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[Introduction to] From Within the Frame: Storytelling in African-American Studies

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From Within The Frame

Storytelling in African-American Fiction

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Introduction

> For us African-Americanists perhaps the most significant aspect of the idea of *lieux de mémoire* ["sites of memory"] was its capacity to suggest new categories of sources for the historian: new sets of sometimes very difficult readings. We considered, for example, how to read certain dances, paintings, buildings, journals, and oral forms of expression. More than ever, we saw novels, poems, slave narratives, autobiographies, and oral testimonies as crucial parts of the historical record. These varied repositories of individual memories, taken together, create a collective communal memory.[1]
>
> –Geneviéve Fabre and Robert G. O'Meally,
> *History and Memory in African-American Culture*

Charles Waddell Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine" first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1887. John Edgar Wideman first published "Doc's Story" in *Esquire* magazine in 1986. Historically, the hundred years between Chesnutt's and Wideman's frame stories have contained a variety of issues that concern the written representation of African American spoken-voice storytelling. The use of an inside-the-text listener situates a storyteller–and that storyteller's story–within a particular reality and, as such, creates a vibrant, fluid storytelling event. Consciously or unconsciously, African-American writers periodically use a narrative frame as a medium for negotiation with their readership; the inside-the-text listeners, argues Walter Ong below, mirror their anticipated readers. These narrative negotiations vary in audience, form and content, but the frame tale convention, in one way or another, speaks to the reader as well as the listener, in each.

This study of written African-American oral storytelling grows out of projects such as Geneviéve Fabre and Robert O'Meally's, particularly as I study

the literary storytelling *event*, the interaction between author, teller, listening audience and reading audience. "As a group looking at these complex forms of expression," writes Fabre and O'Meally, "we realized our responsibility to confront the issue of audience: of those directly and indirectly addressed by these varied historical makers and markers, these *lieux de mémoire*" (9).

Oral storytelling is, after all, intimately concerned with audience. A typical "frame" text is a novel or story in which the opening paragraphs of the text contextualize a coming tale, providing the reader with the setting, the narrator, the teller, and the listener, who is often the narrator. This section of a frame text is called the "open frame," which begins the story or novel. The open frame ends when the tale begins, and in most frame texts the tale is rendered virtually uninterrupted until completed. When the tale is over, the narrator/listener regains (explicit) control of the narrative, so that once again the reader sees the action of the story through the listener or narrator's point-of-view. (Occasionally there is no close frame at all.) Taken together, the open and close frame act as a mediator between the tale and the reader. In much the same way a traditional frame around a painting controls the viewer's visual movement from wall to painting back to wall,[2] the open and close frames in a frame text prevent the teller from speaking "directly" to the reader. In a frame text, the teller is "speaking" to the inside-the-text "listener"; the listener/narrator, in turn, "speaks" to the reader. The conversation that results is a form of call-and-response, an aspect of the African-American vernacular tradition.[3]

But the frame text, whether it is a novel such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or a short story by Thomas Nelson Page, Mark Twain, or Joel Chandler Harris, is not the only way fiction writers represent oral storytelling. The "embedded narrative" is another form of teller-listener-reader communication. While the frame text has, in most cases, explicit and identifiable frames to open and close the narrative at large, embedded narratives, on the other hand, are storytelling events that momentarily occur in short stories or novels as the narrative marches forward. Although these embedded narratives are important to the whole, structurally they are not central to the text–if they were, they would be formal frame texts.[4]

Nevertheless, tellers whose tales are "embedded" rather than "framed" do influence the text and are vital in their own way; they do, after all, have inside-the-text audiences. Perhaps most importantly, the lack of strict open and close frames in novels or stories that contain embedded narratives allow the teller-listener-reader relationship to have consequences over a longer range of narrative time (a storytelling event early in the narrative can play a critical plot- and theme-twisting role late in the narrative, as we shall see in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*). The embedded narrative, then, brings its own advantages to the written representation of spoken-voice storytelling.

