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Finding Identity through 'Place': African Retention in African American Poetry

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FINDING IDENTITY THROUGH 'PLACE': AFRICAN RETENTION IN AFRICAN

AMERICAN POETRY

by

SHELLEY CLOPTON

Under the Direction of Katherine Hankins, PhD

ABSTRACT

This research explores the geographic concept of place and its relationship to identity in contemporary poetry performances. Identity is the most prominent issue of New World African folklore studies, stemming from problems with race, nationhood, and colonial influences. Moreover, many scholars recognize that there is significantly less discernible African retention in African American folklore compared to other New World African folklore. Thus, this research examines contemporary African American storytelling through observing performances of poetry, a notable representation of folklore, to investigate whether African memory has been mobilized in today's African American folklore. The qualitative method of nonparticipant observation was used to collect data, which included 25 poetry performances by African American poets and artists. This contemporary form of storytelling was coded, analyzed, and then compared to traditional African storytelling traits. Conclusions from this research indicate parallels between storytelling traits observed in contemporary African American poetry and traits that historically have been demonstrated in African storytelling.

INDEX WORDS: Memory, Place, Identity, Folklore, Performance, Africa

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2019

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Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2019

DEDICATION

To Jesus Christ, who used the art of storytelling to teach lessons of morality to those who

pursued him. His stories enabled his followers to access the key to gaining everlasting life in the

Kingdom of God (Matthew 13: 1-16).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

1   INTRODUCTION

This research explores the geographic concept of place and its relationship to identity. According to Casey's concept which merges geography and philosophy, place is the "immediate environment" of the "lived body" and is highly related to "self", the "identity" we associate with the "lived place" (Casey 2001:683). Casey asserts that place remains with us, stored in the body, as memory (Schatzki 2001). Similar to Casey, geographers also have a growing interest in capturing the "interrelatedness of place through engagement with" elements such as "memory" and examining the "performativity of place" (Davies and Dwyer 2007: 258, 261). In utilizing Casey's argument that memory represents place, this research seeks to examine the relationship between place and identity through examining African retention in African American folklore.

The "problem of identity" is the most prominent issue of New World African folklore studies, stemming from problems with race and nationality (Prahlad 2005: 254). Tools such as tale type/motif indices, which are used to cross-culturally comparing folktales to identify cultural origins, are argued to be inadequate for properly examining historical materials of African and New World African folklore (Piersen 1971). Moreover, many scholars recognize the argument that suggests there is significantly less discernible African retention in African American folklore compared to other New World African folklore (Piersen 1971; Prahlad 2005; Matory 2009; Courlander 1996). In order to explore connections between African identity and New World African folklore materials, especially in exploring African retention in African American folklore, a more convincing method for analyzing such folkloric materials is needed.

To observe African retention in African American folklore, this research investigates the mobilization of African memory in African American storytelling through poetry. In analyzing African retention in African American storytelling through performance of poetry, this research

seeks to discover: 1) how African ancestral memories manifest in contemporary performances of African American poetry; and 2) how such African retention are being used in African American poetry (Do these memories strive to protect, educate or inform later generations?).

In my research, I utilized the qualitative method of nonparticipant observation to collect data. Twenty-five poetry performances by African American poets and artists were observed and analyzed. The common themes that are prevalent in African storytelling are used as *a priori* codes, or codes determined prior to analyzing the text, to initially categorize data collected from African American poetry performances. Emergent codes, or themes that develop after some analysis has taken place, are also introduced into the study. Conclusions from this research indicate parallels between storytelling traits observed in contemporary African American poetry and traits that historically have been demonstrated in African storytelling. The observance of contemporary African American poetry demonstrated adherence to African values, indicating African Americans' retention of ancestral memory. Through the examination of storytelling, this research seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between identity and place through examining African memory in African American folklore, and strives to explore new methods of analyzing African Americans storytelling that encourages blacks to perceive themselves from the lens of their heritage.

2   CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In striving to examine the relationship between place and identity, the purpose of this research is to investigate the degree to which African ancestral memories are mobilized in performances of contemporary Negro American poetry. As such, it is crucial to investigate literatures examining the geographical concept of place as well as the cultural retention that constructs identity for diasporic African peoples. Next, I explored literatures discussing African

and African American folklore, as this examination utilizes folklore motifs to identify African storytelling traits in contemporary African American poetry. Lastly, I examined literatures discussing the significance of performance in expressing memory.

2.1   Memory as 'Place'

This research explores the geographic concept of place and its relationship to identity. Geographers are increasingly interested in capturing the "interrelatedness of place through engagement with" elements such as memory and performance (Davies and Dwyer 2007: 261). In the 1960s, humanistic geographers began to actively argue and support a concept of place that embodies meaningful personal experiences for individuals and people groups (Young 2001). Edward Casey, a phenomenologist, actively participated in exploring the geographic concept of place by creating compelling literature through merging the subjects of philosophy and geography (Schatzki 2001; Entrikin 2001). Casey attested that for most of the past century geographers regarded 'place' from a "distanced cartographic perspective", as they constantly scrutinized this concept from a detached, impersonal vantage point (Entrikin 2001:694). For Casey, space and place are intrinsically separate concepts. Casey (2007: 683) points out that space is abstract and "discourages experiential explorations". Contrarily, he asserts that place is the "immediate environment" of the "lived body" and is highly related to "self", the "identity" we associate with the "lived place" (Casey 2001:683). Casey goes on to assert that place remains with us, stored in the body, as memory (Schatzki 2001).

In utilizing Casey's argument that memory represents place, this research seeks to analyze African memory in African American folklore and examine the way it relates to the identity of African Americans. In doing so, this research investigates the degree to which the mobilized memories of enslaved Africans are present in African American folklore by examining

images provided through performances of poetry. In considering the existing literature expressing interest in how diasporic African groups perceive themselves (Smith 2012; Matory 2009; Kubayanda 2002; Matory 2008, DuBois 1965 in Black 2007), coupled with geographers' interest in the "performativity of place" (Davies and Dwyer 2007: 258), the findings of this research explore the connections of African identity to the consciousness of African American peoples.

2.2   Memories of Africa in the New World

Memories of Africa were transmitted to the New World by way of the transatlantic slave trade, a massive trading system that involved the enslavement of millions of people (Solow 2001). The transatlantic slave trade took place "between 1500 and the middle of the nineteenth century", and sent approximately 12.5 million people "from Africa to the European settlements in the Americas" (Nellis 2013: xi). There were other slave trading systems that sent enslaved Africans to other various parts of Africa as well as the Middle East (Manning 1990); however, many of the enslaved captured by this particular trading system derived from West and Central Africa (Courlander 1996). Though there is no complete record of all the enslaved persons transported in slave cargoes, some of the enslaved derived from African tribes such as the Yoruba, Ibo, Mahi, Akan, Fon, Bantu, Efik, and the Ekoi (Courlander 1996).

The European settlements where enslaved Africans were sent was known as the New World (Courlander 1996). These settlements, including Portuguese, Dutch, French, Spanish, and English, were dispersed throughout the Western Hemisphere (Courlander 1996). During the trade, Europeans merchants ventured to Africa with abundant goods such as textiles, alcohol, weapons, and gun powder, where such goods were exchanged for Africans who had been enslaved and sold as sources of labor (Solow 2001).

Figure 1: Slave Trade from African to the Americas 1650-1860
Source: https://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/atlantic-slave-trade

As referenced in Figure 1, enslaved Africans were forced to produce goods such sugar, cotton, and tobacco. These products of labor were then sent to Europe (Solow 2001). Through the buying and selling of enslaved Africans as labor, combined with the consumption of goods, "economic links" were established between "the Old World and the New" (Solow 2001: 12).

Due to the aggressive nature of the "contact situation" (Rutledge 1987: 275) between the two cultural groups, European culture was forced upon New World Africans. As a result, enslaved Africans were forced to suppress their native languages, customs and overall way of living, and adopted the cultures of their oppressors (Hamilton 1985). However, despite the forced borrowing of European culture, African retention still carried over to the New World (Courlander 1996). The word "retention" refers to "remembrance" (Norval 1998: 259). There are other places where remembrances of Africa can be explored, many of such memories took place during the Middle Passage. However, the 'African' retention referenced in this research mostly pertains to West and Central African cultures that were dispersed throughout the New World.

African retention can be recognized through the memory of culture arising from

expression through African practices. African retention that survived in the New World can be discerned in "baptismal, burial and mourning rites, in the naming of children, attitudes towards elders and family, group work conventions...vocabulary and grammar retentions, African motifs in religious activities, and of course, in stories and storytelling" (Courlander 1996: 2). In the New World, there is pronounced African retention in elements involving performance such as "music and music making and dance (postures, movements, and concept) ..." (Courlander 1996: 2) Examples of tangible African survivals in the New World are instruments (such as drums, metal percussion, scrapers, and rattles), utensils, game boards, and ritual objects (Courlander 1996). Such survivals are part of the lives of African people spread throughout the New World.

2.3   African Folklore

Intangible cultural survivals are as significant as tangible cultural survivals, as they are a source for connections to identity (Bouchenaki 2003). Intangible aspects regard cultural values, processes, and interactions that disseminate knowledge among people (Bouchenaki 2003). Such intangible survivals include music, dance, and oral traditions (Bouchenaki 2003). As mentioned previously, African retention also is notably recognizable within New World African oral traditions (Courlander 1996).

Oral traditions and storytelling are terms that are also referred to as folklore. Originally, the term folklore was solely used to describe European peasants and was defined by William Wells Newell as "understood oral tradition, information and belief handed down from generation to generation without the use of writing." (Newell 1890 in Dundes 1966: 229). The term has since been extended to all cultures and "now encompasses any willed, individual, creative expression" with a pronounced focus on "aesthetic and expressive aspects of culture" (Magoulick 2001: par. 7). Ogunleye (1997: 436) claims "folklore represents a line to a vast,

interconnected network of meanings, values, and cognitions" and "contains seeds of wisdom, problem solving, and prophecy through tales of rebellion, triumph, reasoning, moralizing, and satire". Folklore encompasses forms of expression such as folktales, myths, storytelling, recollections, and songs (Ogunleye 1997). Courlander (1996: 7) asserts that folklore consists of "near-epics and recollections of historical happenings."

There are certain traits that are signature of African folklore. Animal stories and stories of divination are characteristic of African storytelling (Herskovits 1943; Piersen 1971; Tuwe 2016). Practices for curing (Herskovits 1943), education on survival, morality, identity, community empowerment, and preservation of cultural values are all common elements of African storytelling (Tuwe 2016). African storytelling is a notable form of entertainment, as traits are known to manipulate emotion through performance aspects that are richly based in narration and audience participation (Tuwe 2016). Piersen (1971: 206) describes African storytelling as "the excellent, lively oral delivery with mimicking of animal and other sounds, the tones of voices, the stress on communal performance and the like." African storytelling also often uses improvisation (Dundes 1997). Repetition, gesturing, and singing are also often used in African storytelling (Tuwe 2016). The prominence of these African storytelling motifs are pronounced among the African diasporic population in countries throughout the New World.

