Folklore in New World Black Fiction
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Writing and the Oral Traditional Aesthetics

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For Mama
Mandah Nwaorienma
Whose Cradle Still Rocks Me
And in Memory of Papa
Israel Enyinna
Who Taught Me Books Hum
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The complexity of the New World demands that any meaningful exploration of its cultural landscape, especially with reference to its literary production, take note of the region’s multiple racial identities, the histories of slavery, military conquests, and various forms of migration to the area in different times and circumstances. For a study on folkloric forms in narratives by writers of African descent in the New World, it is certainly important to bear that complexity in mind. Although this study draws heavily from African oral performance aesthetics in the examination of works by the selected authors, I am fully aware of the intersections between African folkloric practices and other cultural traditions that are present in these texts. Yet it is fair to claim a black bias based on the preponderance of signals indicative of that heritage and on the strength of the claims made by the authors. This point is worth emphasizing, for in a region composed of indigenous peoples and descendants of peoples from Africa, Asia, and Europe, it is tempting to view literary production through the prism of its most dominant member, the United States, which, despite the growing visibility of its minority writers, shares greater literary affinity with the West than with the rest of the Americas. Moreover, for much of the Southern Hemisphere that has long come under the political and economic dominance of the North and Europe, the ramifications of this dominance might be felt through the marginalization that occurs due to limited access to the world stage.
In the context of such dominance, many diasporic black writers have sought to assert their place in the New World’s cultural production through conscious engagement with and tribute to their continental African heritage, a heritage largely defined by oral verbal arts and folklore. It is not difficult to assess the reason behind the close association between folklore and New World written narrative tradition. Africans brought in as slaves to work the plantations in the New World strove to maintain their religious and cultural bearing by relying on their memories of folk traditions in their various homelands and transforming them to usable and passable forms in the hostile Europeanized environment of the New World.

While the presence of folklore in contemporary black written narratives is not in doubt, what has not received adequate attention is the extent to which the folkloric tradition serves as the medium for engaging the works at a hermeneutic level. This book attempts to address this problem by adopting oral performance aesthetic values as its principal analytic tool for understanding select works by four prominent African New World novelists. In the New World literary tradition, folklore is not just a major aspect of the tradition, but for the works examined here, meaning is intrinsically connected with the oral strategies they embody.

Folk, Folklore, and the Folkloric Text

In conceptualizing folklore and the manner in which it is studied, it is important to see folklore as dynamic, adapting to the trends and sensibilities of a given group. This goes contrary to Paulo de Carvalho-Neto’s argument in *The Concept of Folklore*, for example, where he tries to make a distinction between folklore and what he refers to as “aesthetic projection,” which he defines as a “simulation of folklore . . . characterized by a change of transmitters, a change of motivation, a change of function, a change of forms, and a change of learning” (101). Put differently, he draws a distinction between “folklore” and “folklore lite.” The idea that different degrees of “folklore” exist stems from his conceptualization of folklore as phenomenon “typified by being anonymous, non-institutionalized, and eventually by being ancient, functional, and prelogical” (82). One senses that Carvalho-Neto locates folklore among groups untouched by “civilization,” while the rest of the world can only produce “simulated” folklore. The idea of “simulation” implicated in his “aesthetic projection” is a misunderstanding of the artistic imagination that inspires a performer and community in producing what is then received as folkloric. And what
preserves a tradition if not the continuous imitation and re-presentation of that tradition by members of the community?

The essentialist bent of Carvalho-Neto is also evident in his argument about authorship and transmission. The folkloric act, he states, is such insofar as the originator is unknown. This position overstates the notion of communal/anonymous authorship related to oral traditions, as well as the connection between orality and antiquity. A pragmatic conceptualization of folklore would suggest that the social and cultural transformations that occur in human societies invariably bring about new and “original” compositions; such compositions are capable of bearing the stamp of individual ingenuity that does not undermine their status as communal artifacts. Besides, the prevalence of oral practices in antiquity does not and should not mean that folklore does not exist in contemporary societies.

On the other hand, Dan Ben-Amos rescues folklore from what seems like an atavistic view by defining it as performance. According to him, folklore is not merely an itemization of acts and thoughts but “a communicative process” (9). A folkloric act occurs when “both the performers and the audience have to be in the same situation and be part of the same reference group.” He also notes that there has to be a “face to face” communication to make the act possible (12–13). The benefit of Ben-Amos’s view is that it places the folkloric act in the field of cultural exchange between performer and audience. Both entities share a common cultural experience and the cultural transaction between them is mutually generated.

Nevertheless, Ben-Amos seems to lean too heavily on the communicative context of the folkloric act. To circumscribe the folkloric act within “face to face” exchange would be to ignore the other levels of orality that are possible. The performance of folklore in print, television, and other such mass media cannot be a basis for not recognizing an act as folklore. If Roger D. Abrahams’s assertion that folklore “gives form to energies set in motion by some shared or social anxiety” (“Personal Power” 19) is valid, then the context of expressing “anxiety” cannot supersede the performance itself insofar as the folkloric transaction, in whatever medium, remains mutual between the participants. This view is made more cogent by the imperatives of social change; folklore resists “tradition” as it is constantly reflecting and refashioning the experience of the community, whether in antiquity or in posterity.

The artistry of folklore (i.e., its capacity to represent group consciousness through artistic expression) further suggests that the primary concern of the performers, and the assumption that informs the group’s reception
of the act, is the quality of the experience being evoked. To emphasize
the point in relation to the present discussion, once folklore is separated
from the narrow notion of being produced by “simple folk,” a more fruit-
ful discussion of its presence in contemporary New World black litera-
ture ensues. To open up possibilities for exploring the kinds of literatures
produced in the New World, especially among writers of African descent,
this work defines folklore as the gamut of cultural and literary production
disseminated over oral, written, and electronic media that is inspired by a
high degree of communal philosophy, ethos, or beliefs.

There are reasons for approaching the concept of folklore from a con-
temporaneous standpoint. First, it creates wider avenues for examining
the subject. The term “folk” can no longer be restricted to the context of
locality or social and economic class. As Alan Dundes posits, “‘folk’ can
refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common fac-
tor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common
occupation, language . . . but what is important is that a group formed
for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own” (2).
Thus a reading, viewing, or listening audience spatially removed from the
performer can constitute a group involved in a cultural transaction that
has been transformed into an available contemporary medium. This book
identifies the New World black narrative as a transmitter of the folkloric
act. The configuration of this act through the interplay of oral and writ-
ten signs forms the central concern of my study. In narrative, there still
exists an identifiable cultural space where the novelists and their audi-
ence in the Americas engage in a folkloric transaction with an empathy
not unlike that of face-to-face interchange in oral groups. As I shall try to
demonstrate, the Afro-diasporic novelist engages in the folkloric act with
an awareness of the community’s traditions similar to that of an oral per-
former. The difference is that the written context of transmission inevita-
ably requires different parameters for the signification of the folkloric act.
This difference is not a devaluation of the act. The challenge facing the
scholar is to evaluate the folkloric act in its transformed identity, as artists
and community respond to a rapidly technologizing world.

