is not “black enough,” rather than thinking about what is new and interesting about its engagement with race—or with any other concern. At the end I will suggest alternative methods of engaging with identity-based literature.

In the 1980s, as the field was coming into its own, Henry Louis Gates published his landmark work *The Signifying Monkey*, which argued for the central role of vernacular culture to both African American literature and literary criticism. For Gates, African American literature as a genre is unified by certain characteristics: it is linked, overtly or subtly, to the African American vernacular; it builds or riffs upon previous artistic forms; and in so repeating previous forms, it parodies them or comments upon them, often in a spirit of irony, humor, and, at the same time, protest. From ragtime’s syncopated take on familiar classical music, to contemporary hip-hop’s sampling of 1970s funk lines, to Toni Morrison’s weaving of African folk tales and 19<sup>th</sup> century forgotten histories into her novels *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, African American art in Gates’s characterization is double-voiced—simultaneously imitative and innovative.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, when the first edition of the Norton Anthology of African American literature was published in the 1990s—with Gates as one of the chief editors—the vernacular tradition occupied a fundamental place in the nearly 3000 page collection. Indeed, while Norton’s other anthologies (of British and American literature) are organized according to a rigorous chronology (by the author’s birthdate, from earliest to most recent), this Norton opens not with the earliest published African American author, Jupiter Hammon who was born in 1711, but with a 150-page sheaf of samplings from “The Vernacular Tradition,” featuring spirituals, worksongs, folk-tales, and even blues and hip-hop lyrics from recent years. This editorial choice, then, is quite significant and not at all accidental.

Indeed, by making students pass through a sort of “vernacular gateway” before they encounter even the earliest black American writers, the Norton makes a clear argument that this tradition forms the foundation of African American literature as we know it.

This claim then serves to problematize the place of certain writers, especially those from before the twentieth century, in the African American literary canon. Take the case of Phillis Wheatley, for instance. By any account her story is astounding: born in Africa in 1753, she was sold into slavery and shipped to America at the age of seven. She had the great fortune to end up with a liberal slave master who recognized her prodigious mind and provided her an education, and by the age of 16, she had written a book of poetry in the neoclassical style in fashion in her Eighteenth century era, published in 1773. Yet, the earliest assessments of African American writing express at best ambivalence about Wheatley as a foremother of the genre. Branding her work pathetic, imitative, or passionless, some argued that her poems didn’t speak to the truths of black experience or to the horrors of slavery and as such do not represent a good model of African American literature.

A look at her most famous poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773), can help us grapple with why she has been such a controversial figure:

Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die."  
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,  
May be refin'd and join th'angelic train. (*Norton* 219)

It’s not hard to see what readers have found unsettling about this poem. What Wheatley calls “mercy” –the bringing of hundreds of thousands of people from Africa to become slaves in the U.S.—others would label brutal human trafficking or a radical corruption and betrayal of American ideals.

Yet we must also keep in mind the pressures Wheatley faced in her efforts to publish her poetry. So unbelievable was it that a mere slave of African descent could produce such writing by herself that Wheatley was summoned to appear in court before Boston’s most prominent leaders who doubted the veracity of her authorship. They required her to answer a series of questions to test her knowledge. She passed the test, but to be published, her book had to include a preface and authenticating statement signed by eighteen white men to attest that she had in fact written the poems that followed.

In this context, then, we can see the real *impossibility* for Wheatley to write more broadly than she did. How could she speak out against slavery when the men who held power to publish her work were themselves slave owners? How could she incorporate folk cultural forms if these forms did not even count as art to Boston's male judges? Indeed, if today we think of the differences between folk cultures and Western enlightenment culture in a pluralistic way—both having their virtues—in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (and in much of the twentieth as well), the arbiters of culture and civilization would have dismissed the oral, collective folk forms of Africans (and indeed, Native Americans, Indians, etc.) as entirely insignificant and inferior to Western enlightenment culture. Since vernacular cultural forms didn't count as art, African Americans were thought to be totally devoid of an artistic tradition, and since literature was thought to be the very mark of humanity in eighteenth-century thought, their lack of any such tradition meant that they were not really human, and if they weren't really human, owning them as property under the system of chattel slavery was easy to justify. As such, what looks like an abandonment of "authentic" black vernacular culture by Wheatley and other early African American authors could instead be understood as a subtle sort of anti-slavery protest—if slaves like Wheatley could create beautiful art in the style of Alexander Pope, isn't it wrong to enslave them?