2.4   New World African Folklore: Searching for Identity

Prahlad expresses that the most prominent issue of "Africana" (a term he created to include all New World African countries) folklore studies is the "problem of identity" (Prahlad 2005: 253-254). This issue has persisted for centuries, as he expresses that the root of this problem derives from the forced removal and dispersal of Africans from their homelands to other territories (Prahlad 2005). Prahlad asserts that African folkloric writings are heavily influenced

by the "politics of race", as well as "moral questions raised by slavery and postcolonial relationships between people of European and African (or other ethnic descent) and the nature of humanness and nationhood" (Prahlad 2005: 254). Therefore, "debate over origins" (Prahlad 2005: 258) is an especially significant debate within the examination of identity in Africana folklore studies. E. Franklin Frazier, a renowned American sociologist, asks:

> "Who is the Negro?" What is the nature of his culture and being?" Is he an ahistorical, New World invention of white American interests, or is he a clever castaway of Africa bearing cultural roots too profound to be completely destroyed even by the experiences of the Middle Passage, and subsequently enslavement?" (Frazier 1963 in Prahlad 2005: 256)

W.E.B. DuBois, an acclaimed historian, activist, and Pan- Africanist (Romero 1976), argued that as a result of America's oppressive culture of white domination, African Americans experience social marginalization. Due to the cruelty they have experienced, DuBois asserts that blacks in America suffer from what he coined as a "double consciousness" (DuBois 1965: 215 in Black 2007: 394). Black (2007: 394) further explains DuBois's term:

> African Americans are forced to view themselves from, and as, the negative perspectives of the outside society. Having two antagonistic identities means that a lot of time and energy is spent negotiating and enduring the conflicts between who one is as a person and how one struggles to live with the misrepresentations of the outside world. Having one's own sense of self and also having imposed contempt for an ascribed self, having twoness, is what DuBois calls double consciousness.

In response to the issues that African Americans face in relation to their identity, this research strives to introduce a new way of analyzing the stories of African Americans that will encourage blacks to perceive themselves from the lens of their own heritage, as this has not been done for most African American folklore (Piersen 1971).

2.5   African American Folklore

Origins of New World African literature are often investigated by examining African retentions and survivals. For example, Kubayanda (2002) highlights the work of Barbadian

writer Edward Brathwaite, who examined various categories of Caribbean literature involving African survivals in the New World, as well as literature on reclaiming African culture in the Caribbean.

Questioning African origin or identity is not nearly as prominent in New World countries in the Caribbean and South America, as it is for America (Courlander 1996). Courlander (1996: 2) suggests that folklore from New World countries like Brazil, Surinam, and Haiti have an abundance of African retention that survived within their cultures, while African retention is much more "muted" in the United States. The reason for this is likely that the "pace" in which New World Africans experienced cultural change varied throughout the New World (Courlander 1996: 2). For instance, in the New World country of Brazil, in its region of Bahia, a compromise exists between sharing the European (Portuguese) dominant culture and the culture of New World African people, as this sharing of cultures is discernible in Bahia's religious beliefs, games, and cuisine (Berghe 1976). Contrarily, English cultural borrowing was extremely prevalent during the time of America's creation and subsequent development, as America's colonizers were from England (Dicker 2008). Furthermore, the United States "further mixed and dispersed" enslaved Africans throughout plantations, which deliberately facilitated the "withering of tribal and cultural ties" (Courlander 1996: 1). African culture was almost completely eradicated from the lives of enslaved Africans in America, which likewise affected the survival of African retention in later generations (Berghe 1976).

That is not to say that African retention is absent in African American culture overall. Courlander (1996) asserts that though African American folklore appears different from Caribbean and Latin American folklore and is treated as such, through comparison, one can truly discern similarities among music, speech, and literature between African American and other

New World African cultures. The Gullah Geechee culture of the Southern United States is an example of how African retention survived in African American culture (Courlander 1996). The Gullah Geechee language, which consists of European and African influences (Crook 2008), developed as a common language used among enslaved Africans from various ethnic groups mostly deriving from West and Central Africa (Ely et al. 2006). This language is still utilized today, as the Gullah Geechee population resides "along the Atlantic coast between southern North Carolina and northeastern Florida" (Crook 2008: 1). The Gullah Geechee people managed to create, preserve, and transmit this language as well as other African traditions such as craftsmanship and storytelling, largely due to their isolation from the mainland (Courlander 1996). With the purpose of acknowledging and preserving such traditions, the "Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor" became federally-designated as a "National Heritage Area" (Jackson 2012: 15). However, Courlander (1996: 281) expresses that the Gullah Geechee "maintained a seemingly more tangible tie with their past than did most Negroes of the south…" In fact, Smith asserts that "the Gullah community remains the only black community in the United States with a national designation" (Smith 2012: 155). The debate continues over the amount of "Africanness" (Matory 2009: 15) that influenced black American folklore. Many scholars recognize the argument that suggests there is significantly less discernible African retention in African American folklore compared to other New World African folklore (Piersen 1971; Prahlad 2005; Matory 2009; Courlander 1996). The minimization of African cultural retention within African American folklore "complicates the task of American folklorists in discovering the roots of black American tales" (Piersen 1971: 205-206), which ultimately complicates connecting African American identity with African heritage through its folklore.

2.6   Examining Origins of Folklore

One way that scholars investigate origins of folklore is through examining the tale type and motif of folktales. Alan Dundes describes tale type as "a *composite* plot synopsis corresponding in exact verbatim detail to no one individual version but at the same time encompassing to some extent *all* of the extant versions of that folktale" (Dundes 1997:196).

Figure 2: Br'er Rabbit and Tar Baby
Source: https://www.blackfacts.com/fact/brer-rabbit

An example of an African American folktale type is Tar Baby, as reflected in Figure 2. In one version retold by Virginia Hamilton, Bruh Wolf uses Tar Baby, a baby made of tar, to catch Bruh Rabbit (also displayed in displayed in Figure 2) and eat him, to punish the rabbit for continuing to raid his fields (Young et al. 2004). In another version of the tale, also retold by Virginia Hamilton, Bruh Fox uses Tar Baby as a ruse to catch and confront Doc Rabbit for drinking his all of his "crock of cream" (Hamilton et al. 1985: 13). Though there are many versions of the Tar Baby tale, including versions from Brazil, the Bahamas, and from African tribes such as the Ewe and Yoruba (Hamilton et al. 1985), the premise of the story virtually remains the same.

A motif is described as "a theme, character, or verbal pattern which recurs in literature or folklore.... A motif may be a theme which runs through a number of different works". (Beckson and Ganz 1960: 129 in Freedman 1971:123). The rabbit (Bruh Rabbit and Doc Rabbit), in both stories retold by Virginia Hamilton, is represented as a trickster, as these characters ultimately outsmart both Bruh Wolf and Bruh Fox (Young et al. 2004; Hamilton et al. 1985). As a trickster in folklore, the defenseless rabbit uses its cleverness to triumph over more powerful animals such as the fox and wolf (Hamilton et al. 1985), serving as a "symbolic" motif (Freedman 1971: 124).

Bruh Rabbit, also known as "B'rabby", "Brer", or "Buh Rabbit" in African American folklore, is considered to be an example of how enslaved Africans combined memories of Africa to experiences in their "new environment", creating "a body of folk expression" (Hamilton et al. 1985: x). Though the character Br'er Rabbit is a component of Gullah/Geechee stories (Ely et al. 2006), this rabbit is considered derived from the African hare (Schmidt 1977; Garrett 1966).

Indeed, African American folklore retains memories of Africa (Garrett 1966), considering its Tar Baby tales and trickster rabbit motif. However, compared to pronounced retention in other New World African folklores, the composition of African American folklore is distinguishable due its mixed elements of African, European and Native American traits (Dundes 1966; Green 2009). The differences between African American folklore and other New World African oral literature drives this research.

Scholars cross-culturally compare the traits of tales types and motifs in order to discover origin; this method is called the historic-geographic method (Goldberg 1984). In investigating African origins of African American folklore specifically, scholars produce their argument by examining numerous African American folktales and motifs, and cross culturally comparing

them to African as well as Caribbean and South American folktales and motifs, noting whether the tale type/motif is characteristically African (Piersen 1971).

2.7   Utilizing Indices to Assess Origins of African Folklore

The historic-geographic method has historically been "employed to analyze the contents of folklore items and to recreate their histories" (Goertzen 1985: 449), as this method "assumes" that all versions of a folktale "are based on a single original" (Goldberg 1984: 2). Thus, within this method, numerous versions of the folklore are collected and usually arranged by "geographic" or "cultural areas" (Goertzen 1985:449). The "portions" are systematically organized, coded, and analyzed (Goertzen 1985: 449). The results produced from analysis reinforce conclusion regarding the "archetype" of the folklore, which expresses its history (Goertzen 1985:449).

For the sake of comparing different versions of tales, folklore is often organized in indices, which are utilized in historical-geographic studies (Martin n.d.). Dr. Stith Thompson, a professor of English at Indiana University (Martin n.d), developed one of the most profound motif indices utilized within folklore studies. '*The Motif-Index of Folk Literature*' is Thompson's "most monumental folklore work, embodying at least forty years of research" (Martin n.d.: 15). This work is composed of literary and oral sources and systematically organizes narrative material such as fables, folktales, and myths (Martin n.d.). The Aarne-Thompson tale type index is another indexing system that is deemed notable by scholars such as Dundes, who asserts that this system as well as the '*Motif-Index of Folk Literature'* are extraordinary tools for analysis used by folklorists (Dundes 1997: 195).

Though widely utilized by folklorists, this method of tale type and motif indexing produces many issues when utilized to assess origins of African folklore, and ultimately New

World African folklore which includes African American folklore (Piersen 1971). As folklorist

Richard Dorson confirms, "Folklorists are just beginning to look at Africa" (Dorson 1972 in

Görög-Karady 1984: 161). One of the main issues with using tale type and motif indices is the

lack of detailed recording and collecting of African folklores by those who create tale type/motif

indices such as Stith Thompson, Antti Aarne, and May Augusta Klipple (Piersen 1971). For

instance, '*The Types of the Folklore'*, the work of Stith Thompson and Antti Aarne does not

"cover Africa" (Piersen 1971: 210), as they state "It would be a mistake to think that it could be

extended to tales of such areas as central Africa" (Aarne, Thompson 1961 in Piersen 1971: 210).

Due to the fact that many African tales are not included in indices, Piersen (Piersen 1971: 213)

argues that numerous "parallel tales" could be excluded as well, thus drawing conclusions about

the origins is complicated for African and New World African tales.

Another issue with using tale type and motif indexing to assess origins of African

folklore is that the majority of African folktale collections adhere to criteria that is incompatible

with the standards utilized by modern folklorists (Piersen 1971). This could stem from the fact

that African storytellers utilize a great deal of improvisation which negates the process of

categorizing African themes under fixed motifs and tale types (Dundes 1997: 196). Ultimately,

these facts lead to a critique that the concept of motifs and tale types cannot effectively be

applied to African folk materials due to the rigidness of its Eurocentric structure (Dundes 1997:

196). These issues complicate any argument that could be made about the origin of African tales

or "the African nature of the black American folktale" (Piersen 1971: 211).

Even if motif and tale type indexing included, accepted, and properly chronicled African

folktales, in the words of Courlander (1996: 255), "the classification of a theme or motif by no

means reveals everything". Scholars cannot state with overall certainty the origin of African

tales, based on the tale type and motif of the tale alone (Piersen 1971). Thus, continuing to perpetuate the usage of tale type and motif indices further obscures the proper examination of the origin of black American folklore, and other folklores that originated from Africa.

As inadequate as this method is in examining origins of African folklore, it remains a primary method for examining African remnants in New World African folklore. Thus, in establishing their arguments, scholars are reliant upon findings that derive from the usage of this method. In referring to the text '*Stith Thompson: His Life and His Role in Folklore Scholarship*', Martin states that "the index was not meant to be an end in itself, but only the foundation for future research--particularly historic-geographic study" (Martin n.d.: 16). Furthermore, efforts should not cease to find authentic, reliable connections between Africa and New World African folklore. Other methods should be introduced into scholarship for the purpose of assessing cultural identity. If the aim of the historic-geographic method is to use the distribution of traits to identify the folklore's cultural history (Schmidt 1939 in Goldberg 1984), this can be done without the necessity of finding absolute origins. Mintz and Price (1976 in Matory 2009: 12) argue that African origins are less important than its significance in the African American community, regarding "institution-building" and "social solidarity". Piersen (1971: 209) states, "A new creation of a unique folk group probably should be studied in terms of its own folk culture, not in terms of inferences from questionable type and motif indexes". He proceeds, "This has not been done for most of the Negro lore in the United States; the studies we have, therefore, must be criticized on their own terms" (Piersen 1971: 209).