Africa and New World Consciousness

Earlier, I referred to the African diaspora as a single cultural space. This is
arguably misleading, for while diaspora black culture may be said to origi-
nate from a common African ancestry, the social, political, and economic
peculiarities discernible in the various geographical spaces occupied by
the diaspora demand an appropriate sensitivity to differences. Thus, in
the matter of the folkloric act and the New World black narrative, it is
necessary to pay attention to the different views on aesthetics of blacks
on both sides of the Atlantic. Bearing this in mind, David Dorsey’s defini-
tion of black aesthetics as “the syndrome of internal factors governing a
black audience’s perception and appreciation of art” (7) may be useful in
distinguishing aesthetics in racial terms, but not adequate in analyzing the
specificities of regional identities that make up what we refer to as the
African diaspora. Certainly, black aesthetics may be assumed to exclude
nonblack communities. However, considering the historical circumstances
that have transformed black peoples in global contexts, it is doubtful that
a serious discussion on Afro-diasporic aesthetics can be sustained where
the category “black” is pressed to the disregard of difference. Surely, there
exists some difference between, say, Chinua Achebe’s and Wole Soyinka’s
conceptualizations of the black aesthetic on the one hand, and James Bal-
dwin’s and Richard Wright’s on the other. An awareness of such differences
will guide the emphasis I intend to place on African New World experi-
ences and discourses, rather than the more tempting option of pursuing
the folkloric act in the New World from an entirely African viewpoint. And by African, I refer principally to the Atlantic West Coast, where the
majority of blacks in the New World trace their lineage and cultural heri-
tage.

In his essay “The African Imagination,” Abiola Irele identifies the spo-
ken word as the informing sensibility of literary expression in Africa. Not
only is oral literature a medium but, indeed, the corpus of artistic expres-
sions in the continent derives its durability from, and is sustained by,
the nature of oral discourse. Hence, Irele concludes that orality is the
“basic intertext of the African imagination” (56). Whatever we identify
as African literature is derived mainly from the creative dynamics gener-
at by the oral form. The “aesthetic transaction” to which Ropo Sekoni
refers in his Folk Poetics is based on an interaction between an audience
and a performer operating in an oral context (10). The audience and the
performer know each other, and both recognize that the artist is work-
ing with materials generated through communal cultural consciousness.
Even where the performer is transformed into a writer, with the attendant
solitariness and individuality that go with the writing process, one finds
that in many instances the writer still lays claim to a communal ethos
shared with the readership. I cannot emphasize enough this necessity
for affinity between performer and audience because that relationship
is connected to the spoken word, a phenomenon that deserves further explanation.

The spoken word does not derive its primacy merely because of the prevalence of primary orality in parts of the continent. Among the Dogon of Mali, for example, the creative principle in Amma, the godhead, is embodied in Nommo, the power of speech. Achebe’s often-cited authorial comment in Things Fall Apart that the art of conversation is highly regarded among the Igbo of Nigeria (7) could also be said about other African ethnic groups. In many African societies, the speech act is a ceremony, an occasion for the display of several levels of artistic showmanship that is an important element in the aesthetics of the group. The ample investment in the spoken word, especially at the literary level, is due to the immense performative force of the speech act. In performance, the artist undertakes complementary kinesic acts that distinguish his or her competence from that of others. These kinesic acts include modulation of voice, dance steps that accompany singing, the interactive gestures the artist makes with the audience, and the facial expressions (including eye movements) that accompany each spoken word. The performance of the spoken word is an occasion for a theatrical assemblage that tasks the creative talent of the performer while satisfying the audience’s demand for a visually and aurally pleasing reinforcement of their artistic heritage.

Furthermore, the eminence given to the spoken word is not only in the opportunity it provides for a sense of theater in performance. Speech is also the agency through which the literary “canons” of the society are reinforced, extended, recreated, and even, logically, created. Built into the aesthetic of the African oral performance is the expectation that the performance would generate a new “tome” to be added to the larger repertoire. The community does not gather to hear and watch what they have heard and seen before; the artistic appreciation of each performance involves the observance of the degree to which the performer has made a peculiar imprint on the material drawn from the common repertoire. What constitutes the repertoire of the community and, by extension, what defines the community’s artistic values is constantly negotiated between the audience and the artist. Such a continual mediation traditionally takes place in the context of the oral performance where the spoken word holds sway, and where each constituted audience is the guardian of the tradition. The significance of the negotiation is what Isidore Okpewho suggests when he says of the nature of oral composition, “it always involves some amount of compromise between tried and tested techniques and new elements invented or substituted for a specific occasion or purpose. . . . The
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A ready-made phrase or pattern of procedure . . . is now combined with new elements . . . and a new song or tale is born” (African Oral Literature 33).

These fundamental principles of the African oral performance also apply to written literature. True, the interactive moments of oral performance are not realizable in print; however, African writers pursue the same aesthetic goals through representing the essence of such values. A performance-driven aesthetic mediates the oral tradition and the relatively younger written tradition. A reading of Yambo Ouologuem’s Bound to Violence or Ngugi’s Petals of Blood, along with more recent works, reveals how some African writers manipulate language and cultural context in order to satisfy the oral performance demand to show competence through verbal dexterity.

In addition to the performative aspect of the oral art, the African aesthetic principle also derives from a connection of art with the physical environment. Okpewho has referred to this situation as the “ecology of art” (Epic 19). One of the examples he uses to buttress his point is a reference to D. T. Niane’s Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali. There, the griot of Sundiata’s father chides the hunter-seer for the obscurity of his prophesy, charging him to “speak in the language of your Savanna” (ibid.). The royal griot seems to be pointing to the unacceptability of art that does not reflect the environment of its community. In the same book, Okpewho demonstrates how difference in the physical landscapes of various African regions is responsible for the prominence or absence of certain narrative tropes across the continent (19–21). Thus, the content of the speech form is reflective of the texture of the environment. Similarly, in the New World black writing experience, one observes the effort of artists or critics to represent their condition through metaphors drawn from their environment. For example, some African Caribbean writers have attempted to articulate their community’s reality through the metaphor of maroonage, a metaphor that interlocks with the landscape of a strange island and a threatening sea.