But to what, exactly, does the term "African-American spoken voice" refer? There are several ways to address the nettlesome problem of identifying a black spoken voice. It is difficult to tell the difference between a voice meant to be "read" and a voice meant to be "heard." The problem is solved easily enough in a text like James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, which begins, "I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life. . . ."[5] The novel is rendered in first-person, but makes conscious references to being written, and therefore is meant to be "read." Similarly, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, in his epilogue, writes, "So why do I write, torturing myself to put it all down?"[6]

Conversely, it should be assumed that if a narrative refers to being "heard," then someone is talking. In Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, for example, Cocoa says, "I sound awful, don't I? Well, those were awful times in that city of yours. . . ."[7] The explicit reference to "sound" validates the orality of the narrator. Still other black spoken-voice narratives, such as Sherley Anne Williams's "Tell Martha Not To Moan," use an identifiable Black English dialect: "That really funny to em. They all cracking up but me. . . . And I know it like I say; any woman can give a man money."[8] (*Norton Anthology*). As Geneva Smitherman writes in *Talkin and Testifyin*, "Black Dialect is an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression, and life in America. Black Language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture."[9] Toni Cade Bambara's "My Man Bovanne" is another example of narrative rendered in Black English dialect. Cocoa, Naylor's narrator, does not speak Black English. But in this instance, her reference to being "heard" earmarks her speech as oral. And since she is an African-American character, she must possess an African-American spoken voice, even if that voice does not possess what Smitherman calls above the "linguistic cultural African heritage" that would aurally identify it as "black."

But what happens when an African-American first-person narrator is "speaking" in Standard English dialect and doesn't make pointed reference to the act of speaking? Although she argues against it, Smitherman acknowledges that "Some blacks try to solve the linguistic ambivalence dilemma by accepting certain features or types of black speech and rejecting others . . . [some] middle class blacks, for example, accept the black semantics of musicians and hipsters but reject the black syntax of working class blacks" (174). Reginald McKnight's narrator in "Mali Is Very Dangerous" is a good example. He speaks in Standard English dialect throughout the story: "I wasn't interested in M.D.'s 'sister,' but I was certainly intrigued. Maybe mystified would be a better word, for it seemed to me that M.D. was offering me the whore for nothing."[10] But McKnight's narrator nods to Smitherman in this passage, where he buys some Heineken for M.D. and his sister:

> "Hinkin!" said M.D. "He bring us Hinkin. Oh, you very big man. You are as boss." Oh cripes, I thought. I am as fool. Rule number thirty-two for getting by in Senegal: *never try to buy yourself out of a pain in the ass.* M.D., steadily tapping my leg, giving me a sinner's grin, said, "You like my sister?" He said this the way Millie Jackson would say, "You like my sweet thang, don't you baby?" And for some reason still a mystery to me today, I said, "Yes-M.D.-I-really-like-your-sister-but-you-see-I-am-married." He looked at me as if I had said, "I-am-in-Senegal" and without blinking, twitching, flinching, said, "You like my sister?" (5)

McKnight's narrator informs his Standard English usage with a black idiolect. As a result, his narrator "sounds" like a black speaker, even though he isn't talking in Black English, and doesn't make an explicit reference to talking or being heard.

These are all examples of the African-American spoken voice. Most importantly, the black spoken voice is a voice that appears to want to be "heard" rather than "read," regardless of whether it leans toward Standard English or Black English. In this study, the texts I examine, whether formal frame texts or not, identify themselves as being rendered in black spoken-voice.[11]

Regardless of the nature of the spoken voice, the frame story form does cede what Robert Stepto calls "authorial control"[12] from the storyteller inside the frame to the listener/narrator. Or as Gayl Jones, talking specifically about Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman,* puts it, "[T]he question of authority is open; we're not sure really who controls the story."[13] At issue, for the most part, was the containment of black speech, largely for audience-related reasons. Certainly, there have long been periodic "frameless" black spoken-voice narratives, but Standard English-speaking narrators have more often "framed" black dialect storytellers throughout African-American literary history. As John Edgar Wideman writes in "Frame and Dialect: The Evolution of the Black Voice," "From the point of view of American literature then, the fact of black speech (and the oral roots of a distinct literary tradition–ultimately the tradition itself) existed only when it was properly 'framed,' within works which had status in the dominant literary system. For black speech the frame was the means of entering the literate culture in order to define the purposes or ends for which black speech could be employed."[14] *From Within the Frame* treats the struggle for authorial control in written oral storytelling in each of the three frame text forms: the formal frame text (in Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman;* Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* James Alan McPherson's "The Story of a Scar," and Wideman's "Doc's Story"), the embedded narrative (*Invisible Man,* by Ralph Ellison), and the "frameless" storytelling event ("My Man Bovanne," by Toni Cade Bambara).

