

ABSTRACT

(Re)covering Lost Lore: Folklore Adaptations in
Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor

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Though folklore is a knowledge-sharing, identity-forming practice that is utilized by a number of cultural groups, many scholars deride its emphasis on orality and storytelling. One reason may be that folklore practitioners are often members of marginalized cultures; for example both Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor, two prominent African American female authors, use folklore, their written literature. In doing so, both Hurston and Naylor recognize the value folklore has played in African American culture and they give voice to its rich complexities.

To address concerns raised by critics, the first chapter examines scholarship regarding Hurston's works, particularly her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Traditionally, Hurston critics interpret her writing as subversively concerned with race issues; however, a comparison between Hurston's published text and holograph manuscript reveals that Hurston's views on race are indeterminate. As a result, her published works, particularly her nonfiction, need to be analyzed through a different lens: folklore. By looking at folklore, I will address Hurston's engagement with racial issues and her desire to move beyond racial restrictions. Folklore, then, is crucial to

understanding Hurston's nonfiction texts because it both reaffirms Hurston's connection to racial issues and recognizes the complexities within Hurston's storytelling.

The second chapter builds upon the first by analyzing the folklore genres used in *Dust Tracks on a Road* to demonstrate how Hurston creates a holistic picture of the African American folklore identity. Notably, she recognizes that Western myth, African forms, fairy tale, and the picaresque all influence the African lore of the American South. In doing so, Hurston creates a more complicated picture of African American folklore. She reveals that myth, a term that will be used to denote Western mythology, communicates the heroic identity, African forms reinforce communal identity, fairy tales provide relatable archetypes, and the picaresque promotes gender stereotypes. Then she moves beyond these forms to subvert genre expectations; thereby creating new folklore that is representative of her contemporary African American experience.

The final chapter shows the influence Hurston has on Gloria Naylor, a contemporary African American female author. In *Mama Day*, Naylor utilizes the same four folklore genres as Hurston. In her text, however, Naylor employs folklore in a slightly different manner. For example, she reveals that myth, in the form of Shakespearean literature, denotes societal values, African forms reinforce communal identity, fairy tales provide relatable archetypes, and the picaresque reveals identity. She then, like Hurston, subverts genre expectations to create folklore that is representative of contemporary African American culture. Unlike Hurston, though, Naylor does not use folklore to explore the complexities within herself, but within her culture.

Together, these chapters reveal the way in which oral culture, particularly folklore, pervades the written texts of African American women. By sustaining the

traditions of African American folk culture, Hurston and Naylor pay homage to a culture that is often ignored by critics and also recognize the influence that various cultural groups – European, Native American, and African – have had on African American customs. Furthermore, both authors note the evolutionary nature of folklore and folk culture, demonstrating the adaptations African American communities have undergone during the twentieth century. By doing so, both Hurston and Naylor complicate and rewrite conventional perceptions of African American culture to create a richer, more complex, picture of folklore communities.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction: The Art of Folklore: Why the Folk Form Matters	1
Chapter 2: (Re)writing Race Issues: Looking at the <i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i> Manuscript	10
Chapter 3: (Re)adapting Lore: Analyzing Folklore Genres in Zora Neale Hurston's <i>Mules and Men</i> and <i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i>	30
Chapter 4: (Re)gaining Still Waters: Analyzing Folklore Genres in Gloria Naylor's <i>Mama Day</i>	51
Chapter 5: Conclusion: The Larger Picture	75

CHAPTER ONE

The Art of Folklore: Why the Folk Form Matters

In the United States, Eurocentric views on history and culture define American social customs. As a result, the practices of non-Caucasian cultural groups frequently are perceived as being outside the norm. This erroneous view leads to the undervaluation of certain ethnic groups, a societal flaw that is made palpable in written texts. While numerous individuals have contributed to the American literary canon, those held in high esteem are almost entirely Caucasian. Consequently, literary scholars have ignored a number of texts that outline alternate cultural and literary practices. Toni Morrison, in her work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, critiques this practice by stating,

For some time now I have been thinking about the validity or vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as ‘knowledge.’ This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical, American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence – which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture – has no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture’s literature. Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular ‘Americanness’ that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence (4-5).

For Morrison, failing to recognize other contributors to American literature, particularly the input of African Americans, denies their role in the formation of the American identity. It also disregards non-Caucasian literary practices, such as oral storytelling and folklore. These practices, however, provide a means by which

marginalized cultures can establish and value their contributions to American culture. For example, African American communities tell “Ole Massa” stories in which a slave named John constantly outsmarts his master. Functioning as an alternative history narrative, these tales rewrite the concept of African primitivism and replace it with cultural empowerment. Though these stories maintain the traditional social structure of slave culture (i.e. the white man is the master and the black man is the slave), they upset conventional power structures by showing John as the superior intellect. In doing so, these tales counter traditional narratives, specifically printed anthologies and/or historical texts, which tend to focus on the experiences of those in power, i.e. white Americans. For marginalized cultures, however, folk tales are a means of creating a cultural identity outside of printed history. The folklorist Bernard W. Bell asserts that folk tales “transmit knowledge, value, and attitudes from one generation to another, enforce conformity to social norms, validate social institutions and religious rituals, and provide a psychological release from the restrictions of society” (73). For these reasons, folklore, particularly African American folklore, demands critical attention. By understanding and analyzing African American folklore, larger American culture can begin to appreciate a cultural presence that has been ignored for far too long.

Furthermore, an analysis of the folklore genres that are integrated into African American folklore – myth, African folk forms, fairy tale, and the picaresque – reveal how African American folk communities, even those intentionally excluding themselves from mainstream culture like Hurston’s Eatonville and Naylor’s Willow Springs, are affected by the storytelling traditions of other cultural groups in the United States. Though Bernard W. Bell, renowned folklorist, recognizes that “residual elements of the oral

tradition of Africa, each fulfilling a psychological and social need in the lives of slaves, fused with the dominant white and indigenous Native American culture,” he does not analyze the ways in which these influences appear in folklore itself (74). As a result, this study builds upon Bell’s findings by analyzing the role of other folklore genres within African American folklore. Whether through physical proximity, as with the Southern and Western picaresque tradition, or through political relationships, particularly with academia, i.e., canonized myth, African American folklore inadvertently responds to Morrison’s concern about black presence in literature. In particular, African American folklore establishes the significance of African culture within larger society and redresses the views of majority culture by creating room for alternate interpretations of American culture.

To gain a fuller understanding of African American folklore, it is necessary to study Zora Neale Hurston, the first native anthropologist to publish a collection of African American folk tales. Her earliest work, *Mules and Men*, is a collection of folktales that she recorded in her home community of Eatonville, Florida. Instead of simply compiling stories, Hurston places herself within the text. Not only does she record her interactions with the storytellers, she also injects her opinions, defines terms, or provides explanations for the information being shared. As a result, Hurston’s text, which was marketed toward white readers, not only recorded African American folktales but also explained them in a way that made them accessible to outsiders. In doing so, Hurston rejected the binary opposition of blacks and whites and instead bridges the gap with a text that embraces the storytelling styles of both cultures, i.e. she captures folklore in a printed text. Jacqueline Fulmer, a folklorist, comments on the hybridity of *Mules and Men* by

noting that Hurston “[...relies] on phrases taken from oral tradition, and by using the conventions of oral storytelling, Hurston writes a book that sounds like oral storytelling, only it appears in print. The work is neither one nor the other, slipping across stylistic and genre borders [...] break[ing] the binary through which the dominant society had tried to isolate African American traditions” (60). By melding oral and print narratives, Hurston creates a middle ground where both forms are given equal weight. In this liminal space, Hurston can praise and critique the customs of both cultures.

As a result, Hurston’s text contains space for social commentary. Though often not spoken by the author herself, both the folktales and the storytellers frequently critique American society. For example, the men at the lumber mill openly criticize their white boss, but also tell stories in which black men are mocked for making poor decisions. Likewise, Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, contains a number of stories in which both white and black Americans are portrayed critically. In the chapter entitled “My People! My People!” Hurston states “Light came to me when I realized that I did not have to consider any racial group as a whole. God made them duck by duck and that was the only way I could see them. I learned that skins were no measure of what was inside people. So none of the [r]ace clichés meant anything anymore” (191). Here, Hurston reasserts the middle ground created by her texts; thus, she allows herself the freedom to critique the entire social structure, both blacks and whites.

In addition to acting as social commentary, Hurston’s use of folktales accomplishes one other goal: it establishes Hurston’s supernatural identity. Notably, in the manuscript edition of her autobiography, Hurston tells a folktale in which she comes face to face with God. At this moment, she takes on supernatural characteristics, placing

her outside the confines of her race or gender. By presenting herself as more than human, Hurston reveals that her life and work exist beyond the restrictions of society. An analysis of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, then, reveals where Hurston moves away from race issues and acknowledges the texts' underlying richness and complexities. Hurston's other work, particularly *Mules and Men*, utilizes folktales to address social issues and move beyond race restrictions. Therefore, folklore is a vital component of Hurston's nonfiction works, and it needs to be treated with due diligence.

Furthermore, Hurston's use of folklore influences later writers. Gloria Naylor, a contemporary African American female author, cites Hurston as one of her most influential inspirations (B&N). Naylor, who wrote her first novel forty-seven years after the publication of *Mules and Men*, was very familiar with Hurston's works by the time she began writing. Maxine Lavon Montgomery, a scholar of African American women's literature, notes: "By the time she entered graduate school at Yale, the books of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and other black women were being taught for the first time in newly formed women's and black studies programs. Gloria Naylor thus became one of the first black women writers to have formally studied her literary predecessors" (107). The formal induction of black female authors into the classroom was part of a canonical shift; the contributions of previously marginalized authors were being recognized as valuable American literature. This canonical movement provided room for scholars such as Naylor to study non-Caucasian authors. As a result, Naylor spent her time at Yale studying Afro-American literature, reading the texts which would later inspire her to write novels.

Naylor was particularly inspired by Zora Neale Hurston, whose philosophy of folk culture she utilized while writing *Mama Day*. She comments, “I thought of Hurston’s whole philosophy. At times during the Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen were glorifying the folk and attempting to raise folk up to art. Zora Neale Hurston’s very cultured, militant position was that you don’t have to raise the black folk up to art; the black folk *are* art” (Montgomery 62). As a result, Naylor does not write characters who need to be raised up socially, spiritually, or morally. Most of her subjects are middle-to-lower class African Americans who are strong and admirable, but also flawed. To emphasize the dynamic nature of her characters, Naylor places them in an environment outside of white influence, i.e. the island of Willow Springs. Doing so allows her text, like Hurston’s, to separate itself from race issues and focus on the intricacies within African American culture. Charles E. Wilson asserts that

Naylor, like Hurston, presents the lives of her black characters almost at the total exclusion of the outside white community. Hurston was even criticized, particularly by Richard Wright, for not addressing more comprehensively the impact of race and racism on the lives of black people. Hurston, however, answered this charge by suggesting that to harp continually on racism inadvertently intensifies the power that whites have over blacks. Instead, Hurston wanted to focus on those moments in black life when blacks do not think about whites or their efforts at supremacy. In this way, Hurston believed that she, to some degree, liberated her characters. Likewise, Naylor, in the contemporary moment, impels her black characters to interact without direct white interception (31).

Thus, by excluding white characters from her novel *Mama Day*, Naylor makes it possible to view each character individually, apart from race issues. Furthermore, she creates an environment in which the richness of African American folk culture can be explored. In *Mama Day*, the majority of characters live on a small island off the coast of South

Carolina and Georgia. This particular community, existing on the border of two states, ultimately belongs to neither. As a result, the island of Willow Springs is an independent state whose population is entirely African American. The citizens intentionally remain secluded from the mainland, and ascribe to a different set of cultural beliefs than Anglo society. For example, Willow Springs does not have a governing body, but instead is overseen by Mama Day, a matriarch and hoodoo practitioner. By creating a world in which these folk practices are not called into question, Naylor validates both folklore and the cultural practices of African American communities. She, like Hurston, realizes that black folklore does not need to be refined, but rather is a valuable form in and of itself.

Hurston and Naylor's texts, therefore, are inextricably linked. Both texts include social commentary; Hurston's is demonstrated through the folktales included in *Mules and Men*, and Naylor's appears in her use of folk genres. More importantly, both women recognize the richness inherent in African American folklore and refuse to view black culture as somehow inferior or in opposition to Anglo-American culture. Doing so gives voice to African American folklore and expands the established literary canon. Thus, reading Hurston and Naylor together further illuminates the values of African American folk community without denigrating its practices as being inferior, interpreting stories in terms of race, or generalizing the African American folk lifestyle.

Though one study of African American folktales cannot possibly transform the injustices of the past, it can help create a more holistic picture of American culture. Acknowledging and celebrating African American contributions to folklore and literature, then, recognizes a different type of knowledge that is equally valuable to society. As Toni Morrison notes, "The contemplation of this black presence is central to

any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination” (5). Thus, the following chapters will examine the role of folklore in the writing of African American women, particularly Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor, and analyze the ways in which folklore enriches the reader’s understanding of African American culture.

The first chapter examines scholarship regarding Hurston’s works, particularly her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Traditionally, Hurston critics interpret her writing as subversively concerned with race issues; however, a comparison between Hurston’s published text and holograph manuscript reveals that Hurston’s views on race are indeterminate. As a result, her published works, particularly her nonfiction, need to be analyzed through a different lens: folklore. By looking at folklore, I will address Hurston’s engagement with racial issues and her desire to move beyond racial restrictions. Folklore, then, is crucial to understanding Hurston’s nonfiction texts because it both reaffirms Hurston’s connection to racial issues and recognizes the complexities within Hurston’s storytelling.

The second chapter builds upon the first by analyzing the folklore genres used in *Dust Tracks on a Road* to demonstrate how Hurston creates a holistic picture of the African American folklore identity. Notably, she recognizes that Western myth, African forms, fairy tale, and the picaresque all influence the African lore of the American South. In doing so, Hurston creates a more complicated picture of African American folklore. She reveals that myth, a term that will be used to denote Western mythology, communicates the heroic identity; African forms reinforce communal identity; fairy tales provide relatable archetypes; and the picaresque promotes gender stereotypes. Then she

moves beyond these forms to subvert genre expectations; thereby creating new folklore that is representative of her contemporary African American experience.

The final chapter shows the influence Hurston has on Gloria Naylor, a contemporary African American female author. In *Mama Day*, Naylor utilizes the same four folklore genres as Hurston. In her text, however, Naylor employs folklore in a slightly different manner. For example, she reveals that Western myth, in the form of Shakespearean literature, denotes societal values; African forms reinforce communal identity; fairy tales provide relatable archetypes; and the picaresque reveals identity. She then, like Hurston, subverts genre expectations to create folklore that is representative of contemporary African American culture. Unlike Hurston, though, Naylor does not use folklore to explore the complexities within herself, but within the culture of which she is a part.