In the Americas, the articulation of the black aesthetic has been both simple and complicated: simple in that blacks in the Americas are historically known to be descendants of Africans captured as slaves and forcefully brought to the New World. At this level, discussion of the black aesthetic has understandably prioritized its African roots and has sometimes even dismissed the possibility of articulating it along other lines. For example, John O’Neal, one of the critics of the 1960s Black Arts movement, argued that African Americans must see themselves as Africans and not as Americans (47–48). In that vein, the aesthetic philosophy expounded takes its
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bearing, or tries to do so, from an African model. In his work dealing with
the corn-shucking activity in slave plantations, *Singing the Master*, Roger D.
Abrahams has argued that though the slaves “developed uniquely Ameri-
can traditions of interacting, celebrating and worshipping,” such traditions
were mainly “organized around the moral and aesthetic principles found
throughout much of the sub-Saharan world from which they came” (xviii).
Using the corn-shucking event as a paradigm, Abrahams reveals how the
performance aspects of the ceremony indicate their African origins and
how these aspects have been critical to the formulation of black aesthetics
in the Americas, especially in the United States. One of the characteris-
tics is the antiphonality involved in the call and response and its effectiveness
in guaranteeing universal participation.

There is also the dance element Abrahams identifies as “cutting,” a com-
petitive process involving “a cutting up, a breaking away from the group,
with the dancer making a bid for attention as he ‘shows his stuff’ or as
she ‘makes her motion’ to the others” (101). Closely related to “cutting” is
“breaking”; but here the emphasis is not so much on establishing differ-
ence from the “norm” as on accentuating the “strangeness of the altera-
tion” (102).

Other artistic aspects of the corn-shucking activity are the audience
that forms a ring around the dancer, the group leader elected because of
his eloquence and ability to improvise, and the songs intricately deployed
as vocal accompaniment to manual work. These close affinities to African
oral performance lead Abrahams to make an important statement: “tra-
ditional features of African eloquence and improvisation in speech, song,
and dance provided the basis for the development of an Afro-American
aesthetic system which has been maintained to this day” (130). Although
he does not underrate the considerable influence of European culture on
blacks, Abrahams’s study clearly situates the core of the African American
aesthetic in an African paradigm.

On the other hand, writers and critics such as James Baldwin, Carole
Boyce Davies, and Paul Gilroy at different times have interrogated the valid-
ity of overemphasizing the African antecedent of the aesthetics of blacks
in the diaspora. The problem begins with the concept of the “African Dias-
pora.” How African can the later generations of former African slaves in
the New World claim to be after such an extensive association with the
whites and Indians of the Americas? With the shifting migration patterns
among blacks in the New World and Europe, to what extent can the notion
of essential “blackness” be pursued in these multicultural sites?

These questions become more cogent by the ascendancy of Afrocentric
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discourse in many U.S. colleges, whereby Africans and blacks in the diaspora are viewed as operating within a homogeneous ontological space. But as Carole Boyce Davies has argued, albeit from a black feminist perspective, any totalizing view of the black experience (or “African-diaspora”) direly needs to be interrogated, especially when linked with a masculinist notion of nationalism. In her words,

Any articulation of a critique of home for Black women has to begin with an examination of the totalizing nature of nationalist (Africa-diaspora) discourse. Pan-Africanism, Black/African nationalism and Afrocentricity are “totalizing discourses” which can tolerate no different articulation and operate from a singularly monolithic construction of an African theoretical homeland which asks for the submergence or silencing of gender, sexuality or any other ideological stance or identity position which is not subsumed under Black/African nationalism. (49–50)

Central to Davies’s position is the conceptualization of “home.” A broader notion of “home,” she suggests, would include recognition of the diverse sociocultural and political experiences that have characterized peoples of African descent around the world. Africa and its aesthetic become an “imaginary/historical basis of identity or self-assertion” that shares equal significance with other ideas of “home” constructed along lines of gender, sexuality, or national territory (51).

Davies at least acknowledges the relevance of an African foundation (even if it is an imaginary one) while constructing other “homes.” The British culture theorist Paul Gilroy dismisses even this minimal connection, claiming that “the term ‘diaspora’ ... points emphatically to the fact that there can be no pure, uncontaminated, or essential blackness anchored in an unsullied originary moment” (Small Acts 99). Forceful as this assertion is, its usefulness is diminished in the extremity of that stance, for the presence of blacks in the Americas and Europe can be historically accounted for. I have already cited one concrete example in Hall’s work where the ethnic identities of many of the Africans shipped to the Americas were documented in detail. Nor is it possible to dismiss as entirely unfounded an aesthetic that in broad terms explains some of the shared cultural categories existing both in Africa and in Afro-diasporic communities.

In The Black Atlantic, Gilroy attempts to articulate his notion of the African diaspora in what he terms the “Black Atlantic” with “The Ship” as its metaphor. The Black Atlantic, Gilroy argues, is “the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formulation,” different
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from what he considers the “nationalistic focus” of cultural studies among the English and African Americans (4). Gilroy posits, “The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons [as] ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland” (4). Later in the work Gilroy specifies that the Black Atlantic construct is aimed at transcending “both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity, and national particularity” (19).

The postmodernist fervor of Gilroy’s argument is obvious. The idea of a ship floating in an ever-unfolding centerless (“rhizomorphic”) space, and lacking a concrete structure, or rather, possessing a “fractal” one, makes for a fine theoretical expedition. Besides, it demands a discarding of presumptions about how cultural or political spaces operate in the pre-constructionist ideologies. We are called to recognize that indeed a space exists in which the historical, cultural, and political experience of blacks in the diaspora could be interrogated outside an African “fore-figure.” But who gains from this proposition, and does the problem it seeks to solve really exist? Gilroy’s premise for this fractal image of the diasporic African centers on the notion that Africans’ cultural encounters, in their forced or voluntary sojourns in Europe and the Americas, have bequeathed on them “two great cultural assemblages” that are “locked symbiotically in an antagonistic relationship marked out by the symbolism of colors which adds to the conspicuous cultural power of their central Manichean dynamic—black and white” (Black Atlantic 1–2). Thus, diaspora consciousness is marked by angst, an eternal struggle of two traditions without resolution. But as Michael J. C. Echeruo ponders, while addressing this particular claim by Gilroy, “why should this particular plague be visited on black people? Why is it that creolisation is always an event attachable only to one of the two sources of hybridity? . . . Why is it that Europe, for all the changes and transformations it has undergone over the centuries, has remained a recognizable entity, whereas Africa . . . is always the sufferer, and its children the natural victims of this unique mental disorder of double consciousness?” (6). Echeruo raises poignant questions regarding the rush to neutralize the ontological and historical connection between Africa and Africans in the diaspora. Other groups that have experienced dispersion, notably, the Jewish people, never question their core Jewish identity no matter the cultural, linguistic, or political tensions that confront them where they sojourn. Thus, Gilroy’s fractal construct proceeds from a faulty notion of diaspora identity.
To take the subject further, if such a rhizomorphic space exists, what do we make of a Black Atlantic that ignores ethnic particularities? The New World and Europe remain racialized and ethnically stratified territories. Race and ethnicity remain at the heart of many of the world’s intractable conflicts, indicating how profound in people’s lives they are. So, is it viable to efface ethnic differences and latch onto a floating ship with no clear idea of its ports of departure and arrival? Gilroy’s Black Atlantic seems to gloss over the particularities of the experiences of blacks in the diaspora. Despite the shared experience of slavery between African Americans, from, say, Guyana and the United States, there are marked cultural and political differences. Nation/state/nationality may be regarded as modern Western constructs by which blacks by virtue of the circumstances of their journey out of their homeland need not be constrained. Yet they are the emblems that distinguish the political expression of the American black from, say, the British black.

