From the African American Oral Tradition to Slam Poetry: Rhetoric and Stylistics

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It was all good—in the hood.
Chill’in wit my fam, watchin’ the game.
My cuzn took a quick trip—to never return a-gain,
And still holdin’ that bag-a-skittles and that can-a-tea—BLAHKA!
Shot left my cuzn laid lifeless lacklustered forever.
Guess it wasn’t all good—in the hood.

That piece was a short slam poem that I wrote. Individuals who are able to understand the situation, language, and intended messages in my poem are part of the same speech community. In his book, Introduction to Discourse Analysis, Malcolm Coulthard defined a speech community as “any group which shares both linguistic resources and rules for interaction and interpretation” (32). In other words, a speech community is a group of people that share a certain language or dialect and share knowledge of linguistic rules for both using and comprehending that language or dialect. Speech communities also share “a common set of normative values in regard to linguistic features” (Gumperz 513). Members of the same speech community must speak the same language; it is required that basic governing rules for communicative strategies of at least one language be shared in order for speakers to be able to decode “social meanings” in modes of communication (Gumperz 16). A speaker and an audience must be part of the same speech community for effective communication to take place. By “effective communication” I mean that both parties in an exchange of messages are successful in that both parties comprehend the intended meanings in the exchanged messages. Speech communities are the center of a language.

Black America, Black English, Black Dialect, Black Idiom, Ebonics, or as Geneva Smitherman refers to it, “the language of soul” (Talkin and Testifyin

1) is defined as “a language mixture, adapted to the conditions of slavery and discrimination, a combination of language and style interwoven with and inextricable from Afro-American culture” (3). In order to communicate with other Africans from various areas in Africa and with their enslavers, the Africans created their own speech community by inventing a language. The pidgin language that the Africans produced combined syntactic and grammatical features of various West African languages with English words and grammar. Africans substituted English words for West African words but retained many of the phonetic and grammatical structures of West African languages. Due to the fact that all languages gradually change over time, the Black English that was first spoken by African immigrants from the 1600s to the 1700s is not the same Black English that is spoken today. The phonetics, or the sounds, of modern Black English are closer to the phonetics of Standard English than they are to Black vernacular phonetics in its original form. In spite of such linguistic leveling or assimilation toward mainstream English over time, distinct features of Black oral vernacular have survived and live on through today’s generation.

Many features of modern Black vernacular can be traced back to the African American oral tradition, or the original Black English dialect invented by Africans brought to this continent in chains. One rhetorical feature of the African American oral tradition that can be found in modern Black vernacular is the high value placed on performance style. Smitherman explained that a “spoken mode for blacks, came from an African, orally-oriented background” (77). Traditional African culture brought the idea of Nommo, or the belief in “the magic power of the Word” to America. Smitherman says that it was believed that, along with water, heat, and seed, Word was “life force itself” (78). A newborn child had no relevance until its father spoke its name: “No medicine, potion, or magic
The value of the spoken word is a tradition in the African American-derived culture, which is displayed in verbal performance.

Verbal performance is exhibited in all forms of African American verbal arts, including the telling of mythical and folk stories, sermons, and jokes. When speaking about slam's new existence, Marc Kelly Smith states that “it is an extension of the spoken-word tradition, which is thousands of years old” (26). Spoken performance has had an important place in Black English and it is folded into a continuum from centuries ago to the 1960s and 1970s and into the slam poetry of today. Stephen Henderson, a theorist from Howard University and spokesman for the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts Movement, said, “there is this tradition of beautiful talk with us—this tradition of saying things beautifully even if they are ugly things. We say them in a way which takes language down to the deepest common level of our experience while hinting still at things to come” (Rickford 15). In other words, verbal performance in the Black Arts Movement was praised for its ability to help an audience understand a performer’s reality. During an interview with a modern Michigan slam poet who goes by the artistic name Shewrights, Christina Jackson stated, “it would be really nice when spoken word is not considered, like, the graffiti of poetry and...I know how important story telling is.” This is to say that Jackson, a young artist in the twenty-first century, values the skill of oral performance and understands how essential it is to what she likes to call her “artivism,” a unique blend of art and activism. Verbal performance, in its continuation from early Black vernacular to the Black Arts Movement, has endured and with the aid of the hip-hop music culture in the 1980s, gave birth to its latest verbal innovation: slam poetry.