Together, these chapters reveal the way in which oral culture, particularly folklore, pervades the written texts of two African American women. By sustaining the traditions of African American folk culture, Hurston and Naylor pay homage to a culture that is often ignored by critics and also recognize the influence that various cultural groups – European, Native American, and African – have had on African American customs. Furthermore, both authors note the evolutionary nature of folklore and folk culture, demonstrating the adaptations African American communities have undergone during the twentieth century. By doing so, Hurston and Naylor complicate and rewrite conventional perceptions of African American culture to create a richer, more complex, picture of folklore communities.

CHAPTER TWO

(Re)writing Race Issues: Looking at the *Dust Tracks on a Road* Manuscript

In 1942, Zora Neale Hurston published her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Though pressured by editors to write the “colored person tell all” of her contemporaries Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, Hurston’s work contains very little explicit discussion of race. Rather, Hurston’s work is imbued with a number of colorful stories and images that highlight her perceptions of self and others. Since her autobiography contains elements of nonfiction (i.e. her day-to-day experiences) and elements of fiction (i.e. folktales), an analysis of the connection between nonfiction and fiction is essential. James Clifford, the author of *Writing Culture*, notes that “Literary processes – metaphor, figuration, narrative – affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered;” thus, Hurston’s use of folklore in place of political narrative drastically affects the way the text is read (4). For example, Hurston’s text, unlike those of her contemporaries, is not aggressive or combative; instead, it is ensconced firmly within her mythical past. Hurston’s use of myth and lore, however, creates some complications for critics. Since folktales are difficult to interpret, critics who engage with Hurston’s autobiography often manipulate and/or disregard the folk stories that structure the text. Doing so eases the analytical process; however, it also distorts the text and thereby does not represent Hurston accurately. A holistic look at Hurston’s autobiography demonstrates that the text contains two significant components: Hurston’s day-to-day experiences and folk stories that elaborate or inform Hurston’s daily life. While critics have traditionally examined the

nonfiction components of the narrative to determine the “truth” within Hurston’s work, the fictionalized stories, or folk tales, also provide an avenue to Hurston’s thoughts because they inform and shape the nonfictional events. As a result, Hurston’s autobiography must be examined in terms of folklore. Doing so brings the reader closer to understanding “truth” within Hurston’s writing. Furthermore, the folklore genre facilitates two significant themes: Hurston’s use of social commentary and Hurston’s connection to the supernatural. Analyzing *Dust Tracks on a Road* through folklore, then, provides a richer understanding of Hurston by both acknowledging and expanding upon the strictly factual components of the text.

One way in which critics debate the merits of *Dust Tracks on a Road* is by comparing the published version to the holograph manuscript. Since the two versions are drastically different (the manuscript contains four full chapters and two partial chapters that were not included in early publications), the manuscript does provide a more holistic picture of Hurston’s autobiographical intentions. Critics, however, often use the holograph manuscript to support their arguments concerning race. For example, Claudine Raynaud, a scholar of race and gender issues, comments that “A comparison of manuscript and published versions of *Dust Tracks on a Road* retraces the process of Hurston’s gradual submission to the control of the white publishing world” (34). While Hurston’s manuscript certainly does address racial issues in more depth than the published edition, Hurston’s view on race in the manuscript is indeterminate. For example, in the chapter entitled “My People! My People!” Hurston criticizes the majority culture for its blanket discrimination of African Americans. To demonstrate her frustration, Hurston tells a tale about two pairs of African Americans on a city bus. The

first pair is well-educated and well-dressed as well as quiet and undistruptive; the second pair is a set of men who are poorly dressed, highly disruptive, and like to abuse their wives. Obviously, this second pair draws attention from the surrounding passengers who, in response, “are grinning from the heel up [or] are stonily quiet. But both kinds are thinking ‘That’s just like a Negro.’ Not just like *some* Negroes, mind you, No, like all. Only difference is some Negroes are better dressed” (DT 235). Hurston includes this text in her autobiography to underscore the blanket discrimination experienced by African Americans. Furthermore, she criticizes both the white passengers and the black men for reinforcing racial stereotypes. The most obvious critique is against the white passengers who overlook the stark differences between the two African American pairs in terms of dress, behavior, and noise level. By viewing these two couples similarly, Hurston reveals how discrimination skews the white passengers’ perceptions of others. At the same time, Hurston admonishes the two black men for living up to racial stereotypes: they are loud, poorly dressed, unclean, and crass. Moreover, it is their behavior that causes the white passengers to react negatively toward both couples; prior to their entrance, none of the white passengers mistreat or discriminate against the less disruptive pair. By shaping the text in this way, Hurston reveals that both whites and blacks need to reassess their views on race. Until that happens, both groups will continue engaging with racial stereotypes in unproductive ways.

On the other hand, in the chapter entitled “The Inside Light – Being a Salute to Friendship,” Hurston attributes her success to the majority culture. In particular, she praises the many patrons and advisors who have assisted her academically and financially. Notably, Hurston states that “Without the juice of friendship, I would not be

even what I seem to be. So many people have stretched out their hands and helped me along my wander” (DT 268). The rest of the chapter details the financial, emotional, and academic contributions made by Hurston’s supporters. In particular, Hurston describes her relationship with Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, an early patron. Not only is Mrs. Mason cited as an influential benefactor, she also appears in the last of Hurston’s twelve prophesies. These visions, though explained sporadically and incompletely in the published text, serve as the foundation of the works’ “rags to riches” narrative: “It was decreed in the beginning of things that I should meet Mrs. R. Osgood Mason. She had been in the last of my prophetic visions from the first coming of them” (DT 268). In this passage, Hurston demonstrates that her literary success was supernaturally predetermined. She also reveals that Mrs. Mason is the means to fulfilling her destiny, implying that their relationship is both affirmative and beneficial. Finally, this vision completes the text’s “rags to riches” saga, ultimately showing that Hurston’s struggles, both financial and otherwise, have come to an end. When analyzed collectively, these factors reveal that Hurston has a positive relationship with her patrons, and that the majority culture has fostered her success.

Many critics would support this reading, arguing that Hurston pandered to her Caucasian audience. In fact, some critics, like Trudier Harris-Lopez, in her work *South of Tradition: Essays on African American Literature*, regarded Hurston as completely disconnected from the African American folk community; she notes that Hurston’s failure to write a traditional biography signifies her inability to “operate within the black folk world that she admires” (66). This, however, oversimplifies Hurston dramatically. Instead of dissociating from folk, Hurston spent her life engaging with folklore on every

level possible. As a child, she rewrote animal tales to reflect the personalities of her neighbors and friends. As she grew older, Hurston pursued the academic study of folklore with its leading scholar, Franz Boas. After completing her degree, she became the first African American to record the folklore of African American communities; furthermore, her collection of these tales, *Mules and Men*, was a literary success. Thus, Hurston is not disengaged from her folk roots, rather she is constantly returning to them for fulfillment and inspiration. As a result, Hurston's autobiography cannot be analyzed apart from folklore. As Fulmer says, "To read Hurston is to see the depth of her research as a folklorist and the depth of her childhood memories of African American communities in Florida" (53).

Critics who recognize the value of folklore in Hurston's corpus, however, tend to disregard *Dust Tracks on a Road* because of its non-linear, choppy narrative. Alice Walker, who is credited with rediscovering Hurston, comments that "For me, the most unfortunate thing Zora ever wrote is her autobiography. After the first several chapters it rings false" (Hemenway, xviii). Certainly, Hurston's work does not follow clear-cut narrative of convention; instead, it bounces from mythic vision, to childhood reminiscence, to financial struggles without any clear pattern. Though Hurston initially structures her autobiography around twelve prophetic visions, she does not maintain this construction throughout. In fact, only four of the visions are outlined in the published text (one additional vision appears in the holograph manuscript). As a result, creating a chronology of events within *Dust Tracks on a Road* is nearly impossible; however, its construction was likely intentional. Trudier Harris-Lopez claims that Hurston shaped the text this way to rebel against white power structures. She states, "By refusing to retain

strict chronology, by setting up a structure of twelve recurring visions and refusing to adhere to it, and by lapsing from narrative into essay, Hurston retains the voice and control that she was not otherwise allowed,” and, to a certain degree, this is true (55). Hurston does write *Dust Tracks on a Road* in a way that conceals the inner self. In doing so, she meets publisher expectations while preserving her mysterious identity. At the same time, Hurston reveals much of her identity through folklore. Alice Deck, a scholar of discourse, argues that “the critic’s job is then to interpret the truth of autobiography in its psychological dimensions rather than in its factual or moral ones” (Deck 2). By building upon this method, I will examine Hurston’s “psychological dimensions” to interpret the complexities within her autobiography. Furthermore, this study will use folklore to address issues of race while simultaneously valuing other aspects of Hurston’s intricate narrative.

The danger in looking at folklore, however, is that stories can be challenging, if not impossible, to interpret. As a result, some critics, like Judith Robey, argue that “Storytelling itself is, in fact, set up in the text as an act of defiance against powerful white personages,” but her evidence falls short (7). Though it is clear that “Zora appears to share her community’s conception of art as a subversive yet regenerative activity (This is reflected linguistically in the term the community uses for storytelling, lying, and in the way folktales arise as a means of criticizing individuals and/or laughing at individual or collective foibles),” subversion does not always necessitate political rebellion (Robey 7). Rather, the folklore genre is naturally inclined toward subversion; in particular, folklore reinforces cultural identity and rejects negations of cultural practices. Since folklore is often used by oppressed cultural groups, the tales frequently contain hidden critiques of

majority culture. As such, folktales subvert the values of majority culture to reinforce the practices of the minority. Bernard W. Bell, folklorist and author of *The Contemporary African American Novel*, defines folklore as

symbolic representations of crucial life situations that are shared by a people, residually oral [...] myths that are moral as well as speculative, stories that are archetypal in pattern and ethnic in content. They explain the origins of things, activities of gods, and historical human dilemmas. They are therefore generally a fusion of myth and legend that are concerned with the founders of an ethnic group or lineage and that justify the taboos and authority of the group or lineage (80-1).

Folklore, then, reinforces social, religious, and behavioral norms of a particular group. Furthermore, its historical presence speaks to its significance as a storytelling form. The Greeks, for example, tell the story of Theseus and the Minotaur. In the tale, a Minotaur, or a monster with the head of a bull and the body of a man, has taken control of the Minoan settlement Knossos. Every nine years, the Athenians, who are under Minoan rule, are forced to sacrifice seven men and seven women to the beast for the sake of peace. One day, a young Athenian named Theseus attacks and kills the monster, preventing it from maiming any other citizens. Theseus, then, is named King of Athens. Initially, this tale appears to highlight Theseus' heroism and bravery. When the tale is examined through a historical lens, however, it becomes much more subversive. In early Greek history, the Cretans were a powerful group who conquered much of mainland Greece. They ruled with an iron fist, and often sacrificed the citizens of conquered territories in their religious ceremonies. The tale of Theseus, then, demonstrates Athens' ability to break away from the bonds of Crete; it also highlights Athens' movement from archaic religious practices. Thus, the tale of Theseus, like many other folk tales, contains a subversive, underlying message.

Similarly, the folk tales in Hurston's text are, at times, political, but they also function in social and cultural ways that are essential to understanding the text. For example, in the chapter "The Inside Light – Being a Salute to Friendship," Hurston allegorically describes her relationships with her patrons, each of whom is discussed in detail thereafter. By beginning the chapter with a foundational text, Hurston suggests that the nonfiction (i.e. the discussion of her patrons) should be read in terms of the fiction (i.e. the allegory). The text is as follows:

You see lonesome-looking old red hills, who do not even have clothes to cover their backs just lying there looking useless. Looking just like Old Maker had a junk pile like everybody else. But go back and look at them late in the day and see the herd of friendly shadows browsing happily around the feet of those hills. Then gaze up at the top and surprise the departing sun, all colored-up with its feelings, saying a sweet goodnight to those lonesome hills, and making them a promise that he will never forget them. So much tender beauty in a parting must mean a friendship. "I will visit you with my love" says the sun. That is why the hills endure (DT 267).

Immediately after telling this tale, Hurston concisely summarizes the tale by saying, "Personally, I know what it means. I have never been as good a friend as I meant to be," [...] But I have received unaccountable friendship that is satisfying" (DT 267). The subsequent passages then outline the friendships that Hurston deems satisfying, particularly those between her and her patrons. Though Hurston's summation of the allegory appears to transition the reader from one portrayal of friendship to another, rereading the allegory in terms of the chapter's content proves fruitful.

For example, Hurston's praise for her patrons mirrors the positive relationship between the hills and the sun. Notably, the two exchange promises of eternal friendship and are described with positively connotative terms such as "sweet" and "tender." Furthermore, the hills are left with the strength "to endure" simply through the promise of

the sun's love. Placing the narrative onto Hurston's relationships, however, complicates interpretation of the text. For example, in one interpretation Hurston may be cast as the hills and her patrons the sun. In this reading, Hurston appears to be a "junk pile," or someone whose circumstances are less than favorable. After a while, she is graced through patronage, creating happy relationships between herself and her supporters. Once Hurston is financially secure, the patrons, like the sun, can move on to other ventures. Thus, the two part amicably and Hurston can endure financially until they meet again.

Switching Hurston and her patrons' roles significantly alters this interpretation. If Hurston is cast as the sun, then she is the one bringing light, or her talents, to her patrons; in other words, her writing is a bargaining tool. If Hurston produces writing, and is appropriately thankful, her servitude is complete. By promising to return with "love," Hurston keeps her patrons satisfied and obtains the freedom to pursue her own interests. Hurston's letters to Fannie Hurst, housed at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas support this interpretation. Nearly all of the letters begin by thanking Hurst for her generosity. For example, a letter dated March 8th, 1934 states: "Dear Miss Hurst, This is to try to turn you some humble thanks for all the lovely things that you have done for me. Words seem so useless, so I pledge that which I know you value most. I promise to work, and to turn out the best literature that I can" (*Collected Letters*). Here, Hurston pays tribute to her patron, then promises, like the sun, to fulfill the others' expectations. Making promises, however, is not the same as keeping them. As their correspondence continues, Hurston frequently dismisses Hurst's requests, hinting that her literary pursuits

must take precedence. In this interpretation, then, the allegory becomes subversive; rather than praising friendship, the tale hints at its manipulative underbelly.