As previously mentioned, Courlander (1996: 255) states, "the classification of a theme or motif by no means reveals everything". I agree with this assertion, as in New World African folklore, the repetition of themes that are prominent in African storytelling does necessarily

indicate an African identity. However, African identity can be asserted if the usage of motifs aligns with the way Africans historically utilize storytelling. Therefore, motifs can be useful when used in a suitable method for recognizing and assessing African storytelling traits. Moreover, the most suitable method for this process should be to recognize and expand upon any African storytelling trait. For this research, a method has been chosen that will explore African identity in New World African folklore, as it explores connections between African identity and African American folklore. In what follows I examine memory in the performance of African American folklore.

2.8   Assessing African Retention through Performance

African American folklore serves as a tool to continue the transmission of cultural African heritage amongst African American people (Smith 2012; Ogunleye 1997). It is important to retain and perpetuate African American stories as well as magnify African retention, as many aspects of African cultures have been threatened with annihilation. However, despite cultural change that has impacted African storytelling in America, I agree with the perspective of John Roberts (2009: 115) who expresses that "Cultural change through transformation does not lead to the abandonment of group values and processes, but rather represents an attempt to maintain adherence to them under new conditions". In this research I investigate the degree to which African American storytelling adheres to or reflects African values.

In the text '*The Work of Memory in Madagascar*', Jennifer Cole (1998) discusses the traumatic impacts of colonialism that affected the Betsimisaraka, an ethnic group that survived colonization from the Merina and the French. She asserts that the Betsimisaraka practice a collective decision-making process, where they chose to commemorate their ancestors, rather than recall their experience of colonization (Cole 1998). Cole (1998: 614) expresses, "This

process of remembering the choices and actions made by ancestors is not the heroic history of events reflected in Merina and French archives, but rather the slow and always tentative process of etching individual desires, intentions, and relationships onto particular places, objects, and bodies...In this way, the remembered goals and intentions of the actors become a permanent part of the landscape..." These choices have obfuscated the usual consequences of colonization on consciousness, as these choices provide evidence that "local cultural autonomy can be partially maintained through the work of memory" (Cole 1998: 610). This research investigates whether group values or memories of enslaved Africans, such as protection of community, promotion of survival, reverence and remembrance of ancestors and their goals, exist in contemporary African American folklore.

2.9   Performance of Poetry

Toni Morrison, an esteemed writer of works regarding memory and identity, expresses that when she is recollecting or interpreting her own memories as well as memories of others, she utilizes imagery (Morrison et al. 1988). Morrison (et al. 1988: 92) explains that she practices a type of "literary archeology" to interpret the image or "remains" of the past and to express accurately "the feelings that accompany the picture". She expresses "the image comes first and tells me what the "memory" is about" (Morrison et al. 1988: 95). Furthermore, many artists and scholars like Morrison express the significance of performance to examine memory.

Piersen asserts that the "process of Africanization" is often recognized through "performance" in "Negro storytelling" (Piersen 1971: 206). Young points out the importance of remembering the memories mobilized by enslaved Africans and remembering our memories of them (the enslaved Africans themselves) (Young 2006). In emphasizing the work of Professor P. Sterling Stuckey, Young reiterates the importance of remembering "the lived experiences of the

enslaved, including visual art, song, dance, aesthetics, and vernacular traditions" (Young 2006: 391). Likewise, Magoulick states that scholars themselves are dissatisfied with simply "collecting, classifying, and cataloguing" folklore materials (Magoulick 2001: par.1). She continues that there is a growing interest by "the new generation of folklorists" in "interactions between an individual telling a story and how the audiences react and interact" (Magoulick 2001: par.8). Magoulick (2001: par. 9) asserts that performance theory should be used more frequently, as it remains "a valid and useful perspective."

Poetic inquiry is a multifaceted methodology that involves the interpretation of various forms of poetry and has been utilized in the field of geography for qualitative inquiry (Prendergast 2009). Edgar Lee Masters (1915) describes poetry as the orientation of the soul to conditions in life, and as life experiences are extremely diverse among people, he described the composition and structure of poetry as being quite open-ended and flexible. He expressed that poetry is comprised of rhythmic vibrations that emanate from the soul, and forms into words (Masters 1915). Masters (1915: 308) further asserts that poetry is comprised of a "subtle and inherent cadence even where no definite rhythm is attempted." Likewise, Brady (2009: xiii) points out that poetry encourages communication and *re*-presentation of the inner dimensions of humanity and has the ability to interpret humanity through the performance of "acting out the meanings of being human". Poetry is a prominent tool that "promoted black consciousness" (Rambsy 2014: 52) among African Americans to transmit, express, and remember their cultural heritage. In 'Its Role in Reconstructing African American History', Ogunleye emphasizes the words of Molefi Asante (1989: 491 in Ogunleye 1997: 435) who expressed "no art form reflects the tremendous impact of our presence in America more powerfully or eloquently than does folk poetry in the storytelling tradition". Margaret Danner, an African American poet expressed that

her motivation to express heavily African heritage in writings was "to cause men, especially Blacks, to realize that Black roots are as deeply planted and authentic as those of other people with whom we must deal in creating this New World" (Danner in Aldridge 1987: 202). As such, I turn to poetry as an important source for examining African retention in African American storytelling, and thus the significance of place to identity.

3   RESEARCH QUESTION

This research seeks to answer the question: How do African ancestral memories manifest in contemporary performances of African American poetry? The purpose of this study is an attempt to explore memories of African culture in African American storytelling through poetry. To what degree are such memories being mobilized? This research analyzes what these memories consist of, whether there is the presence of tangible African retentions such as instruments, less tangible African retentions such as remembered goals, intentions, and warnings of ancestors, or the presence of African storytelling themes such as spirituality, entertainment and education. In providing this more nuanced contribution to the historic-geographic method, the examination of African retention in African American poetry further explores connections between African identity and African American folklore. In addition, I ask: How is African American storytelling "used" (Piersen 1971; Courlander 1996) during performance? This could include decision-making, problem solving, community empowerment, or entertainment (Ogunleye 1997; Tuwe 2016). Exploring the usage of African American storytelling provides more implications in regards to its association with identity.

4   POSITIONALITY

As an African American social scientist, I have a profound interest in how memory influences people's behavior in certain environments. I realized there must be some truth to

folklore when I found myself in a situation that so closely resembled an African American folktale called 'Wiley and the Hairy Man'. This folktale was read to me as a bedtime story and is one of the tales in the book '*The People Could Fly',* told by Virginia Hamilton. In this situation, I experienced all of the essential elements of the story. I was Wiley and my adversary was the Hairy Man. One of the elements of my situation that resembled this folktale was the Hairy Man's complete lack of respect or reverence of my beliefs. In another element that resembled the story, I was deceived and threatened by the Hairy Man. But like Wiley, I ultimately outsmarted him. After reviewing the story again, I recognized the similarities between my experience and the folktale. I even realized how much my adversary looked like the Hairy man! As Garrett (1996: 243) expresses, "Wherever the Negro has gone, tales have gone too, and with only minor alterations in plot". Here is where I found that the purpose of folklore is indeed to protect others, as the summary on the copyright page of '*The People Could Fly'* states: "Retold Afro-American folktales of animals, fantasy, the supernatural, and desire for freedom, born of the sorrow of the slaves, but passed on in hope" (Hamilton et al. 1985).

My experience combined with the existence of this story only suggests that folklore represents the mobility of memories. In fact, African American folklore is regarded as an excellent tool for teaching lessons (Turner 1990), yet literature suggests that the usage of this folklore is dwindling as a means of education, as it is being disregarded by younger generations (Ogunleye 1997). I embarked on this research to assist in the transmission of such folklore, and to better understand its significance. I developed this research project in hopes to enlighten contemporary African Americans on the value of African American folklore and encourage them to investigate folklore for themselves so the "valorization" of such an art form can persist in later generations (Ogunleye 1997: 453). Considering the problems of identity that African Americans

arguably face due to racism, the double-consciousness that DuBois identified, and issues with nationality, this research most importantly strives to explore new methods of analyzing African Americans storytelling that encourages blacks to perceive themselves from the lens of their heritage. It is my hope that this research is recognized as a step towards reconciling such issues of identity.

5   METHODOLOGY

In order to examine concepts such as place, performance, and, memory in social science research, qualitative methods are often used (Davies and Dwyer 2007), as qualitative researchers attempt to provide answers to inquiries that question social construction. In striving to understand "emotional geographies", human geographers have historically collected data using qualitative methods such as studying texts, conducting interviews and focus groups, and engaging in ethnography (Davies and Dwyer 2007: 257-258). This research uses the qualitative method of nonparticipant observation to collect data (Ostrower 1998: 57). This method allows researchers to study and record human "interactions in the flow of time and real events" (Troutman 1972: 1). Troutman (1972: 2) asserts that this method is necessary in order for the researcher to "fully understand the impact of such sensitive and emotion-laden curricula". Thus, the nonparticipant observation method is designed to reveal behavior in a specific audience.

All observed data consists of performances from African American poets, as known as spoken word artists. All data was collected at open mic events. An open mic event is offered to the general public and invites people to showcase various types of performances such as poetry, comedy, and acting (Fann 2013).

The research setting is Atlanta, Georgia, which is very significant to this study. William Wells Newell characterized "Lore of Negroes in the southern States of the Union" as "fast-

vanishing remains of Folk-Lore in America" (Newell 1888 in Dundes 1966: 227). Observing poetry in Atlanta, a bustling southern US city with a black majority population (Teague 2019), provides an important representation of the content of contemporary African American storytelling.

Between December 2018 and February 2019, I used the Meetup app to find open mic performances occurring in Atlanta. Meetup is an application that allows people to search for various activities and events taking place in their area and connects them with others who share similar interests. I downloaded the application onto my phone and searched for poetry performances. Meetup provided me access to numerous networks of spoken word events. These events occurred nearly every day of the week and were located throughout the Atlanta area.

Aside from intentionally selecting open mic performances that occurred in close proximity to my home or work, I did not use any criteria to select the open mic events that I observed. I did not intentionally seek or investigate the observed poets and did not have any prior knowledge of their style, content, or background. I simply checked the Meetup application for upcoming events, chose an event that worked for my personal schedule, and attended the event.

Considering that some open mic nights presented non-poetry performances, it was difficult to plan concretely the number of poetry performances that I would be able to record at any given event. Creswell (2003: 181) states that qualitative research is "emergent", flexible and tentative rather than "tightly prefigured". He proceeds that "the data collection process might change as doors open and close for data collection..." (Creswell 2003: 181-182). I aligned my observation protocol with this Creswell's assertion, and applied an open-ended approach to the number of poetry performances that I recorded at each open mic night.

Per experience from observations noted at previously attended open mic events, I was aware that turning the recordings on and off between performers can compromise the data (i.e. not capturing pertinent material that may be expressed during intermissions, forgetting to turn the device back on). Therefore, the start time and length of each performance was not captured. Furthermore, though I allowed the recorder to remain on throughout the duration of the open mic night, I did not include non-poetry performances in my data.

The observed data consists of public performances. SMART phone technology was used to capture all performances. Though videotaping is regarded to provide more authenticity to material (Prendergast 2009), and effectively capture elements of storytelling such as gestures, audiotaping was the primary method used to capture data. Visual elements of performances such as gestures were noted in my field notes. After performances were captured, they were uploaded to a Google drive, which was used as a second location to store data. After finalizing data collection, I analyzed 25 poetry performances from 25 individual spoken word artists. The following information provides the place and date of the observed events: Djea Natural Hair Spa on Saturday, December 29th, 2018, Apache Café on Sunday, January 20th, 2019, The Red Door on Wednesday, February 6th, 2019, Black Dot Cultural Center and Bookstore on Friday, February 8th, 2019.