Jumping ahead some one hundred and fifty years, after the abolition of slavery, the granting of certain civil rights to African Americans, and the mass migration of black folks from the agricultural south to the urban, industrialized North, we find a new and utterly different relationship between African American writers and the vernacular tradition. In this era, widely known as the Harlem Renaissance, vernacular forms became a point of pride—legitimately artistic rather than inferior to Western forms. Perhaps the most famous artist of this era is poet Langston Hughes, who self-consciously broke with traditional English meter and turned instead for inspiration to the rhythms of jazz and blues—which themselves evolved from indigenous African music.

Here's a sample, from Hughes's 1925 poem "The Weary Blues":

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,  
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,  
    I heard a Negro play.  
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night  
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light  
    He did a lazy sway. . . .  
    He did a lazy sway. . . .  
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.  
With his ebony hands on each ivory key  
He made that poor piano moan with melody.  
    O Blues!

Swaying too and fro on his rickety stool  
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.  
Sweet Blues!  
Coming from a black man's soul.  
O Blues! (Norton 1294)

This poem celebrates blues and jazz both as subject—it's about a blues musician—and as form—it's syncopated, inviting the reader or listener to tap her foot along with the poem's rhythm.

While Langston Hughes is most famous as a poet, he also served as a spokesperson of the Harlem Renaissance, aiming to put defining terms to the movement as well as to African American literature as a budding genre. In his 1926 essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," we find him testifying that mere racial phenotype does not make one a so-called "Negro Artist"; something more in terms of subject matter is required. He starts off by discrediting artists who want to set aside their racial identity, when he says:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, 'I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,' meaning, I believe, 'I want to write like a white poet'; meaning subconsciously, 'I would like to be a white poet'; meaning behind that, 'I would like to be white.' (Norton 1311)

Later in the essay, Hughes specifies in more detail what he believes it means to be a real "Negro poet," or even a real "Negro." Arguing that most "high class" black folks spend their time aping white culture, he praises the lower classes for being more authentically black:

But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common elements, and they are in the majority—may the Lord be praised! The people who have their hip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round.... These common people are not afraid of the spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. (Norton 1312)

What we clearly see here is Hughes's belief that African Americans ought to embrace rather than shy away from the vernacular tradition—they should not be "afraid of the spirituals" and they should recognize that "jazz is their child." But what do we make of the associated fact that according to this description, to be authentically black is to be "common," "low-down," "lazy," not too well learned or well fed, and carrying a "hip of gin"? Surely Hughes is attempting to carve out a fundamental difference between white folks and black folks, but isn't it disconcerting that that difference requires blacks to be uneducated and hungry?

Here is one clear problem to the test of authenticity, as Hughes created it and as current readers sometimes create it—it is often based on a social and economic hierarchy that keeps African Americans down in order to “keep it real,” as the expression goes.

Ralph Ellison is one African American author who would likely object to Hughes’s prescription for how black writers ought to position themselves. Most famous for his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, Ellison’s essays offer equally dense and brilliant accounts of racial otherness in twentieth-century America. In this excerpt from his 1958 essay “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” Ellison responds to another critic who had argued that Richard Wright, a contemporary of Ellison’s, was a better black writer because he engaged more directly with the black vernacular tradition. Here’s one sample of Ellison’s rejoinder:

I use folklore in my work not because I am Negro, but because writers like [T.S.] Eliot and [James] Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance. My cultural background, like that of most Americans, is dual.... I knew the trickster Ulysses just as early as I knew the wily rabbit of Negro American lore, and I could easily imagine myself a pint-sized Ulysses but hardly a rabbit, no matter how human and resourceful or Negro. And a little later I could imagine myself as Huck Finn...but not, though I racially identified with him, as "Nigger Jim," who struck me as a white man's inadequate portrait of a slave....

My point is that the Negro American writer is also an heir of the human experience which is literature, and this might well be more important to him than his living folk tradition. (*Norton* 1578)

Were Langston Hughes to have responded to this essay, he might have argued that Ellison was similar to that poet whom he accused of wanting to be “white.” But what I read in Ellison’s words is a desire to be able to write as a singular person—a unique subject not limited to his racial identity or to the cultural inheritance of the black vernacular, but composed of a lifetime of various and diverse influences.

We have seen thus far several pitfalls of making the presence of African American folk forms a prerequisite for writing authentic black literature: such connections may be impossible (as for Wheatley) or they may restrict the literature to too narrow a portrayal of blackness. Here is another problem I wish to explore now: many times in American history, the prescription that African American literature should be rooted in the black vernacular has come not from inside but from out: from the white majority. In this way of thinking, to mark African American literature as distinctly tied to an “authentic” black tradition can turn out to be simultaneously a means of solidifying white superiority and power.