So, which of these two readings is correct? The answer likely lies somewhere in the middle. As her autobiography and letters express, Hurston was truly grateful to receive support from patrons. In “The Inside Light – Being a Salute to Friendship” she emphasizes this sentiment by listing each of her patrons and their contributions in detail. For instance, Hurston exudes, “I fell in love with Jane Belo because she is not what she is supposed to be. She has brains and talent and uses them when she was born rich and pretty, and could have gotten along without any sense” (DT 270). Undoubtedly, Hurston admired a woman who, like her, was breaking away from tradition to pursue an academic career. Furthermore, Hurston’s discussion of Belo does not contain any subtext that suggests Hurston’s disapproval. At the same time, it is essential to note that Hurston’s relationships with patrons were not free from difficulty. Robert Hemenway, author of *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, comments that “Not only did Mrs. Mason’s largesse enable Zora to do the basic field work that established her fame as a folklorist; it also eventually led to dependency and bitterness” (105). He goes on to say that “The problem with Mrs. Mason, as perhaps with all patrons, was that she expected some return on her money. In Hurston’s case it was a report on the aboriginal sincerity of rural southern black folk” (107). When Hurston’s work failed to uphold racial stereotypes, her relationship with Mrs. Mason became strained. Hurston also experienced difficulties with her other patrons, particularly when they had expectations that she could not meet either physically or ideologically.

The allegory form, however, provides Hurston with a way to express her frustrations with patrons and critics. By describing friendship allegorically, Hurston reveals her true perceptions of patronage and friendship. Certain readers, then, may pick up on Hurston's dissatisfaction with patronage while others, particularly her supporters, are narratively convinced to do otherwise. Susan Meisenhelder, a seminal Hurston critic, notes that Hurston "conveys her controversial cultural messages not by explicitly analyzing folktales but by embedding them in social contexts that underscore issues of race and gender" (270). Jacqueline Fulmer takes Meisenhelder's argument one step further by asserting that "coding lets Hurston comment on volatile topics without having to seek permission or fear reprisal" (56). Thus, Hurston's use of coding allows her to express politically charged ideas in a non-offensive way. In this study, then, Hurston's 'social context' is the folklore within her work. By placing her opinions within the tale, she both masks and integrates her innermost feelings into the text.

For example, in the chapter entitled "My People! My People!" Hurston explicitly addresses racial issues through folklore. In this instance, however, Hurston criticizes both African Americans and the majority culture. She states,

There is the folk-tale of the white man who hired five men to take hold of a rope to pull up a cement block. They caught hold and gave a yank and the little stone flew way up to the pulley the first time. The men look at one 'nother in surprise and so one of them said to the bossman: "Boss, how come you hire all of us to pull up that one little piece of rock? One man could do that by hisself." "Yeah, I know it," the bossman told him, "but I just wanted to see five Negroes pulling together once (DT 239).

In the tale, Hurston explicitly condemns the disunity of African Americans. In particular, she notes that a unified African American effort is rare, and that it is often instigated by majority culture. By addressing both cultural groups, Hurston underscores the influence

that whites have on African American culture. The folk tale, then, questions the efficacy of the contemporary social structure. If social unity is initiated by the oppressor, then collective efforts may be counterproductive. At the same time, the workers have great potential to bring about change, as exhibited by the ease with which they move the cement block. Furthermore, their collected effort alleviates the burden of physical labor because each man has an equal share in the task. Similarly, Hurston asserts that racial unity would diffuse the burden of discrimination so that a few well-known figures, such as Richard Wright, would not have to carry more than their share.

Though less racially charged, Hurston also engages in social commentary in the published edition of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. The published edition, which has been edited and rubber stamped by editors, contains far less social commentary than Hurston's manuscript. One reason Hurston's politicized language was removed is because the editors did not want to offend Hurston's audience, white readers. Another reason is that Hurston's autobiography is not set up to be a political text; in fact, it is intentionally non-didactic. As a result, the discussions of race which fit Hurston's text were left largely intact while other sections that were less conducive to her overall work were not. In the published version of the text, Hurston begins analyzing her social context at an early age. In particular, Hurston critiques the neighborhood recluse, Mr. Pendir, and comments on his disconnectedness from the larger African American community of Eatonville, Florida. In her tale, Mr. Pendir is termed the "Alligator King," a being who possesses supernatural powers. Though Mr. Pendir's designation as the Alligator King may appear strange, his role is actually an archetype common to animal tales, or stories "in which animal characters talk and act like human beings" (Botkin 652). These tales, which function as

“allegory, satire, and children’s ‘bedtime’ stories,” are particularly common to African American folk communities and appear in many of Hurston’s works, including *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Mules and Men* (Botkin 652). In addition, animal tales serve a variety of purposes: they explain the defining characteristics of different animal species, they reflect and comment on the relationship between African American and Caucasian culture, and they provide entertaining stories about “trickster” figures. For example, in *Mules and Men* Hurston outlines traditional African American folklore concerning Brer Alligator. She notes that Brer Alligator was originally beautiful shade of white, but Brer Rabbit, who is jealous of the alligator’s coloring, decides to set fire to Brer Alligator, which ultimately turns his skin black (MM 106-7). Explaining the alligator’s rough skin in non-scientific terms serves two significant purposes: it negates the conventions of dominant culture and reinforces folk identity. As such, Hurston uses animal tales to shape the folk identity of Mr. Pendar.

In one illustration, Hurston cites the “Alligator King” for pushing an elderly woman into the lake, which he does to dispel the hoodoo curse that she has placed upon him. When his mission fails, however, the “Alligator King” remains cursed, eliciting the reader’s pity. In Hurston’s anthropological work, *Mules and Men*, Brer Alligator also elicits sympathy because he is always victimized by other animals. In fact, two of the tales included in *Mules and Men* describe the ways in which Brer Dog tricks Brer Alligator into causing himself physical harm. Brer Dog’s trickery, rather than Brer Alligator’s personality, then, is labeled as the cause of an alligator’s meanness. In the same way, Brer Alligator’s physical appearance is attributed to a nasty prank played on him by Brer Rabbit. Using these tales to explain the alligator’s appearance and

temperament paints Brer Alligator as a sympathetic figure. As a result, the “Alligator King,” like Brer Alligator, is portrayed as a victim, rather than a victimizer, of the people of Eatonville. Though the Alligator King is outwardly cruel and vicious, his temperament is a direct result of his victimization. This tale, then, makes a larger statement about victimized individuals, particularly those who exist outside of social norms. Since this story uses the African folk form, it is likely speaking to the African American experience. As members of a marginalized group, African Americans are often victimized by the majority culture. Though this may manifest itself in behaviors that are “cruel and vicious,” much like those of the Alligator King, Hurston suggests that these individuals or groups should be viewed with sympathy. By doing so, human beings can gain a better understanding of traditionally victimized peoples.

Hurston, however, prefers not to be viewed with sympathy; rather, she creates a mythical identity that sets her apart from her peers. To do so, she includes a number of visions in the *Dust Tracks* manuscript that align her life with the supernatural. Each of these visions moves Hurston along the spectrum from human to prophet to establish the exceptionalism of her life and work. The first, an alternative creation story, asserts that pain and oppression are necessary parts of life. This creation story, then, is broadly applicable; not only does it address Hurston’s own suffering, it also recognizes the subjugation of all marginalized peoples. By including this vision in the text, Hurston identifies herself as a member of an oppressed group. In second vision, Hurston notes that her suffering leads to divine beneficence; as a result, Hurston is placed in one-on-one conversation with the divine. At this time, her spirit becomes a part of the natural, divinely created world and her body is imbued with the gift of prophecy. Both of these

themes, explored in Hurston's third and fourth visions, reveal the ways in which Hurston moves beyond oppression to achieve divinity. Looking at these visions holistically, then, reveals Hurston's movement away from social and racial restrictions and movement toward a liberated and divine sense of self.

In her first vision, Hurston produces an alternate creation story in which the elements of the universe – Thing, Time, and Power – interact with her on a personal level. These communications lead to an epiphany, in which Hurston discovers God's true nature. By doing so, Hurston gains a richer understanding of the universe at large, ultimately melding her identity with creation. As a part of divine creation, Hurston is imbued with supernatural abilities that enable her literary success. In the beginning, however, Hurston must prove her mettle by experiencing the gamut of human struggles. In the creation story, these obstacles are created by the enemy of the living, Time. She posits:

Thing lies forever in her birthing-bed and glories. But hungry Time squats beside her couch and waits. His frame was made out of emptiness, and his mouth set wide for prey. Mystery was his oldest son, and power is his portion. That brings me before the un-lived hour, that first mystery of the Universe with its unknown face and reflecting back. For it was said on the day of first sayings that Time should speak backward over his shoulder, and none should see his face, so scornful is he of the creatures of Thing (DT 247).

In this creation tale, all living things are descended from Thing. Human beings, then, are products of Thing and are keenly pursued by Time, who despises them. Hurston, like other humans, has suffered at the hands of Time; in fact, she claims, "My knees have dragged the basement of Hell and I have been in Sorrow's Kitchen, and it has seemed to me that I licked out all the pots" (DT 247). The narrative of her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, affirms this statement, particularly through its use of the "rags to

riches” structure. In Chapter Six, Hurston experiences the death of her mother. The loss impacts Hurston emotionally, and also sets in motion a sequence of negative events. Soon after the death, for instance, Hurston’s father remarries an “evil stepmother” who kicks Hurston and her siblings out of the house. Hurston is placed in a boarding school where she has trouble socializing; later, she is forced to do custodial work to make up for her father’s delinquent tuition payments. Soon after, Hurston withdraws from school and begins working a number of odd jobs to support herself; years later, Hurston is rewarded for her hard work and is able to return to school and pursue her literary interests.

Though Hurston suffers deeply, she also credits Time with great beneficence. In the manuscript, for instance, Hurston claims that Time “transport[s] me to high towers of elevation so that I might look out on the breadth of things (DT 247). While there, Hurston encounters God in the natural and God’s reflection in human creation, in this case, the Manhattan skyline. This divine experience mirrors Hurston’s personal journey as conveyed through her autobiography. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston is elevated socially through her divine experience of prophecy. For example, in the third vision, Hurston is “aimlessly wandering,” until she finds work with Miss M---, a singer (DT 97). While employed, Hurston converses with many affluent actors, works with an entire theater company, and hones her storytelling abilities (i.e. she made wisecracks about the theater company and posted them backstage). The welcoming environment of the theater, as a reflection of divine love within humanity, changed Hurston’s demeanor; in fact, after working with Miss M---, Hurston “loosened up in every joint and expanded in every direction” (DT 116). Such personal growth gives Hurston the self-confidence to return to school, which in turn, fosters her literary success.

The divine not only mirrors Hurston's reality, but also interacts with her on a personal level. In the manuscript chapter "Thing," Hurston, as a part of creation, becomes an integral part of the divine. Mythic language and imagery, as well as a personal creation narrative, emphasize Hurston's deified status; thus, Hurston becomes a supernatural being in the flesh:

I have given myself the pleasures of sunrises blooming out of oceans, and sunsets drenching heaped-up clouds. I have walked in storms with a crown of clouds about my head and the zig zag lightning playing through my fingers. The gods of the upper air have uncovered their faces to my eyes. I have made friends with trees and vales. I have found out that my real home is in the sea. That the earth is only my step-mother. My old man, the sun, sired me out of the sea (DT 264).

Here, Hurston attributes herself with the characteristics of the gods, particularly Zeus and Poseidon. In Greek mythology, Zeus and Poseidon are two of three brothers who rule over all creation. The third, Hades, is lord of the underworld. Hurston does not affiliate herself with him because, as a living being, she cannot gain dominion over death. However, her connections to both Zeus and Poseidon are significant because they emphasize that Hurston's connection to the divine manifests itself in supernatural ways. For example, Hurston connects herself to Zeus by giving herself a "crown of clouds," which often circled Mount Olympus, the place from which Zeus reigned. She also gives herself the ability to control lightning, a trait that Zeus also possessed. Zeus, as the "sky father," has dominion over the skies and the earth. By taking on his characteristics, Hurston also gains power over the earthly realm. Hurston's connection to myth, however, does not end here. Notably, Hurston also unites herself with Poseidon by being "sired out of the sea." This connection furthers Hurston's supernatural abilities by granting her power throughout the living world. Being born out of the sea also establishes Hurston as

distinctly non-human, and explicitly mythical. Hurston uses this tale, then, as a foundation for the mythical identity created within *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

In particular, Hurston generates supernatural powers so that she can explain the twelve prophetic visions that structure her text. As someone noticeably connected to the divine, Hurston's ability to prophesy seems natural. Thus Hurston, the character, can prophesy a future that guarantees her literary success. Notably, the few visions that Hurston elucidates in the text follow the narrative's "rags to riches" structure. The early visions depict Hurston as dejected, homeless, or hopeless. For example, immediately after experiencing the visions, Hurston notes, "I knew my fate. I knew that I would be an orphan and homeless. I knew that while I was still helpless, that the comforting circle of my family would be broken, and that I would have to wander cold and friendless until I had served my time" (DT 42). Here, Hurston foreshadows the struggles that will later impact the narrative, ultimately signaling to readers that her literary success, which was widely accepted at the time of *Dust Tracks on a Road's* publication, was not achieved without due diligence. At the same time, Hurston also foreshadows her ability to overcome life's obstacles:

And last of all, I would come to a big house. Two women waited there for me. I could not see their faces, but I knew one to be young and one to be old. One of them was arranging some queer-shaped flowers such as I had never seen. When I come to these women, then I would be at the end of my pilgrimage, but not the end of my life. Then I would know peace and love and what goes on with those things, and not before (DT 42).

Here, Hurston is referencing the scene in which she encounters Mrs. R. Osgood Mason. Since Hurston's final prophetic visions were not included in the published text, the narrative never comes full circle. By looking at *Dust Tracks on a Road's* manuscript, however, readers can see how Hurston fulfilled her destiny. Furthermore, Hurston's

encounter with God, the event which imbues her with supernatural abilities, is also described in the manuscript. Connecting these two events with Hurston's mythical portrayal of self illuminates the text dramatically. In particular, these two scenes demonstrate how Hurston's use of mythological imagery cast her as someone outside of race or designation. Thus, Hurston's fulfillment of prophecy seems natural; since she is a mythical being, she is imbued with literary greatness.

