



African-American History and the Oral Tradition

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This article offers the text of remarks given by Professor Turner on March 3, 1990, at a presentation on oral history to a gathering in Shambaugh Auditorium that was held in conjunction with an exhibition entitled "The African-American Experience at The University of Iowa." This University of Iowa Libraries' exhibition was on display from January 29 to mid-March 1990 in the North Lobby of the Main Library. — Editor

The speakers this evening have contributed to a long tradition in world culture—that of oral literature and oral history. Although the tradition is not unique to Africans, it is well-established as a part of Black culture. Some of you may have heard or read Alex Haley's non-fiction account of the manner in which he discovered his ancestry. After he had exhausted written records—those of sales of slaves, property listings, and ships' records, he had traced his ancestry to Africa. But he never would have confirmed his exact origin if he had not been helped by an African who could recite the history of the village until it reached generations into the past, back to the moment at which Haley's ancestor was named as part of that history. The written records of civilization had guided Haley only to the dim past. It was oral history that illuminated that past.

As I said, I do not wish to give the impression that the oral tradition is unique to Africans or that it is the only tradition of African culture. Pre-literate or non-literate peoples throughout the world have depended upon the oral tradition to transmit their culture from one generation to another. Some scholars, for example, argue that the great epic poem *The Iliad*—probably

composed during the tenth century B.C., when Greeks were not using writing for literary purposes—that *The Iliad* probably had been recited for years before it was written down; and some of you who have made the comparison may have noted how *The Bible's* recitation of “who begat whom” resembles the litany through which Kunta Kinte evoked his ancestry. On the other side, however, we must not forget that Africans contributed to the written literature that was studied at the great University of Timbuktu and that was doubtless housed in the library of Alexandria, burned in the first century B.C. by the invading forces of Julius Caesar.

Despite African contributions to the written tradition, however, it was the oral tradition that Africans brought to America in slave ships during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries as they endured what poet Robert Hayden has described as

Voyage through death
To life upon these shores.

(“Middle Passage”)

The reasons for their dependence upon the oral tradition are obvious. Most slaves could neither read nor write; and many white Americans, acting according to law and custom, prevented the slaves from learning to read or write. Even if they had been able to write, pens and ink and paper would have been luxuries that few could afford. Finally, even if they had had both the training and the tools, few slaves would have been so unwise as to record their actual thoughts about their history and about slavery in any form that could be discovered by their masters.

Since the middle and late nineteenth century, recognition has been given to two manifestations of the oral tradition in African-American culture—the folk tales and the folk songs, including, of course, the spirituals. Until recently, however, too little attention was paid to oral history. Some of it existed in the pre-Civil War slave narratives—autobiographies written or told by former slaves, particularly during the second quarter of the nineteenth century when the Abolitionist Movement

surged upward. Although some former slaves, such as Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, could write their own stories of their lives, others told their horrifying tales to abolitionist audiences or to individual abolitionists, who published them. In a sense, however, these narratives must be identified as the histories of extraordinary individuals. That is, any slave who possessed the intelligence, the courage, and the determination to escape was heroic, extraordinary.

The first major effort to collect the histories of what Langston Hughes would have called “the not-so-common common” African-American came as late as the 1930s, when the Works Progress Administration (the WPA), seeking to provide jobs for out-of-work scholars and students, sent them into the Southern states to collect stories from former slaves. The method of collection was probably sexist. That is, the African-Americans’ answers suggest that the women were generally asked about such domestic matters as clothes, food, and medicine whereas the men were asked about jobs and adventures. Nevertheless, the histories were collected. Then they gathered dust in archives for more than three decades until historian Norman Yetman published some in a book entitled *Voices from Slavery* (1970).