The notion of the Black Atlantic turns suspicious when an undercurrent of white supremacist thinking seems to be running through its rhetoric. In *Small Acts*, Gilroy proposes an aesthetic he calls “populist modernism,” a term that, by his definition, shows the subordination of black art and politics under Western modernist thought and practice. According to him, populist modernism is a “distinctive aesthetic and ethico-political approach [that] requires a special gloss on terms like reason, justice, freedom and ‘communicative ethics.’” He continues, “It starts from recognition of the African diaspora’s peculiar position as ‘step-children’ of the West and of the extent to which our imaginations are conditioned by an enduring proximity to regimes of racial terror” (103). Though he refers to W. E. B. DuBois’s famous notion of double-consciousness (8), what he fails to recognize, or perhaps chooses to ignore, is that DuBois’s concept does not hierarchize the two shades of cultural consciousness the African in the New World embodies, as he (Gilroy) does by referring to diasporic blacks as stepchildren of the West—the quotation marks notwithstanding. The inferiorization of an African consciousness, whether imaginary, as precondition for articulating a so-called liberatory African diasporic discourse, raises questions on the sincerity of such a project and equally calls for a scrutiny of whose interest is served in the process.

**Orality and Literacy**

Considerable scholarship has been produced in the field of orality and
its relationship to literacy. In the past fifty years or so, oral literary specialists have been engaged in exploring the connection between the oral performance of literature and the production of its written counterpart. Scholars such as Albert Lord, Walter Ong, Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, Isidore Okpewho, Deborah Tannen, John Foley, Ruth Finnegan, and Elizabeth Fine have raised questions or attempted to answer questions, related to these interconnections. Their research has considered some of the following issues: To what extent is the epic genre a function of orality? What constitutes the oral imagination? What is the nature of the association between the oral performance as a text and the written representation of this text? How far can we attempt to establish a relationship between the dynamic nature of the oral performance and the fixed space wherein the written narrative is composed? Certainly, there are no clear-cut answers. Rather, what scholars have done is to discuss the issues with specific applications.

For anthropologists, folklorists, literary critics, and creative writers, these issues are pertinent in analyzing and (re)defining the process of literary production and transmission. In the African literary experience, the distinctions between literacy and orality also have a political dimension because of slavery and colonialism. The European colonizer, armed with a notion of cultural superiority (and a gun to enforce that belief on the colonized, to boot), promoted a new set of social and economic values based on literacy. In the process, the prevalent traditional oral arts were suppressed as products of a bygone, barbaric age, while the new class of Africans literate in the colonizer’s language was taught with novels, poems, and, in some places, the Bible as models of “literature.” The enthronement of Western literacy in the African colonies created a mistaken impression that literacy was synonymous with civilization, even though as early as 3000 BCE, ancient Egypt had developed a pictographic form of writing (hieroglyphics) that was to hold sway for the next two thousand years. By being attached to the idea of civilization, literacy became an index of cultural and intellectual refinement.

In Interfaces of the Word, Walter Ong argues that the rise of empiricist-scientific consciousness is traceable to the alienation of verbal performance from the speaker. Ong roots the consciousness (especially as it relates to the West) in the way certain languages, Latin, for example, originally a natural human oral verbalization acquired through nurture (“mother-tongue”), gradually became an exclusive and gender-discriminatory language, what he calls “Learned Latin” (25). The shift of medium of acquisition from mother to child through the spoken word to its appro-
prialion in the formal all-male classroom through rules of writing effectively weakened the oral attribute. The development of the language no longer depended on the way it was spoken but on the way it was written. “This is a strange situation for a language,” Ong remarks. “Latin was distanced—alienated—not from day-to-day life, for it was of the substance of daily life for lawyers, physicians, academic educators, and clergymen, but from the psychological roots of consciousness. It no longer in any sense belonged to mother. It did not come from where you came from” (28).

It is important to stress Ong’s idea of alienation, for through it he pursues the connection of the written word with science—at least early modern science. With individuation, it was logical that the needs of science—the “need to hold at arm’s length the human lifeworld with its passionate, rhetorical, practical concerns”—were readily met by written learned Latin (35). From being an ordinary chirographic signifier for the spoken language, writing became linked with cognitive capability. A similar thread of discussion runs in Eric Havelock’s Preface to Plato. Havelock provides valuable insight through his reading of Plato’s Republic in charting the course of the ancient Greeks’ departure from the dialogic world of the spoken word to the monologic and “silent” discourse of writing. Education received during Homer’s time and after relied on the ability to memorize (itself monologic) and perform the rhythmic epic narratives considered as a paideia, embodying the totality of Greek life and culture. Commenting on the significance of this form of education, Havelock writes: “Its [rhythmic narrative—epic] acceptance and retention are made psychologically possible by a mechanism of self-surrender to the poetic performance, and self-identification with the situations and the stories related in the performance. Only when the spell is fully effective can its mnemonic powers be fully mobilized” (198–99). It was an oral-aural pedagogical technique in which knowledge, or the ability to know, could not be separated from the ability to see, speak, hear, and feel. It was a formula that ran counter to Plato’s concept of autonomous self “symbolized as the power to think, to calculate, to cogitate, and to know” (206).