By using folktales to make social commentary, and then building upon those tales to create a mythical identity, Hurston both recognizes racial issues and moves beyond them by establishing herself as something more than human. In doing so, Hurston writes an autobiography that is more than political: it is mythical. As such, it contains folk forms that reinforce Hurston's membership in the African American community as well as give value to African American cultural traditions. These folk tales, which are both inherently subversive and fictional, allow Hurston to address social and racial issues without becoming political. As a result, Hurston can move beyond racial issues to discuss something greater, her ability to achieve literary success. Using mythical elements to cast herself as supernaturally talented, Hurston debunks racial stereotypes. By looking at the holograph manuscript, which contains many folk tales not included in early publications, Hurston use of social commentary and mythological allusions becomes clear. Notably, Hurston's manuscript includes the chapter "My People! My People!" which discusses race more explicitly, showing how folk tales are used to demonstrate societal flaws. Hurston's folklore then goes further, revealing Hurston's connection to the divine and completing the "rags to riches" saga. In particular, Hurston undergoes her final prophetic vision, meeting Mrs. R. Osgood Mason and receiving financial support for her work. In

the text, Hurston notes that upon completion of this vision, she “would know peace and love and what goes with those things, and not before” (DT 42). Through her use of mythological identity, Hurston ensures that this vision comes to pass, and, in turn, ensures her own literary success. Thus, the narrative comes full circle. Hurston achieves due recognition in spite of personal and racial obstacles. Her folklore, then, reveals this journey in a way that is both unfailingly complex and inherently Hurston. As such, it is the folklore, rather than the nonfiction, that moves one step closer to revealing Hurston’s inner self.

CHAPTER THREE

(Re)adapting Lore: Analyzing Folklore Genres in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*

In her essay “Art and Such,” Zora Neale Hurston describes the pitfalls of political writing; in particular, she notes that the stifling of creativity, particularly in African Americans works concerning race issues, was detrimental to the text’s literary value. Hurston herself was pushed to write politically; for instance, “Bertram Lippincott used his publishing prerogative in requesting that Hurston fall in line with the prevailing ‘colored person tells all’ syndrome that was flooding the American markets at this time” (Harris-Lopez 51). Hurston, however, was uncomfortable sharing too much of her inner self, so she filled her nonfiction works, *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, with folk tales. The folk genre, then, allows Hurston to “set something outside the door of her mind for [the white man] to play with and handle,” so that her deepest thoughts and feelings can remain hidden (MM 3). The use of folklore, however, has another purpose; namely, to “transmit knowledge, value, and attitudes from one generation to another, enforce conformity to social norms, validate social institutions and religious rituals, and provide a psychological release from the restrictions of society” (Bell 73). Folklore, then, is a form of social commentary that both validates communal practices and evaluates social norms. As such, folklore is affected constantly by its context. African American folklore, in particular, stems from

[...] residual elements of the oral tradition of Africa, each fulfilling a psychological and social need in the lives of slaves, fused with the dominant white and indigenous Native American culture. This syncretism process created a new system of shared symbols that, even though complementary, was different in pattern and emphases from both its European and its African antecedents.” (Bell 74-75)

Thus, African American folklore is comprised of multiple subgenres, a concept which Hurston explores in her nonfiction works *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*. By paying homage to multiple folklore genres, Hurston creates a holistic picture of the African American folklore identity, notably, she recognizes that Western myth, African forms, fairy tale, and the picaresque all influence the African lore of the American South. In doing so, Hurston creates a more complicated picture of African American folklore: she reveals that myth, a term which will be used to denote Western mythology, communicates the heroic identity, African forms reinforce communal identity, fairy tales provide relatable archetypes, and the picaresque promotes gender stereotypes. Then she moves beyond these forms to subvert genre expectations; thereby creating new folklore that is representative of her contemporary African American experience.

Placing *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* in conversation with each other, however, requires the two works to be generically similar. For example, both *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks* are labeled as nonfiction even though they contain a number of significant literary elements. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston either creates or manipulates events so that large narrative arcs exist over the individual recordings of folklore. Notably, she spends much of the text talking about her flirtations with the men of Eatonville, which ultimately escalate into a fight between her, Lucy, and Big Sweet. Though these events may have occurred during Hurston’s ethnographic study, their presentation in *Mules and Men* follows a literary structure, the climax of which

transitions the reader between parts one and two of the text. By including a narrative arc, Hurston uses literary elements to switch gears and begin her discussion of hoodoo; she also justifies her hasty retreat from Eatonville. Thus, the literary elements included in *Mules and Men* are both entertaining and functional; furthermore, they do not take away from the text's accuracy, but rather enrich Hurston's work by adding excitement to the narrative.

Dust Tracks on a Road also contains passages that are literary in form and function. For example, Hurston includes long narratives discussing her interaction with Miss Corn-Cob and Mr. Sweet Smell, fictional characters that she creates during her childhood. Though these passages do little to illuminate Hurston's life experiences, they depict the development of her imagination. Thus, by including these stories Hurston emphasizes that her creativity and wonderment with the world began at a young age. She also highlights her ability to create a literary narrative by showing character growth and plot development through the lives of Miss Corn-Cob and Mr. Sweet Smell. As a result, Hurston reveals her particular proclivity for creating literature within her autobiography. While these stories likely are based in fact, in the sense that Hurston truly played with corn husks at a young age, their factual value is nearly negligible when compared with the way in which the literary elements enhance the reader's perception of Hurston.

Consequently, Hurston's combination of the literary and factual adds depth and richness to her works; however, it also creates generic confusion for readers and critics. One critic in particular, James Clifford, notes that from the seventeenth century on fictive and nonfictive works were often considered to be distinct genres containing very specific elements. In his introduction to *Writing Culture*, he comments that "Literary texts were

deemed to be metaphoric and allegorical, composed of inventions rather than observed facts; they allowed a wide latitude to the emotions, speculations, and the subjective ‘genius’ of their authors” (5). Novels, then, became a creative outlet for authors who were not interested in cold, hard facts, but rather for those who wanted to tell stories. Ethnographers, on the other hand, were cultural scientists whose purpose was to examine and expose the inner workings of an exotic culture. The disparity between the two genres, particularly in terms of their purpose, left no room for interpretation. This cut-and-dry philosophy has, unfortunately, been used by many Hurston critics, including Alice Walker, who noted that “Novels offer us the authentic self, and ethnographies offer us authentic others. In the novel, we have access to, and in fact sometimes occupy, the interior of characters; in the ethnography, we access the interior of a group of others” (Laudun 45). Though Walker’s intent was to distinguish further between literature and ethnography, she effectively provided a means by which to read the two genres into one another. In *Mules and Men*, the readers certainly see “interior” folk practices of the people of Eatonville. At the same time, Hurston provides the archetypal characters of Big Sweet and Lucy, who have a protagonist-antagonist relationship, as well as a multi-faceted portrayal of self as ethnographer, folk participant, and desirable female. Similarly, in *Dust Tracks on a Road* Hurston provides readers with the “authentic self” in all its creative and manipulated forms, as well as the “authentic others,” historical figures who aided Hurston throughout her tumultuous life. By including characters who exist on both sides of Walker’s dichotomy, Hurston creates a new, albeit convoluted, way of looking at literary nonfiction; as critic D. A. Boxwell notes, “Hurston shift[s] the stable

ground of traditional anthropology by the ways in which she presents the self in the act of participating in, and subsequently recording, the ‘folklore event’” (606).

Hurston’s inclusion of the self in both *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* not only subverts anthropological expectations, but also challenges conventions related to autobiography. Traditionally, autobiographies have been viewed as similar to ethnographies: both provide an in-depth, factual description of a particular person or culture. The difference between the two is subject: ethnographies examine a particular group, while autobiographies describe an individual being. By overlapping these two themes, that is, by including a description of self within her analysis of culture, Hurston becomes a part of the folk which she studies. Domina aptly describes the intersection between autobiography and ethnography in Hurston’s nonfiction by commenting that

In Hurston’s oeuvre, the generic distinctions between ethnography and autobiography are suspect. In *Mules and Men*, her own activity provides the narratorial grid onto which various folk tales are inscribed, whereas in *Dust Tracks on a Road* Hurston constructs her life such that many events and characters acquire mythic significance; in her folklore, that is, she tells her own story, while in her autobiography, she includes much ‘lore.’” (1)

By recognizing the similar generic function of *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Domina takes a necessary step in establishing the value of folklore in these works; however, she does not make the connection between folklore and social commentary. In Hurston’s nonfiction works, however, social issues, whether serious or entertaining, lie at the heart of folktales. For example, when visiting the men at the lumber yard, Hurston utilizes the “Old Massa” accounts to reflect the folk-tellers’ social context. The tales portray how John, a slave, frees himself from the bonds of “Old Massa” through his intellect. The men in the labor camp, similarly, are freed from the demands of white culture through their rejection of the swamp boss’ demands; their engagement with

folklore furthers this sentiment by uniting the men around folktales, or the specific expression of their community. In *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston pushes folklore further by using the genres of myth, African folktale, fairy tale, and picaresque to explain and adapt the African folk experience for contemporary society; thus, an analysis of each of these genres reveals Hurston's perception of African folk culture.

At the very beginning of her autobiography, Hurston places herself within the African folk community by describing the "memories within that came out of the material that went to make me" (DT 1). Here, Hurston demonstrates that her identity has been shaped by myth and lore that preceded her birth. Soon after, she reaffirms her connection to folklore by recounting the lore she read as a child: "Gulliver's Travels, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Dick Whittington, Greek and Roman Myths, and best of all, Norse Tales" (DT 39). By citing these texts as influential to her childhood, Hurston reveals her connectedness with the folklore of other cultures; furthermore, she places these tales in conversation with the "lies" told on the porches of Eatonville. In doing so, Hurston reveals that Western myths and African folktales both strive to answer questions about the human condition: Is there a God? How was I created? What is my purpose? How do I understand death? Additionally, both Western myth and the tales told on the front porch stem from oral traditions inherent to a specific culture and/or community. Hurston's fascination with these legends, then, is completely understandable; for her, one form of folklore informs the other, creating a rich and more complex image of existential concerns. By collecting African American lore, then, Hurston places her culture's lore alongside that which has been memorialized to construct "a bridge tween the 'primitive'

authority of folk life and the Literary power of written texts” (Boxwell 616). The end result is two works, *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, both of which use folklore to create a holistic picture of the African folk identity.

Hurston’s birth, in particular, uses mythic images to establish her heroic identity. For example, her birth narrative includes many “generic conditions of legend: She is born in dire circumstances, saved through outside intervention, prophesied over, named somewhat mysteriously, threatened with natural disaster in the form of a hungry sow, and perhaps subjected to hoodoo” (Domina 5). Although none of the myths included in *Mules and Men* connects Hurston’s birth to African American folklore, a comparison between Hurston’s birth narrative and Greek myth does prove fruitful. The legend of Hercules, in particular, mirrors Hurston’s own journey; a fact which is not surprising because “Of the Greeks, Hercules moved [her] most” (DT 39). These similarities begin at birth, when both Hercules and Huston are saved from death by an unlikely hero. Hercules, the son of Zeus and his human conquest Alcmene, is targeted by Hera, Zeus’ wife, because he is evidence of Zeus’ infidelity. To prevent Hercules’ birth, Hera places a curse of Alcmene. When Alcmene’s servant, Galanthis, becomes aware of this plot, he tells Hera that Hercules already has been birthed; she then removes the curse and unknowingly grants the child life. Soon after, Hercules’ heroic identity is established through prophecy. In a similar way, Hurston’s birth is marked by traumatic circumstances that ultimately determine her heroic nature. She is born in seclusion, and is only saved from death by a stranger. This man, who is not given a name in the text, becomes emotionally invested in Hurston’s upbringing; in particular, he provides Huston with moral advice to mold her character: “never let nobody spit on you nor kick you. Anybody who takes a thing like

that ain't worth the powder and shot it takes to kill 'em, hear?" (DT 31). Though not prophetic, these words build Hurston's moral character. Furthermore, these conversations garner Hurston's heroic qualities by providing her with laws and rules by which to live a moral life: "Truth is a letter from courage. I want you to grow guts as you go along. So don't you let me hear of you lying" (DT 31). Finally, Hurston's interactions with the stranger establish her as being morally superior to other human beings; when he tells her not to "be a nigger," she is careful to note that "the word nigger used in this sense does not mean race. It means a contemptible person of any race" (DT 30). Thus, when Hurston lives by the stranger's moral codes, she is behaving in a way that emphasizes her moral nature.

The rest of Hurston's heroic identity, however, is established through her subversion of the Hercules story. Perhaps the simplest way Hurston plays with myth is by highlighting her father's discontentment with her gender: "I don't think he ever got over the trick he felt that I played on him by getting born a girl, and while he was off from home at that" (DT 19). She also subverts conventional naming traditions by being named after something exotic, rather than something directly related to her lineage or heroic nature. Her name, Zora, is mysterious in origin, but Hurston speculates that it came from a book, or perhaps was written on a box of Turkish cigarettes (DT 21). The ambiguity surrounding her name differs greatly from Hercules, whose name literally means "for the glory of Hera"; an ironic designation given that he was born of a union between Zeus and one of his human conquests. The greatest distinction between these two figures, however, is the manner of their early adventures. While Hercules goes into nature in order to conquer it, Hurston goes into the world to discover the beauty it has to offer.

Hurston demonstrates her connection to nature by creating her own myth: “Naturally, the world and the firmaments careened to one side a little so as not to inconvenience me [...] For instance, for a long time I gloated over the happy secret that when I played outdoors in the moonlight, the moon followed me, whichever way I ran” (DT 26). In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston’s perceptions of the moon constitute her earliest engagement with storytelling. As she grows, nature continues to play a significant role in her fictional creations. For example, while shucking corn for a family dinner, Hurston composes a lengthy narrative about Miss Corn-Shuck, Miss Corn-Cob, and Mr. Sweet Smell. When their adventures fail to provide her with any sense of creative satisfaction, Hurston begins to create stories around human subjects.

One reason Hurston writes about real-life situations is to determine her understanding of the African American identity, which she explores through African folk forms. In particular, she comments on social issues, particularly education. To show her transition from childhood tales to more serious matters, Hurston describes her engagement with the African folk form:

There is an age when children are fit company for spirits. Before they have absorbed too much of earthly things to be able to fly with the unseen things that soar. There came a time when I could look back on the fields where we had picked flowers together but they, my friends, were nowhere to be seen. The sunlight where I had lost them was still of Midas gold, but that which touched me where I stood had somehow turned to gilt. Nor could I return to the shining meadow where they had vanished” (DT 56-7).

Here, Hurston elucidates her loss of a child-like imagination by referencing Midas; thus, her stories become gilt in the hands of their aging creator, a person whose mind has become so disconnected from childish things that she can no longer resurrect the spirits of Miss Corn-Cob or Mr. Sweet Smell. Though Hurston’s loss of childlike wonder is

certainly regrettable, it also moves Hurston to write about humanity at large: “It seemed to me that the human beings I met reacted pretty much the same to the same stimuli. Different idioms, yes. Circumstances and conditions having power to influence, yes. Inherent difference, no” (DT 171). Hurston’s tales, then, are analyses of the human experience that emphasize a collective human identity through the form of the folk tale.