5.1 Place Analysis

Kapchan (1995: 483) states "Because performance is more than a "mode of language use" or a "way of speaking," it is necessary to take account of the space of performance and the role of the senses in connecting performers to a somatic experience of place." The following place analysis provides details of the places where the observed data was captured. The dates and start

time of the observed open mic events are also provided. The names of all performers are reflected in Table 1.

Located in Conyers, Georgia, the first observed event took place at 6:30pm on Saturday, December 29th, 2018 at a beauty salon called Djea Natural Hair Spa. This event was filled with chairs that faced an open space in the front of the room that served as a stage. This stage was also equipped with a microphone sitting on a stand. The event provided a professional DJ, a host, as well as light snacks. One featured artist commented on the significance of hosting a spoken word event at a place like a beauty salon, as he expressed that the black community often uses both places to exchange information. The self-love movement was discussed with the audience at this event. Four of the observed performances were captured at this place.

The following event took place on Sunday, January 20th, 2019. This show began at 8pm at a place called Apache Café which has been operating in downtown Atlanta, Georgia for many years. Located at the end of a small street, its physical location is very discrete. This location is a very intimate space that operates as a café during the day and turns into a club at night. Dimly-lit and enclosed with brick walls, this place has an atmosphere that is largely performance-centric and has a stage that is situated close to the audience. With some space left for standing room, most of this place consists of a dining area with seats and small tables. There is also a bar that is positioned against one of the walls of the venue. This place showcases various types of music including jazz, hip hop, R&B, and Latin music, as well as poetic and comedic performances.

This event had a professional, fully equipped DJ, along with a host. Before the performances began, the host introduced himself, and instructed everyone to get up from their tables to introduce themselves to someone that did not know. He said "We're gonna act like its church in here"! This gesture created a comfortable environment for the audience. Once

everyone returned to their seats, he instructed the audience to write a question on the piece of paper (one piece for every chair) that was placed on table. After the audience members had written their questions, the papers were then collected and given to the host. He then invited the audience to play a game called *Never have I ever*. He provided the audience with instructions to the game. First, he would read one of the questions that the audience provided. If the audience member had experience engaging in the situation that the question presented, they would take a sip of their drink. If they had no experience, they would reply "Hell No!" aloud. This game was played throughout the night between performances, adding another communal element to the show. After the first round of *Never have I ever,* the host initiated the show by calling up the first performer. I was informed by a lady seated at my table that performers were called up randomly from the sign-up list. Eleven of the observed performances were captured at this place.

The next event I attended took place at The Red Door on Wednesday, February 6th, 2019 in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and began at 8pm. This place is an event space that is also intimate, where wedding receptions, baby showers, and community events are hosted. It is brightly lit and filled with chairs that faced an open space in the front of the room. This open space served as a stage. This event had a professional, fully equipped DJ, offered light snacks, and free prizes were given to the audience through a raffle. Four of the observed performances were captured at this place.

The final observed event took place on Friday, February 8th, 2019 and began around 9pm. The place where this event occurred is called Black Dot Cultural Center and Bookstore. Located in Lithonia, Georgia, this center hosts numerous events, such as dance classes, open mic nights, and community forums. The material offered within its bookstore focuses on black consciousness and black history. Its walls have shelves which are stocked with books. This place

is decorated with symbols of black empowerment such as Egyptian hieroglyphics. This place had several rows of chairs that faced an open space in the front of the room. This open space served as a stage. On the wall that the audience faced, which stood behind the performer, there was a mural of an enormous tree painted in colors of red, orange, yellow, and brown. Surrounding the tree were numerous signatures from patrons and community members, which provided their salutations and well wishes to the bookstore. The media crew that was present recorded the entire event.

Prior to the show, the host engaged the audience in conscious conversations surrounding health and education. The audience participated in this engagement, offering solutions to issues that plague the black community. Affection for self, or self-love, was that night's discussion topic. This audience was very diverse in terms of the ages of the audience members. The host acknowledged the audience's age diversity, as during the conversations, wisdom was dispensed from the viewpoint of various generations. The host spoke about how the generations must transmit information to one another for the community to continue thriving. After the conversation, the host initiated the show. After every performance, he would engage in a small commentary with the artist inquiring about their inspiration for the piece that they performed. Six of the observed performances were captured at this place.

At all observed places, energy was a pivotal element during the performances. Hosts would often recognize trends in masculine or feminine energy, depending on the sequence of performers. Poets were often considerate of the performance act that followed theirs. In doing so, they would signal the end of their poem, communicating preparation for the following act. This provided a sense of fluidity to the overall event. All observed places exemplified a space for healing, represented a sense of community, and encouraged the transmission of information.

Table 1: List of Performers

1	LadyVee DaPoet
2	Lavell Scales
3	The Lightresses
4	Sleepy Eyez
5	Bloo
6	Clear Vision
7	Isna Tianti
8	Nate
9	Sundawg the Que
10	Asia Queen
11	Winter
12	Papi Picasso
13	Ms. Thomas
14	Example
15	Kitty Pride
16	Red Storm
17	Amavi
18	Kiss the Poet
19	Rewop
20	Lyrical Lunatic
21	Fitzgerald the Poet
22	Noble Julz
23	Asia Rainey
24	Karega Ani
25	Krissy (Chrissy)

5.2   Transcription

I transcribed all performances captured through audiotaping, which amounted to 58 pages of text. During the process of transcription, I listened to each recording on the Google drive that I used to store data. I began by playing the recording and proceeded to type what I heard. When language was unclear, I would rewind the recording to grasp the words. This step was helpful considering that there were times when previously typed words were corrected upon reviewing to recordings again. The process of transcription was instrumental in providing me insight on codes that would provide the most accurate analysis of data.

I carefully listened to every recording and applied the same care when transcribing data. However, I am aware of the challenges that the process of transcription entails regarding trustworthiness and confirmability. Blake Poland (in Holstein and Gubrium 2003) discussed the challenges of transcribing qualitative data. He problematizes verbatim transcription by recognizing elements that often make transcriptions susceptible to errors, such as quality of audio recordings and accents of speech (Poland in Holstein and Gubrium 2003). He also considers ethical issues that can occur as a result of erroneous transcriptions, such as the misrepresentation of data which consequently impacts the authenticity of research (Poland in Holstein and Gubrium 2003). I am aware of these issues that surround transcription, but I am also confident that this research properly represents that data that was captured.

Most poets did not express the titles of their work; therefore, titles are not provided in the observed data. Complete poems were not provided in this research. I simply used portions of the observed artists' poetry to exemplify the content within the code that was assigned. If ellipses (…) are present at the beginning or end of a line of poetry, this indicates that content within the poem was omitted.

All artists maintained a unique rhythm when performing their poetry. This rhythm was tangible during the process of transcription. The rhythm provided by performers made it easier to transcribe their poetry. Between the steps of hearing the language and typing the words, the rhythm enhanced what I recalled hearing, which assisted my memory in typing the language.

5.3   Textual Authority

Julie Schmid (2000) discusses challenges that scholars face when producing literature about performance poetries. She asserts, "Just as these community poetries call into question commonly held notions regarding textual authority and authorial "ownership," they also defy

conventional forms of exegesis" (Schmid 2000: 19). Though data analysis and commentary are part of establishing scholarship, scholars who study performance poetry engage in analysis that can be particularly challenging as they essentially take artwork viewed in the public sector, place it in literature, and disseminate it along within their research findings and subsequent opinions. By discussing terms such as "textual authority" and "authorial ownership" (Schmid 2000: 19), I argue that Schmid is questioning whether scholars have a right to change this public verbal artform that is owned by the artist, into literature that will be transcribed and critiqued. Furthermore, Schmid (2000: 19) inquires as to how literature regarding "the poem-as-text, the poem-in-performance--including the interaction between poet and audience--and extratextual elements such as audience demographics and location" can be created if scholars cannot overcome the issues they face in assessing performance poetry.

I sympathize with Schmid's perspectives, and assert that my intention is not to violate or irresponsibly use the work of artists. This analysis does not analyze or discuss literary devices, rather it explores specific themes within the observed data. Indeed, exploring the content of poetry is challenging, as meaning and significance held within the art form of poetry can be very flexible and open to interpretation. I recognized the fluidity of poetic interpretation and interconnectedness of themes within the observed data, as each theme appeared to buttress or resemble the significance of another observed theme. Many of the themes were so enmeshed, their connections nearly transcended the ability to code them. Yet, I strived to accurately explore the inner dimensions of artists through the artwork that they generously provided. Though I am not privy to sentimentalities provided within the poems such as spelling of names, I provided my best effort to accurately interpret and honor the words and emotions transmitted by the observed artists.

5.4 Data Analysis: Motif Coding

After transcription, all poems were combined into one Word document, which was imported in NVivo 12, a qualitative analysis software. I then used NVivo to code the observed data. In this analysis, African storytelling traits were used to create codes, which served as criteria to identify African storytelling traits in the observed performances. Coding is a method that organizes "text data" by "segmenting sentences…into categories", then "labeling those categories with a term" (Creswell 2003: 192).

Saldaña (2013: 58) defines the "first cycle" coding as "processes that happen during the initial coding of data". He expresses that this cycle of coding is "divided in subcategories" (Saldaña 2013: 58). Considering that my research aligned with the "literary and language" (Saldaña 2013: 58) subcategory, motif coding was used to categorize the observed data. Saldaña (2013: 128) asserts, "A motif as a *literary device* is an element that sometimes appears several times within a narrative work, and in Motif Coding the motif or element might appear several times or only once within a data excerpt". Thompson identifies motifs as "characters (fools, ogres, widows, etc.), significant objects or items in the action of the story (a castle, food, strange customs, etc.), and single incidents of action (hunting, transformation, marriage, etc.)" (Thompson 1977: 415–16 in Saldaña 2013: 128). Motifs that were coded in this research include both symbolic and literal references. Saldaña (2013: 128) expresses, "Motif Coding is the application to qualitative data of previously developed or original index codes used to classify types and elements of folk tales, myths, and legends." As opposed to creating codes from indices, this research used predetermined codes, created from African storytelling traits indicated in the literature review, as well as codes that emerge from the data.

Themes within the literature review that were identified as prevalent African storytelling traits were used to create *a priori*, or predetermined codes (Stemler 2001 in Blair 2015: 16). The application of these codes categorized references. A total of seven predetermined codes were used to code the observed data. All predetermined codes are reflected in Table 2, and provides descriptions of references that these codes were applied to. Citations from the literature review which identify these themes are also provided in the below table.

Table 2: A priori codes

Code	References descriptions	Supporting Literature
Spirituality	Religion, divinity, interpreting the universe, mentions of God, Jesus, Devil, Heaven, Hell	Tuwe 2016, Herskovits 1943, Piersen 1971
Ancestral/Family Remembrances	Reminiscences honoring significant individuals who have passed away, recollections of emotions pertained to living family members	Young 2006
Entertainment	Reference to entertainers (i.e. musical artists, athletes) games, contests, music	Tuwe 2016
Self/Community Empowerment	References to self-love, love and protection for community	Tuwe 2016
Singing	Songs applied to poetry performances	Tuwe 2016
Gesturing	Exaggerated facial expressions, bodily movements	Piersen 1971, Tuwe 2016
Audience participation	Audience engagement	Piersen 1971, Tuwe 2016

Emergent codes, or themes that develop after analysis has taken place (Stemler 2001 in Blair 2015: 16), surfaced within the observed poerty. These codes were also applied to the data to categorize references mentioned within the observed content. Seven emergent codes are reflected in Table 3, which also provides descriptions of references.