Certain inferences can be drawn from Ong’s and Havelock’s theories. The first is that the appearance of writing in these cultures resulted in, or at least was instrumental in, the alienation of the spoken word. It was no longer tied to acoustic production by voice. It could be objectified and made visible instead of being evanescent. By that act, writing aided the abstraction of not only language but also human thought, separating it from the imagism that characterized its oral existence.
The second point is that oral narratives were not regarded as flights of fancy but as a body of the community’s cultural and philosophical thoughts, even as the actual performance of these narratives was equally aesthetically and emotionally pleasing. Thus, the narratives were rigorously composed and kept alive in the consciousness of the citizenry through memorization and ability to recall, as well as through performances to the accompaniment of music. Equally significant, verbal performance was intrinsically associated with superior cognitive abilities. Ruth Finnegan’s study of the interfaces between orality and literacy among the Limba people of Sierra Leone in West Africa is particularly relevant. According to Finnegan, despite the concrete presence of literacy among the Limba, the mark of intelligence and of authority is located in speech, signified by the term bafunu. “Speaking” validated social contracts in the very way that written documents function in most literacy-dominant societies. With regard to the construction of abstract thought, Finnegan writes:

If you ask a Limba the meaning of bafunu (a wise/clever/intelligent man) the explanation is almost always in terms of his capacity to speak. . . . [I]n Limba language the particular noun class which refers to words to do with language is the same as the class containing abstract nouns. The possibility of abstract terms and abstract thought is, for the Limba, directly associated with speech—rather than, as often with us [the West?], with writing or perhaps inner thoughts. (58)

With this clear evidence of orality as the preferred mode of demonstrating high cognitive ability, it is difficult to agree with Jack Goody’s claims that “cognitively as well as sociologically, writing underpins ‘civilization,’ the culture of cities” (300).  

Plato’s banishment of affective poetry from the polis stemmed from the development of a new concept that valorized the thinking being outside of his/her psychosomatic and physiological referents. The alienation of the performer from the audience that takes place in writing made it possible to forge new modes of thought that unwittingly gave the impression that the Homeric age, because of the primacy of the spoken word, was not capable of the sophisticated ordering and reordering of words and ideas that writing immediately made possible.

Recent scholarship, however, has revealed the complexity of oral performance. The systemic arrangement of thoughts in definite patterns and their articulation through several oral rhetorical strategies demonstrate an active consciousness. Ong calls these strategies the “psychodynamics
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of orality” (Orality and Literacy 30). They include the formulaic styling of thought and experience, a mnemonically preserved lore of the land, a rhetorical formula of addition and repetition that enables the performer to maintain communicative equilibrium with the audience and perhaps, most importantly, the emphatic and participatory nature of spoken performance.

A discussion of orality and literacy cannot be altogether effective if critical attention is consistently placed on their dissimilarities, the features that, as Finnegan puts it, constitute the “Great Divide” (12ff). Yet these dissimilarities need attention. The differences are most evident when comparing writing to the operational dynamics of an oral narrative performance. By performance, I refer to Richard Bauman’s view that it is a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus laid open to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer’s display. (Story, Performance, and Event 3)

Bauman’s definition establishes a framework for our understanding of the oral performance. The performer has a responsibility to his or her audience and wins their critical attention through the display of skills that appeal to their senses. It is not static; it is not merely the narrated event but the event of narration that is called into account in this mutual oneness of audience with artist that Ropo Sekoni refers to as “aesthetic transaction” (10). The open-endedness of the performance moment makes it a “living process by which performance is continually actualized” (Okpewho, Epic 50).

Conversely, in the written medium, the word, which in oral performance is received as an extension of the performer, slumps lifeless onto paper (as contrived letters). As an individual and isolated exercise, the narrative event in a written mode grapples with new strategies that are aimed at restoring the severed “aesthetic transaction.” The writer’s attempt to attain a successful performance similar to an oral one results in a different schematization of the narrative. I would like to suggest that the penetration of characters in written narratives, for instance, is a feature meant to complement the vivid portrayal and dramatization of characters in an
oral performance. This point will be explored in detail while discussing Jean Toomer’s *Cane* in chapter 5.

Even though some of the scholars whose works I have referenced do not apply exclusively to African or Afro-diasporic narratives, the issues they raise are germane to the question of orality and literacy in the Afro-diasporic literary tradition. For one, the existence in Africa of traditional art forms that are largely oral and of modern literary forms that are sustained by a literate culture offers a good opportunity for analyzing and discussing the relation between the spoken and the written word in Afro-diasporic literature. One way of explaining the relationship is through the impact of the two main epochs of Africa’s contact with Europe, namely, slavery and colonization. Although before contact with the West, some African civilizations had developed alphabets and such other indices of literacy, what today goes as written African literature is largely a consequence of encounters with the Islamic and European world. That these encounters have influenced the nature and meaning of African literature, there is no doubt; what remains debatable is the extent of the influence of the colonial/Western encounter in the study of contemporary Afro-diasporic literature.

The New World experience of the encounter is particularly remarkable. In the United States, the African slaves were by default inscribed into the literate culture of the dominant Anglo-European Americans. The slave master’s use of the Bible as a pacifying agent further exposed the Africans to the structured and formalized world of the written word (even though the formal education of the African was seriously discouraged). Despite this exposure, the core of African American literature is located in the folkloric tradition. In *Talkin and Testifyin*, Geneva Smitherman not only demonstrates how oral verbal skill is the hallmark of African American speech but also shows how this characteristic is directly related to an African worldview. Hence she states, “The persistence of the African-based oral tradition is such that blacks tend to place only limited value on the written word, whereas verbal skills expressed orally rank in high esteem” (76). Smitherman then identifies the various verbal forms in black vernacular, which include the call-and-response performance of the traditional black church sermon, rap, signifyin’, and the dozens.

On the other hand, the African slaves in the Caribbean, who occupied a hostile cultural space where the use of their native languages was strongly discouraged, evolved new modes of cultural expression. Kamau E. Brathwaite, the celebrated Barbadian poet, identifies the evolution of an alternative mode of expression as borne primarily through what he calls
“Nation Language” (History of the Voice 13). Forced to learn a European language, the Africans nonetheless subjected the alien tongue to their needs, creating Nation Language, which, Brathwaite indicates, “is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage” (13). It is an oral-based linguistic medium that incorporates the verbal nuances of their African ancestry and, in contemporary times, has influenced the character of African Caribbean art—poetry, music, the novel, and other expressive forms. Indeed, in calling for the extension of the frontiers of its usage, Brathwaite sees Nation Language as a liberatory tool capable of steering Caribbean literature from European models to a new homegrown paradigm (49).

What blacks in Africa, the Americas, and Europe point to through their distinct literary heritage and their checkered experience in global history is the necessity of recognizing a paradigm that does not conform to any erroneously totalizing model of art but rather represents the set of values that inform black people’s appreciation or rejection of works of art by their artists. The call for the formulation of an Afro-diasporic literary aesthetic based on the recognition of the oral-written interplay in texts forms the foundation of the following exploration.

