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[Introduction to] From My People: 400 Years of African American Folklore

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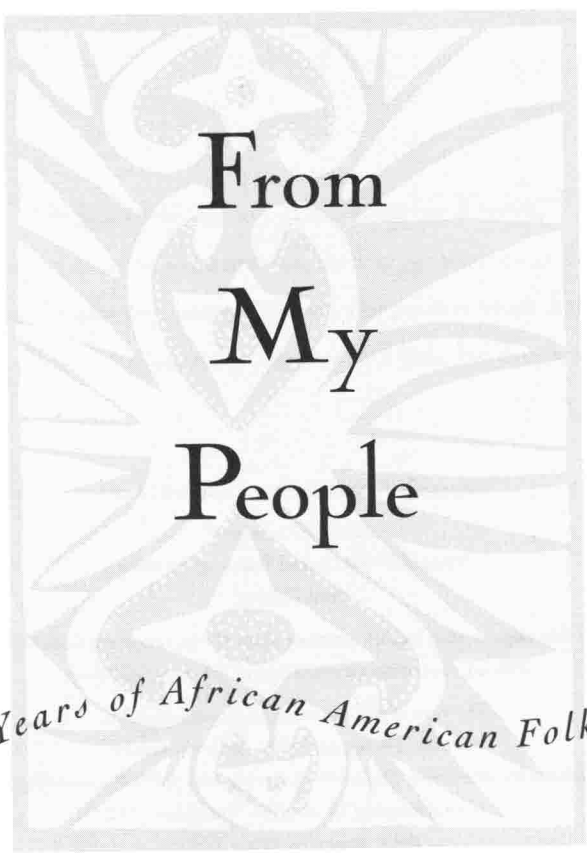
Recommended Citation

From My People: 400 Years of African American Folklore, Edited by Daryl Cumber Dance. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002.

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2002



From My People

400 Years of African American Folklore

Edited by Daryl Cumber Dance

Daryl Cumber Dance



W. W. Norton & Company

New York London

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Introduction

Folklore is the boiled-down juice of human living. It does not belong to any special time, place, nor people. No country is so primitive that it has no lore, and no country has yet become so civilized that no folklore is being made within its boundaries.

—Zora Neale Hurston,

“Go Gator and Muddy the Water”

There is probably no body of materials as rich and informative, as interesting and entertaining, as tragic and painful, as humorous and healing, as honest and imaginative, as provocative and disturbing, as broad and diverse, as universal and distinctive, as African American folklore. Those truly interested in African American life and culture need to begin their quest for knowledge here. Acclaiming the power and wonder of Negro folklore, novelist Ralph Ellison has written in *Going to the Territory*:

But what we've achieved in folklore has seldom been achieved in the novel, the short story, or poetry. In the folklore we tell what Negro experience really is. We back away from the chaos of experience and from ourselves, and we depict the humor as well as the horror of our living. We project Negro life in a metaphysical perspective and we have seen it with a complexity of vision that seldom gets into our writing.

Folklore is an important source for the study of any racial or cultural group because it provides so much that is missing from tradi-

tional scholarly sources. We are coming to realize that the facts of historical studies and the data of sociological treatises, while indispensable in the quest for an overall view of the history and culture of a people, do not completely achieve that goal of revealing to us the *full* picture. Historical and sociological studies often fail to offer a human, individual perspective; and despite their claims to objectivity, they are limited by the biases of individual scholars. A volume of history is after all but one person's interpretation of the sources at his or her command. The choice of sources, the limitation of sources, the possibilities of varied interpretations, the personal leanings of the scholar, time constraints, and a number of other variables all undoubtedly color the history that he or she produces.

While folklore is an important source for the study of any group, it is critical and indispensable as a source in our consideration of the African American experience. This fact is best illustrated in a well-known and widely disseminated folktale, the version of which I borrow here from John Oliver Killens's *Black Man's Burden*:

A little boy had read numerous stories in his children's books about various life and death struggles between a man and a lion. But no matter how ferociously the lion fought, each time the man emerged victorious. This puzzled the boy, so he asked his father, "Why is it, Daddy, that in all these stories the man always beats the lion, when everybody knows that the lion is the toughest cat in all the jungle?"