Hurston develops the African folk form further in her discussion of education. Here, she uses social commentary to express the disparity between educational standards for African Americans and Caucasian Americans. *Mules and Men*, for example, includes two folk narratives concerning education. When placed in conversation with *Dust Tracks*, these tales reveal the strengths and weaknesses within formal education, as well as Hurston’s own educational experience. In the first tale, a man sends his daughter to school in hopes that she will return with skills that will be of great assistance to their family. The limits of her education are quickly revealed, however, when he asks her to create a formal written expression for an abstract sound. Since she is unable to complete the task, the father assumes that her education has been worthless. In a similar way, Hurston confronts similar sentiments when she returns to Eatonville after receiving a college degree. Though her immediate family was highly educated, Hurston knew that formal education was not well regarded in her home community for two main reasons: first, education’s focus on literature and philosophy had no practical application in the community of Eatonville during the 1930s; second, education acted as a social distinguisher. In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston depicts both conflicts by describing her attempt to collect folklore from African American communities of the South. She notes that her earliest efforts resulted in failure “because I did not have the right approach [...] I went

about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, ‘Pardon me, but you know any folk tales or folk songs?’ The men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores, look at me and shook their heads” (DT 144). Instead of talking with Hurston, the interviewees distrusted Hurston because of her use of formal discourse; in fact, they may not have even understood that their neighborhood tales were “folk tales and folk songs” (DT 144). Furthermore, they were dubious of Hurston’s motives because they could not see the academic value of collecting and chronicling the folk tales of their communities. The connection between folklore and education, then, reveals that formalized education is not valued in African American communities of the South because it did not recognize non-Western forms of scholarship.

Although Hurston’s engagement with anthropology and ethnography suggests that she replaced the imaginative world of her childhood with objective scientific study, her academic publications suggest otherwise. In *Mules and Men*, for example, Hurston includes her own telling of folk tales within her anthropological accounts. In doing so, Hurston not only places herself within the community being studied, but also allows herself to interact and create fictional narratives for the purpose of enriching her text. By framing *Mules and Men* with her own fictive works, Hurston establishes herself as both creator of and participant within the folklore event. The final tale, in which Hurston takes on the attributes of Sis Cat, is especially significant because by “Adopting this feline persona, Hurston has, in essence, compared herself to a folktale character, one eminently worthy of emulation. Hence, *Mules and Men* ends on a creatively affirmative act of self-mythification,” a process which is sustained into her autobiography, *Dust Tracks*, which begins by describing the unlikely and fantastical founding of her hometown of Eatonville,

Florida (Boxwell 614). From there, the book develops and subverts traditional folklore patterns by describing Hurston's birth, adolescence, and adult life.

The form of the fairy tale, in particular, is used because it garners specific emotional reactions from readers. In Hurston's autobiography, the Cinderella story forms a narrative arc that shows Hurston's growth from poor, undesired child to successful scholar and writer. One noticeable similarity is that both Hurston and Cinderella lose their mothers at a young age: "Mama died at sundown and changed a world. That is, the world which had been built out of her body and her heart" (DT 67). As she grieves, Hurston analyzes her mother's role within the family and concludes that her parents' romantic relationship may have been marked by difficulties because her "mother took her over-the-creek man and bare-knuckled him from brogans to broadcloth, and I am certain that he was proud of the change, in public. But in the house, he might have always felt over-the-creek, and because that was not the statue he had made for himself to look at, he resented it" (DT 69). By highlighting her parents' marital misgivings, Hurston foreshadows that her father will end up with an inferior mate, or an "evil stepmother."

As a result, when the stepmother appears in the narrative she is immediately criticized. Within weeks of the marriage, Hurston's stepmother throws Sarah, the favorite daughter, out of the house. Sarah's position as the "favorite daughter" is significant because it suggests that the un-named stepmother wants to establish herself as the female authority within the Hurston household and, to do so, she needed to remove the competition. This scene is also significant for one other reason: it gets Hurston's blood boiling. In fact, she even goes so far as to threaten her stepmother by saying, "God, how I longed to lay my hands upon my stepmother's short, pudgy hulk! No gun, no blade, no

club would do. Just flesh against flesh and leave the end of the struggle to the hidden Old Women who sit and spin” (DT 74).

Though Hurston’s reference to the Old Women is not explained, the texts that influenced Hurston provide a means by which to unpack Hurston’s narrative. “The Three Spinners” by the Grimm brothers, for example, involves a cruel mother, a seemingly helpless daughter, and three spinners who function as “fairy godmother” types, all of whom appear in Hurston’s own narrative. In the tale, a mother beats her daughter for idleness and is reprimanded by the queen. To justify her actions, the mother claims that she was preventing her daughter from spinning too much. The queen, delighted by this information, tells the daughter to spin the castle’s flax; by doing so, she will be eligible to marry the prince. Unfortunately, the daughter cannot spin, so she enlists the aid of three fairies so that she can marry the prince and live happily ever after (Grimm and Grimm).

“The Three Spinners,” then, reflects Hurston’s family situation by highlighting the cruelty of her stepmother and suggesting that the fates will rescue her. Though reference to this tale does not reappear in the text, Hurston continues building on its themes by discussing her own misfortunes. Hurston, like her siblings, is cast from her father’s house at the hands of her stepmother. Though Hurston succeeds at the boarding school to which she is sent, she struggles in other ways, particularly when it comes to socializing with her peers; however, she comforts herself by imagining her fairy tale future: “When I would be grown and sit up in my fine palace eating beef stew and fried chicken, that duty-girl was going to be out in my backyard gnawing door-knobs” (DT 81). Unfortunately, Hurston’s fairy tale ending is not in sight. In fact, she is put to work cleaning the school because her father and stepmother refuse to pay the tuition.

To avenge herself, Hurston gives her “evil stepmother” a beating. Though the exact time when this event takes place is unclear (Hurston admits that she is playing with the chronology of events when she shares this story) she notes that she “began to scream with rage. I had not beaten more than two years out of her yet. I made up my mind to stomp her, but at last, Papa came to, and pulled me away” (DT 77). Upon her defeat, Hurston’s stepmother leaves her husband and demands a divorce. Hurston, then, achieves a number of goals specific to fairy tales: she vanquishes her evil stepmother, grows through suffering, and ultimately finds success by pursuing her passions.

Notably, Hurston finds her “fairy godmother,” Miss M---, and works as her maid. Their relationship flourishes for a period of eighteen months, a time in which Hurston regains a sense of self-confidence and self-worth, or, as she states, “I had loosened up in every joint and expanded in every direction” (DT 116). As a result, Hurston regains her self-confidence and decides to return to school, later achieving her “fairy tale” ending by becoming an acclaimed author and folklorist.

Thus, Hurston’s work, even that which is labeled as non-fiction, never fully separates itself from the fictive elements of folklore. Even her descriptions of life post-*Mules and Men* fit into patterns established within folklore. For example, in Chapter Fourteen of *Dust Tracks* Hurston describes her romantic relationship with P.M.P. When recounting her affections, she claims that “God must have put in extra time making him up;” however, their relationship ultimately fails because they cannot reconcile their views on gender roles (DT 205). Perhaps the best way to understand their relationship is to look at a folk tale from *Mules and Men*. Though the tale allegedly explains “why women always take advantage of men,” its actual message is a bit more subversive: the story

emphasizes how women, even in the traditional role of homemaker, gain power within marriage. Notably, the tale shows how God distributed power to the genders. While men are blessed with greater physical strength, women are given three keys: “dis first big key is to de do’ of de kitchen, and you know a man always favors his stomach. Dis second one is de key to de bedroom and he don’t like to be shut out from dat neither and dis last key is de key to de cradle and he don’t want to be cut off from his generations at all” (MM 33). According to *Mules and Men*, a woman prevents herself from becoming victimized by controlling these three keys. On the surface level, then, this tale appears to uphold traditional gender dynamics. When applied to Hurston’s relationship with P.M.P., however, the exact opposite becomes true. Hurston notes

[P.M.P.] begged me to give up my career, marry him and live outside of New York City. I really wanted to do anything he wanted me to do, but that one thing I could not do. It was not just my contract with my publishers, it was that I had things clawing inside of me that must be said. I could not see that my work should make any difference in marriage. He was all and everything else to me but that. One did not conflict with the other in my mind. But it was different with him. He felt that he did not matter to me enough. He was the master kind. All, or nothing, for him (DT 208).

Hurston refuses to be a traditional housewife and thereby does not attempt to gain power through conventional routes. Rather, she takes man out of the equation and instead focuses on her other love, writing. By doing so, Hurston subverts typical gender relations as portrayed in folklore and embraces her own unique feminine strength. Thus, Hurston’s life both aligns with and negates folklore by moving beyond gender stereotypes.

Masculinity, in particular, is rewritten in the picaresque. While the picaresque is most commonly associated with western adventures and Latin American tales in which two men travel into the wilderness, Hurston uses the genre to represent herself as fitting

both masculine and feminine gender stereotypes. For example, during her childhood Hurston portrays herself as an adventurous and, at times, violent, individual whose sole desire is to explore the world beyond her immediate experience. She notes,

Our house then, was in the center of the world. It grew upon me that I ought to walk to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like. The daring of the thing held me back for a while, but the thing became so urgent that I showed it to my friend, Carrie Roberts, and asked her to go with me. She agreed. We sat up in the trees and disputed about what the end of the world would be like when we got there – whether it was sort of tucked under like the hem of a dress, or just was a sharp drop off into nothingness (DT 27).

Her desire to venture beyond the known world sets Hurston apart from other little girls, particularly Carrie Roberts, who ultimately decides to cancel the trip because she fears being punished for her adventurousness. Hurston responds by physically assaulting Carrie, severing their relationship and ending their journey. As in the picaresque, the bond of the two central figures determines the success of the journey. For example, in Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole travels into Texas with his best friend Rawlins. The two friends, though frequently in disagreement, provide support for one another in a number of dangerous situations: being pursued by bandits, being imprisoned, and working on a ranch. In the end, however, John Grady Cole and Rawlins separate when Cole decides to pursue a love interest rather than return to the United States with his friend. His journey ultimately fails, and, though there are many reasons for this failure, one central cause is his separation from Rawlins. Similarly, Hurston's disagreement and separation from Carrie causes their journey to come to an unsatisfying end. This, however, is the point where Hurston breaks away from the conventions of the picaresque. Rather than allowing her relationship with Carrie to determine, or even influence, the course of her adventures, Hurston uses her own feminine strength to break

away from masculine expectations by creating space for her independent lifestyle.

One way in which Hurston asserts her own feminine power is through her engagement with dream-prophecy. In Houston Baker's essay "Working of the Spirit: Conjure and the Space of Black Women's Creativity," African American wise women are attributed with three specific traits: "discernment, prophecy and healing" (76). By imbuing herself with these characteristics, Hurston becomes a wise woman who achieves a superhuman level of greatness. For example, Hurston studies under the leading ethnographer of her era, Franz Boas, while facing familial and financial hardship. Under his guidance, Hurston collects the most comprehensive body of African American folktales and gains a reputation for her work as both anthropologist and novelist. Such greatness, however, is attributed to Hurston's wisdom, or her discernment regarding tricky situations.

Discernment is an element often missing from the picaresque. The leading characters tend more toward recklessness and spontaneity. As a result, Hurston's ability to assess and navigate obstacles sets her apart from her traditional male counterparts. For example, Hurston initially has trouble collecting African American folk tales because her education places her in a social sphere separate from the men and women she interviews. To make herself more relatable, Hurston begins presenting herself as a bootlegger on the lam. In doing so, she explains her material wealth, her car and somewhat expensive clothing. Bootlegging also establishes Hurston as a fugitive, or someone who does not conform to the expectations of the ruling class. As a result, Hurston regains her position in the folklore community. After all, "the essential feature of any identity system is an individual's belief in his personal affiliation with certain symbols, or, more accurately

with what certain symbols stand for” (Spicer qtd in Dundes 8). For the African American communities in Hurston’s study, then, folklore preserves and upholds a specific cultural identity, one with which Hurston, through her ability of discernment, is identified.

In addition to manipulating her identity masterfully, Hurston possesses the second trait of an African wise woman: she prophesies. Specifically in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston organizes the story of her life around twelve dream-visions:

Like clearcut stereopticon slides, I saw twelve scenes flash before me, each one held until I had seen it well in every detail, and then replaced by another. There was no continuity as in an average dream. Just disconnected scene after scene with blank spaces in between. I knew that they were all true, a preview of things to come, and my soul writhed in agony and shrank away. But I knew that there was no shrinking. These things had to be” (DT 41-2).

Following this passage are twelve chapters that outline the major undertakings of Hurston’s life. Though Hurston does not describe her visions in detail, she does allude to these visions throughout the remainder of the book. In Chapter Six, for example, she notes that her first vision, “leaving the village home, bowed down with a grief that was more than common,” has come to pass (DT 71). Her later visions, on the other hand, must be deduced from the narrative. Less than half of the twelve visions are delineated in detail. The mysterious quality of the visions, however, does not negate that Hurston is, within the scope of her autobiography, imbued with the supernatural gift of foresight. Her skill, then, not only positions her as a participant within the folklore event, it also subverts masculine identity of the picaresque.

The final way Hurston subverts masculine expectations commonly attributed to the picaresque is through her ability to heal. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston engages in numerous rites intended to heal, or remedy, other’s illnesses through hoodoo. For

Bernard W. Bell, hoodoo is an essential element of African American folk culture because “Antiblack racism prevented the full participation of blacks in the dominant culture so that their need for symbols and values had to be filled by the ethnic subculture. This process encouraged the retention, reinterpretation, and syncretism of Africanisms (e.g. hoodoo, conjuring or magic, dance, field holler, work song, and folk tale)” (75). Thus, hoodoo not only provides healing for members of African American communities, but also reinforces a specific cultural identity. By participating in hoodoo, then, Hurston reestablishes her membership within the African subculture while simultaneously portraying herself as possessing superhuman abilities. For example, Hurston notes that the ceremony of getting the black cat bone caused “great beast-like creatures [to thunder] up to the circle from all sides. Indescribable noises, sights, feelings. Death was at hand! Seemed unavoidable! [...but] Before day I was home, with a small white bone for me to carry” (MM 211). In this example, Hurston makes it clear that she, through her participation in hoodoo, survived an experience that would have killed many others. These otherworldly skills also emphasize Hurston’s healing prowess; in the hoodoo section of *Mules and Men*, Hurston provides specific instructions regarding how to solve a number of human problems. For example, she describes how tying knots in a string can keep a man from committing adultery (MM 203). By presenting the recipes in this manner, Hurston not only heals one particular relationship but also provides her readers with the means by which they can be healed. In doing so, Hurston underscores her role as an African wise woman: she discerns, prophesies, and heals.