In Caribbean Poetics, Silvio Torres-Saillant observes that among Caribbean writers there is a “historical imagination” that accounts for their interest in creating works that reexamine the history of the region (90). Torres-Saillant notes that the conviction that the history of the Caribbean has been written mostly by Western colonialists and West Indians sympathetic to the West “breeds a widespread desire to undertake a general historiographical repair in the area” among Caribbean artists (91). The existence of various racial and ethnic groups in the region, all with their unique historical experiences and encounters with the West, further propels the need to reexamine or—to use Torres-Saillant’s word—“repair” the dominant narratives that tend to erase those differences. By reconstructing the past in ways that are meaningful to the Caribbean experience, the writers implicitly engage in a conversation on the conceptualization of a Caribbean Voice. When writers such as Wilson Harris, Roy Heath, and Alejo Carpentier deploy mythohistorical strategies in their narratives, they point to the link between the idioms of narration and the narratives they constitute. Thus, the narrative forms operate within a Caribbean worldview that destabilizes Western constructions of history and narrative.

Folklore not only occupies a unique position in addressing the connection between the oral and the written, but it is also the central constituent in the African diasporic narrative tradition. From myths to the dozens,
Chapter One

from the trickster to the black sermon traditions, an aesthetic based on the dynamics of folk expression can be discerned. An expressive tradition fashioned from the interaction of the community at the grass roots not only forms the foundation of much of African and Afro-diasporic art, but it also constitutes the paradigm by which it may be appreciated. The business of appreciation needs to be highlighted, as it significantly bears on this study.

Textual Specifics

This study is premised on according due recognition to the artistic integrity of blacks in the diaspora, even when tracing the African “genealogy of culture and cultural expression” among writings of persons of African descent in the New World is implicated (John 8). For a while, tracing African roots in the artistic creations of blacks in the New World has tended to generate much attention, as if to suggest that the New World does not have a profound impact on their creative spirit. It is only in his formulation of a separate space for the African diaspora that I find Gilroy’s intervention useful, especially as I have deliberately chosen only black writers from the Americas for study. Other aspects of Gilroy’s position are problematic, especially where they have sought to undermine the integrity of black/African cultural consciousness or dismissed the legitimacy and relevance of African roots for African diasporic discourse.

I have selected four authors for this study. Roy A. K. Heath and Wilson Harris are from Guyana, while Toni Morrison and Jean Toomer are from the United States. By choosing Heath and Harris, I do not mean to cast them as representatives of the Caribbean writers, nor do I intend such for Morrison and Toomer. I selected Harris and Heath for their consistency in representing the mythic consciousness of their native cultural and geographical space in their narratives, even though both writers reside in the United Kingdom. On the other hand, I have chosen Morrison for her consistent engagement with the representation of African American experience, through her performance and interrogation of the uses of folklore and the oral tradition in her novels. Toomer’s Cane serves as a model for understanding the process of transposing oral folklore to print. It is equally a viable text for the application of oral performative criticism.

Chapter 2 examines Heath’s representation of the Guyanese mythic figures, Old Higue, Durga, and Bakoo, in his novels. My reason is that Heath’s application of folklore is not for embellishment; rather, an understanding
of the Guyanese mythic figures, especially those that feature in what Heath calls the “anxiety-lore” of the land, is crucial for grasping meaning in his novels.

Harris’s reconceptualization of literacy in light of the oral imagination is central to the texts examined in chapter 3. He subverts the notion by resting it on the ability not to read and write but to perceive or imagine reality from the mundane and the sublime. Offered as a counterdiscourse to rigid Western constructs of reality, Harris argues that the oral mind, with its ability to traverse the material world, its limitless space, and its capacity for adapting to constantly changing ideologies and ontologies, is the inheritor of the form of literacy that Harris calls the “literacy of the imagination.” This notion, I suggest, is significant, for it changes the power equation between the binary and hierarchized reasoning of Western civilization and other civilizations that privilege the type of perception Harris explores. I have selected the later works of Harris, not only because they offer a fresh portal into Harris’s lifetime artistic and political preoccupation but also because of my interest in contributing to scholarship on these texts, which, as opposed to the earlier ones, have received considerably less attention. Invariably, I would argue that it would not be too difficult to apply some of my conclusions here to the earlier works. It is in that light that the chapter devotes some space to considering Harris’s first novel, *The Palace of the Peacock.*

Chapter 4 is devoted to three novels by Toni Morrison and continues the exploration of the place of memory in narrative. I examine the implications of the oral imagination on history and community. From *Song of Solomon,* which shows the power of communal memory to counter a hegemonic history; to *Paradise,* where this memory and its narrative performance are subverted; to *Jazz,* which features a collage of contestatory narrative perspectives, Morrison interrogates the idea of a neutral oral tradition that always serves the needs of the oppressed, especially as it relates to African American experience. What my study reveals is a folkloric presence in Morrison’s novels that is both celebratory and interrogative.

In the final chapter, “‘Singing Before the Sun Goes Down’: Jean Toomer’s *Cane* and the Black Oral Performance Aesthetic,” I offer a performative reading of *Cane.* Critics have failed to pay adequate attention to the text’s oral performance background. While some note folkloric materials in the text, a study of how the different creative acts in it cohere to form a single performance is rarely done. This chapter redresses this absence by presenting black oral performance aesthetic as the interpretive tool for reading *Cane.* By this gesture, *Cane* becomes a quintessential model showing the
positive transformation that occurs when the black oral tradition speaks in the written medium.

This book proposes an interpretive model for the reading of the Afro-diasporic novel that pays attention to folklore not as an ingredient in the narratives but as the basis for the narratives. The works I have analyzed here do not contain folklore materials; they are folklore, constituted by the intersections of oral narrative aesthetics, New World sensibility, and the written tradition. As I have stated earlier, the study seeks to expand our understanding of the forms of folklore as it pertains to black texts. The book seeks to demonstrate the durability of the black aesthetic as formed in the spoken word and made manifest in the written.
In the preceding pages, I have followed an interpretive model for reading the selected Afro-diasporic narratives that emphasizes their folkloric content. I began by placing the texts as folkloric acts based on their indebtedness to black folk culture in form and meaning. My inquiry is framed by the discussion of the relationship between the spoken and the written word in Afro-diasporic narratives. Folklore is a viable form for such an inquiry because of its direct connection to the community’s sense of well-being and its capacity to register the transformations that occur within the group. Both the Old World’s oral tradition and the artistic forms available or fashioned in the Americas find expression in the Afro-diasporic novel.

In exploring the interface between the oral and the written in the Afro-diasporic narrative, I have argued that such an inquiry must move beyond the practice of identifying folkloric materials in the texts. It is not enough to show how indebted they are to the oral tradition. In my study, I have shown that the written narrative is a folkloric act. I have also adopted a way of reading the texts that reveals the significance of folklore to their success as creative endeavors.