But there is still more at stake in the use of a narrative frame. Walter Ong has discussed the process of writers "fictionalizing" their audience. The

practice of writing is, after all, essentially a solitary activity, one where, as opposed to the oral speech act, the audience must be imagined. As Ong writes, the writer "is writing. No one is listening. There is no feedback. Where does he find his 'audience'? He has to make his readers up, fictionalize them."[15] But according to Ong, while the writer must fictionalize his or her readers, the readership is simultaneously called upon to fictionalize themselves as receivers of the fiction:

> Readers over the ages have had to learn this game of literacy, how to conform themselves to the projections of the writers they read, or at least how to operate in terms of these projections. They have to know how to play the game of being a member of an audience that "really" does not exist. And they have to adjust when the rules change, even though no rules thus far have ever been published and even though the changes in the unpublished rules are themselves for the most part only implied. (61)

Certainly, Ong continues, "the roles readers are called on to play evolve without any explicit rules or directives" (62), but there are, indeed, examples of the *im*plicit rules alluded to in the block quotation above. Chancer's *Canterbury Tales* is his primary citation: By setting the stories within a frame, writes Ong, "Chaucer simply tells his readers how they are to fictionalize themselves" (70). Since there was no established tradition in English for many of the stories, Chaucer uses the frame for what Ong calls "audience readjustment." Although Ong discusses the frame story's didactic purpose, he dismisses it otherwise. "Would it not be helpful," he writes, "to discuss the frame device as a contrivance all but demanded by the literary economy of the time rather than to expatiate on it as a singular stroke of genius? For this it certainly was not, unless we define genius as the ability to make the most of an awkward situation. The frame is really a rather clumsy gambit, although a good narrator can bring it off pretty well when he has to. It hardly has widespread appeal for ordinary readers today" (70).

Except, I would argue, for today's "ordinary readers" who enjoy being *told* a good story in addition to reading one. The fictional storytelling event is still a viable form of presenting an oral tale in literature; there are several contemporary African-American literary works where oral storytelling has been an important component of the text.[16] Contemporary black writers use all three forms of the frame convention: framed, embedded, and frameless. The listener can be inside the text, as in Rita Dove's "The Vibraphone" (1985), or "frameless," as in "The Life You Live (May Not Be Your Own)," by J. California Cooper.[17] This study, then, suggests a way to "read" significant texts in African-American literature–texts which use the spoken-voice storytelling format in some manner–in the context of the frame.

Inside-the-text listeners of African American tales emerged as models for readers in the earliest of African-American fictions. In Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave" (1852), Madison Washington's oral stories moved an initially apolitical Listwell to lean toward abolition. As such, Douglass was using Listwell, as Ong would suggest, as a model for his readers. I contend that African-American fiction writers like Douglass mediate the line between accommodation and resistance to audience demands by opening and sustaining "narrative negotiations" with their audience, negotiations executed through the act of storytelling.

In "'A Little Personal Attention': Storytelling and the Black Audience in Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*," I suggest that throughout Chesnutt's conjure tales Julius negotiates with John and Annie for increased power and privilege. However, Chesnutt was also negotiating with an African-American readership, however small. As such, the conjure stories can also be seen as an attempt to open the constricting spaces for black individuality in the black community itself. I view the community of enslaved blacks Julius describes in his tale as a microcosm of African America: in part, Chesnutt is negotiating with his implied black frame/audience for increased tolerance of difference among African-Americans *by* African-Americans. Throughout "Hot-Foot Hannibal," then, Chesnutt demonstrates the dual nature of his white and black audiences by subverting the surface-level tale, which seems chiefly concerned with getting two young, white lovers back together, in order to argue for black cooperation.