Though not a folk genre itself, hoodoo certainly functions as a folk practice which “transmit[s] knowledge, value, and attitudes from one generation to another, enforce[s]

conformity to [certain] social norms, validate[s] social institutions and religious rituals, and provide[s] a psychological release from the restrictions of society” (Bell 73). Thus, Hurston’s engagement with hoodoo makes tangible her fascination with the African American folk lifestyle. Her use of folk genres in *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* furthers this passion by allowing Hurston to become a participant within folklore: she alters old forms to reveal the ever-changing identity of both the African American folk community and herself. By doing so, Hurston recognizes the many cultures, European, African, and Native American, that have influenced the African American folk community. She also acknowledges the implicit role that culture plays in shaping identity; consequently, Hurston’s nonfiction works argue that folklore is inseparable from an understanding of the self. Folklore, then, reveals an individual’s adherence to and/or movement from communal norms. For example, in *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* Hurston is portrayed as someone who values African American cultural and religious practices but feels that the African American folk community’s understanding of gender roles is outdated. Similarly, folklore allows Hurston to demonstrate the disconnect between her views and her community’s perceptions of formal education (and does so without pointing any fingers). Thus, Hurston uses folklore as a form of social commentary. In other words, she provides realistic descriptions of social issues without taking a political or moral stance. Reading Hurston through folklore, consequently, allows readers to appreciate Hurston’s complexity without placing sociopolitical significance onto her works. It also provides a lens through which to understand Hurston’s portrayal of the self, as well as her (semi)fictionalized characters; specifically, folklore defines an individual’s role within the larger African American folk community.

Folklore, then, establishes identity with limited bias and, in doing so, creates more truthful, albeit unfailingly complex, depictions of both Hurston and her characters.

CHAPTER FOUR

(Re)gaining Still Waters: Analyzing Folklore Genres in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

Trudier Harris-Lopez, in her work *The Power of the Porch*, names Zora Neale Hurston as “the folkloristic foremother to [Gloria Naylor] in geography, subject matter, structure of text, and [...] audience” (54). Using Hurston as a lens by which to read Naylor, then, reveals how the latter has been influenced by the former. In particular, Naylor “follows Hurston in asserting not only that southern soil is healthy for black people but that the traditions African Americans forged out of that once salted ground provide the resprouted fibers from which the very narrative structuring of *Mama Day* grows” (Harris 54). For Harris, Hurston and Naylor’s works are founded on storytelling; yet, the authors’ use of folklore, which is inherent to the storytelling phenomenon, is not analyzed. Folklore, however, plays a prominent role in both Hurston’s works, particularly her nonfiction, and Naylor’s *Mama Day*, where she expands upon Hurston’s use of folklore genres. Notably, she, too, recognizes that Western myth, African forms, fairy tale, and the picaresque all influence the African lore of the American South. In doing so, Naylor reveals that myth, in the form of Shakespearean literature, denotes societal values, African forms reinforce communal identity, fairy tales provide relatable archetypes, and the picaresque reveals identity. She then, like Hurston, subverts genre expectations to create folklore that is representative of contemporary African American culture.

Though Naylor relies upon the same folklore genres as Hurston, the overall generic structures of their works are quite different. For example, Hurston combines

fictional elements (i.e. folklore) into her nonfictional narratives, blurring the lines of autobiography and ethnography. Naylor's work, on the other hand, contains fictionalized ethnography, allowing her to both interact with and critique previous studies in folklore. In particular, Naylor explores contemporary concerns about cultural anthropology; thus, *Mama Day* begins with the story of Reema's Son, the native-born folklorist of the novel's setting, Willow Springs. When Reema's Son conducts fieldwork in his hometown, he

returns from an American university with a tape recorder and a specialized vocabulary that transforms his home community into a collection of "unique speech patterns" worthy of "cultural preservation" (MD 7). In that vocabulary, he reveals his training in a method of cross-cultural interpretation clearly informed by the tenets of cultural relativism and the prevailing imperative of the academic circles of his day to explicate the strategies of self-empowerment and resistance practiced by cultures threatened by colonization (Blyn 242).

In other words, Reema's Son believes that citizens of Willow Springs created rituals to reinforce their unique, non-European identity. For instance, he asserts that the town's idiom "18 & 23" isn't truly "18 & 23 at all—was really 81 & 32, which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on the map. And we were just so damned dumb that we turned the whole thing around [...] Not that he called it being dumb, mind you, called it 'asserting cultural identity'" (MD 8). Here, Naylor outlines problems inherent within contemporary ethnography, namely, its tendency of reasserting racial stereotypes. Although Reema's Son is a Willow Springs native, he is also formally educated in the United States. As a result, his ethnographic knowledge is inextricably linked to his American education. As such, Reema's Son's observations are those of the colonizer, so he believes that Willow Springs established a cultural identity solely in response to white colonization. He does not consider the possibility that Willow Springs' traditions were the product of organic cultural growth.

The reader, then, is warned against looking at Willow Springs through Reema's Son's eyes; doing so will cause one to label the island's rich traditions as the petty rebellions of an inferior people.

The narrator, however, provides readers with a different view of the island, one which distances itself "from all that Reema's boy represents – exploitation, loss of cultural memory, misguided education" while further complicating Naylor's portrayal of ethnography (Harris 104). As the voice of the island, the narration within *Mama Day* is in itself a form of cultural anthropology. Thus, Reema's Son's work is an ethnography described within the narrator's ethnography. Naylor begins the novel by debunking Reema's Son to emphasize which voice should take precedence; in other words, a comparison between Reema's Son and the narrator clearly establishes one's authority over the other. Thus, "[t]he narrative voice that condemns Reema's Son and assumes its own autoethnographic authority gains its subversive power not in isolation but precisely in the context of cross-cultural exchange" (Blyn 244).

By giving authority to the narrative voice, Naylor identifies which ethnographer most accurately represents Willow Springs. At the same time, valuing one critical perception over another seems to "[implicate] the Willow Springs narrator in the very poetics and politics of interpretation for which it disparages Reema's Son" (Blyn 244). Here, however, a careful distinction needs to be made. Reema's Son, as a formally educated, culturally distant observer, exists outside the Willow Springs community. The narrative voice, on the other hand, is not associated with any particular being, rather it is the organic voice of the Willow Springs community. As such, the narrator is inherent to Willow Springs, creating a "link between the narrative voice and audience [...] that

cannot be broken by the physicality of the text itself, for the voice enters into the minds of the readers, finds fertile ground in a commonality of philosophies, characters, activities and approaches to the world. Readers thus become voluntary extensions of the voice” (Harris 58). Since the narrator’s explication cannot be separated from the reader’s understanding of Willow Springs, the readers themselves assert the narrative authority of the voice. The fictionality of the narrator, furthermore, allows for a “perfect ethnographer” that presents the Willow Springs community without bias.

Naylor’s blend of ethnography and fiction is not unlike her predecessor, Zora Neale Hurston. For example, Hurston participates in her nonfiction works *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* to subvert traditional African American folklore conventions. Naylor does the same thing, but does so without including herself in *Mama Day*’s narrative. Instead, Naylor speaks through the narrative voice. In doing so, Naylor is both a part of the text and the audience who reads it. By bridging the gap between text and audience, Naylor reveals how “Willow Springs defies the traditional construction of the ethnographic object; it is not isolated, static, or unitary;” rather, it is constantly being shaped and formed by authorial intention (Blyn 249).

The dynamic nature of *Mama Day*’s narrative voice reflects folklore itself; both constantly adapt to meet the needs of their social contexts. Perin Gurel, a professor at Yale University, notes that “folklore genres are revived and new examples generated in rapid response to socio-economic and political shifts. Folklorists now agree with Dundes that far from dying out, folklore adapts to contemporary circumstances” (8). As a result, *Mama Day* adapts Hurston’s folklore for the modern era. Though relying upon the same genres, Naylor’s use of Western myth, African forms, fairy tales, and the picaresque

communicates different, or more current, concepts than Hurston's texts. Both of them, however, paint folklore as

symbolic representations of crucial life situations that are shared by a people, residually oral [...] myths that are moral as well as speculative, stories that are archetypal in pattern and ethnic in content. They explain the origins of things, activities of gods, and historical human dilemmas. They are therefore generally a fusion of myth and legend that are concerned with the founders of an ethnic group or lineage and that justify the taboos and authority of the group or lineage (Bell 80-1).

As such, the folk tales in *Mama Day* reinforce the cultural practices unique to Willow Springs. Alternately, folklore is used to critique mainstream culture, particularly that of people who live across the bridge, or, more concisely, those who are subject to the United States' culture and government.

Western myth, in particular, is used in relation to characters that exist outside of Willow Springs' autonomous community. For example, Cocoa's love interest, George, is frequently associated with Shakespeare's *King Lear*. He notes, "I'd gone through *Lear* unaccountable times. It had a special poignancy for me, reading about the rage of a bastard son, my own father having disappeared long before I was born" (MD 106). In this passage, George affiliates himself with Edmund, the play's villain, because both were raised without their fathers. Their similarities, however, do not end there. Like Edmund, George's voracious ambition not only stems from his desire to succeed, but also from his yearning for recognition denied him as a bastard. Thus, both men are cold and calculating; more significantly, they pride themselves for being self-made. While Edmund attains power through cunning and manipulation, George acquires business savvy by asserting his life philosophy: "Only the present has potential" (MD 23). In other words, George believes that he only has control over the present, so he makes all his

decisions without regard for the past or the future. Furthermore, he notes that “[t]o believe in fate or predestination means you have to believe there’s a future, and I grew up without one. It was either that or not grow up at all. Our guardians at the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys were adamant about the fact that we learned to invest in ourselves alone. ‘Keep it in the now, fellas,’ Chip would say” (MD 23). This philosophy, while vital to George’s business success, prevents him from developing meaningful relationships. In particular, George’s inability to invest in others denies him the one thing he truly desires. After all, George’s struggle for recognition is, like Edmund’s, a desire for love.

In fact, George reveals his yearning to be loved while reading *King Lear*: “‘You know,’ [George] said [to Cocoa], ‘I can identify with this line: ‘None but the fool who labors to outjest his heart-struck injuries.’” (MD 106). Here, George identifies himself as someone who has “heart-struck injuries,” referring to his bastard status as well as his lack of significant, loving relationships. By citing this line, George also separates himself from the fool mentioned in the text. In particular, George argues, as does Shakespeare, that heart ailments cannot be circumvented; rather, they are inescapable parts of one’s being. He also makes a careful distinction between himself and Edmund. While Edmund may attempt to fix his heart through manipulation, George realizes that his ailments cannot be remedied. By opening himself up to Cocoa, however, George begins to form a lasting relationship that, while not capable of healing past wrongs, can fulfill his desire for love.

When Cocoa hears that George has an injured heart, she responds, “I can imagine – you’re such a nice guy, a lot of women must have run over you” (MD 106). Instead of

affirming Cocoa, George reveals that he has a heart murmur. George cannot admit his own relational troubles, to Cocoa or himself. In his hyper-rational mind, emotional struggles are a sign of weakness, while a heart murmur is a heart injury that is “*real*” (MD 106). His physically weak heart, then, symbolizes his emotionally weak personality. By using *King Lear* to describe his heart injuries, George intellectualizes his problems, thereby distancing himself from the emotional. His relationship with Cocoa is similarly intellectualized; notably, George “can only think of his love for Cocoa in terms of white myths” (Meisenhelder 116). For Meisenhelder, however, white myth refers to American regional stereotypes. Thus, George dreams of Cocoa as fulfilling the ‘Southern woman’ stereotype – sweet, obedient, and gentle:

That’s why I wanted you to call me George. There isn’t a southerner alive who could bring that name in under two syllables [...] It conjured up images of jasmine-scented nights, warm biscuits and honey being brought to me on flowered china plates, as you sat at my feet and rubbed your cheek against my knee [...] So I had the same myths about southern women that you did about northern men (MD 33).

When George admits that he desires an archetype of the Southern women, he divulges two significant facts: 1) George has no concept of real romantic relationships and 2) George’s understanding of the world is rooted in the white, patriarchal beliefs of American society.

Virginia Fowler, an African American literature scholar, argues that George’s assertion of white values is “reflected in his identification with Edmund” (104). As a result, both George and Edmund struggle to create order and authority within chaos. Edmund rises to power when King Lear grants authority to Goneril and Regan, thereby manipulating England’s political turmoil for his own personal gain. Lear, on the other hand, mourns his loss of authority and, when he experiences a violent storm, realizes that

his individual power is nothing when compared to the forces of nature. Similarly, George rises to power through sheer force of will: “When I left Wallace P. Andrews I had what I could see: my head and my two hands, and I had each day to do something with them [...] I may have knocked my head against the walls, figuring out how to buy food, supplies, and books, but I never knocked on wood” (MD 27). George’s ability to overcome obstacles, however, leads him to believe that he has complete power over his own destiny. As a result, when he is stuck in a severe storm, he tries to reconstruct the bridge connecting Willow Springs to the mainland. When his efforts fail, George feels helpless. He, like Lear, realizes that he does not have authority over nature, others, or, in this case, his circumstances. As a result, George must submit himself to Willow Springs, a task which challenges his ideals and his relationship with Cocoa.

Like George, Cocoa is also affiliated with Western myth; however, the connection is not as strong because her relationship with American culture is much more ephemeral. Though Cocoa lives in New York for a number of years, she is inherently a resident of Willow Springs. As a result, her given name, Ophelia, is less symbolically significant than it may appear. Cocoa does represent Ophelia in some ways; namely, she falls madly in love with George to the point of metaphorically drowning:

I wanted us to work so badly that I would be tempted to try and squeeze myself up into whatever shape you had calculated would fit into your plans. How long could I do it? The answer scared the hell out of me: I could have done it forever. You start out feeling a little uncomfortable, but then when you look around that’s the shape you’ve grown into. Yeah, I could have worked myself into your life (MD 146).

Though Cocoa is willing to sacrifice herself for love, she, unlike Ophelia, does not have to. Instead, Cocoa retains her independent identity while George becomes victim to his own philosophy. So, while Cocoa’s feelings for George may resemble Ophelia’s, that is

where the comparison ends. In other words, while Cocoa maintains a connection to American culture, her true identity is inherently linked to Willow Springs.