Table 3: Emergent codes

Code	Reference descriptions
Plight of Blacks	Slavery, racial discrimination, black on black crime, tragedy, loss, gang activity, incarceration
Drugs	Mention of any type of drug
Royalty	Titles of nobility such as King, Queen, prince
Dynamics of Relationships	Decision-making in relationships, dynamics of dating based on perceptions about the opposite sex
Sex	Mention of sexuality or sexual relationships
Future generations	Youth, children, or generations that have yet to come
War	Reference to armed forces, combat, battle

Sometimes it is necessary to apply another cycle of coding to qualitative data, after the first cycle has been completed. Saldaña (2013: 207) states, "Second Cycle coding methods, if needed, are advanced ways of reorganizing and reanalyzing data coded through First Cycle methods." Second cycle coding is required for this content, as the purpose of the research is to simply identify predetermined and emergent themes within the content and use these themes to explore parallels between African American storytelling and African storytelling.

In NVivo, a passage that has been assigned to a code is referred to as a reference. NVivo provides users with the ability to extract references from the overall body of data. This feature is typically used for analytical purposes. References inform the researcher of the number of times a topic is mentioned in their material. In order to accurately reflect the references made within each poem and to minimize the superfluous accumulation of references that could misrepresent the data, I attempted consolidate references. For example, if an entire poem consisted of one theme, I applied its designated code to the entire poem, which created one reference, as opposed to creating an individual reference for each line of poetry. However, if I could not combine related mentions into one reference (i.e. if related themes were scattered throughout the poem) I would assign separate references to them in order to avoid miscoding the surrounding data. A long poem did provide more opportunities to produce more references, but this mainly depended

on the structure of the poem and the variety of topics discussed within the poem. In some cases, the content within shorter poems was more diverse, thus produced more references. Sometimes references within a poem received more than code, because its content applied to more than one theme. The purpose of consolidating references was to ensure that the number of references within each poem accurately reflected the amount of times these references were mentioned. All references were quantified and are reflected in Table 4.

Table 4: Observed references

Name	References
Plight of Blacks	22
Spirituality	16
Ancestral/Familial Remembrances	13
Drugs	10
Royalty	8
Entertainment	8
Self/Community Empowerment	8
Battle of the Sexes	6
Singing	5
Sex	5
Future Generations	4
Gestures	4
War	1
Audience participation	1

The file summary report in NVivo indicated that 93% of the observed data is coded. This data includes 14 codes and 111 references.

6   RESULTS

Poetic interpretation varies depending on the perspective of the observer. I perceived some of the content to be "self-explanatory" (Freedman 1971: 124), so this made it easy to code such themes. However, the observed content provided so much depth in terms of the ability for its references to evoke various meanings, selecting codes for some of the observed data was a

complex process. By relying on my "researcher's analytic lens" (Cooper 2009: 246), I coded this data by applying what I perceived to be the most appropriate code, or codes, to the observed content. The following results provide an assessment of the references made during the artists' performances.

6.1   Plight of Blacks

References to various issues that plague the black community were prominent in this body of data. I named this code 'Plight of Blacks', as poets voiced their opinions and concerns about the societal menaces that impact African Americans. In what follows I provide excerpts of ten spoken-word performances in which this theme was prominent.

Ms. Thomas voiced issues of crime in the black community:

> *…There's not much left of what he called black pride,*
> *We still have black on black crime…*

Crime and violence were themes that permeated other poems. Police brutality was particularly salient in the performance by Lavell Scales:

> *…That same devil has put on a uniform,*
>
> *And that uniform consists of a badge, a gun, and a baton, and a body cam,*
>
> *And that same person is in possession with more violence than Silence of the Lambs or*
>
> *the Son of Sam.*
>
> *And everything recorded on that body cam, it might get photoshopped,*
>
> *Stop! Imma cop!*
>
> *And I will shoot!...*

He continued by expressing his feelings on blacks' usage of derogatory terms towards one another:

> *…I really wanna know how do we go from being kings and queens*

To pimps and hoes…

…Some people use derogatory words like n****…

Fitzgerald the Poet used college life as a symbol to represent the allure of street life, which often captivates some black youth. In his poem, he voiced similar concerns:

…Here we offer courses that teach your sons all about bitches and hoes,

Hoes and bitches, and how they don't have to refer to y'all as queens or ladies…

During his performance, Fitzgerald the Poet discussed elements such as guns, gang activity, and tragedy:

…Tuition also covers one bandana that you ain't do a damn thing for,

Just learn a handshake, congrats,

Somehow in 2019 that's all it takes to be a blood now…

…Tuition also covers one strap,

That you can keep in your lap for any situation,

It is in this position, you're in position to earn your diploma,

Fast forward, Fast forward, Fast forward,

Your cap and gown is in the mail,

Welcome to graduation day,

Where I'm pretty sure all you n***** gonna show up,

Even put your name and face on your shirt, all for your support,

And you go log into Facebook, and tell Facebook you made it,

Wait you won't be able to log into Facebook and tell Facebook you made it because

you'll be in a box, up front…

Noble Julz's performed a lamentation remembering the loss of a young man due to gun violence:

It was 2pm and the phone calls came in like bulletins,

Aye yo there was a shootout last night on the Ave and we ain't seen Taji since,

One john doe causality and police sirens sing,

Nana predicted this whole festival in a dream and often confirmed it with her psychic

friends,

Its 2:10, families gathering, supporting…

Asia Rainey shared her grandmother's memories of the abuse she suffered while fighting for

civil rights:

…Grandmother said she sat at Woolworth lunch counters,

Said she let the spit slide down her cheek,

Said it wasn't hers,

Said she let the hate slide off her soul,

Said she ate her pie slow,

Said she sat down so I can stand up and know how to get back up when knocked down…

In recalling another memory of her grandmother, Asia Rainey expressed:

Grandmama said she came from the country,

Where tree branches still hung heavy from noosed cadavers…

The dramatic representation of lynching reflects the history of violence against African

Americans. Within the spoken-word performances, there were several references to slavery.

Lavell Scales voiced:

…You know they cut off Kunta Kinte's toes in Roots

Because he was tryna escape the Master…

…Disaster strikes, the Master likes to crack the whip, and that same whip causes a sting,

and it hurts more than the truth…

Likewise, Clear Vision expressed:

We hang with the unjust for the come up,

Brutally and mentally enslaved for a buck…

…Not devaluing yourself just to sit in degrading the others just to show and know that the

invasion of the body snatchers is not just a theory,

It played a part in human history…

Nate stated during his performance:

…You see the Serengeti, Africa, witnesses fried chicken, me and you, moving packs for

spaghetti, Italians, and hot dogs, good old boys, perpetuate the lie that slavery wasn't

vetted, and that we are indebted cuz of some hermetic myth…

Incarceration was another prominent issue referenced by the poets.

Ms. Thomas asserted:

…Still too many brothers and sisters doing time…

Example expressed:

…You better stay focused on raising your kids,

Or else, you'll be doing a bid,

Wishing you woulda stayed focused on raising your kids…

Red Storm voiced:

…I detoured the road through a dark age dimension,

N**** I been through the prisons,

Homies they been convicted…

…I made it through crack and jail,

Through death and Hell…

Amavi exclaimed:

…When moms should be serving 20 to life,

And if daddy was alive, he coulda served it twice,

My brother was charged with a murder he didn't even do,

He said ten years in the pen, look Mav, it'll change you,

No matter how you go in, you won't come out the same you…

'Plight of Blacks' discusses hardships and oppression experienced within the black community such as slavery, black on black crime, gang activity, police brutality, incarceration, and racial injustice. Previously mentioned, Prahlad (2005: 254) asserts that African folkloric writings are heavily influenced by the "politics of race", "moral questions raised by slavery", as well as "the nature of humanness". These performances perpetuate the memory of issues that impede African Americans' connectedness with their own history and foster the problem of identity. In regards to these issues, artists used poetry to inform and warn the audience of threats that menace the black community.

6.2   Spirituality

Spirituality is one of the most prevalent and compelling traits in the observed data. Nearly half of the observed poems reference spirituality using various expressions. Bloo's poem offered praise to the Universe. Her performance asserted that despite the challenges, temptations, and trials she has faced in life, the Universe continued to accept, support and comfort her. Using feminine pronouns to describe the Universe, Bloo expressed:

The Universe is such a lovely being,

Bless her, as she reminds me of that one friend that was always there for me in life, no

matter what…

In proclaiming his love and adoration for women, Papi Picasso associated them with God:

…But sometimes women tend to look at us men as less, because we are still in the middle

of our lessons,

How can we not see the God in you, when you hold the blueprint while pregnant?...

...You bad ass mother of the Earth,

So please don't confuse my envy with jealous,

Because where I see God I could never see an enemy.

Kitty Pride expressed her association with Ifá, an African religion that derives from the Yoruba tribe (Tidjani-Serpos 1996):

...I'm made in the image of God,

Child of Obatala, daughter of Africa...

Isna Tianti spoke about God's acceptance of all people in her poem:

...See this message is for the homos, the bis, the down low bros, lesbians, drug dealers...

Even those who are in gangs and mobs that kill,

See I am the Church and yes the Most High still sees your worth...

Likewise, Red Storm talked about God's acceptance of him despite challenges he experienced while battling addiction:

...He took a addict like me, and molded me into a blessing...

...I made it through crack and jail,

Through death and Hell...

Many poets spoke of the faithfulness bestowed to them through their exaltation of higher powers. Despite moments of distress that she brought on herself, Bloo expressed that the Universe remained faithful to her:

...Even when I feel that there is no person or spirit that I can go to,

As I was troubling my energy, she is always the one who is around,

And listen, as she is embedded deep within my existence,

Clear as a diamond she believes in me…

Isna Tianti expressed how God continues to be faithful to her, and assured her audience that it is

possible for them to receive the same commitment from God:

> *…Yet, The faithfulness of my heavenly Ever Loving Father has made me pure,*
>
> *And I walk in the righteousness and I've been made sure,*
>
> *That all of life experiences are to get us to see that we have a chance, after chance, after*
>
> *chance to receive forgiveness and mercy…*

Red Storm spoke on his reverence and love for God:

> *… no one comes before him,*
>
> *No mother, no idle, no woman, no title…*
>
> *…God took my addiction away and he saved me,*
>
> *Put me on stages all over this world,*
>
> *So you can see God is amazing.*

Some of the observed poets spoke about the warnings that were dispensed to them through

spirituality. Bloo voiced of how the Universe provides her with warnings about life's

occurrences:

> *…The one friend who is not afraid to say, "don't be crying to me when shit hits the fan",*
>
> *Cuz I warned your silly self to many times at this point,*
>
> *I swear, she be shaking her head at me,*
>
> *And stays wondering to herself, "when is this little girl ever going to learn from her past*
>
> *mistakes"?...*

Similarly, Red Storm warned his audience about living dangerous lifestyles by describing how

he suffered due to his own disobedience:

…Cuz I suffer, cuz I didn't listen homie,

I was on a star wishing,

I detoured the road through a dark age dimension…

Red Storm also warned his observers about obliviously or unwittingly living a life without God:

…God is forreal people, I can't deny,

And you can't either, you gone see when you die…

…What if He came when you was at home,

You ain't playing attention, don't start playing wit yo phone…

…Or got popped by them Feds, cooking them eggs,

He was standing in court and all the lights went dead,

He was cheating on his wife bout to get high as a kite,

He struck a light, and He came like a thief in the night…

…Beginning and the End my friend, Alpha, Omega,

Look there's nowhere to run, won't be no alarms…

These poets encouraged their observers to seek help and wisdom through spirituality. Bloo encouraged her audience to seek the Universe:

…As I stated before, Isn't she just a lovely being that you'll always need to know?