The father answered, "Son, those stories will always end that way until the lion learns how to write."

Certainly the "history" of African Americans in this country has been written for hundreds of years with few or (all too often) no contributions from the subjects themselves. It was a history largely written from the perspective of Whites, most of them racists who felt compelled to use their studies to defend their system of slavery and segregation. It was written from the perspective of those who operated and profited from a system of slavery and who had never experienced Black culture, Black life, Black conditions. Traditionally what has been presented as the history of African Americans is a history of lies, distortions, and misinterpretations. It is a history that

maligns Blacks as everything from happy and contented slaves and clowns to barbaric and monstrous beasts. It is a history that insists that Blacks are a people without a history, culture, distinctiveness, or meaningful traditions. It is, as the folk so aptly put it, not history but "*his* story." And "his story" denies in the most demeaning manner African American culture and history. As James Baldwin reminds us in *No Name in the Street*, "the key to a tale is to be found in who tells it."

The Negro who is pictured in these "histories" is unrecognizable to most of the folk that one of John Langston Gwaltney's informants referred to as "just drylongso¹ Black people"—for the simple reason, as another of his informants astutely observed, that things "mean one thing to us and something else to white people." And if we want to know what things mean to many drylongso Black people, our best source is unquestionably the African American folk tradition.

John Little, a runaway slave, noted, "'Tisn't he who has stood and looked on, that can tell you what slavery is—'tis he who has endured" (cited in Norman R. Yetman, ed., *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution"*). Although not too many John Littles left written accounts, a surprising number orally passed on their experiences through their children and their children's children so that it is indeed possible, even to this day, to hear the voices of those who "endured." The interpretation of those voices is a matter of some serious import to those interested in America's history.

It is also important to note that traditionally history has been concerned with rulers, wars, powerful forces, and grand adventures, events far removed from the folk whose voices are heard in the oral traditions. Mr. Dooley, in Finley Peter Dunne's *Observations by Mr. Dooley* humorously, but forcefully, reinforces this point:

"I know histhry isn't true, Hinnessy, . . . because it ain't like what I see ivry day in Halstead Sthreet. If any wan comes along with a histhry iv Greece or Rome that'll show me th' people fightin', gettin' dhrunk, makin' love, gettin' married, owin' th' grocery man an' ebin' without hard-coal, I'll believe they was a Greece or

¹*Drylongso* is an African American folk expression meaning ordinary or regular.

Rome, but not before. Historyans is like doctors. They are always lookin' fr symptoms. Those iv them that writes about their own times examines th' tongue and feels th' pulse an' makes a wrong dygnosis. Th' other kind iv history is a post-mortem examination. It tells ye what a counthry died iv. But I'd like to know what it lived iv."

Similar details of the lives and loves and hopes and fears—what ordinary African Americans "lived iv"—are the stuff of the folk tradition. This is indeed a necessary component in the study of American culture, for one of the lessons that must be learned from history is that it is not merely the rulers and the intelligentsia and the wealthy and the Whites who influence history and whose lives are of significance to us. The so-called powerless folk are actors in the drama as well and likewise contribute to the events that transpire in a nation's life. A lowly female slave creeping away from her master's bed, a common male slave plotting revolt, an ordinary mother slave singing a spiritual, and a conjure doctor concocting a potion to cast a spell on his master were all reflecting the past, responding to the present, and influencing the future. Their experiences are as necessary in truly understanding American history (Black and White) as those of any prominent figure. We must realize then that the facts of historical studies, the data of sociological treatises, the imaginative accounts of literary works—while indispensable in the quest for an overall view of the history and culture of a people—do not completely achieve that goal of revealing to us the full picture.

