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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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