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**FOLLOWING IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S
DUST TRACKS: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES
BY THE AUTHOR OF SHUCKIN' AND JIVIN'***

Daryl Dance

When Indiana University Press issued its Spring/Summer 1978 catalogue, and I noted the announcement of my first publication, *Shuckin' and Jivin'*, just above Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*, I thought that like Dante in Limbo I was indeed admitted into select company. I was further complimented when, in his review of my book, Richard M. Dorson generously accorded it "a place alongside the classic collection of Negro tales, *Mules and Men*."¹ Being associated with so prominent a writer and folklorist as Zora Neale Hurston is a bit overwhelming for one who eight years ago would have considered preposterous the idea that she would do any scholarly research in the field of folklore, much less publish a collection.

Eight years ago I was working on my doctoral dissertation on wit and humor in black American literature. Until that time my sallies into the field of folklore extended no further than checking out the motif of a Chaucer tale, observing the appearance of a folktale in an M. B. Tolson poem, or following the debate on the use of folk speech by Paul Laurence Dunbar. But as I started to study very carefully the humor in

* The title alludes to Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*.

This essay was written while I was doing some research in Jamaica with the assistance of a Fulbright Grant, for which I wish to express my gratitude to the United States Government Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Program.

writings by black Americans and the critical work dealing with those writings, I began to note that one of the most serious weaknesses in the consideration of this body of literature was the failure of critics to observe and note the impact of the folk tradition on those writers and their works. It became obvious, for example, that one had to know the popular folktale about the black man who raised hell in heaven when he was given a pair of wings in order to fully appreciate "Flying Home" by Ralph Ellison or *Lawd Today* by Richard Wright, whether the complete story is built around that tale as in the case of "Flying Home" or whether there is merely an allusion to it as in *Lawd Today*. The folk speech, the folk beliefs, the folk customs, the folk heroes, the folksongs, and the folktales are so much a part of the works of most of the black American authors (most notably Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison and Ishmael Reed) that it became quite clear to me that any development of my dissertation must begin with a consideration of the folklore.

As I began to peruse collections and studies of black folklore, I found that although considerable work had been done from which I was learning a great deal, there were some aspects of black folklore with which I was personally familiar (from my childhood in Charles City, Virginia, my college days in Petersburg, and my adult life in Richmond) that I had observed as influence in numerous literary works, particularly contemporary works, that were not included in the material I was finding, or were not presented in anything even vaguely resembling the versions I knew and saw represented in much of the fiction and poetry I was studying. It occurred to me then that there must indeed be a wealth of folk materials circulating contemporaneously that was neither treated in these studies nor included in my own knowledge of black folklore, but that I needed to be familiar with in order to adequately treat the subject of wit and humor in black literature. Thus began my collecting of black folklore.

My formal preparations for the task were nil. I had never had a course in folklore —had never even met or talked with a professional folklorist. I soon discovered Jan Brunvand's *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*, Kenneth S. Goldstein's *A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore*, and numerous helpful essays and introductions to collections by Richard M. Dorson, and these became my Bibles. Warned of many of the pitfalls that confront the novice collector and armed with the accumulated knowledge of many who had laid the groundwork before me, I set out, still a bit apprehensive and insecure about my

ability to accomplish the task I had set for myself, to collect materials that would be helpful to me in my study, without any thoughts of publishing a collection of folklore. Such an ambitious goal would probably have appeared so presumptuous at the time that I would have abandoned the project immediately.

If I did not have the advantage of formal training in the field of folklore, I did of course have the natural advantage of being a black person who grew up in a home where the black folk tradition was appreciated and in a small rural county—Charles City, Virginia—which was rich in black folklore; thus I did not face the immediate problem of “finding” informants and getting them to “open up” to me.

In a few instances my longstanding association with some of my informants was not an advantage, however. There were some older friends in my home community who still thought of me as “Little Daryl” whom they had known since I was a baby and to whom they would never dream of telling certain types of tales.