The inspiration for this project came about many years ago when I came across an anthology of Guyanese mythic figures and read the entry for Coolie Jumbie. Coolie Jumbie is a spirit that prowls around cemeteries and confronts unsuspecting passersby with a wide grin, saying, “Ever see teet’ as dese?” as it exposes a frightening jagged dentition made up of metals,

— AFTERWORD —

Of Goat Paths and Dixie Pike
broken bottles, and pins. I was shocked. Years before I read that book, while in middle school in Nigeria, some of us would ask one of the guards in the boarding school I attended to tell us stories. De John, one of the three security men who worked the night shift, always obliged. He walked with a limp and we always wondered how he would cope if he had to chase an intruder on foot. Because it was late at night, often after regulation time, he always chose to tell creepy stories—infants crying in the bushes only to gobble up the unsuspecting adult who rushed in sympathy to save the child; beautiful women standing by the roadside who turned out to be just skeletons, using one of their ancient bones to crush the head of the unfortunate lover; men who were actually women and seemed to enjoy inflicting pain on the opposite sex. De John was full of stories with gloomy endings, and this elementary school dropout in his late fifties regaled us with those stories for years to come in boarding school.

A few weeks before our high school graduation, I remember De John telling us a special story. He said it was a true story of an incident that happened to him and that he wanted to use it to explain his fascination with ghost stories. He was in his early twenties, he said, and had a job as a driver for an executive in an oil company in Port Harcourt, a city about an hour away from where our school was located. He enjoyed the benefit of taking the car home and reporting at the executive’s home early each morning. On this one day, it was approaching midnight before he started home. On the way home, there was this long stretch of road where nobody lived. It was in that area that De John told us he beheld a terrible sight. On the roadside was the body of a man lying spread-eagled with eyes wide open and mouth in a wide grin that exposed his full front teeth. It was when he stopped by the body that he saw that they were not human teeth but an assortment of broken bottles in jagged positions. One glimpse at the body and he quickly sped away in dread.

Five minutes later, he saw a young woman carrying a sack on her head flagging down his approaching car. De John could not imagine what the woman could be doing on the road at that hour of the night, but he was so grateful for the prospect of human company that he pulled up to where the woman stood. She got in after putting the sack in the trunk of the car and De John, without prompting, began telling the woman about the frightful sight he had just witnessed. The woman did not say a word but kept nodding her head as she kept her eyes straight on the road. De John described the ghastly grin on the man’s face and told her how he had never seen a mouth full of broken bottles in place of teeth. Immediately, the woman turned to De John and, wide eyed, said, “Abi na like dis?” She
opened a wide mouth revealing rows of sharp objects, needles, nails, and pieces of broken bottles that stood where teeth should be. According to De John, right there the woman’s face was transformed to that of the man on the road. De John screamed and in fear swerved off the road and hit a tree trunk. The woman had vanished immediately after she revealed her true self. De John could not say how he managed to get home, but once he recovered, he quit his job in the city and returned to the village. From his story, we found out that his bad leg was because of the injury he sustained on that fateful night.

After finding out about Coolie Jumbie, it became clear to me that De John had constructed a grand narrative scheme for his young graduating audience. His fateful encounter embodied all the horror stories he had streamed into our consciousness up to that moment—that is, before I found out that the dead and living wo/man he met on the road was no other than Coolie Jumbie, hanging around the cemeteries and the consciousness of the Guyanese since the era of slavery when those harried Africans made the Middle Passage. De John wanted to make sure that by the time we graduated, he was no longer just the teller of ghost stories; he was in fact the text of a ghost story. For his final performance to the graduates, he probably felt that the ultimate tale had to be him, not him telling us about fictive characters and their vicissitudes.

Encountering Roy Heath’s novels in college, reading about Kwaku and Bakoo confirmed to me that the relationship between Africa and blacks in the diaspora was not a mere academic exercise, unlike the sense one gets in considering Paul Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic.” The linkages are real, making it imperative that studies exploring the dimensions of diaspora consciousness be sustained and pursued with the seriousness and commitment that the subject deserves. I offer this book in the spirit of such a pursuit. It is also written to extend the frontiers of folklore studies. Conducting fieldwork and documenting oral traditions and performances for analysis are useful. But my work attempts to use the insight gained from such folklore studies to conduct literary analysis of texts that suggest that they would yield deeper meaning through that prism.

In all the texts examined in this study, I have focused on their status as folkloric performances. In these works, the connection to the oral tradition is not a question of borrowing. The texts do not embody elements of folk culture; rather, they are unique folkloric acts. Through the written word, the mythic or folkloric sign is intensified. Writing is the context of performance. Thus, a performative approach to criticism of black texts is crucial to the formulation of a viable black aesthetic.
Furthermore, Harris, Heath, Morrison, and Toomer, in their respective works, offer unique representations of the interface between the spoken and the written. Be it the resuscitation of mythic figures as agents of hope and (inter)national redemption in Harris or Heath, or Morrison’s playful narrator in *Jazz* and Toomer’s exuberant raconteur, these writers have broadened the area of interaction between the two communicative forms. What this research advocates is that readers and critics of Afro-diasporic narratives must become aware of the nature of the oral-written interface and respond with a commensurate emphasis on the texts as performances.

In the chapters on Morrison and Toomer, I have emphasized the texts as performances by examining how the authors construct their narrative voices and imitate some of the performance nuances identifiable in an oral context. Heath and Harris, on the other hand, have so integrated folklore or the mythic sign into their works that a proper understanding of their narratives can hardly be achieved unless one understands their grammar of meaning.

The interrogation of the oral form through writing, most noticeable in works by Morrison and Harris, is a vital aspect of sustaining the tradition. Indeed, in the oral performance, the skill of an artist is partly assessed by the extent to which he or she has extended the frontiers of the tradition. When these writers problematize some aspects of the oral tradition, it is for making them more usable and relevant for contemporary audiences. Consider, for example, the envisioning of hope in Guyana. From the uncertainty and fear inherent in the myth of Bakoo, Heath delineates a persona (Kwaku) who, though conscious of his vulnerability, is able to project a Guyanese personality at peace with his environment, thereby offering hope for a nation in political flux. Thus, Heath seems to be making the argument that myth is the society’s hope.

Folklore largely reflects every community’s cultural consciousness. The New World black “community” is no exception. Because of historical circumstances, the African diasporic written narrative carries an artistic heritage composed of oral and written forms. The task facing the critic is to account for both forms adequately. What this study has done is focus on that creative space where the oral meets the written and interpret the texts as full-fledged performances helping to vitalize the black aesthetic.
Chapter One

1. One of the dangers inherent in the Afrocentric ideology is that it has the possibility of articulating a philosophy of homogeneity that effaces the peculiar experiences of blacks in the New World, as against Africa.