In order for you to succeed and to grow…

Similarly, Isna Tianti encouraged her audience to seek Jesus (Yeshua):

…See Yeshua died so that you too can be multiplied,

Changing you from inside out, outward in and regardless of the present state you're in,

Taking you from Glory to Glory to Glory so you can share your story…

Contrary to expressions of love, strength and guidance, in the observed poem, spirituality is also used to personify evil. As discussed in the 'Plight of Blacks' code analysis, Lavell Scales used

the "Devil" to symbolize a police officer:

> *…But see, I live in the world where the Devil has taken on human form,*
>
> *That same Devil has put on a uniform,*
>
> *And that uniform consists of a badge, a gun, and a baton, and a body cam*
>
> *And that same person is in possession with more violence than Silence of the Lambs or*
>
> *the Son of Sam…*

Nate inquired about true image of Jesus:

> *…Wondering if the Jesus on that stain glass window was the same Jesus in this bible,*
>
> *Wondering if I had to worship the man that looked like the man that they said ran the*
>
> *Klan…*

Within these performances, aspects of spirituality were observed as greetings. During Noble Julz's poem, she exclaimed:

> *…Taji five minutes ago was greeted with hugs and "Thank You Lord" Oh, "Thank You*
>
> *Lord", Oh, "Thank You Lord"…*

Such aspects were also observed in affirmations. During his performance, Sleepy Eyez expressed:

> *…Either way it goes, its hungry souls are starving to be fed,*
>
> *Somebody say Amen…*

References to spirituality observed in this data include expressions of patience, faithfulness, acceptance, support, comfort, reverence, help, love, praise greetings, women, family, Earth and creation, personifications of evil, as well as an overt example of African retention presented through Kitty Pride's association the Ifá religion. The overwhelming sense of well-being that artists receive from spirituality allows them to entrust the lives to guidance from higher powers. Artists also express using spirituality when confronted with issues such as

addiction, oppression, and incarceration. Used traditionally by Africans, the storytelling trait of spirituality is likewise used by African Americans for protection and support within the black community.

6.3   Ancestral and familial remembrances

Ancestral and familial remembrances is yet another compelling trait observed within these spoken-word performances. Ms. Thomas began her poem with a tribute towards Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

Martin Luther King had the right state of mind,

Preaching and teaching people of all kind,

He had a dream to yet come to past,

For love and peace to come and to last,

For than 50 years since his life has gone by…

Red Storm evoked numerous ancestors during his performance.

What if King didn't get shot?

Would he have been the first black president before the Lord blessed us with Barack,

And what if Malcolm would have stayed just Dirty Red?

Would his speeches have meaning, or just some hot air?

And what is Harold Washington didn't drink no coffee?

Would he still be here or would that still try to off him?

And What is Tupac ain't take Sug Knight's offer?

Would he be in Riker's Island, writing about them charges?

Would Big be Notorious with Puff Daddy?

Would a pimp be a pimp without the women and the caddys?

Would Beyoncé be on top if Aaliyah didn't fly?

Would TLC be out if we didn't lose Left Eye,

What if Arthur Ashe had an earlier chance to catch it?

Would he be at seminar standing next to Magic?

And what if Len Bias didn't die from that habit?

Would he be at practice, dunking on Robert Parish?

And what if thought didn't matter,

And what if Jam Master Jay was still scratching?

What if 50 cent didn't happen?

What Ja Rule and Ashanti still be platinum?

What if it wasn't no rapping?

And what if Denzel and Samuel wasn't acting?

What if Richard Pryor never started joking?…

…I'm a little like Malcolm Little when you meant Elijah Muhammad…

As Red Storm proceeded with his performances, he expressed mourning for his own mother:

…But it was real hard though, when He snatched my moms bro,

*Yall n***** really don't know,*

In the jail cell, I grabbed that towel and I was ready to throw, but no,

Without my mama, God knew I had nowhere else to go…

As discussed during the 'Plight of Blacks' code analysis, Noble Julz performed lamented the loss of a young man. In this poem, she expressed the family's bereavement due to his loss, as their mourning aroused raw emotion and past family histories:

…It's 2:15, and a father walks in with Remy Martin screaming, "my son, my son!"

Mama looks up astonished at the first time he's ever acknowledged to be Taji's sadly,

She wipes her tears, thinking of the years she chose heroin, and things like gin,

Feeding the neglection, unforgettable pains of non-affection…

…It's 2:46 and Auntie Ria gave Nana a kiss, they ain't even spoke since 1996,

When Nana beat Auntie Ria down with her fist,

Let me tell you, Auntie Ria tried diss,

She stole some cash from under the mattress when she was supposed to be taking a piss,

Yeah it's funny how this tragedy brought back family matters with a Brady bunch twist…

…Screams of you bitch and you whore!

Ceased to the slam of a door, followed by three Boom! Boom! Booms!

From a van colored blue with tinted windows, license plate read "Family Doomed"…

As discussed during the 'Plight of Blacks' code analysis, Asia Rainey performed a poem that reminisced her late grandmother, as one memory evoked the activism displayed by her grandmother when she participated in a sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter.

Asia Rainey discussed her grandmother's memories of doing black hair:

…Grandmama said she straighten their hair, day in and day out with hot combs sizzling like blacksmith irons,

Said them women tried to press out their oppression,

Said it never did,

Said she only pulled the kinks from my hair on holidays,

Said I would never be Shirley Temple, but it was alright to wear these curls,

Said she didn't want me forgetting the rough side of my roots…

She also shared her grandmother's memories of surviving domestic violence:

Grandmother said they wondered why she didn't have no man,

Said she had a man until he raised his fists,

Said when her brothers raised there's, Grandfather wasn't ever coming back in,

Asia Rainey most emphatically expressed how her grandmother loved her dearly:

…Grandmother said I was her baby,

Said I was sweet, beautiful like brown sugar,

Said I was smart like old eyes in thick trees,

Said she would hug me as long as she could…

Some references of familial remembrances described recollections of situations involving family members that were still living. Karega Ani's performed a very delicate poem, expressing the challenges he experiences while enduring his father's sickness. The poem references the floors of the hospital where his father receives treatment. Each floor is named after a flower:

…Then Elevator G to Honeysuckle,

My daddy and I used to play chess,

But lately we taken to playing impromptu games of conversational charades,

Brain cancer has a way of stripping even the most mundane notions from the minds of

brilliant men…

…Elevator E to Rose,

To Elevator F to Camelia,

Some of the flowers that I give him while he yet lives,

I sit silent more lately,

Juggling optimism and pragmatism

Praying and preparing,

Cheerleading and consoling,

Wanting to take my father home…

These poems evoke numerous ancestors, some of whom were family members of the artists. There are many references to black heroes, which include civil rights activists, music artists, entertainers, comedians, and athletes. Remembrances also recall family tragedy, familial love and support, as well as recollections of living loved ones. The observed artists demonstrated their reverence for their ancestors by professing remembrances of their skills, platforms, and goals. These artists used their poetry to express gratitude for the martyrdom and sacrifice that their ancestors endured, as well as the accomplishments that they achieved. I would argue that the remembrance of ancestors by present-day African Americans helps to alleviate the history of oppression and uplift the consciousness of the black community, as the observed poetry is evidence that "cultural autonomy can be partially maintained through the work of memory" (Cole 1998: 610).

6.4   Drugs

The motifs relating to drugs was an emergent theme found in the body of data. There is a range of references regarding the drug motif. The entire poem performed by Sundawg the Que expressed his recreational use of marijuana. This poet's performance was very light-hearted and jovial, as he voiced how he gains love, joy, and ease from smoking:

…Now, I don't wanna be misleading, but I can't stop the leaning, I don't wanna make it sound too much like dope,

Although it does take the pain away,

Somehow brighten your day,

Making everything a little bit better than okay…

...Ain't nothing like a buzz,

You feel it because you blaze too,

You know the two pulls and pass,

After work after class,

You know how you do,

So for the rest of my piece, back me up at least,

Even if you don't wanna hit these trees when I'm through...

In a more earnest tone, Red Storm described how he triumphantly recovered from addiction.

...He took a addict like me, and molded me into a blessing,

After all the checking from God, I didn't ask not one question...

...I made it through crack and jail,

Through death and Hell...

...So witness who made me,

God took my addiction away and he saved me...

In the following line, Red Storm recognized fathers who suffer from addiction:

...So I spit for the dope fiend fathers that's still locked in they pen...

In Amavi's performance, she expresses her disapproval of inauthentic rap artists, who glorify drugs to bolster their false images:

...Hearing the privileged talking about bricks that never sold,

Or traps they never been through,

Do I gotta sell a story to sell out a venue?...

In her line, "*…blacks sale weed and rocks, cakes and socks…*", Rewop speaks about drugs being sold in the black community. Fitzgerald the Poet also speaks about drugs in the black

community, asserting how this dangerous activity is sometimes perceived to be alluring to some young impressionable black men:

…We'll teach you how to manage flip, multiply your income,

Like see this is a dime bag,

And see this is a three five,

And see this, well see this is a whole pound…

…So we can sell it to you for less than nothing,

And you can sell it to dudes, who look just like you,

Around the city, or your own town…

Within this code, expressions regarding the simple joys of smoking weed, testimonies of beating drug addiction, and stories of how drugs impact families and the black community are chronicled. Similar to the 'Plight of Blacks' code, many of the references made within this code warn the audience about the threat that drugs pose to the African American community. However, rather than reflecting traditionally African themes, I regard such references as modern topics that have the ability to enlighten observers on the experiences that blacks encounter in America.

6.5   Royalty

Within the observed performances, there were several references to titles of nobility being used to address another person. The following lines provide the artists who mentioned these titles, along with their references.

The Lightresses: express that their performance is a simple "*conversation between queens*".

Fitzgerald the Poet: *…Here we offer courses that teach your sons all about bitches and*

hoes, Hoes and bitches, and how they don't have to refer to y'all as queens or ladies…

Lavell Scales: *…I really wanna know how do we go from being kings and queens to pimps and hoes…*

Papi Picasso: *Peace queen…Now I see queendom in your meaning, belief in your message…*

Isna Tianti: *…I need a King or Queen in this portrait scene the chess of life…*

Nate: *…My purpose is to shape the mentality of young kings…*

Asia Queen: *…How it is a privilege to be welcomed into the queen's palace…*

Schmidt (1971) and Tuwe (2016) express royalty as a theme that is often perpetuated in African storytelling. These references exemplify how titles of royalty are used to perpetuate honor among members of the African American community. In the observed African American poetry, references to nobility manifest through greetings, salutations, as well as simple ways of addressing loved ones.

6.6   Entertainment

Poetry is consumed by many as a form of entertainment. In the poems I listened to for this research, the poets celebrated the art of entertaining. I observed that entertainers, such as musical artists and athletes, are highly respected by the poets. In Amavi's performance, she expressed excitement about contributing her gift of rapping to "hip hop", as she believes this genre of music is slowly dying:

Somebody call the police,

Hip Hop is dead,

Press release "do not resuscitate" is what it read,

On my television screen back in 2008, they said you arrived on the screen perhaps a little

too late,

I'm in a nick of time, stay mellow, not need to panic…

She compared her skills to famous rappers:

…Look, not disrespect to the greats that came before me,

But if you are not Kendrick or J.Cole, you are below me…

…And look, I am rap,

I am Jay,

I am Nas,

I am Pac,

I am Eminem,

I am Big,

I am Stacks…

…No matter how you go in, you won't come out the same you,

Cuz nights as cold as Drake with views out in the 6…

Like Amavi, Kitty Pride evoked rapper Nas:

…I got that Oochie Wally like I'm the female Nas…

Red Storm evoked many late entertainers during his performance such as music artists Tupac,

Notorious B.I.G., Aaliyah, Jam Master Jay, Left Eye and comedian Richard Pryor. He mentioned

renowned athletes such Arthur Ashe and Len Bias. He also referenced athlete Dikembe

Mutombo:

…You better look at my credits n****, they long like Mutombo,

Straight from the slums bro…

Likewise, Amavi made a reference to athlete Derrick Rose.