The second chapter, "'Ah Don't Mean to Bother Wid Tellin' 'Em Nothin': Zora Neale Hurston's Critique of the Storytelling Aesthetic in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," treats the novel as a long-form storytelling event. To that end, as I discuss Janie's quest to master the storytelling aesthetic–the teller-tale-listener storytelling construct–I disagree with the widespread notion that Janie is telling her tale in order to have Pheoby pass it on to the community. While still a willing participant in the African-American vernacular tradition, the idea that Janie is *consciously* passing the tale on to the community is difficult to sustain. In the process of examining Pheoby as a model for both Eatonville's porch-sitters and the text's readers, it becomes clear by the end of the novel that the *result* of Janie telling her tale is far more problematic than the telling of the tale itself: Janie's exchange with Pheoby in the close frame is contradictory at best. Hurston uses Pheoby as a model for the reader in a slightly different manner than Ong's theory might suggest.

"Listening to the Blues: Ralph Ellison's Trueblood Episode in *Invisible Man*," the third chapter, views the Trueblood episode as crucial to the reading of the novel's depiction of Invisible Man's growth from a naive college student to a mature, knowledgeable individual. Jim Trueblood, who uses the blues to

attempt to solve his tragic-comic "ambivalence," emerges as a model (for both Invisible-Man-the-listener and the reader) of what Invisible Man would become in the epilogue: a bluesman. Mr. Norton, who also appears in the epilogue, listens (and *hears*) Trueblood's tale in a different fashion and emerges as a problematic model for readers who identify with him. I also examine the way Ellison, in his epilogue, has his narrator discuss the very nature of audience itself.

James Alan McPherson's "The Story of a Scar," the topic of the fourth chapter, moves the storytelling event to a Northern, urban setting. Aside from expanding the storytelling function from its rural roots, this frame text ably demonstrates that just because a black teller has a black listener doesn't mean that that black teller is a competent listener. The teller in this story must practice audience readjustment with a suspicious *black* listener.

My fifth chapter, "Narrative Negotiations with the Black Aesthetic in Toni Cade Bambara's 'My Man Bovanne,'" demonstrates the way "frameless" frame texts, independent of an explicit frame, negotiate with an *implied* frame. During the late sixties and mid-to-late seventies, some black writers represented spoken-voice storytellers telling first-person tales unencumbered by either a frame or a third-person narrator. By reading the story through Gerald Prince's theory of the Narrator/Narratee, I demonstrate the way Bambara's text works as a fictional argument for artistic autonomy.

John Edgar Wideman's "Doc's Story," like Chesnutt's conjure tales, offers two models for reader identification: a sympathetic black listener and his (ex)girlfriend–a skeptical (potential) white listener. The chief irony rests in the fact that the sympathetic listener, who is also the story's central character, is unsure as to whether the girlfriend "would have believed any of" the tale. As such, "Doc's Story" is an ideal text for a discussion of Stepto's "discourse of distrust" (198), particularly since that distrust is rooted in Wideman's knowledge of and reference to Chesnutt's similar distrust of his readers a hundred years earlier. Wideman's "Doc's Story," then, can be read in several ways: as commentary on the social act of storytelling, as an illustration of a form of "blindness" that connects the interior tale and the external tale, and as direct signification on Chesnutt's dialect tales, thereby bringing this study full circle.

Ultimately, my purpose here is to explore the various written representations of African-American spoken-voice storytelling by African-American writers. Certainly, the existence of stories by writers such as Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris influenced Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and other early writers of black frame texts. I discuss that influence in my Chesnutt chapter, but my focus is on the African-American representation of black spoken-voice storytelling during the century between Chesnutt and Wideman. Without pretending to present a comprehensive account of

African-American frame texts, I will open periodic windows on the black frame text to examine the variety of authorial responses to the convention.

By reexamining the relationship between writer, teller, tale, listener and reader, I will show just how the texts of Chesnutt, Hurston, Ellison, McPherson, Bambara and Wideman alter–sometimes subtly and other times substantially–"traditional" readings of some canonical texts, while establishing readings of non-canonical texts. Altering our angle of vision allows us to shed new light on some "old" texts to produce alternative readings that, while not definitive, do point to the questionable nature of the idea of a "definitive" reading of any text.

From Within the Frame: Storytelling in African-American Fiction, then, probes the tension between the frame and the black spoken voice–and the way that tension manifests itself in different ways, depending on the writer's strategy for accommodating or resisting a particular audience. In the process, this study explores a "spoken" storytelling tradition in African-American literature. By eavesdropping on the conversation between teller and listener inside the text and author and readership outside the text, and then interpreting that conversation, this study professes to tell a critical tale about the role of audience in African-American fiction.