The example of Paul Laurence Dunbar, a lesser-known poet and novelist from the late nineteenth century, provides an interesting demonstration of this dynamic. Dunbar was born to former slaves, but never knew slavery personally; he attended all-white schools and was an avid reader. He wrote two distinct styles of poetry—one, using the standard English in which he had been schooled; and the other, in African American dialect. First, here is an excerpt from an 1895 dialect poem, “When Malindy Sings”:

G’way an’ quit dat noise, Miss Lucy—  
Put dat music book away;  
What’s de use to keep on tryin’?  
Ef you practice twell you’re gray,  
You cain’t sta’t no notes a-flyin’  
Lak de ones dat rants and rings  
F’om de kitchen to de big woods  
When Malindy sings.

You ain’t got de nachel o’gans  
Fu’ to make de soun’ come right,  
You ain’t got de tu’ns an’ twistin’s  
Fu’ to make it sweet an’ light.  
Tell you one thing now, Miss Lucy,  
An’ I’m tellin’ you fu’ true,  
When hit comes to raal right singin’  
‘T ain’t no easy thing to do. (Norton 916)

In this excerpt and what follows, Dunbar speaker creates a contrast between Miss Lucy’s failed attempts to teach herself to sing and Malindy’s comparative ease and mastery of good singing. What is fascinating about this poem—apart from its written representation of black oral speech—is the way it validates Malindy’s “nachel” (or natural) singing over the “music book” Miss Lucy is trying to learn from. That is to say, the poem explicitly opposes “raal right singin’” (or black authenticity) and book learning, and thus makes a distinction similar to Langston Hughes’s that we have just seen.

This becomes even more fascinating when we compare “Malindy” to a standard English Dunbar poem from the same year, titled “We Wear the Mask”:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.



Why should the world be otherwise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask! (*Norton 918*)

What is this “mask” Dunbar’s speaker laments, a grinning mask that hides “torn and bleeding hearts”? Perhaps it is dialect—and the cheerful subject matter dialect always seems to be expressing in Dunbar’s poems. If so, this is a compelling reversal of what we would expect: dialect would seem to be the natural and authentic expression of the black subject, but here Dunbar suggests it is instead an unnatural, smiling, and painful mask covering over his truer desire to write in standard English.

And why would Dunbar imply that dialect is more painful than pleasurable? It might have something to do with the way in which dialect, and black vernacular more broadly, were portrayed in white popular culture of the era. A generation after the abolition of slavery in 1863, African American oral and folk culture rose to prominence as objects of caricature in vaudeville and minstrel shows, as well as in advertisements and print culture. If African Americans were no longer naturally slaves, the color line between black and white became vaguer and blurrier. Depicting blacks not as modern urban workers, but as happy slaves down on the plantation, singing cheerful work songs and performing cake-walk dances, would recreate and reinforce that hierarchy for whites eager to regain their dominance. Given this context, it’s easier to understand Dunbar’s frustration with the well-known white editor who praised his dialect poems and discouraged him from writing in standard English; as he once wrote in a letter: “I’ve got to write dialect poetry; it’s the only way I can get them to listen to me.” Whereas for Langston Hughes, the African American vernacular provided a font of inspiration and racial pride, for Dunbar, it represented a devil’s bargain, allowing him to gain readers while risking that his work would therein promote a limited, stereotypical picture of black people.

Nearly a century later, Amiri Baraka’s surrealist play *Dutchman* (1969) presented more dramatically the hegemonic white mandate that African Americans adhere to a restrictive form of blackness. The one-act play depicts two strangers—Lula, a seductive white woman, and Clay, a young, naïve, aspiring black man—meeting on a New York subway. They first

banter flirtatiously, but soon their dialogue turns uglier, as Lula calls Clay out for failing to acknowledge his racial self as she understands it. She accuses Clay: “What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and striped tie? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn’t go to Harvard.” Lula bases these judgments in her presumed knowledge of African American folk forms, insisting that Clay join her in a public performance of the “belly rub” to prove his authenticity:

Come on, Clay..let's do the thing. Uhh! Uhh! Clay! Clay! You middle-class black bastard. Forget your social-working mother for a few seconds and let's knock stomachs. Clay, you liver-lipped white man. You would-be Christian. You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man. Get up, Clay. Dance with me, Clay. (Norton 1956-57)

