
*From Folklore
to Fiction*

A STUDY OF FOLK HEROES
AND RITUALS
IN THE
BLACK AMERICAN NOVEL

H. Nigel Thomas

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“Learn It to the Younguns”: Passing on Folk Wisdom

Daryl Cumber Dance

This is the book I had been planning to write for the past fifteen years, it was inevitable that if I kept procrastinating, someone would more expeditiously respond to the obvious void. Finally H. Nigel Thomas has provided the kind of exploration and explication of the use, influence, and impact of Black folklore on literature that I perceived was so much needed. Despite the numerous published commentaries on the influence of Afro-American folklore on individual works and specific authors, and the occasional consideration of its influence on a particular genre or a limited period (such as Keith Byerman's focus on ten contemporary writers in *Fingering the Jagged Grain*), nothing approaching the scope of this study has appeared. Thus I welcome *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel*, at the same time I upbraid myself for dallying while Thomas forged ahead.

Black writers have long acknowledged the significance of their folk heritage to their development as writers. A heritage that influences the subject matter, the themes, the motifs, the characters, the symbolism, the tone, the value system, the language and the style of their writing. Ralph Ellison acknowledges that “Negro American folk tradition constitutes a valuable source for literature,” and frequently comments on his use of his folk heritage (Ellison 1964, 59). Langston Hughes acclaimed the Black folk community that “furnish[es] a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist” (Ellison 1964, 693). Richard Wright maintained that “Negro folklore [is] the Negro writer's most powerful weapon” (1937 [1971], 8). Noting that one of her early efforts at writing began with an idea from her mother's oral tales and a consequent interest in exploring voodoo, Alice Walker informs us that with its completion she experienced that “wonderful feeling... of being with... ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting and acknowledging them” (Walker 1983, 9–13); her continuing sense of herself as a medium, recording and transmitting folk experience, wisdom, and magic, is reinforced with her ending to her latest novel, *The Color Purple*:

I thank everybody in this book for coming.

A. W., author and *medium* (italics mine)

Paule Marshall frequently lauds those “poets in the kitchen” who passed on to her “the rich legacy of language and culture” (Marshall 1983, 30). Toni Cade Bambara asserts when asked what her mother tongue is: “The language of Langston Hughes, the language of Grandma, the language of ‘mama say’” (Bambara 1980, 48); elsewhere she declares, “the voice of my work is bop” (Tate 1983, 29). Similarly, Gayl Jones credits the “‘speech community’ in which I lived” as being one of the “most important influence[s] on my storytelling writing style” (Tate 1983, 94). And thus, ad infinitum, from Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt through Sterling Brown and Zora Neale Hurston on to Ishmael Reed and Toni Morrison, Black writers have maintained that they are inspired and shaped by Black folk culture.

H. Nigel Thomas begins this important study by introducing the principal forms of Afro-American folklore, tracing their African roots and considering their function in the folk community. He then proceeds to review the major folk heroes, including the Preacher, the Bad Nigger, the Black Moses, and that most popular of all the heroes—the Trickster. He goes on to introduce the rituals, including religious rituals, blues, dozens, and jive. This important review not only provides a useful introduction to Black folklore, its origins, role, and significance in Black culture, but it also serves as a valuable bibliographical study since Thomas offers a comprehensive survey of major folklore studies and collections.

Having laid a firm foundation, Thomas proceeds to explore the appearance of these folk heroes and rituals in the literature, focusing on selected, relevant works by James Baldwin, Hal Bennett, Arna Bontemps, Cecil A. Brown, Charles W. Chesnutt, Alice Childress, Countee Cullen, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Ralph Ellison, Leon Forrest, Ernest J. Gaines, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, John Oliver Killens, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Margaret Walker, and Richard Wright. In addition to the intensive consideration of these authors he mentions specific instances of particular heroes and rituals in the works of such authors as Claude Brown, Martin Delaney, Lorenz Graham, Gayl Jones, Louise Meriwether, Albert Murray, Ntozake Shange, Mildred Taylor, Alice Walker, and Walter White, thereby providing a basis for expanding the exploration that he begins here. His discussion of the literature reviews significant prior scholarship and offers interesting new and often provocative readings of a number of the works.