In Willow Springs, traditions are dictated by an entirely different, or subverted, set of myths. The story of Sapphira Wade, in particular, governs Willow Springs' history. In the myth, Sapphira is a slave who marries and then kills her slave owner, but not before bearing him seven sons. These children, given the surname Day, are the heirs of Willow Springs, blessed with the gifts of material wealth and magical powers. According to narrator, in "1823: [Sapphira] married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons in just a thousand days, to put dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman's noose, laughing in a burst of flames" (MD 1). As the legend unfolds, however, a number of different versions are described. Different accounts, for instance, claim Wade's death was caused by smothering, stabbing, and poisoning. Sapphira's fate varies as well; notably, she disappears, births children by many men, and/or bursts into flames after a thousand days. The inconsistencies within the myth are typical of oral folklore, which is adapted in each telling. The fact that Willow Springs utilizes spoken, rather than written, folklore highlights its disconnect from larger American culture. Unlike George, who can refer to his printed copy of *King Lear* at any time, residents of Willow Springs must retell the myth to each generation to ensure its longevity. Oral myth, then, is symbolic of community. Since tales can only be told in communal settings, Willow Springs' citizens are taught to value their history through their relationships with one another. Bernard W. Bell, author of the *The Contemporary African American Novel*, asserts that "Cultures in which oral forms compete with the dominant system of print, as in the case of the black American subculture, may thus be classified as residually or largely oral cultures [which]

‘has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process’” (Williams qtd. in Bell 78). As such, the myth of Sapphira Wade is subject to the cultural and social changes. Thus, oral storytelling helps maintain distance from American culture and to emphasize Willow Springs’ rootedness in the past, particularly in the life of Sapphira Wade. Furthermore, when looked at holistically, each version of the Sapphira myth “end[s] up with the death of Bascombe Wade [...] the deed to [Willow Springs] land, [...] and seven sons,” who carry on the legacy of their foremother (MD 1). As a result, the myth of Sapphira is rooted in concrete details that are merely embellished to best reflect contemporary circumstances.

Another way the Sapphira myth responds to American culture is by making a statement regarding Christianity. According to legend, Sapphira states that “God rested on the seventh day [...] and she would too” (MD 151). Here, Sapphira associates herself with the divine, alluding both to the feat of having seven children, the holy quality of the number seven, and her own supernatural abilities. As the myth states, Sapphira had seven children in one thousand days. Though the family admits that the timeline may be exaggerated, the number of children is itself symbolic. In Genesis, God creates the Earth in seven days; on the first six, he creates the physical world, but on the seventh he completes creation by resting. This day, above all others, he blesses and makes holy. In a similar way, Sapphira blesses her seventh child, Jonah, whose line, consequently, is supernaturally connected to the natural world. For example, Jonah’s granddaughter, Mama Day, determines weather patterns by analyzing the behavior of chickens. She also heals many Willow Springs’ citizens through her knowledge of natural remedies. Her divine power comes from Sapphira, who purportedly “escaped the hangman’s noose,

laughing in a burst of flames” (MD 1). Refusing to die at the noose, Sapphira establishes autonomy by determining her own death: mystical fire. She also claims Willow Springs for her own, specifically, she convinces her husband, Bascombe Wade, to deed the land to his slaves, many of whom are her children.

The myth of Willow Springs, then, is significant in its antithetical portrayal of heroism, or its “destabilization of traditional notions of myth” (Thompson 93). Sapphira does not resemble Shakespearean idols; rather, she is a victim of the sociopolitical conventions of American society. When compared to Henry IV (or a number of other Shakespearean heroes), a number of differences are evident. For example, Henry IV is born into political and financial circumstance, is given numerous opportunities to cultivate his regality, and is viewed as a sage leader. Sapphira, on the other hand, is born into slavery and given very little opportunity for autonomy. She has no financial resources and is forced to marry her slavemaster, Bascombe Wade. Marriage, however, provides Sapphira with the means to manipulate Wade’s affections, ultimately ensuring two things: 1) her personal freedom and 2) the well-being of her fellow slaves. Garnering her own freedom, as well as the rights to Willow Springs, Sapphira makes it possible for a completely autonomous community of former slaves to thrive. Thus, as Susan Meisenhelder notes, Sapphira “not only asserted both her autonomous ethnic and gender identity by defying her position as a slave and freeing herself from her white master; but through her heroic actions in securing the land for her descendants, she also made possible their freedom and cultural independence” (1445). In other words, Sapphira’s heroism is directly responsible for the existence of modern-day Willow Springs. Her

story, then, is a creation story; so, as God created the earth in seven days, Sapphira's seven sons ensured the survival of an autonomous and ethnically empowered community.

Though founded upon myth, Willow Springs' contemporary cultural traditions are communicated through folklore. For example, African belief systems, particularly regarding the family, influence how the Days' communicate with one another. In African folk traditions, family is comprised of the living, dead, and unborn, with communication open among each group. As a result, "The silent conversation between the dead George and the living Cocoa that comprises much of the narrative points to the African belief system operating in Willow Springs" (Fowler 94). Here again, Cocoa's inherent connection to Willow Springs is emphasized. Rather than separating herself from the cultural practices of her childhood, she upholds African folk traditions. Specifically, Cocoa reveals how the dead are as dynamic and present as the living, even though they no longer have a physical form. At the end of the novel, she states, "I'll be forty-seven next year. And I still don't have a photograph of you. It's a lot better this way, because you change as I change [...] I guess one of the reasons I've been here so much is that I felt if we kept retracing our steps, we'd find out exactly what brought us to this slope near The Sound. But when I see you again, our versions will be different still" (MD 310-11). Thus, Cocoa is still fully engaged in a relationship with George. Though he is dead, George continues to influence Cocoa; notably, Cocoa incorporates George's love into her other relationships. For example, she describes George as similar to "the center of marshmallows, [...being] high on the Ferris wheel, and [...] the way the water and sand felt between his toes" because these are all things that communicate love (MD 310). She also learns from George by refusing to make the same mistakes with her second husband:

“I allowed myself to see him for exactly what he was – no chance of being the best, but he’s still all that he can be” (MD 309). By integrating George into her relationships, Cocoa continues to learn and grow from him, even beyond his death.

In a similar way, Mama Day communicates with the dead. For her, the spirits of her ancestors are housed in the Other Place, or the family property located in the backwoods of Willow Springs. While there, Mama Day interacts with past family members, such as her mother and father, to understand the family more fully. In particular, she analyzes the family curse: romantic relationships are always broken at the Other Place. Bascombe and Sapphira’s relationship, for example, ends in murder and divine disappearance. John-Paul’s wife drowns herself after the death of her child. George’s heart bursts in an attempt to save Cocoa. All of these moments are housed at the Other Place, so that future Days can learn from the mistakes of the past. For example, when Cocoa is suffering from Ruby’s curse, Mama Day calls upon her ancestors to find a cure: “I can do more things with these hands than most folks dream of – no less believe – but this time they ain’t no good alone. I had to stay in this place and reach back to the beginning for use to find the chains to pull her out of this here trouble” (MD 294). Like Cocoa, Mama Day’s communications with the dead help her learn and grow; they also provide a means of influencing future events. So, when Cocoa is cursed by Ruby, Mama Day finds a cure at the Other Place. Though this cure does not work according to plan, it ultimately saves Cocoa from death. As a result, Cocoa continues the Day family line and its history of learning from the dead.

Mama Day’s healing powers, however, are not solely a product of her lineage. In fact, Mama Day’s hoodoo powers largely influence her ability to help others. According

to John Roberts, hoodoo involves “the transformation of common elements in Africa[n] religions [used] to deal with conditions that threatened physical health and social well-being[. This ritual] eventually led to the creation of a system of spiritual beliefs and practices that came to be known by various names such as hoodoo, rootwork, and conjuration” (117). Mama Day, as a hoodoo practitioner, can heal and protect Willow Springs’ citizens through herbology. She, however, also possesses a certain magical quality. For example, she uses an egg to ensure that Bernice, an infertile woman, can get pregnant. In this ceremony, Mama Day and Bernice go to the Other Place so that Bernice becomes “a center between the thighs spreading wide to take in...the touch of feathers. Space to space. Ancient fingers keeping each in line. The unaccountable, the unthinkable, is one opening. Pulsing and alive – wet – the egg moves from one space to the other. A rhythm older than woman draws it in and holds it tight” (MD 140). Though this ritual may appear strange or uncouth to an outsider, in Willow Springs it is a characteristically magical occurrence. In fact, hoodoo is at the very heart of Willow Springs. Since the community maintains a separate existence from the mainland United States, reliance upon Western developments, including medicine, is not an option. As a result, hoodoo is the community’s alternative. Mama Day’s mix of hoodoo and magic, in particular, provides Willow Springs with the healing and attention it needs.

When George, a native New Yorker, arrives in Willow Springs, however, the community’s folkloristic traditions are challenged. Though George tries to assert power through traditionally patriarchal means – logic, science, and brute force – he is largely unsuccessful. Since Willow Springs’ society does not subscribe to the capitalist, Eurocentric views of American culture, “George is rendered hopeless in the face of the

power of African voodoo” (Thompson 95). As a result, his intellectual effort to colonize Willow Springs fails. For example, when George plays poker with Dr. Buzzard, he is shocked that Dr. Buzzard is allowed to cheat. Though the other players are content with this outcome, George views it as inherently unjust. To change this unfair tradition, George begins to apply statistical analysis to the game. After a few rounds, George has acquired the pot and has prevented Dr. Buzzard from cheating; however, he also has removed the joy from the game: “Slowly, I broke even and then began to win. Now all eyes were on me – and were they, I thought with amazement, suspicious? Afraid? Yes, a bit of each. The joking ended completely then” (MD 212). Here, George imposes his own values onto Willow Springs’ citizens, in effect, colonizing their traditional practices. Because he cannot understand their customs, he assumes they are the product of ignorance or injustice. As a result, he feels compelled to change their ways. Ultimately, however, George furthers the distance between himself and the people of Willow Springs.

Likewise, George alienates himself from Willow Springs during the building of the bridge, the only thing that connects Willow Springs to the United States’ mainland. At this time, Cocoa notes that George is “edgy and short-tempered in a way I hadn’t known before. Finishing the bridge. Finishing the bridge. A constant obsession when you left in the morning, came back at lunch, and returned again in the evening. No one was working fast enough, no one was working long enough” (MD 171). In contrast, Willow Springs’ residents felt that careful construction and attention to detail would result in a bridge that is “intentionally kept flimsy by the residents of Willow Springs who are aware of the double-edged nature of contact with the mainland [...] On one level, the storm’s

destruction of the bridge represents an assertion of independence from the mainland, a rejection of white domination. But the bridge is also an impediment to Cocoa's personal liberation" (Meisenhelder 1446). For Willow Springs, a residually oral and communal society, the proper construction of the bridge is more valuable than one person's life. Thus, the safety and well-being of the community is more significant than Cocoa's struggle. For George, on the other hand, the exact opposite is true. His American heritage has taught him to value the individual, so he believes rescuing Cocoa is more important than the bridge's construction. The tension between George's values and those of Willow Springs continue throughout the novel and are only resolved posthumously, when George's body is put to rest in the Other Place. His physical bond to Willow Springs shapes his values and allows him to appreciate a community so unlike his own.

In the beginning, however, George and Cocoa's relationship is not filled with stress; rather it is highly influenced by fairy tale, particularly the Grimm's Brothers' *Briar Rose*. In *Briar Rose*, commonly known as *Sleeping Beauty*, a princess, named Aurora, is blessed at birth by three fairy godmothers. Though it appears that Aurora's good fortune will lead to a life of happiness, one evil fairy, who is not invited to the birth celebration, decides to place a curse on the princess. She proclaims that Aurora, upon reaching adulthood, will prick her finger on a spindle and die. One fairy godmother who has not yet blessed the princess, however, counteracts the spell. She states that a spindle will not kill Aurora, rather, it will cause her to slumber for one hundred years. Though the king tries to delay the curse, his efforts are in vain. When Aurora succumbs to the evil fairy's scheming, a good fairy puts the whole kingdom to sleep. Sometime thereafter, Aurora is discovered by an adventuresome prince who has heard the legend of the

sleeping princess. He kisses her and she awakes, completely rid of the curse. The good fairy then wakes the slumbering town, and all live happily ever after (Grimm and Grimm).

Similarly, Cocoa is born into a family where she is viewed as a princess. Since many of her relatives, particular females, died at birth, Cocoa's survival is near-miraculous. Mama Day, Cocoa's caretaker, notes that the Day family is "generations of nothing but girls, and only one left alive in this last generation to keep the Days going – the child of Grace" (MD 39). To celebrate Cocoa's survival, Mama Day and Abigail, like the fairy godmothers, bless Cocoa with gifts. In particular, they give her the nickname Cocoa to "put a little color on her somewhere" (MD 39-40). In doing so, the two godmothers connect Cocoa to Willow Springs. Cocoa, who has a very light complexion, often feels like an outsider when interacting with other Willow Springs residents: "It was awful growing up, looking the way I did, on an island of soft brown girls, or burnished ebony girls with their flashing teeth against that deep satin skin. Girls who could summon all the beauty of midnight by standing, arms akimbo, in the full sun" (MD 233). In the outside world, however, Cocoa's name connects her to familial love. When George interviews Cocoa for a job, she notes that her name is a "pet name. My grandmother and great-aunt gave it to me, the same women who put me through business school in Atlanta" (MD 29). So, even though Cocoa's childhood memories of Willow Springs are not the best, her name is a constant reminder of her godmothers' support. The nickname, then, is a gift that symbolizes many others: love, discipline, education.

Cocoa's special status within the Willow Springs, community, however, makes Ruby, a hoodoo woman, jealous. As a result, Ruby places a curse on Cocoa while

secretly pretending to be her friend. Specifically, Ruby braids Cocoa's hair and, while doing so, covers Cocoa's scalp with a poisonous herb: "The teeth of the comb dig in just short of hurting as she scratches the scalp showing through the parted hair before she dips her fingers into the round jar and massages the solution down to its length. The second big part crosses the first, going east to west, and this time she dips her fingers in the square jar, massaging hard" (MD 246). Soon after Cocoa has her hair braided, she begins to experience strange symptoms. When looking in the mirror, for instance, Cocoa thinks her face is missing large patches of skin. Though she looks normal to others, Cocoa cannot shake the feeling that something is wrong. A little later, Cocoa develops large bumps on her back. Though Mama Day and Abigail, her fairy godmothers, treat her with hoodoo remedies, each of their cures fails. Cocoa's illness becomes more severe as time progresses, and she ultimately falls into a coma from which she cannot be awakened. At this point, Mama Day discovers Ruby's evil-doings and enlists the help of George, Cocoa's Prince Charming, to save her.