Several reasons caused scholars and others to neglect the oral histories even after they became available. First, most scholarship in history—or even in literature—has trusted written record or the third-person written account as evidence of objectivity, truth, and permanence. We sometimes distrust first-person accounts because we know how individuals retelling their lives may be motivated subjectively to stray from the truth either consciously or unconsciously. Unlike videotape cameras, we human beings do not merely record our lives; we interpret them. Indeed, evidence does suggest that some former slaves embellished the truth for the WPA collectors—most often for the white men, less often for white women, least often for other African-Americans. One former slave, for example, told the collector that he had once worked for a group of men until he discovered that they were cattle rustlers. After

he escaped from them, he took a better job working on a farm for a very nice man—a man named Jesse James. (For lovers of Westerns, I need not point out that, during the peaceful interludes when he was not robbing banks or trains, Jesse James used the surname “Howard,” not “James.”) Despite such embellishments, however, authenticity in the stories can be discovered from the resemblances of one narrative to another in the description of clothes, manner of treatment, living conditions, etc. Authenticity can be discovered also in the occasional that unmistakably rings with truth—truth such as the complaint by a former slave and former soldier that, when his Black troops fought for the U.S. Army against Indians in the late nineteenth century, the Indians were armed with repeating rifles and Winchesters supplied by the Federal Government, whereas the Black soldiers fought with front-loading muskets (the kind that you see in motion pictures about the American Revolution).

A second reason that oral history of Blacks—or whites for that matter—has assumed slight importance is the belief that individual memories have scant value. Some scholars have judged oral history just as disdainfully as, according to Zora Neale Hurston, the Black community in Florida judged folktales. In *Mules and Men* (1935), she reported that, when she tried to collect folktales, African-Americans asked her why an educated woman would want to listen to such foolishness.

Finally, and this may be worst of all, oral history has been dismissed by a younger generation of African-Americans who have not wanted to listen to the elders’ tedious memories of the past. With regret, I remember how my brother and I listened only politely when our grandmother tried to tell us about her father, who became a bank messenger despite the William Howard Taft family, or about her grandfather, who was four years old when George Washington died. (Note the technique of the oral tradition in that statement: Even though she was an educated woman, a school principal, who had encyclopedias in her home, she never dated the year of her grandfather’s birth or that of Washington’s death; oral history tradition measures

time not according to dates but according to memorable events.) Foolishly my brother and I decided individually that we did not care about the family's past; we were interested only in the present and in the future that we could create. Even though I still believe that individuals must not polish their reputations on the past, I have often wished that my grandmother had lived until I became sufficiently wise to listen to her and to take notes.

Scholars have begun to listen within the past twenty years. Such historians as George Rawick, in *From Sundown to Sunup* (1972), and John Blassingame, in *The Slave Community* (1972), have based their histories upon oral accounts by former slaves. This practice represents an important change in American scholarship. Previously most of the histories of American slavery relied upon the written records by whites—often the masters or their visitors, whose frequently biased accounts were accepted as truth merely because they existed in written form. Now such pro-slavery historians have been balanced by histories written from the perspectives of the slaves.

Oral history is important for still another reason. Recalling memorable events that will never be inscribed in history books, it reminds us that history is the story of the lives of human beings—not merely the record of great battles, changes of authority, and momentous discoveries. This is no better evidenced than in Ernest Gaines' novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971). Having lived more than one hundred years, Miss Jane, a former slave, does not recount the history written in the books; perhaps she never knew it. The facts that she remembers of the twentieth century are these: Boys whom she knew went away to fight in some war somewhere; Governor Huey Long helped Louisiana Negroes more than people said; and Jackie Robinson entered baseball and made the Brooklyn Dodgers win their games. Above all, she remembered the lives—and deaths—of those whom she loved. Perhaps this is the truly important history.

Just as scholars increasingly have noted the importance of oral history, so too have communities in many states, including

Iowa. During the past eight years, several communities in Iowa have sought funds from such organizations as the Iowa Humanities Board to support their projects of collecting oral history. Sometimes, however, the designers of these projects have seemed to forget that African-Americans, few though they may be in the state, have created a part of Iowa's history.

As you return to your communities and your families after this evening of oral history and African-American exhibits in the library, I urge you to seek out the elders; open your ears and your tape-recorders to them; preserve their memories and your own in the archives of Black organizations and non-Black historical societies. Collect your history from those who have lived it; and, like Pilate in Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* (1977), carry your history with you—so that you will never forget who you are and where you have been.