Looking over the whole body of Black American literature that incorporates folklore, Thomas concludes that while earlier writers were “somewhat clumsy” in their integration of folklore into their fiction (partly because of publishers’ demands and reader expectations), most writers

from the thirties on have been selective of materials that can be truly integrated into their work. Thus the folklore and rituals used do not remain a thing apart, interesting for their quaintness only, but rather become an integral part of the quest of the characters and the revelation of the plot. He notes also that what the writer does with the folk material "is largely determined by a folk tradition, in the main African-derived, that demands that black artists minister to their society (176)." This conclusion is sanctioned by a number of Black writers, most notably Toni Morrison, who insists that the Black novelist must assume the duty of the ancestors, the "timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (Morrison 1984, 343). Theirs is the wisdom that Ralph Ellison has the Invisible Man's grandfather pass on to him on his death bed, where he reveals the traditional ways in which the Black man has appeased, misled, and thus overcome his enemy. Then with his last breath he whispers fiercely, "Learn it to the younguns" (Ellison 1952, 20). Countless contemporary authors are about the business of studying their past, preserving the wisdom of their ancestors, and dedicating their work to "learn[ing] it to the younguns."

Finally, Thomas observes interesting new and innovative trends occurring in the more recent works of Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Toni Cade Bambara, and Paule Marshall, but concludes that this "requires a study of its own" (177). Ending on this provocative note, Thomas inspires the possibility that, though he has given a comprehensive overview, he has not exhausted this brainchild I cherished so long as my own; thus there may *perhaps* be a second volume that I shall attempt. If indeed I (or some less procrastinating scholar out there) attempt this sequel, I (or he/she) shall certainly profit from the groundwork that Thomas has laid out in this pioneering effort at defining, identifying and assessing the use, incorporation, and impact of folk materials in the full range of American literature.

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Preface

When Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981) was published, I became convinced that Morrison had added a new dimension to the rhetorical use of folklore in black American literature. Three years later I decided to analyze that contribution, to add it to other studies that I was sure existed on the subject. I was dismayed by the absence of scholarship that compared black American writers' use of folklore. I decided to turn my attention in that direction, and the present study is largely the result of that decision.

Several people have provided me with invaluable assistance in making this study a reality. Professor Jay Bochner of the English department of l'Université de Montréal stands foremost among them. His perceptive comments, made after numerous hours of reading an earlier version of this manuscript, have resulted in greater clarity and better organization of the ideas expressed here. Ms. Shirley Small, a friend and colleague, listened to and commented on many of the ideas expressed here. Doctor Daniel Kabasele and I talked for long periods about the presence of African beliefs in the African diaspora. The professors of the English department of l'Université de Montréal showed an interest in my work through its varying stages, especially Professor Richard Robillard with whom I discussed many of the works analyzed here. Special thanks go to Professor Daryl Dance of the English department of Virginia Commonwealth University for her very insightful criticism of this manuscript and her very valuable suggestions.

It is my hope that this study will spur others into exploring the asset that black folklore is to black writers and into creating a body of scholarship for future scholars and creative writers to draw on.

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Introduction

This study focuses on the transposition of Afro-American folk heroes and rituals from folklore to literature. There exists enough material on folk heroes and rituals for either to be a full-length study. But the one telescopes into the other; the folk hero is a part of ritual creation and is usually best understood in his ritual context. Before proceeding, it is important that folklore be defined—if only because many people claim not to understand what the term means. Folklore is the dramatization of the psychic essences that bind a people. It is therefore the sum total of the rituals, practices, and behaviors undertaken with community sanction to reinforce the beliefs, the values, and the attitudes of a community. Thus, all culturally recognizable codes constitute a part of that culture's folklore. The more homogenous a culture is, the more effective is its folklore.

Identifying whether there exists a tradition for the treatment of black American folk heroes and rituals in the black American novel and examining their function within the black American novel are the principal reasons for this study. It is postulated on the fact that Afro-American novelists utilize folklore because it embodies certain truths or attitudes that they wish their work to reflect or analyze. With few exceptions, the novelists we shall encounter here have as their principal goal a clearer understanding of the role that folklore plays in black American survival.

Aware that many readers of this study may be ignorant of the principal forms of Afro-American folklore, their origins and functions, I intend the first chapter to express precisely that. There one will see, where such can be proved, a tracing of such forms back to Africa, either through an examination of analogous forms in present day West Africa or of similar forms among blacks of the diaspora. My other concern in the first chapter is to analyze the functions of these folk forms, a necessary task since the value of the lore is of predominant interest for the novelist and very little scholarship that interprets the lore exists.

Chapter two deals with major folk heroes who nonetheless appear infre-

quently as major figures in the novel. This chapter is concerned with how and why the authors incorporate these heroes in their work. In this category of heroes we shall first examine the black preacher of folklore—Dunbar's Parker, Hurston's Pearson, and Bennett's Titus and Cobb—for their similarities to the preacher of black popular imagination; Baldwin's Gabriel we shall analyze as a contrast to the foregoing. We shall next look at defiant heroes—Killen's John Henry; Bontemps' Gabriel, and Morrison's Shadrack as Black Moseses; and Wright's Bigger Thomas and Gaines' Marcus as Bad Niggers.