Occasionally, also, the fact that I was a woman caused some informants to be reluctant to give me certain kinds of materials. The toast, for example, is an exclusively male form designed by and usually related to males. In addition to being outrageously obscene, the form is, like many other male-created stories, blatantly anti-female. Consequently it is not surprising that many males hesitate to recite toasts to a woman—especially one, who, like me, seems to unwittingly present a rather prim and prudish image. A few men absolutely refused to tell me *any* obscene tales. That it is unusual for a female to successfully collect such materials was reinforced when I was recently interviewed on the Bruce Twyman television talk show in Richmond, Virginia. Mr. Twyman, a bit surprised at the fact that I had been able to collect such materials, prefaced his inquiry about my procedures and success with, “You *seem* like a very nice lady. . . .”

At one point I considered trying to change my image to better blend into the group, but I soon discovered the futility of this ruse: a middle-aged woman with sons in high school will never be accepted as one of the kids in a session with teen-agers, one who thinks of her lawn when she hears the word “weed” will never be considered one of the gang in a toast-telling session, and a Ph.D. in English doesn’t just become one of the “folk” in a “down home” session. But I quickly learned that when most of my informants observed that I was truly interested in and genuinely appreciative of their materials, they accepted me and generously, if sometimes condescendingly, helped me to overcome the language, generation, as well as cultural barriers that

occasionally made it difficult for me to understand their materials. It was obviously unusual for a toast teller to have to explain to a member of his audience such terms as "poke," "scratch," "boosting hand," "drags," "rag," among others, but most of my informants did so graciously. I had a similar language problem with some older informants who had to explain the meaning of terms such as "cush," "clapped for," and "Lydia Pinkham." My frequent requests for explanations of unfamiliar terms became so perturbing to one gentleman that in "Counting Souls," my tale # 47, he mentions walnuts and interrupts his tale to ask, "You know what *walnuts* are?"

Though I accepted the futility of projecting an assumed image, I soon learned the necessity of establishing the proper kind of atmosphere for my sessions. A woman with a tape recorder, camera, and notepad does not usually motivate storytellers to perform at their best, as I early discovered from one of my dear friends who was the best toast teller I have ever heard. He willingly consented to assist me in my project; however, when I sat down with this friend—and my tape recorder and my camera and my notepad—to collect some of those narratives that I had many times heard him tell, he could not give me one complete item. He made several weak beginnings but was unable to get through one narrative without a more natural audience. When other friends were invited, the music turned on, the drinks served, and the kind of social atmosphere in which these narratives are normally presented was established, he was again at his best. The reactions of the audience, the contributions of other storytellers, and in some instances some "spirits" are the things that motivate many of the excellent storytellers. Though I collected some superb items in single interviews, I found that usually my best material came from group sessions where not only was there a large enough audience to make everyone forget about me and my tape recorder, but also there were a couple of storytellers to compete with each other.

The actual collecting of my material was almost embarrassingly free of exciting incidents, which I fear is a reflection of my rather ordinary personality and undeviatingly commonplace life. Unlike the colorful Zora Neale Hurston, I was not almost killed in my escapades around the countryside. Indeed, I never faced any real danger of which I was aware, and was rarely even the least bit frightened. I experienced an occasional slight alarm when I found myself lost on a country road or in a "bad" area of town at night. But considering the kind of adventure to which I am prone, you can be sure that there was always some kind gentlemen or lady to immediately guide me back to

the right path. And then there was the acute discomfort I felt upon my entry into the state penitentiary as the steel doors clanged to, the guards impersonally searched me and impounded my camera (on my first visit there). But immediately a smiling official put me at my ease as he guided me to a room for a session with some interesting young inmates. There the outside environment was temporarily forgotten as we chatted and exchanged tales. As a matter of fact, the session was so lively that several passers-by stopped in to see what was going on. One entered with the inquiry, "What's all this shuckin' and jivin' going on in here?" And instantaneously I knew that that familiar old phrase was to be the title of my collection. Perhaps the most agonizing experience I suffered was walking out of that prison after those sessions, knowing that the friends I had made there—all friendly, interesting, enthusiastic, and bright young men—would remain behind those bars for five, ten, fifteen, or more years.