The folk tradition, for numerous reasons, may present a much more honest, objective, and direct reflection of a people than can be found in what those in the academy usually designate history, or sociology, or literature. First of all, folklore is a group creation that by its very being—its conception, transmission, and survival—reveals a great deal about the realities of the life of that group—about their experiences and reactions to those experiences. I am not proposing, of course, that all folktales be viewed as literal history: not all of them are true accounts of events—though many indeed have their origins in actual incidents from everyday life. The important point is that even when they deal with fictional events, those tales, when carefully analyzed, reveal the true soul of the people who created them. It is

in the folklore of a people that we find out most about their values and concerns, their innermost thoughts and desires. Folklore indeed tells us what people “lived iv.” The revelations therein are often greater than even the creators of the tales themselves realize. A tale’s growth and continued existence is contingent upon its acceptance by a larger group. The modifications it undergoes will reflect the soul of the group within which it circulates, so that when a tale can properly be called a folktale—when it has a currency among a certain group, when it exists in variant forms—we should be aware that it is thereby an item of some significance in understanding something about that group. As Frantz Fanon notes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “When a story flourishes in the heart of a folklore it is because in one way or another it expresses an aspect of the ‘spirit of the group.’” In the Black community, an item of folklore will not be admitted or even listened to if it does not reveal the unique characteristics of African American materials that some may call soul, others spirit, still others style. Castigation awaits the speaker whose material is not consistent with the group’s specifications and values.

While folktales are among the largest group of oral folk items, while they represent the most easily accessible genre in the oral folk tradition, and while they have a peculiar significance because of the way they can project and comment upon a complete situation, this anthology aptly demonstrates that those interested in the full range of African American folklore will find wealth aplenty in numerous other forms, oral and otherwise—notably songs, styling out, sermons and speeches, family legends and memorates, soul food, proverbs and other memorable sayings, rhymes, worksongs, shouts, riddles, verbal tests, contests, folk art and crafts, graffiti, superstitions, rumors, and techlore. My goal in this collection is to acquaint readers with the broad range of folk expressions, from the creations of enslaved Africans to contemporary forms.

My efforts to include contemporary materials have reinforced the need for new definitions of folklore in a twenty-first-century world. Those whose earlier definitions of folklore limited it to “popular antiquities” or “archaic” beliefs and customs that circulate only in the oral tradition certainly never envisioned such things as photocopiers and computers. Many of them would have looked for folklore only in isolated societies, far removed from the modern workplaces and

subways of cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, or Chicago, where new forms, such as photocopied sheets, E-mailed rumors, urban legends, rap, breakdancing, and subway graffiti, are constantly being spawned daily. Obviously earlier proscriptions that folklore only circulates in variant forms must be modified to take into account new media of circulation, such as photocopied sheets, E-mails, and Web sites, not to mention CDs, television programs, and nightclub comic shows. The degree to which such "standardization" or "formalization" of materials removes them from the realm of folklore is an issue that will continue to be debated for many years.

A close study of a number of these modern forms, such as I attempt in individual chapters in this book, will in fact reveal that there is much more of the traditional in these "new" expressions than many of their practitioners realize. Rap, stomping, graffiti, and many popular new dances are simply slightly modernized variants of long-standing traditional practices. The photocopied sheets, E-mails, jokes, tales on Web sites, and comic revues continue to retain traditional motifs, form, structure, and tones.

This anthology also includes a number of selections by creative writers, pieces that are folkloristic literature rather than actual folklore collected in the field. I have included such works when these authors seem to be transcribing folk events that they have witnessed rather than imaginatively creating those events. Certain pieces presented in the creative work of writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and others (all of whom were close students of Black folk culture) are arguably more authentic than many of those provided by folklore collectors. When I was collecting folklore in the 1970s for my book *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans*, several of my informants had not heard of Dunbar but recited verses from him that they had learned from family and friends. His work, growing out of the folk tradition, was easily accepted back into the folk culture. I also include here a number of sermons from trained theologians who continue to use elements from the folk tradition that they learned long before they attended college and divinity schools. Several recent studies of the Black folk sermon, such as those by Dolan Hubbard and Gerald L. Davis, likewise include such works in their analyses. I recognize that there may be some debate about the

distinction between folklore and literature, between the folk sermon and the learned oration, but I include a limited number of carefully selected items here because of the strong folk influence upon them; in each instance I also provide some commentary to highlight their sources. On the other hand, I have been careful to exclude folk imitations, or works by those who consciously mimic folk art. Rather, I have attempted to include a few clear and natural evolutions or evocations of folk expressions.