This research project is designed to show that slam poetry is a modern discursive innovation derived from the African American oral tradition and performance poetry of the 60s and 70s. Black vernacular style from three time periods will be analyzed: the 1800s, 1960-1970s, and the contemporary period. I analyze selected features of a text and demonstrate the presence and function of signifying and tonal semantics in each. Verbal artistry is also described by a contemporary slam poetry artist. The slam artist gives her views on slam poetry. Lastly, an original poem that I wrote in the opening of this paper will be analyzed.

Using descriptive linguistics and discourse analysis scholars have identified common strategies and verbal devices that have evolved from early Black English vernacular. I will begin this paper by also using descriptive linguistics and discourse analysis to show continuities between slam poetry and early Black vernacular. I will describe in detail two communicative strategies, signifying and tonal semantics, and their rhetorical functions in the Black English folk tale, “The Wonderful Tar Baby,” Nikki Giovanni’s 1968 poem, “Beautiful Black Man,” and Christina Jackson’s poem, “Baby Brother.”

The first of the two communicative strategies I will describe is signifying. There are many forms of signifying, but in its simplest definition, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines signifying as “repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference” (xxiv). This is to say that in order to signify, there must be a prior speech, act or text, which a subsequent speaker or writer can re-use in a different way than the original. In addition, signifying also refers to indirect encoded messages. Mitchell-Kernan’s definition of signifying stresses not only a prior text, but also “the establishment of context, which may include antecedent conditions and background knowledge as well as the context in which the [speech] event occurred” (165).

Signifying appears in “The Wonderful Tar Baby,” a black vernacular story narrated by an enslaved African American first written down by Joel Chandler Harris in the 1880s. The folktales that Harris had been told as a boy were previously told for generations through the African American community. Harris did something new when he decided to try to write the folktales down in early Black vernacular for others to read. There are many indirect messages in the stories. The following passage displays one indirect message in the joke that Brer Fox is playing on Brer Rabbit encoded in the phrase “stuck up”:

En den he butted, en his head got stuck. Den Brer Fox, he sa’ntered fort’, lookin’
dez ez innercent ez wunner yo’ mammy’s mockin’-birds.

“Howdy, Brer Rabbit”, sez Brer Fox, seexe. ‘You look sorter stuck up dis mawnin’,
sezee, en den he rolled on de groun’, en laft en laft twel he couldn’ laff no mo’. (lines 29-32)

While the fox simply stated that the rabbit looked stuck up in line 31, his laughter afterwards in line 32 is a clear indication that the fox was signifying on Brer Rabbit’s predicament. The laughter is an important part of the context that tells the audience to interpret the phrase “stuck up” as a joke in addition to interpreting it literally. The fox found a clever and indirect way to state that the rabbit had been tricked.

Signifying also appears in Nikki Giovanni’s “Beautiful Black Men,” a poem published in the 1960s during the Black Arts/Nationalist Movement. Nikki Giovanni, whose works emerged in the 1960s, is the author of a number of books of poetry for both adults and children. She is one of the most celebrated and controversial poets in the Black Arts Movement and her piece, “Beautiful Black Men,” contributed to The New York Times crowning Giovanni as the “Princess of Black Poetry.” The images of black men have been seen everywhere in films, photos, and everyday life, but Giovanni describes the beauty of these images in the same way she perceived them to be in the sixties. This poem signified on a message about the struggles of being a black man in the 1960s in the following passage:

i wanna say just gotta say something bout those beautiful beautiful beautiful outasight
black men
with they afros
walking down the street
is the same ol danger
but a brand new pleasure (lines 1-7)
Line 4 mentions the “afros” of African American men. This was a hair style worn to resist western society’s beauty standard of straight hair and was an acceptance of the natural hair and beauty of African Americans. Giovanni saw the resistance as a beautiful thing that beautiful and “outasight” black men were wearing. Giovanni also mentions in lines 5 and 6 that walking down the street still had “the same ol danger” to black men. This poem was published in 1968—four years after the Civil Rights Act had been passed. Discrimination against minorities was outlawed, but discrimination was still very much alive. Even still, line 7 shows that Giovanni saw the men who were still being discriminated against walk down the street with “a brand new pleasure.” The initial message says that although discrimination against black men still existed, there was a sense of pride that black men carried with them because the fight for equal rights finally gave African Americans legal rights. A speech community with knowledge of the struggle of African American men during and after the Civil Rights Movement would understand the unstated messages that Giovanni intended for her audience to gain from her poem.

The last text I will use to demonstrate signifying is a spoken word poem, “Baby Brother,” written by contemporary slam poet Christina Jackson. Jackson has performed her poetry at numerous venues. She is a respected artist in the Detroit and Grand Rapids, Michigan areas. Her poetry includes what she likes to call artivism. Artivism is a unique mix of art and activism and is what Jackson brings new to performance art. In the poem, “Baby Brother,” she finds a clever way to criticize or signify on society. Transcribed from an interview that I conducted with Jackson, the following passage demonstrates her successful encoded message:

...live with conviction
and you will lessen your chances of
having an unnecessary collision.
I urge you to be the change, brother.
There are enough of you living in prison. (lines 1-5)

The overall message is for Jackson’s brother. She advises him to be a better man than the man that society expects him to be, but the message in the particular passage criticizes or signifies on society. It is a known fact that there are more black men in the prison system than any other ethnicity. Jackson tells her opinion about that fact in line 5 when she says “there are enough of you [black men] living in prison,” as if to say that it is a shame that so many black men are in prison and that she does not want one more [her brother] to be thrown in jail. Jackson shows that signifying still continues to be a communicative strategy from the African American oral tradition to slam poetry.

The second communicative strategy that appears in Black vernacular texts spread over centuries is tonal semantics. According to Smitherman, “tonal semantics refers to the use of voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning in black communication” (134). This feature cannot be realized on the written page. Therefore only a reader who is part of the Black vernacular speech community can detect a tonal semantic feature in a written text. To identify a tonal semantic feature, it is vital to listen to the text read aloud by an expert in the speech community. Like signifying, tonal semantics has many functions, but I will focus on a specific form of tonal semantics called intonational contouring which is “the specific use of stress and pitch in pronouncing words in the black style” (Smitherman 145). This is to say that the use of a distinctive pattern of changes in pitch, stress, or tonality, across all or part of an utterance contributes to its meaning. A listener would have to be aware of this in order to extract meaning from the sound contours. Since speech rhythms and vocal inflections cannot be captured in print, to transcribe the vernacular into writing one runs into the proverbial problem of arbitrary spellings.

Joel Chandler Harris confronted this problem in “The Wonderful Tar Baby.” Harris tried to write the actual speech he heard African Americans articulate, but Harris was not an expert in the speech community that he was recording, so his transcription seems to exaggerate the speaker’s language. Even in written form, early Black vernacular is not readily comprehensible to those outside of the speech community. The following passage was read aloud by an expert in Black vernacular as the narrator of the story and contains a tonal semantic feature:

En he didn’t hatter wait long, mudder, kaze bimeby here come Brer Rabbit pacin’ down de road—lippity-lippity, lippity-lippity—dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird. Brer Fox, he lay low. Brer Rabbit come prancin’ ‘long twel he spyde Tar-Baby, en den he fotch up on his hehim legs like he wuz ’stonished. De Tar Baby, she sot dar, she did, en Brer Fox, he lay low. (lines 4-8)

Throughout the story, the narrator, acting as Uncle Remus, repeats that the Fox “lay low.” Uncle Remus’ voice drops in tone every time he uses the phrase “lay low.” The drop in tone implies that Brer Fox is plotting a trap for Brer Rabbit. The distinctive pattern of pitch and rhythm of the phrase, “lay low,” in both lines 5 and 7 indicates Brer Fox’s devious plan to members of the speech community who know the rules for interpreting the vocal inflections that Uncle Remus uses. The vocal inflection in this passage contributes to the meaning intended.