…That bar was weaker than D. rose's knees, sheesh,

But to a few careers It meant defeat, capeesh…

In addition to revering entertainers, rhythm was another aspect of entertainment that all observed artists displayed within their poetry. The drum, one of Africa's most notable tangible survivals (Courlander 1996) was referenced during Nate's performance:

…You see my voice does not resonate the irregular rhythm of drums…

Ms. Thomas was one artist that physically and verbally displayed rhythm. Upon her entrance to the stage, she asked the audience to give her a beat. The audience began to clap, and she delivered her poem based on the rhythm of that beat. During her performance, she stepped and bopped her head nearly the entire time. By observing Ms. Thomas, as well as all other performers, I recognized that rhythm was key to these spoken-word performances. I would furthermore argue that rhythm is more than an aspect of entertainment within African and African American folklore, but it is more so a tool used to communicate emotions within storytelling. Upon observing the uniqueness of each performer's rhythm, their celebration of entertainers, the DJs that provided music, and the games and contests that were played at these events, it was apparent that the African storytelling trait of entertainment had manifested in these performances.

6.7   Self/Community Empowerment

The poets I observed actively advocated self-love, as well as love and support for their community. LadyVee DaPoet allowed her feelings to soar, as she delivered her thoughts and feelings about her womanhood:

I can make cars slow down, and eyes glance out of side windows

I can make a man's mind wonder what's the content of my thoughts

I can make you wanna kiss my hand and not even have a reason

I am woman, the object of your desire

I can make twelve tasks mull into one without breaking a sweat

I can manage and supervise a group of people without them feeling inferior

I may not change the whole world, but my world is organized, stylish, and complete

I am woman, the master of my success…

The Lightresses, a collective of three women (Denell Porche', JRenee, and Kamaria Sauda) are a group of performers who combined singing and poetry. The performance of their poem was structured as a conversation, as they communicated intimate thoughts to one another. JRenee's performance offered her own self-reflection:

…I scanned me taking every even and uneven thing,

Watching me rise and fall…

She then expressed her yearning for self-appreciation, even when she is unkept:

…This ain't me, I don't like what I see,

See, I look good but I wanna be good raggedy…

JRenee continues through her performance, expressing her desire for profound self-love:

…I was pressed and suppressed…

…I was folded into just a mere shell of me…

…That was trying to glow, my life force, my soul…

…I wanted to be inappropriate,

I wanted to be politically incorrect…

…I wanted to be real and raggedy…

…I wanted to see the unperfect me,

> *I wanted to see the good, but I want you to see the raw,*
>
> *Indirectly, because that's me,*
>
> *Good and raggedy.*

Comparably, Clear Vision asserted the importance of accepting yourself, despite the social pressures of society:

> *…You just gotta learn how to get in where you fit in…*
>
> *…It's that detaching from society's standards, while realigning with myself, that's the real metamorphosis…*

Clear Vision continued by advocating unity in her community:

> *…Why can't we just come up together just to come up together,*
>
> *No matter the time, place, whatever, because I believe that we still have time to really shine together…*
>
> *…So we gotta wake up.*

Rewop expressed feelings of black pride:

> *…Blacks rally,*
>
> *Rise, protest, and improvise black pride,*
>
> *Black pride, be long, be gone, be strong…*

Ms. Thomas encouraged the audience that our personal dreams are very important, and that we have the responsibility of bringing them into fruition:

> *…For all of us that are having dreams that you want to see in 2019,*
>
> *What I say to you is hold fast to your dream,*
>
> *Even if at times it seems it may not come true,*
>
> *Living your dream will depend on you,*

The roads that we take, the paths that we choose are necessary to live our dreams

through,

There may be detours, winding roads, and wrong turns,

All in which are lessons to be learned…

She encouraged her audience to embrace their uniqueness:

…That's your greatness,

Your greatness need not compare with anyone, anywhere,

There's not need to compete with others you chance to meet,

Your greatness is unique,

It makes your life complete…

Ms. Thomas ends her poem by encouraging her audience to seek their best self:

…Just be yourself and do your best,

And do your best,

And do your Best!

That greatness your greatness, your greatness will stand the test.

A poet by the name of Example advocated health, mindfulness, satisfaction and love of self:

…Thinking you need more and really you have all you need,

That other feeling is evil,

It's called greed…

…Me personally, I need health and time,

Everything else will fall in line…

…Everyday you spend that revenue, you lose,

Use it, it's in between your two shoulders,

It's called a God-Given tool…

The performances reflect another African storytelling trait of community empowerment. Artists encouraged their audiences to practice self-love, self- acceptance, self-discovery, and confidence. Poetic references to displaying black pride, protesting, and practicing acceptance instructs the audience of how to thwart the negativity they may encounter when experiencing personal issues or societal pressures. Poets assert that self/community empowerment leads to a better self and community.

6.8   Dynamics of Relationships

Unique conversational poems were observed in this research, where men and women offered their experiences and feelings about the opposite sex in regards to romantic relationships. In Sleepy Eyez's poem, he allowed his thoughts to wonder, as he questioned why women sometimes endure negative treatment from men:

> *I just wanna ask her how does she stand up,*
>
> *Cuz if you got two legs attached to your waistline, to hold up your upper body,*
>
> *Then why would you describe yourself as an animal that crawls around on all fours?*
>
> *Or perhaps we got the math all wrong, and it really depends on the position you can let a*
>
> *man up you in?...*

He continued by informing men of how precious women are:

> *…See we was always told that since she comes from the rib, she supposed to be on the*
>
> *side,*
>
> *Nahh, nahh bruh, think about yo ribs,*
>
> *They surround the body to protect vital organs so that the man doesn't die,*
>
> *Why you think we call you a ribcage?*
>
> *That's only because I wanna protect you cuz bruh,*

It's painful to walk when yo rib breaks…

Sleepy Eyes ended his poem by warning women about the dangers of some men*:*

…But women ask yourself,

Is it food, or is it really you that's on this menu for dinner tonight,

If so, just know a dog won't eat with forks and knives,

In fact, dogs eat table scraps, drink out toilet bowls, and pee on floors,

But just so you won't be alone, you'll chain link this type of man to the backyard of your

soul,

Oh please know, in backyards, a dog only digs holes and then roam,

So if a one-night stand wasn't nothing but a bone,

Then baby girl, we was already a doggy bag to go.

Bloo spoke about her own past regrets:

…And yet, she is also that one friend who tries to warn my silly behind on giving

m************ a chance…

Winter's poem was energetic and explosive, as she spoke about her disdain for indiscretions that

transpired in her previous relationship:

You must think that I am a fool, m***********,

Playing me like I'm some sucker m***********,

Like in your delusion, I can't come to the conclusion that you're f****** around on me…

…Heck, I'm the one that worked and slaved for every m************ thing you got,

Turned yo black ass to a have from a have not…

As discussed during the 'Spirituality' code analysis, Papi Picasso's poem had an apologetic tone,

as he sought to reconcile the pain women endured on behalf of the hurtful actions of some men.

Kiss the Poet performed with a hopeful tone in desiring find a companion:

I do not know this girl, she'll be my world when I greet her...

...She said that I complete her, and I'll be kind to believe her, but she'll complete me too,

You can tell by how I treat her,

My one and only Diva, I can trust with my Visa,

I'm waiting on your presence in advance, its's nice to meet you.

This code provides insight how some individuals perceive the opposite sex, as this perception impacts decision-making when interacting in romantic relationships. While love is a popular topic in traditional African folklore (Schmidt 1971), these references also offer modern perspectives on other elements besides love. Within these poems, feelings of love, encouragement, conflict, opposition, persuasion, and pursuit are shared, all reflective of circumstances that occur in African American relationships. Overall, artists mainly discuss respect within this code, as women demand respect from men and demonstrate their eagerness to provide respect to women. Though the dynamics that occur in black relationships are too vast to fully discuss in this research, these artists expose observers to realistic facets of African American relationships.

6.9   Singing

Singing was included in several of the observed artists' performances. As aforementioned, The Lightresses is a group of three women, and their performance was a combination of singing and poetry. Denell Porche' sang in between JRenee and Kamaria Sauda's parts of the performance, always ending the verse with:

good and tired

The singing of these verses connected with JRenee and Kamaria Sauda's poetry. Isna Tianti sang the below verse, before beginning her poem:

Speak Lord, Speak to me

Speak Lord, speak through me

Speak Lord, set us free

Likewise, before performing her poem, Noble Julz sang the following verse:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,

Ye though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

Ye though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

We are a long way from home,

A long way from home,

A friend of Asia Rainey sang prior to the performance of Asia's poem:

Grandma's hands,

Clapped at church on Sunday morning,

Grandma's hands,

Played the tambourine so well,

Grandma's hands,

Used to issue you out a warning,

She say, baby don't you run so fast,

Might fall on a piece of glass,

Might be snakes there in that grass,

Grandma's hands

Rewop concluded her poem by singing:

…But we're still here with no fear, we outchea, just doing it, doing it.

The African storytelling trait of singing enhanced the liveliness of the observed performances and contributed to capturing the attention of the audience.

6.10 Sex

The theme of sex emerged as a code. Poets creatively voiced sexual expression, ranging from rage, pleasurable past sexual experiences to sexual fantasies. During the Lightresses' performance, Kamaria Sauda expressed:

Yo, yo, yo!! I am good and horny!

Happy to ride on the joys of your company…

…My, oh my even your tongue speaks to me

Did you turn on the AC?

I'm shivering, delirious and whimpering…

In expressing her thrilling enjoyment, she ends her piece by disappointedly realizing that she was only dreaming:

Horny and good,

Good and horny…

… Lord I'm dreaming,

I'm just simply dreaming…

While expressing her feelings about her lover, Asia Queen's poem voiced that her affinity for him is aroused by his intellect, charisma, and sexual prowess.

…It's deeper than sex,

Like this for instance,

A few minutes into our initial meeting,

I'm already imagining how tongue feels tied around his,

How I got this wet when all he did,

We got the talking about existential theories,

Black feminist thought,

How he misses the queen…

…How it is a privilege to be welcomed into the queen's palace,

How he's not scared to drown between the legs of a goddess,

For he finds baptism in between y'all,

He came through powerful in this initial meeting,

Already going deep…

Winter voiced the past indiscretions of her lover:

…Tip-toeing through the front door,

*Making sure that you don't smell like her p**** no more,*

*N****, I know, get you and your mammie shit and go…*

She ends her poem by expressing feelings of vengeance:

*…And I dear you to talk shit cuz I'm bout to f*** your kin, and your homie, and your*

enemy, and all your friends,

Played me like I'm some sucka,

*Inadequate m***********.*

Kitty Pride discussed seeking the attention of a man she admires,

…He's in my peripherals but he don't know,

He's talking to pretty women,

But all I know is he's so dope to me,

But does he notice me?

Once in a while, we'll catch each other's eye and say hi,

But every time I think to shoot my shot,

Either someone gets in the way or I get real shy,

So I proceed to write my rhymes and hide,

In the back,

Daydreaming that's me in the front,

Sitting in his lap,

Ridin' him like a Cadillac…

…There's a mystery like the Wizard of Oz,

I got that Oochie Wally like I'm the female Nas…

Sex is a vast and at times highly political topic within literature that discusses African people (Ogunleye 1997, Ojaide 2017). However, I would not argue that the observed references are reflective of being traditionally African, rather I would argue that these references use expressions that uniquely derive from the African American community. Her lover's knowledge of Black feminist thought enhanced Asia Queen's attraction to him. Kitty Pride's used the term 'Oochie Wally' to describe her own sexual prowess. These performances have the ability to expose onlookers to elements of sexual attraction, expression, as well as reactions that result from sexual relationships in the black community.