As you peruse these chapters, you will discover that the classifications I have attempted do not achieve distinct and clear-cut differentiations. The fluidity of folk forms is remarkable. All of these forms are related and interrelated. Quilting includes socializing with its tale-telling and feasting; sermons are not mere oral discourse but a kind of styling out; talking can be just as much a work of art as a painting; songs are narratives, and narratives incorporate songs; graffiti and toasts often reflect the same goals. The lines of demarcation are never clear between family legends and folktales, rhymes and songs, rumors and urban legends. Numerous items included in one chapter could conceivably be situated elsewhere in the book.

As in any effort at a folklore anthology, I am limited in my ability to convey the full context of the folk event, during which the folklore arose. Your appreciation of oral items transcribed here would be enriched if you could hear, see, and feel the dynamic presence and voice and drama of a mesmerizing performer. Your appreciation would be enlarged were you privy to the explanatory commentaries of the tellers and the responses of the audience during the actual performance. Your appreciation would be increased had you experienced or witnessed the precipitating events that motivated the folk expression. Your appreciation would be enhanced were you able to observe other activities in conjunction with the oral expressions: tonal variations, meaningful gestures that occur during a recitation, games played during the singing of a particular song, dances accompanying a song. I have taken many paths (some of them a bit roundabout) to attempt to provide you with as great a sense of the folk piece as the limitations of my format here allow. I provide the texts of many forms—tales, songs, proverbs, rhymes, and so on—but you must use your imagination to conceive of their delivery. The rhythms, the tones, the modulations, the gestures cannot be incorporated into the

pages of a book. Occasionally, I have provided some contexts for selected pieces to help you to better envision the whole event.

In some instances, I am not even able to provide the text of a folk practice that is not easily reproduced on the page, such as the ring shout. In such situations, I can offer only summary-descriptions provided by viewers—and in a few situations a photograph.

As I compiled this anthology, I wrestled with the overall issue of the source of the texts of African American folklore. Some of the most beautiful performances of Black people are provided by observers who could see nothing but barbarism and ignorance when they looked at Negroes. Where the only other option was to drop such items completely, I have included a number of these pieces, trusting that readers will look through and beyond these sources' narrow views and hopefully appreciate the subject despite the limitations in presentation. I faced other problems too: the material may not be fully representative; it may have been dangerously expurgated or edited by an outsider; it may reflect the prejudices of the folk collector more than the views of the teller; and it may even have been censored by the teller himself. Elsie Clews Parsons, for example, reported in *Folk-Lore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina* that obscene tales were absent in Carolina; yet she acknowledged that her informants wouldn't tell her toasts and men's tales, and she included several riddles with an obscene suggestiveness that she obviously did not recognize. She also observed that another collector of Black folklore, A. M. H. Christensen, "told me that, faithful recorder as she was, on this point she had been selective: the stories she found 'vulgar' she had not taken." Howard Odum and Guy Johnson likewise omitted a great deal of material because of its perceived obscenity. Even Langston Hughes, given the times and publishing exigencies, cleaned up the toasts to the point that his versions would have limited usefulness to a student of the form. I, myself, have done some limited expurgations of the toasts and a few other items in this anthology because I did not want young people to be denied access to this rich heritage because of concerns about profanity.

Furthermore, in order to make the selections more readable, I have also regularized spelling in a few instances in which transcribers of the material used exaggerated dialect and misspellings, as was popular in treating Black speech until well into the twentieth century.

I have done this with great caution, seeking not to standardize the speech so much as to prevent its nuances and rhythms from being lost amid an unreadable, mutilated, buffoonish, minstrel-type gibberish. In other words, in carefully selected cases, I have made very minor changes to try to restore passages to a recognizable African American vernacular expression. For example, I have sometimes changed *wur* to *were*, *consequens* to *consequence*, *I'z* to *I's*, *uv* to *of*, *nuthin'* to *nothin'*, *doan't* to *don't*, *gin'ral avrig* to *general average*, *tur'ble trub'le* to *terrible trouble*, *sed* to *said*, *furloserfers* to *philosophers*, *nu* to *new*, *sezee* to *says be*, *wen* to *when*, etc.