Unlike Zora Neale Hurston, I was not hotly pursued by any of the men whom I met in my travels. To an occasional older gentleman I was "a pretty young lady whom I wish I had met in my heyday" or a "sweet child" (and I was old enough to accept this designation as a compliment), to the young men I was a prim and proper professor, and to others I was a long-time friend. On one occasion while I was poring over Stith Thompson's *Motif Index* at the University of Virginia library, a man bent over me, placing his hands on the desk at either side of me and pressing his mouth to my ear, making it impossible for me to turn my head. He then proceeded to whisper obscenities in my ear for what seemed like ten minutes. I never saw his face, only those hands which were intensely pressed against the desk; and I felt his breath hot against my ear and neck. I was so unnerved that though I sat there for several more minutes without moving my head—I was afraid he was still behind me since I never heard him leave—I didn't check any more motifs that night. I have concluded, however, that my racist interloper would have molested me had I been reading the King James Bible, and so I cannot even definitely attribute this incident to my folklore studies.

In keeping with my penchant for order, planning, and organization, I experienced no disasters which make good anecdotes to relate later and which could serve as warnings to other collectors. I carefully planned each interview, arrived promptly with all my materials (my tape recorder, a sufficient supply of tapes, a notepad to observe gestures and audience reactions, a camera, and a nip of whiskey if this had been advised by my contacts), painstakingly established the proper atmosphere for the session, and put my informants at ease. Only once

in the years of collecting did I become so engrossed in a session that I failed to notice that the tape had run out.

My major regret is that I do not have a better visual and oral record of my work. I prize the pictures that I took, only because they evoke certain memories of people and situations that I wished to capture, but they are of too poor a quality to be very useful in exhibits and the like, which is a real loss. I suppose the only solution to this problem for me would have been to hire a professional photographer to take pictures, preferably motion pictures, since only the latter would have captured something of the drama and excitement of some of the sessions. Many of my tapes are not of the highest quality, first of all because I did not have a very good recorder nor at first did I purchase the best grade cassettes. Secondly, there is a great deal of interference which cannot be avoided in large group sessions. In the interviews in my home there are frequent interruptions from the telephone and my children. I'm not sure that the elimination of these problems would not have created other problems. To remove the informant to a soundproof room would result in a superior recording but might well, as I have already suggested, affect the delivery of the tale. To gag my children would certainly have eliminated a great deal of interference, but it might have alarmed some of my informants.

The pressures of time forced me to call a temporary halt to my folklore collecting in 1971, but even then I had gathered enough material so that the major emphasis in my dissertation was on the folklore and the influence of folklore on the recorded literature. Eager to return to the collection of folklore upon the completion of my dissertation and realizing by this time that I could indeed gather a significant collection of material, I applied for, and fortunately received, a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities which enabled me to spend the school year of 1974-75 completing the collection of tales that has recently been published as *Shuckin' and Jivin'*.

I am, of course, indebted to the many folklorists whose work preceded mine—black folklorists like Zora Neale Hurston and J. Mason Brewer, and white folklorists like Joel Chandler Harris, Richard M. Dorson, Bruce Jackson, and Roger Abrahams, to name only a few of the more prominent scholars. I hardly have the audacity to consider my work as something that could ever supplant the major collections of these scholars and others. *Shuckin' and Jivin'* is designed to complement prior collections. It is a more general collection than its predecessors and it represents a broader range of informants than any of the previous collections. The book includes materials collected from both

rural and urban areas, from informants of all ages, and from storytellers of all educational and economic levels. I included all types of folklore which I found current in the black community—obscene tales, toasts, and other forms, complete and unexpurgated—which is something no black collector had previously done. Fortunately, Roger Abrahams and Bruce Jackson had already established such forms as the toast as legitimate areas of folk expression and legitimate areas of scholarly research.

Currently, as I continue my research in black folklore in Jamaica with the assistance of a Fulbright research grant, I am constantly reminded of Zora Neale Hurston's interest and work in West Indian folklore. I recall also that Langston Hughes noted that Ms. Hurston "was always getting scholarships and things."² So perhaps I shall be following in her "dust tracks" for a while. As a matter of fact I hope one day to publish a work which might well be compared to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. There are a Janie and a Teacake of the '70s whose story I'd like to tell—and I'm not just shuckin' and jivin'.

NOTES

¹ Richard M. Dorson, "Review" of *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans*, in *The New Republic* 179(1978):34-5.

² Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography by Langston Hughes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), p.239.