Mama Day's solution, however, involves hoodoo. Since Cocoa's curse was caused by a hoodoo spell, the only way to counteract it is to combine Mama Day's magic with George's love:

[Mama Day] needs his hand in hers – his very hand – so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before. A single moment was all she asked, even a fingertip to touch hers here at the other place. So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl [Cocoa] to walk over. Yes, in his very hands he already held the missing piece she'd come looking for (MD 285).

George, however, is hesitant to help Mama Day because he does not believe in the power of hoodoo healing. His deviation from Mama Day's plan, then, marks his deviation from the conventions of fairy tales. Though Mama Day and Dr. Buzzard try to convince

George that the cure will work, his rational mind cannot accept their words as true. Thus, when Mama Day orders George to go to the chicken coop and return to the Other Place with his findings, George does not understand the task. Instead of returning to Mama Day with his hands, he flies into a fit of rage. In the process, he destroys the chicken coop and everything inside of it. The physical exertion causes George's heart to burst, preventing him from completing his task. From beyond the grave, George explains "The worst thing about the blinding pain that finally hit me was the sudden fear that it might mean the end. That's why I gripped your shoulder so tightly. But I want to tell you something about my real death that day. I didn't feel anything after my heart burst" (MD 300-1). George's death ends the journey to save Cocoa; however, his death produces some miraculous results.

Notably, George's sacrifice saves Cocoa. His death acts as a substitute for her own, allowing to fulfill her legacy as the next Mama Day. Though George and Cocoa do not live happily ever after, as the characters do in *Briar Rose*, their individual journeys end well. George continues to support Cocoa from beyond the grave, and Cocoa rebuilds her life in Charleston, a city just beyond the Willow Springs bridge. Furthermore, Cocoa begins the grieving process, rebuilding her life with greater knowledge of herself and love. Mama Day comments, "One day she'll hear you [George], like you're hearing me. And there'll be another time – that I won't be here for – when she'll learn about the beginning of the Days. But she's gotta go away to come back to that kind of knowledge. And I came to tell you not to worry: whatever roads take her from here, they'll always lead her back to you" (MD 308). Thus, George's death is not the end of the story; rather,

it is a new beginning. As such, George and Cocoa continue to grow in their relationship with one another while simultaneously developing in distinctly different ways.

Their growth, however, is not part of the idyllic nature of fairy tales. Instead, George and Cocoa's sociopolitical struggles are demonstrated through the picaresque. In the traditional picaresque, two figures, traditionally men, venture into the wilderness to conquer the unknown. For example, in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Tom and Huck explore the seedy underbelly of their town and, in the process, witness a murder, become pirates, cheat death, and find buried treasure. Throughout these exploits, Tom and Huck experience and resolve multiple conflicts. Their ability to work cooperatively determines the success of their journey. Since they do not falter in times of conflict, they do not suffer failure, injury, or death.

In *Mama Day*, however, the journey does not end as smoothly. George and Cocoa experience a number of conflicts in Willow Springs that reflect the episodic nature of the picaresque. At the heart of these conflicts is heritage: George believes in American exceptionalism and Cocoa, as a Willow Springs native, represents the Other. These differences are not apparent while the couple is living in New York because Cocoa adapts to fit into larger American culture. When the couple returns to Willow Springs, however, Cocoa reverts to her Willow Springs identity. Doing so creates a large gap between the couple: George remains stolidly individualistic while Cocoa reestablishes communal ties. Notably, George constantly feels the need to reinforce his intellectual superiority, even with something as simple as poker. What he does not realize is that the men of Willow Springs use poker to celebrate Dr. Buzzard's wit; thus, they allow and even encourage Dr. Buzzard to cheat them out of money. For these men, the game is the means by which

Dr. Buzzard exhibits his creativity; it is not a way to prove one's mettle. George, however, cannot participate in this ritual because he cannot subordinate himself for the sake of his community.

Cocoa, on the other hand, values community over the individual. When Mama Day and Abigail hold a wedding party for George and Cocoa, Cocoa feels the need to satisfy communal expectations. As a result, she puts on dark-toned makeup to make herself look more like a native of Willow Springs. Cocoa does so because she desires the approval of her native community. Unlike George, who firmly states, "I was all I had," Cocoa belongs to a communal group whose identity formation is based in ritual.

The differences in George and Cocoa's social positions are evident in their behavior toward one another, particularly in their use of wit and manipulation. Their conduct reflects the picaresque, in which characters rely on wit rather than industry. For example, in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Tom tricks and manipulates others for his own ends. In one scene, he convinces his friends to paint a white picket fence for him. Though Tom is supposed to paint the fence as punishment, his cunning allows him to get out of it. In a similar way, George and Cocoa must rely on their wits when faced with challenges. When dealing with one another, both George and Cocoa use their intellect to get what they want. Cocoa utilizes silence to convince George to visit Willow Springs. She makes George so uncomfortable that he is compelled to go simply to relieve the tension (MD 164). George also tricks Cocoa; notably, he refuses to hire her at his business, but surreptitiously convinces a business associate to do so. Thus, George and Cocoa both act like picaresque characters; however, their relationship is complicated when they travel to Willow Springs.

Though George and Cocoa continue to outwit one another in Cocoa's hometown, they are unable to work together to outwit, or overcome, social obstacles. For instance, George cannot understand Cocoa's insecurity about the color of her skin. As a firm believer in individualism and American exceptionalism, George believes that Cocoa, as a resident of the United States, is inherently superior to the citizens of Willow Springs. To him, the folk lifestyle is trivial and outdated, so, when he meets Mama Day and Abigail, he assumes they are doddering old women who are in desperate need of his assistance. George's perceptions, however, prove to be completely wrong. Mama Day, in actuality, is the matriarch of Willow Springs and Cocoa, her granddaughter, is insecure because she, unlike George, grew up in a setting where communal identity (i.e. fitting in) is more valuable than individualism. For George and Cocoa, these different ideologies prove to be irreconcilable when confronted outside the confines of the United States.

The tension between George and Cocoa is exacerbated when a hurricane hits the island. For George, the hurricane provides an opportunity for him to demonstrate the superiority of his heritage. Consequently, George decides to oversee the rebuilding of the Willow Springs bridge for two significant reasons: he believes that his advanced wit will accelerate the building process and he wants to get the ailing Cocoa stateside so that she can receive Western medicine. These two reasons, both founded upon American exceptionalism, reveal George's inherent weakness: he is close-minded toward non-Western cultural practices. So, instead of listening to Willow Springs citizens' rebuilding plans, George begins piecing together the bridge without regard for workers, design plans, or structural integrity. His participation in bridge building ultimately slows the

process and creates a colonizer-colonized relationship between himself and the Willow Springs citizens.

Cocoa, on the other hand, recognizes the hurricane as an insuperable force of nature. She does not believe that she, as a human being, can overcome the forces of nature and she does not presume that she can fix the bridge. As a result, Cocoa does not support George's solution to the problem. Instead, she, as a member of the Willow Springs community, becomes one of the colonized. Cocoa's subordination to the position of the Other ultimately leaves George to complete his journey alone. He, like the cowboys and adventurers of the conventional picaresque, goes out into the wilderness of Willow Springs and attempts to conquer the unknown. At the beginning of their journey, Cocoa appears to have the same goal, however, as time progresses, Cocoa begins to associate herself with the oppressed. In the end, George and Cocoa cannot reconcile their perspectives and their journey fails. At the same time, their underlying feelings for one another remain strong. George ultimately sacrifices himself for Cocoa, and, in doing so, demonstrates his love for her. Analyzing the text through the lens of the picaresque makes it possible to assess George and Cocoa's political, as well as personal, relationship.

Naylor's use of folklore genres, then, reflects George and Cocoa's myriad experiences both before and during their stay in Willow Springs. In her work, Western myth, or Shakespearean literature, reveals social principles, African forms reinforce communal practices, fairy tales supply relatable archetypes, and the picaresque underscores political issues. By utilizing these genres, Naylor pays homage to her predecessor Zora Neale Hurston, but, more importantly, chronicles the development of

African American folk culture. Since Hurston was the first African American woman to publish folklore on a large scale, her work focused on recording folktales accurately. As a result, Hurston provided readers with insight into folklore and her own folklore identity, but did not explore the African American folklore community in depth. Naylor, on the other hand, depicts African American folk culture through her description of Willow Springs and its residents. Her characters, particularly George, Cocoa, and Mama Day, are dynamic and well-developed because they all have pressing concerns and unavoidable flaws. Furthermore, these flaws make a statement about their larger social context. The tension between George and the Willow Springs community, for example, denotes the strain between Eurocentric culture and African American folk culture. George's weak heart symbolizes his desire for power and recognition, values that have no place in the community-based society of Willow Springs. Likewise, Cocoa's insecurities about her skin color emphasize race issues inside and outside the folk community; notably, her light skin is a benefit in Eurocentric culture, but a detriment in Willow Springs. By presenting Willow Springs through the eyes of these characters, Naylor paints a fuller picture of the African American folk community and the sociopolitical issues connected to it, but does so without pointing fingers or placing blame. Thus, folklore in *Mama Day* depicts African American folk culture with limited bias, and, in doing so, cultivates the rich complexities within African American folk traditions.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion: The Larger Picture

Analyzing the connection between Hurston and Naylor's use of folklore reveals the numerous cultural influences within African American folklore. While many scholars focus on the African elements of African American folklore communities, European, African, and Native American folklore all play an integral role in African American folk tales, particularly through the genres of myth, African folk form, fairy tale and the picaresque. Hurston's *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* as well as Naylor's *Mama Day* utilize these genres to demonstrate the multi-cultural nature of African American folklore and the adaptations that these folk tales undergo over time. Furthermore, these works show how African American folk culture appears in written form by addressing a number of larger issues regarding folklore and genre: manuscript vs. published text, fiction vs. nonfiction, meaning of autobiography, purpose of folklore, and self as performance.

The first of these questions, manuscript vs. published text, looks to authorial intention. When the manuscript edition of a text varies significantly from the published version, an analysis of the two texts may illuminate unclear passages within the final text. In this study, the holograph manuscript of Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* contains a number of folktales and life experiences that are not included in the original published copy. Looking at these omitted sections reveals 1) Hurston's publishers removed political content to make the text more appealing to a white audience and 2) Hurston's

twelve visions were grounded upon her encounter with the divine, an incident which changes popular perceptions of the text. In particular, Hurston's divine experience shows that Hurston wanted to be viewed as superhuman, in other words, she wanted to move beyond the social and political restrictions placed upon her and her work. Removing this portion of the text caused *Dust Tracks on a Road* to be critiqued as a subversively political text, and while this is true at times, it does not consider Hurston's work holistically. Reading the holograph manuscript into the published text, however, provides a fuller, more intricate, understanding of Hurston's work.

These omitted passages are significant in another way as well. Hurston's encounter with divine is fictional, yet it is included in her nonfictional autobiography. At the same time, analyzing Hurston's fictional experience is necessary to understanding her as a character. This raises an important question: what role does fiction play in nonfictional texts? Since fiction is conventionally labeled false, and nonfiction is typically considered factual, what connection exists between the two? *Dust Tracks on a Road* is a prime example of how fiction enriches, rather than detracts from, nonfictional texts. By including fictional passages in her autobiography, Hurston emphasizes her child-like imagination, her superhuman perception of self, her connection to the folklore of her community, and her subversive views on social and political topics. In essence, Hurston's "true" self is revealed through fictional elements rather than factual ones. Thus, fiction is integral to understanding the real Hurston.

Hurston's use of fiction also influences traditional perceptions of the autobiographical genre. Historically, autobiographies have been treated as objective, nonbiased accounts of people or events. Hurston's autobiography, on the other hand,

lends itself to a different reading. Her stories, fictional experiences, and imaginative language are vital to the text; thus, *Dust Tracks on a Road* is an early example of what is known as autofiction, a genre that recognizes the ways in which fiction informs reality. By rewriting genre expectations, Hurston creates what was in her time a non-traditional form of the autobiography. Her experimentation with the autobiography reflects her unconventional life story; in addition, it gives her a unique voice that varies strongly from that of her contemporaries. Hurston, therefore, creates her own identity by blending fictional stories with her own life events and, in doing so, establishes her own place among the black autobiographies of her time.

Another way Hurston sets herself apart from her contemporaries is through her use of folklore. In particular, Hurston integrates the folk tales of her community into her nonfiction texts *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*. These folktales provide a lens by which to more fully understand Hurston's texts; furthermore, they reinforce social values, establish cultural norms, and reject mainstream culture's history narrative in favor of a communal one. When Hurston places folk tales in her written, published works, she gives voice to cultural traditions outside the mainstream. She recognizes, whether intentionally or not, the multiple influences within African American folklore and creates a definition of Americanness that acknowledges her own life experiences.

She also integrates herself into the folklore by including herself in the performance of the tales. Since Hurston is a character in both *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she is able to participate in the folk events included in the text. As a result, she can control and manipulate folk tales so that they reflect her own life experiences. Hurston's life thereby becomes an extension of folklore itself; she identifies

herself through the communal process of storytelling and, in doing so, becomes inextricably linked to the African American folklore community.

Like Hurston, Naylor plays with conventions regarding genre and folklore. Though her text is fictional, she presents it as if it were ethnographic, or a factual description of the Willow Springs community. Naylor's manipulation of genre expectations speaks to the inherent bias of all texts, including nonfiction. Within the first few pages of the novel, Naylor criticizes nonfictional texts for their supposed objectivity. She argues that authorial bias, not objective fact, shapes many understandings of African American culture. To remedy this issue, Naylor's text seeks to provide a more realistic, albeit fictional, account of Willow Springs. She, like Hurston, acknowledges the thin line between fiction and nonfiction and utilizes both to create a more holistic picture of an African American folk community.

She also enriches her text through the use of folklore. In particular, Naylor uses a number of folklore genres, which, as in Hurston, demonstrate the many cultural influences within African American folk tales. Naylor's folklore, however, does not reveal the author's own connection to her community, but rather emphasizes the intricacies within Willow Springs' customs. Furthermore, Naylor's novel updates Hurston's by adapting folklore to reflect contemporary African American culture.

Reading the two women together, then, reveals the many cultural influences within African American folklore. Their texts also highlight the evolution of African American folk tales throughout the twentieth century. By analyzing these two authors in-depth, and by addressing the many questions presented by their works, this research reveals the rich complexities within Hurston and Naylor. In particular, it both addresses

and is not limited to issues of race to paint a more holistic, and appropriately complex, picture of Hurston, Naylor, and the African American folk traditions that influence them.

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