6.11 Future Generations

Some of the observed poets made several references that expressed concern for future generations. A young poet named Krissy (Chrissy) performed a poem that expressed feelings about her peers and current trends within her generation:

It seems like no one is unique anymore,

Everyone's worried about what that person said or who's on the next tour…

…It seems like it only takes a song with a dance to become a sensation in this nation,

because I telling you, our generation does not fully understand the comprehension of

everyone not being owed a pension…

…According to society, what ethnicity you are, it's something important,

Whether it has to do with the law, or who's the most attractive of them all…

…It's brings the suffering and the pain,

Not for us to gain but for nothing to change,

But who is to blame?

Lavell Scales expressed his desire of well-being for younger generations:

…Our only mission in life should be to save the youth…

Similarly, Nate asserted:

…My purpose is to shape the mentality of young kings…

Example voiced the importance of parental responsibility:

…Now if that wasn't helpful, I don't know what is,

You better stay focused on raising your kids,

Or else, you'll be doing a bid,

Wishing you woulda stayed focused on raising your kids…

Such references are evidence of the artists' concern for upcoming generations. As previously referenced during place analysis, this theme was also recognized in other elements of open-mic nights. Sinsear, the host of the event that took place at Black Dot Cultural Center and Bookstore, acknowledged the age diversity in his audience and asserted that the transmission of information from one generation to another is pivotal to the survival of the black community. These references exemplify the purpose of folklore, which is transmitting information to across generations (Tuwe 2016).

6.12 Gestures

Abrahams asserts the "*embodiment* of movement" is "performer-oriented", as one emotionally impacted by the performer, and is dependent on imagination (Abrahams 1976: 207 in Kapchan 1995: 481). Some of the observed poets displayed gesturing during their performances. Sundawg the Que made many gestures of smoking. At times during his performance, Sundawg the Que would gesture holding a joint to his mouth with his fingertips. At another time, he gestured passing the joint to the audience. He exclaimed:

> *"...Thanks for this support, pat yourself on the back,*
>
> *Or give a cheer,*
>
> *You know what, for not getting bored, you deserve a reward...*(pulls imaginary blunt and extends it to the audience)*...Hereee."*

The audience then erupted in laughter. Red Storm embodied postures of liberation, as he described how he overcame states of sorrow. During his performance, Red Storm would swing his body back as if burdens are being lifted from him. During this movement, his chin was always elevated. He would move around the stage in excitement, motioning his arms directly to the audience. The audience observed his actions, and remained relatively quiet, except for intermittent moans and groans that could be heard in response to his passionate story. During some parts of her performance, Noble Julz gestured toward her audience as if she were engaging them in a personal conversation. There were times when she would use facial expressions of sarcasm, rage, and excitement. At other times, she would use her hands to matter-of-factly explain portions of her story. The animations that she provided during her performance were very fitting and enabled the audience to visualize her story. Gesturing, an African storytelling trait, used to create imagery through during performances captured the attention of the audience.

6.13 War

A young US veteran by the name of Lyrical Lunatic poured her emotions into her performance as she expressed the traumas of war:

> *When I turn on the radio and hear war songs,*
>
> *Thanking me and my fellow warriors for a job well done,*
>
> *As innocent as it may be I am filled with tears,*
>
> *Not tears of joy but of pain,*
>
> *Excruciating pain that punches me in the chest,*
>
> *Pain that stems from those horrific thoughts I have…*
>
> *…See I'm reminded of the daily fighting dodging many bullets,*
>
> *The ducking for cover from the incoming mortar,*
>
> *I'm reminded of all the little kids that's been killed,*
>
> *Some of them innocently, some as enemies,*
>
> *I'm reminded of the strides I have taken to not be afraid of children,*
>
> *Who want nothing more than to shake a soldier's hand,*
>
> *See, I'm not tryna be a dampering on thank you war songs,*
>
> *When I hear one, I'm reminded of the many men and women I had to watch to transition*
>
> *from this world into the next offering comfort, but nothing more…*

War and battle is an element that is often discussed in African storytelling (Tuwe 2016). Lyrical Lunatic expressed heroism not only while in active duty, but also by sharing stories of the tragedies of war and informing the audience of the experiences that veterans endure in life after combat.

6.14 Audience Participation

Sundawg the Que promoted active participation with his audience. He emphatically directed, "When I say, I get love in my weed spot, you say, in my weed spot I gets love"! The audience eagerly followed his instruction, as this exchange took place repeatedly throughout the course of the performance, creating a communal sense in the audience.

The synergy created between performers and the audience shaped the atmosphere of the performances. Both the performers and the audience demonstrated abilities to feel the release of emotions during performances. Winter's performance was very electric, and stimulated the audience with conversation, laughter, and intense movement. However, Papi Picasso followed Winter's performance, and intentionally delivered a calming sentimental poem. Papi Picasso's poem shifted the energy within the event, noticeably soothing the once rowdy audience. As this African storytelling trait was also witnessed through conversations, games, and contests that took place during events, interaction between performers and the audience is essential to transmitting stories.

7   DISCUSSION

The images that were projected through poetry performances provided insight as to how Africa shapes African American consciousness. For instance, the storytelling trait of spirituality demonstrated in the observed performances provided evidence of this African "group value" being used to withstand "new conditions" (Roberts 2009: 115) experienced by blacks in America, such as incarceration and drug addiction. The memorialization of ancestral goals, choices and actions was used in the observed storytelling to uplift the black community, as artists mentioned ancestors that liberated, entertained, encouraged, and supported African Americans. Stories presented within the observed poetry also encouraged the practice of self-love, self-acceptance, as well as promoted respectful interactions between members of the black community. Artists used their poetry to provide warnings of societal dangers, and encouraged healthy decision-making and problem-solving skills. Entertainment was an essential element used to engage the audience during the observed performances, exemplified through poets' reverence of entertainers, as well as the music, games, and contests that were played during events. The poets also engaged their audience through conversations about health and well-being. Embodied movements used during performance such as singing and gesturing stimulated the audience's imagination and attention, enabling observers to visualize the poet's story. Rhythm and the manipulation of energy significantly enhanced the observed performances. The poets' usage of such embodied elements allowed storytelling through performance to be a vehicle for dispensing emotions and knowledge to community.

Some of the emergent themes also demonstrated the mobilization of African memory in African American folklore. Artists used terms of nobility when addressing individuals in their stories. Royalty is a theme that is often used in African storytelling (Schmidt 1971; Tuwe 2016)

and likewise, this theme has manifested in African American poetry through respectful human interaction. War, another topic that can be discerned in African folklore (Tuwe 2016), emerged in the observed performances, as one artist dedicated her poem to expressing the tragedies of war and informing the audience of what veterans endure for the sake of their country. During events, artists transmitted knowledge among the various generations that were present at performances and encouraged well-being for upcoming generations. Through these actions, poets exhibited the primary purpose of folklore, which is transmitting information from one generation to the next (Tuwe 2016).

However, it is within these same performances that the double consciousness can also be discerned. References coded as 'Dynamic of Relationships' discuss the poets' perspectives, feelings, and experiences about interacting with the opposite sex in romantic relationships. Like other codes, the emotions discussed in this group of poems are varied, as poets share feelings of love, encouragement, conflict, opposition, persuasion, and pursuit. Similarly, sex emerged as a theme. Ranging from pleasurable past sexual experiences to sexual fantasies, poets voiced intense feelings regarding sexuality. Contrary to predetermined and some emergent themes, these references largely discuss stories that reflect black linguistics, experiences and relationships in America.

Furthermore, DuBois recognizes oppression as the main factor that impacts African American consciousness. Likewise, institutions of oppression were acknowledged by many of these artists. References to slavery, racial injustice, police brutality, black on black crime, incarceration, and drugs are highly significant to this "problem of identity" (Prahlad 2005: 254), as these oppressions reinforce the "imposed contempt for an ascribed self" rather than support "having one's own sense of self" (Black 2007: 394). These issues negatively influence "the

nature of humanness" (Prahlad 2005: 254) that blacks receive from their oppressors and from one another.

Although, artists did discuss African American experiences that positively impact their community. There were many self and community empowerment references presented in these performances. Even when discussing personal issues or societal pressures, poets instructed their audiences on how to thwart this negativity. This community empowerment is indeed an African storytelling trait, yet this same positivity is recognized by DuBois in his discussion about reconciling African Americans' double consciousness. DuBois (1965: 215 in Black 2007: 394) asserts:

> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America…He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American…

The observed poets memorialized African storytelling, and yet adhered to African American life and culture.

8   CONCLUSIONS

This research provides implications regarding the relationship between place and identity which indicate that memory has the ability to be mobilized in the stories of cultures that have experienced a disconnection from their heritage. The resiliency of ancestral memory is exemplified in the observed research. By identifying the parallels between African storytelling and contemporary African American storytelling, the research serves as an acknowledgment of the profound "Africanness" (Matory 2009:15) prevailing in present-day African American folklore.

The usage of motifs served to be very useful in recognizing and assessing African storytelling traits in the observed African American poetry. In reference to the severe shortcomings that have been historically exhibited during quests for origins of folklore, I would argue that the usage of motifs in this research contributes to the historic-geographic method, by providing an innovative way of identifying a folklore's cultural history. I would argue that this research assessed African American folklore "on its own terms" (Piersen 1971: 209). In this sense, this research used literature to identify traits of African storytelling, then compared such traits directly to the observed folklore, negating the usefulness of tools such as indices that often exclude African folklore materials.

In regards to my research question, 'How do African ancestral memories manifest in contemporary performances of African American poetry?', I found that African memory is very pronounced in the observed performances, and has manifested through stories of spirituality, ancestral remembrances, community empowerment, as well as through the genius of entertaining. Through this remembrance, artists reconstructed and understood their past, forming the group's contemporary identity. Furthermore, in regards to this identity, I argue that African

Americans perceive themselves as African Americans that continue to fight against pressures that discourage embracing their blackness and African identity.

I must reiterate that this research does not attempt to "Africanize America" (DuBois 1965: 215 in Black 2007: 394). The observed poets' embrace of both places, Africa and America, is an important observation in the research. On one hand, African American storytelling allows opportunities to introduce new perspectives to observers that may be unfamiliar with the discussed topics from the viewpoint of African Americans. This revelation of black life is essential for one to understand black lives. On the other hand, artists memorialized African values and demonstrated their desire expel the negativity that America attached to their blackness. It is my hope that this research perpetuates awareness of the African soul that African Americans have manifested through storytelling, as remembrance of heritage is very important. I also hope that the stories referenced in this research offer some-reconciliation of our "double consciousness" (DuBois 1965: 215 in Black 2007: 394), providing a step toward solving this "problem of identity" (Prahlad 2005: 254) and encouraging African Americans to "merge his double self into a better and truer self" (DuBois 1965: 215 in Black 2007: 394).

9   FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This research champions various forms of future research initiatives. In recognition of the issues with current collections of New World African folklore, Herskovits (1943: 5) argues that "Close scrutiny of such materials can thus give the student hints of real value in planning future research, or in assessing the variation in the resources of a given area, or in suggesting comparisons that might otherwise be overlooked". Additionally, this research promotes accepting folklore studies as viable research. Since research such as this explores the intangible, inner worlds of personal experience, such studies have historically been regarded as unreliable (Magoulick 2001). This study expands the historically disregarded "insider" discourse and provides "a more complete context" which can be utilized for gaining more understanding of cultural processes (Magoulick, 2001: par. 1). Similar to the interest of other scholars, this research contributes to establishing new theoretical approaches that can be utilized in African diasporic studies and transnationalism (Prahlad 2005, Görög-Karady 1984) and in black geographies (e.g., McKittrick 2006). As studies such as this continue to persist in scholarship, it is my hope, like other scholars, that African folklore (Görög-Karady 1984) and New World African folklore (Prahlad 2005) emerge as fields of study.

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