By focusing on the trickster, the most popular character in Afro-American folklore and fiction, the third chapter continues the examination of folk heroes. The chapter begins with a commentary on the various trickster traditions that have influenced the Afro-American version. Thereafter various tricksters are examined for what each author reveals about his function. These include Chesnutt's Uncle Julius, Dunbar's Buford, Scatters, and Ruggles, Cullen's Sam, Ellison's Bledsoe, Rhinehart, and Invisible Man, Wright's Tyree, Cecil Brown's George Washington, Leon Forrest's Ford, Hughes' Laura, and Childress' Mountain Seeley.

The techniques and reasons for incorporating Afro-American rituals in the black American novel are the chief concerns of chapter four. The number of rituals discussed vary according to the novelist and the value accorded the ritual in question. By far the most frequently appearing are those of the black church—the folk sermon, the singing of the spirituals, and the ecstasy that derives from these. The blues are next in importance, followed by the dozens and jive. The rituals are discussed on a novel by novel basis, for the first concern of this study is the individual artist's use of his material. The works to be covered are Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*, Wright's *Lawd Today* and *The Long Dream*, Walker's *Jubilee*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, and Forrest's *The Bloodworth Orphans*. This chapter points out the increasing adeptness at exploiting Afro-American rituals that develops with each new generation of novelists.

From chapter one to chapter four the key word is *survival*. Matters of technique aside, the discussion centers for the most part on whether the values symbolized by these folk heroes and dramatized in these rituals promote or impede Afro-American survival. The conclusion summarizes the principal findings of this study.

REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP

In 1982 Berndt Ostendorf wrote: "In 1969 Lawrence Levine complained that the history of black culture could not be written since there were so few documents to go by; in 1977 he is overwhelmed by the sheer mass of

unanalyzed material which rests in collections of black folklore and in archives all over the United States" (3). This statement is indicative of the change of attitudes, since the 1960s, on the part of white scholars vis-à-vis Afro-American culture. Much of the credit for this change of attitude, as Albert Murray notes, belongs to those Afro-American and occasional whites who told the truth about the black experience at a time when Americans wished to see blacks as simply deviants (1970, 179).

Such a change of attitudes has resulted in an abundance of available folk material and increased scholarship devoted to interpreting those materials. Since Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps published *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958), several other collections have appeared. They include John Mason Brewer, *American Negro Folklore* (1968), Harold A. Courlander, *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore* (1976), and Daryl Cumber Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin'* (1978). These four collections complement one another, for each tends to be strongest in an area where the others are weak. They are fine for an initiation to Afro-American folklore. Another collection, Benjamin A. Botkin, *A Treasury of American Folklore* (1944), is useful for someone wishing to compare parallel black and white forms of folklore.

When we turn to specific areas of Afro-American folklore we come not only to collections but to interpretations as well. In the area of the Afro-American folktale, everyone knows of the popular "Uncle Remus" stories of Joel Chandler Harris, which are quite entertaining despite the old fool that Harris creates to tell them. But as a repertory of Afro-American trickster tales this collection is limited, for slaves never allowed whites to hear stories about the slave trickster John. For these we need to turn to Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935). Hurston's collection is also superb for its "lies." John Mason Brewer, *The Word from the Brazos* (1953) is a wide collection of tales from rural Texas, especially preacher tales. Richard M. Dorson's *American Negro Folktales* (1967) is, as well, excellent. For an understanding of the ethos out of which these folktales emerged one should browse through George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (1972), for it is rich in accounts, anecdotes, and tales of slavery.

Among the better interpretations of the Afro-American folktale are Daryl Dance, "In the Beginning: A New View of Black American Etiological Tales" (1977), and Langston Hughes, "Fooling Our White Folks" (1956). Hughes's essay is not about tales *per se* but rather how Afro-Americans apply the cunning the tales dramatize. Bernard Wolfe's "Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit" (1949) is marred by an interpretation that promotes the stereotype of the black man existing to entertain the white. Alan Dundes, "African Tales among the North American Indians" (1965), explores the scholarship that once argued that blacks borrowed the tales from Indians. Dundes feels it was a part of the white attempt to prove that black culture is always an imitation of somebody else's culture.

The specific body of folktales in verse form that is called toasts and that Daryl Dance refers to as "Tales of the Bad Nigger" now exists principally in three collections: Seymour Fiddle, *Toasts: Images of a Victim Society* (1972), Bruce Jackson, "*Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me:*" *Narrative Poetry from the Black Oral Tradition* (1974), and Dennis Wepman, Ronald B. Newman, and Murray Binderman, *The Life: The Lore and Folk Poetry of the Black Hustler* (1976). Not convincing, however, is the scholarship that purports to interpret the toast: Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep down in the Jungle* (1970) and *Positively Black* (1970); Bruce Jackson, "Psychosocial Aspects of the Toast" (1972); David Evans, "The Toast in Context" (1977). Such scholarship suffers from a basic ignorance of the use of functions of Afro-American language. More to the point is Lawrence Levine, who identifies the roots of the toast in the various inverted functions of language in West Africa (1977).