When Clay finally loses his patience and lashes out at Lula, he angrily insists on his own authority on matters of blackness: “You don’t know anything except what’s there for you to see. An act. Lies. Device. Not the pure heart, the pumping black heart” (Norton 1958). And further, he bases this authority upon a superior knowledge of blues dance and music: “The belly rub? You wanted to do the belly rub?...you don’t even know how.... [White folks] say ‘I love Bessie Smith’ and don’t even understand that Bessie Smith is saying, ‘Kiss my ass’” (Norton 1958). Yet while Clay’s invective reclaims the black vernacular as belonging exclusively to black people, he doesn’t have the last word—or rather, his words get invalidated when Lula suddenly pulls out a knife and murders him to silence him once and for all. The conclusion of *Dutchman* thus seems to suggest that any argument over black authenticity and black vernacular is ultimately trivial compared to the hegemonic violence of white superiority.

Baraka’s implication that the demand for authentic blackness can become deadly may seem a bit hyperbolic, but I hope the examples I’ve shown succeed in demonstrating the pitfalls of rooting African American literature too rigidly in a certain origin or formula or subject matter, be that vernacular culture or any other prescribed racial form. To be clear: I do not wish to argue that we should abandon the category of African American literature—or any other hyphenated minority literature for that matter (Native American, Asian American, Indian American)—although such arguments are common in what many consider a “post-racial” historical moment. And moreover, I do think that studying African American writing with black vernacular in mind can enrich our study of that literature greatly. But insisting that black writers engage with the folk tradition—or indeed with any content or form—to qualify as authentically black involves projecting our own desires and wishes onto a text rather than reading it for what IS there. I advocate that we move away from these insinuations, choosing rather to read African American authors, texts, and characters in a way that privileges multiplicity over singularity.

Too often, critics and scholars of minority literatures read and interpret in what I call an **evaluative** mode, asking questions of texts such as:

- How true is this text to the African American (or woman's, or working class) experience?
- How well does it reveal, and how loudly does it protest against oppression (e.g. racism, or sexism, or classism)?

Instead, I propose that as readers, scholars, and teachers, we practice an interrogative mode, pursuing questions such as:

- What does it **mean** to be black in this text?
- What are the signifiers of race and how do they intersect with those of class and gender?
- How does the character's sense of racial/gender/class identity change or evolve throughout the narrative?
- What might be some essential paradoxes or contradictions in the way othered identity and community get characterized?

I suggest this approach not simply because I dispute the hubris involved when we subject literature—or people—to a litmus test, but also because I think literary analysis, with its openness to ambiguity and valuing of multiple interpretations, can be a particularly useful vehicle for thinking more deeply and complexly about categories of identity. By checking our presumptions at the door when we read, we can push beyond letting literary texts affirm *what* we already know and believe about identity, oppression, and power and instead investigate *how* each text constructs its own representations of identity, oppression, and power.

In this way, we can avoid what Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie calls the “Danger of a Single Story.” That is the title of her brilliant TED talk from 2009. Reflecting on how her native place of Africa is often perceived (as a land of mere poverty, war, and sickness) as well as on how her work has sometimes been criticized for not being “African” enough,” she says:

to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

To avoid “the single story” when it comes to African American and other minority literatures means avoiding the temptation to evaluate a work of literature based on whether it is “black enough,” or “feminist enough,” or “political enough.” Exposing oppression and creating solidarity among those oppressed are important tasks, but literature, I contend, is

better positioned to get us to multiplicity, complication, and thereby to new discoveries about the things we already thought we knew.

## Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story." *TED Talk*. 22 December 2009.

Gates Jr., Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: Towards a Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

Gates Jr., Henry Louis and Nellie Y. McKay, Eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2004.

### BIO:

Dr. Molly Hiro is associate professor of English at the University of Portland, where she has taught since 2005 and served as department chair from 2011-2014. A native of Florida, she earned her BA in English at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and her PhD in American literature at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her scholarly interests center on the relations between race, feeling, and narrative, considering what literary texts might have to say to respond to or counteract the prevailing social discourses of their time. She has published academic articles in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, *Arizona Quarterly*, and *Pedagogy*, and she teaches courses in African-American literature, multi-ethnic American literature, and American protest literature, as well as American literature surveys and introductory-level writing-intensive courses. As a Fulbright Scholar, Professor Hiro taught in the University of Mysore's English M.A. program, gave teacher-training workshops in Mysore and Madurai, and presented lectures at Kuvempu University and Mercy College.