Giovanni also demonstrates intonational contouring in “Beautiful Black Men.” This poem is written in the Black vernacular that was spoken in the 60s and 70s, but the difference between Giovanni and Harris is that Giovanni is an expert in the speech community. She wrote the poem the way that she would speak the words. Due to the fact that the poem is written on the page, it leaves room for individuals who read the poem aloud to include their own vocal contours. The arbitrary aspect in this analysis is that the recording of the following passage was not done by the author of the poem, but another expert in the speech community: dashiki suits with shirts that match
the lining that complements the ties
that smile at the sandals
where dirty toes peek at me
and I scream and stamp and shout
for more beautiful beautiful beautiful
black me with outasight afros (lines 21-27)
The unnamed reader posted a video of this performance on YouTube. Her voice inflections may not be those of Giovanni’s, but they still display the meanings that the reader pulled from the poem. There are no periods in the poem, which eliminates long pauses. The reader read most of the poem non-stop, but slowed down on certain lines to reflect meaning. For instance, the reader read the descriptions in lines 21 through 25 non-stop but reduced the speed on line 26. The three consecutive “beautifuls” were meant to catch the reader’s attention which allowed the reader to change vocal patterns once it was reached. The reader read the “beautifuls” with pauses as if there were commas between them although there are not any written. On the last “beautiful,” the reader put stress on the “u” and broke the word up into syllables (beaU-ti-ful). This was to put emphasis on the beauty that the poem gives black men. The emphasis on the word “beaU-ti-ful” sends a message to the audience to pay special attention to the beauty of black men that society tries to demonize.

The following transcribed passage shows how Jackson used intonational semantics to reflect the meaning of her words:

I know you’ve seen it done, but it just isn’t right. Please don’t be one of those brothers who dwells on the black man’s plight and decides to live in the dark because you are too lazy to turn on the light. I know that you have seen that done, but what I am telling you is that doesn’t make it right. (lines 6-14)

As stated earlier, the overall message of this poem is for Jackson’s brother to be a better man than society expects him to be. She uses vocal inflections in this passage to convey this message. In the beginning of the passage, Jackson says line 7 at a normal speed. She says this line the same way she said the other lines. Jackson changed the pace of her performance in line 13 when she said, “what I am telling you…” She spoke these words in a choppy manner and broke the word “telling” up into syllables as if there were dashes in between the words. This choppiness conveys to Jackson’s brother that this is a part that he needs to pay special attention to: that line 13 and what came after it was very important for him to know. The message in lines 13 and 14 for her brother is not to be lazy (as in line 11) but to fight to be a good man just because it would be easier not to fight to be a good man; that just because he can decide not to be a good man does not “make it right” to do so.

Like signifying, Jackson proves that tonal semantics continues to be a communicative strategy from the African American oral tradition to slam poetry. Her poetry signifies on past incidents by adding her articism into each poem. All of her performance poems have the intent to teach the audience something about racism or sexism because she feels strongly about the two issues. Her performances are meant to put these issues in the faces of her audience so they can see things the way that she sees them.

In an interview with Jackson, she also explained her views about producing poetry that she will perform. She writes her poetry in parts and the parts come together as a whole. She compares her process and need to write a poem about an incident to “pooping”—it gets to a point where she has to let it out or she’ll feel constipated. She says that her poetry reveals the ugliest parts of her—all of her raw emotions. Jackson admits that she does not always write about beautiful things, but she makes them sound beautiful. When she performs she gets lost in the piece and pours everything on to the stage when she does both spoken word and slam.