Alongside the toast one should look at the dozens, which could best be defined as ritual insult. Among the publications containing these insults are Abrahams's *Deep down in the Jungle* (1970, 46-51) and H. Rap. Brown, *Die, Nigger, Die* (1969, 25-29). Regarding interpretation, Abrahams sees the dozens as functioning to liberate the young black male from the dominance of his mother. It is a theory that is generally rejected nowadays. An earlier study, John Dollard, "The Dozens: Dialectic of Insult" (1939), is excellent for its description of the ritual and sees it as a way of channeling aggression into the group rather than into the white community where such hostility could have fatal consequences for the dozens player. William Grier and Price Cobbs (1971) perceive the dozens as a black young man's initiation into the humiliation that he must endure for the rest of his life in America. None of these scholars knew that parallel forms of the ritual are widespread in Africa. Lawrence Levine, writing at a time when this information became known and benefiting from the pioneering scholarship, provides the best overall analysis of the ritual. He emphasizes the play element and the ritual bonding it fosters.

The musical forms of Afro-American folklore is the area that is best known and most widely studied. Several collections of blues lyrics exist. From earlier times there are Howard Odum, *The Negro and His Songs* (1925), and Howard Odum and Guy B. Johnson, *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926). Post-1960 collections, thematically arranged, include Kay Shirley, *Patterns of the Blues Romance* (1963); Harry Oster, *Living Country Blues* (1969); Eric S. Campbell, *The Blues Line* (1969); and Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Down Home Blues* (1977).

When it comes to blues scholarship, an interesting situation presents itself in the distinctions between scholarship by whites and scholarship by blacks. The former are preoccupied with form and history, the latter with ritual function. The most obvious place to examine the blues is in the accounts blues musicians provide about their craft. *W. C. Handy, Father of the Blues*, edited by Arna Bontemps (1941), is fascinating both for its insights

into composing blues music and for its understanding of the people's need for the music. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People* (1963) is a fine study of the blues from a historical, sociological, psychological, and political point of view. Ralph Ellison's "Blues People" in *Shadow and Act* (1964) is occasioned more by Ellison's ideological quarrel with Jones rather than any fundamental disagreement with Jones's explanation of the blues. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (1966) is a significant exploration of the relationship between the blues performer and his audience. The best overall work on the blues, one that comments on ritual, performance styles, and relationship of the blues to the Afro-American ethos, is Albert Murray's *Stomping the Blues* (1976). Other works, particularly valuable for close textual analysis, are Paul Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning* (1960) and *Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (1968); and Paul Garon's *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (1975). Robert Palmer's *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History of the Mississippi Delta* (1981) is a strictly historical work via biography based on episodes in the lives of various Mississippi blues musicians.

When we discuss the spirituals we are in fact examining black American theology and an aspect of black American religious rituals. Several collections of spirituals, complete with musical notation, are available. They include William A. Fisher (ed.), *Seventy Negro Spirituals* (1926); James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson (eds.), *The Book of Negro Spirituals* (1925) and *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* (1926); John Work (ed.), *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* (1940).

One of the earliest essays on the spirituals is W. E. B. DuBois' "Of the Sorrow Songs" found in *The Soul of Black Folk* (1903). It focuses on the doctrines of self-vindication and on the musical styles and influences in these songs. Alain Locke's "The Negro Spirituals" (1925) was published within the context of the Harlem Renaissance (1923-1930). It therefore focuses on what is distinctly Afro-American in the spirituals as a preliminary to finding touchstones for distinctly Afro-American art. Miles Mark Fisher's *American Negro Slave Songs* (1953) explores an aspect of the spirituals that scholars had previously ignored, i.e., their documentation of contemporary events. Fisher probes the nineteenth century spirituals and historical documents and points to the way in which the spirituals, via allegory, record the slaves' reactions to events of the time. Many of the essays on the spirituals tend to make exaggerated claims about them as political tools. D. K. Wilgus' "The Negro-White Spiritual" (1959) is mandatory reading since it outlines the major tenets of a century-old debate on whether the spirituals are imitations of white music or are in the main modified African music. Christa K. Dixon, *Negro Spirituals: From Bible to Folksong* (1976), is typical of the type of scholarship that exists on the spirituals. While the study reflects the author's thorough knowledge of the Bible and Judaeo-Christian traditions in general, she writes little beyond cliché about the psyche and traditions of the people who produced the spirituals.