My goal throughout my career and in this anthology has been to collect, transcribe, preserve, and respect the integrity of the folk text. As I have worked in the field over the last thirty years, I have been keenly aware that my informants, the depositories of the knowledge of the past, have entrusted their histories and stories to me in the faith that I will respect, protect, and preserve them. That trust is an obligation that has motivated me here and elsewhere to strive for the most honest and representative texts.

Finally, in judging collections of folk texts, I have had to consider the possibility that informants will eliminate certain materials or modify them before sharing them with some folklorists. I remember the first time I collected the popular parrot tale about a maid stealing hot biscuits from her mistress, "Hot Biscuits Burn Yo' Ass" (Chapter 1): the teller carefully expurgated the narrative, and the audience of older ladies did not respond at all to the story, which they all knew. Finally one lady spoke up, and said, "Aw, Sadie, you know that ain't the way that ends," and she proceeded to provide the usual obscene punch line. The original teller's attempt to explain her variation cannot be heard on my tape because of the loud outburst of the audience, both in response to the proper punch line and to the original teller's unsatisfactory and clearly unacceptable attempt to change the tale. I experienced other similar incidents where tellers obviously responded to me as a collector: some males, for example, would not tell me certain tales. In other instances the group was restrained by a member of the audience. My problems, however, were infinitesimal when compared with those faced by some White collectors. The selectivity oftentimes practiced by Black folk approached by White collectors was noted by Zora Neale Hurston:

Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a featherbed of resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries. The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song!" (*Mules and Men*)

Such different reactions are clearly illustrated in studies of the WPA collections of narratives from former enslaved African Americans: The South Carolina WPA collectors were all Whites, and the accounts indicate that those who were enslaved were well fed, well clothed, and generally well treated by kindly masters. A completely different image of slave life emerges from the tales Black scholars at Fisk, Hampton, and Southern University collected. The narratives Blacks collected also contain many more details about "sensitive" subjects, such as life in the slave quarters, miscegenation, and Black anger, hatred, and resistance. We can conclude that these variations may have had something to do with, among other things, choices the tellers made based upon the race of the collectors as well as the choices the interviewers made about what they recorded, whom they recorded, and the questions they asked.

I have brought these and other considerations to the choices of selections I include in this anthology. I have considered the quality of the collectors and the collections from which I have reproduced material. I have chosen, where possible, material taken directly from the folk. Despite the fact that in many instances I would have preferred

to provide a more objective, open, and inclusive version of some items, I have made every effort to present the most representative, accurate, and interesting account available. In instances where I have used literary sources, I have attempted to choose selections from writers who were most appreciative of, sensitive toward, and faithful to the actual folk sources. However, at times I found it necessary to include descriptions by academic observers writing for an audience far removed from the folk community and utilizing terms that their subjects would never understand as descriptive of their actions. Their didactic, verbose, pompous, and theoretical presentation is often so alien to their subject matter that it threatens to obscure rather than illuminate. Yet in some instances theirs are the only descriptions available of particular gestures, actions, dances, and music. But when I have had to select a source undesirable for one reason or another, I have chosen the least compromising one. In every case I have considered the quality of the text as well and made every attempt to provide the version that would likely merit the approval of a demanding folk audience.

There is, unfortunately, some truth to the folk expression, "You've got to go there to know there," but my goal in this anthology is to take you there in every way that the printed word and the reproduced picture can possibly do.

As you read this collection, you will note many of the distinctive qualities of the folklore from the African American community. At the same time that you appreciate its uniqueness, it is also important to note that remarkably similar items of folklore circulate in other countries and a variety of racial and ethnic groups. The same motifs, the same character types, and indeed the same tales have frequently been collected from one part of the globe to the other. Certainly nothing reinforces the kinship of humanity across oceans and time more than folklore. Thus at the same time their tales, language, style, songs, and proverbs tell us about the African Americans' experience in America, they reveal a great deal about Blacks as a part of a universal family.

May you be enlightened, inspired, and entertained as you enjoy four hundred years of folklore from my people.