What is the difference? Jackson gives her opinion to this question when she says, slam is “competitive poetry where there are random judges in the audience that vote… When you open mic [do spoken word], you just kinda get up there, do a poem; it’s not rated; it’s not judged…you just do the poem and kinda sit down.” The one question that is difficult to answer is “What does the ‘slam’ in slam poetry mean?” When asked this question, Jackson replied that slam is not just about winning, but about “do you understand” what it takes to put all an artist’s raw emotions in a compact, four minute piece that not only sounds good, but has an effect on the audience? For her the “slam” in a slam poem is the “sting” in a piece that allows the audience to feel what the artist feels the way the artist feels. She says that, “The ‘slam’ in slam poetry means to lay it out…like the sound a ‘slam’ would make…to make sure the piece is heard.” Jackson is aware that many people do not like poetry, but she has found that some of those people do like slam poetry. Written poetry and slam poetry are not the same in that slam poetry has the element of performance from the African American oral tradition. As Marc Kelly Smith states, “Slam is more than just an entertaining show; it’s a global social/literary movement fueled by the passion and energy of thousands of organizers, poets, and audience members” (26). It is an important art to those that choose to participate in it.

My short slam poem from the beginning of this paper also displays the verbal strategies of signifying and tonal semantics. It is important to know that the poem was not written with either of the verbal strategies in mind. I wrote it for the purpose of creating an attention-getting introduction for this project. Only after the poem was written was I able to identify the presence of signifying and tonal semantics.

It was all good—in the hood. Chillin’ wit my fam, watchin’ the game. My cuzn took a quick trip—to never return a-gain, And still holdin’ that bag-a-skittles and that can-a-tea—BLAHIKA! Shot left my cuzn laid lifeless lackustered forever. Guess it wasn’t all good—in the hood. (lines 1-6)

In line 4, the mention of “that bag-a-skittles and that can-a-tea” signifies on the recent Trayvon Martin case. The image has been discussed many times, but I use the image in a new way that conveys meaning to the audience about how skittles and tea gives the thought of youth and care free living; but, at the end of line 4, the word “BLAHIKA” (the sound of a gun)
slices the thought of youth and care free living in half. The image is not so innocent anymore and the intended message in this line is that innocent child snacks can now remind us of how people can still die from racial profiling.

When this piece is performed, voice inflection is an important detail to include. When performed, the phrase in line 1, “It was all good—in the hood,” is said in a normal tone; but in line 6, the phrase, “Guess it wasn’t all good—in the hood” was said in a lower tone. The lower tone conveys to the audience that the emotion in the poem has changed to a sad one. The intended message that this tone gives to the audience is that the situation in the poem is a sad and shameful case and asks for society to eliminate racial profiling without directly saying so.

In summary, as slam poetry becomes more popular globally in modern culture, scholars are paying more attention to its linguistic and artistic qualities. Slam poetry employs features that can be traced to early Black English vernacular and to performance poetry of the Black Arts/Nationalist movement. African American vernacular lives on in today’s generation because as long as a speech community uses particular phonetic and verbal strategies, those strategies will get passed on to others joining the speech community. To date, no one has been able to transcribe intricate aspects of tonal semantic features of Black vernacular in print. However, an expert in the Black vernacular speech community will recognize from the context how to vocalize or articulate a passage written in Black vernacular even if the passage is written with standard English spellings. Tonal semantics is a tradition brought to America from the orally-oriented culture of Africa. The specific belief in Nommo may not have been passed down to modern generations, but the value of the Word has, which is why verbal performance is still respected in Black vernacular speech communities. As Marc Kelly Smith said, slam is “the merging of the art of performance with the art of writing poetry.” It is an art form that should be taken very seriously as well as enjoyed, and its history is rich in vocal and performance tradition.


Jackson, Christina. Personal interview. 5 Aug. 2012.