2. This point on defining aesthetics in geocultural terms is driven home in a dialogue between Achebe and Baldwin. While Achebe argues that aesthetics stems from “art which is committed to people,” Baldwin interprets Achebe’s position as pointing to morality. “And beneath that word [morality],” Baldwin states, “we are confronted with the way we treat each other. That is the key to any morality.” As an African, Achebe’s definition is informed by anticolonial struggle, whereas racial equality and tolerance are at the heart of Baldwin’s point of view, being an African American. See Dorothy Randall-Tsuruta, “In Dialogue to Define Aesthetics: James Baldwin and Chinua Achebe,” 214, 216.

3. On the other hand, a peremptory denial of a connection between Africa and blacks in the New World is absurd. This is the case with C. L. R. James’s surprising response when asked about the connection of the African Caribbean to Africa in an interview with Alder Calder. His words: “I do not know what are the African roots of the language and culture of Caribbean intellectuals. I am not aware of the African roots of my use of the language and culture. I pay a lot of respect to Africa. I have been there many times. I have spoken to many Africans. I have read their literature. But we of the Caribbean have not got an African past. We are black in the skin, but the African civilisation is not ours. The basis of our civilisation in the Caribbean is an adaptation of Western civilisation” (“An Audience with C. L. R. James” 6). Significantly, though, see also chapter 7 of Kenneth Ramchand’s pioneering work The West Indian Novel and Its Background, where he traces African presence in early West Indian texts.

4. There is ample data on the most common slave sources in Africa, but
Gwendolyn Midlo Hall’s *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas* is perhaps the most comprehensive in providing detailed data on the ethnic identities of many of the Africans sold into slavery. Critically, the information is gleaned from the direct identifications by the slaves. According to her, “We [African diaspora scholars] can no longer be satisfied with simplistic, romanticized ideas about the identities of the African ancestors of African Americans” (165). Hall’s work is an impressive piece of data mining and compelling findings on the subject.

5. For example, in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s novels, one observes a consistency in his narrators’ efforts at securing group solidarity. Similarly, the proverbs that appear as linguistic and thematic capsules in Achebe’s narratives effectively place the narrative consciousness within the ethical and aesthetic consciousness of the Igbo community. The same cultural affinity between the writer and community can be observed in writings by Buchi Emecheta, Wole Soyinka, Sembene Ousmane, and Ama Ata Aidoo, among others.


7. Part of the theory Henry Louis Gates formulates in *The Signifying Monkey*, and which informs the analysis of some African American texts found in the second part of his book, is based on these two stylistic devices of the black plantation society.

8. As an instructor in courses where I have black students from the Caribbean as well as the United States, I have not failed to notice how, say, a Jamaican student would express disgust with what she perceives as unacceptable conduct by “Americans,” by which she means blacks and whites of the United States.

9. In *The Black Atlantic* Gilroy describes the West as stepparents of blacks (49).

10. In his recent work *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies, and the Black Atlantic*, John Cullen Gruesser praises Gilroy’s work for its use of postcolonial theoretical terminology in the study of African diasporic literature. Gruesser concedes that Gilroy’s approach is useful to “a lesser extent [to] African philosophy, music, literature, and political discourse” (17) than to diasporic Africans. Although Gruesser proceeds to study African American literature in light of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic, it is ironic that a concept that serves to place Africa at the periphery (Black Atlantic) appropriates some terminologies by which the vast majority of scholars and writers from Africa engage the cultural production in the continent (postcolonial studies).


12. See, for example, Goody’s *Domestication of the Savage Mind*, where “savage” connotes “inferior,” “unlettered,” and “primitive.”

13. See also Christopher Wise’s essay “Nyama and Heka: African Concepts of the Word,” where he offers a comprehensive study of the complex relationship between the West African griot’s abilities and the Mande term “Nyama,” loosely translated as occult abilities (19, 26). One of the critical observations Wise makes in his analysis is the inseparability of the griot’s occult power and the spoken/aspirated word. Through in-depth etymological research, Wise’s study seeks to reestablish an African approach to language that locates creative force, seat of consciousness, and ontological outlook in the spoken word, especially the kind embodied in and made manifest by the griot.
14. Isidore Okpewho’s essay “The Cousins of Uncle Remus” is a critical response to Roberts’s *Trickster to Badman*. There Okpewho cautions that an overemphasis on the African roots of African American creative imagination could wrongly misstate the genius of the African American artist. In his words, “we do not give proper credit to Afro-American genius if we put all our investigative energy into tracing to African sources every cultural achievement it has recorded” (27).

Chapter Two

1. In his study of the epic and novel genres, M. M. Bakhtin lists three features that distinguish the novel from other narrative forms. Among them is the novel’s contemporaneity: “the zone of maximal contact with the present . . . in all its openendedness” (11). By using this criterion Bakhtin sees the world of the epic as closed, “walled from all subsequent times,” and therefore lacking space for “any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy” (16). One must add that Bakhtin’s distinction is not entirely applicable to the African epic where, due to the interaction between the singer and the audience, the performance is never a closed text; the experience it evokes may belong to a heroic past, but the performance consciously addresses itself to the concerns of the contemporary or immediate audience.

2. Webb’s study also uses the theory of “magical realism” in reading the novels. Many scholars have applied this concept while examining Caribbean writing, or Latin American writing, to be specific. It operates on recognizing mystery as part of material consciousness. But while this term is consistent with Webb’s argument, Selwyn R. Cudjoe rejects the implications of the term “magical” since it seems to suggest that an experience represented by such a term is not historical or real. In the place of magical or marvelous realism, he proffers “critical realism,” because novels under this rubric that “attempt to discover the ‘essence’ of Caribbean experience . . . contain social analyses of that reality” (265). Cudjoe’s argument is pertinent especially when he uses it to repudiate the idea of history as cyclical. The Caribbean experience writers represent, he asserts, “proceed forward in an opening or spiral development which is neither magical nor cyclical” (265).

3. See further discussion of the phenomenon in Wilson Harris’s discourse on trance in Voodoo religion in the next chapter.

4. I am referring to Soyinka’s exposition on the Ogun’s mythopoesis in his essay “The Fourth Stage,” where he describes the abyss into which Ogun descends to fashion a bridge between Yoruba deities and mortals as the “seething cauldron of the dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming” (*Myth* 142).

5. André Breton’s definition of surrealism as the “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought” aptly captures the mood of this moment in the novel (*Manifestoes* 26).

6. One of the character flaws of the trickster figure is its habit of overreaching itself. Most times, it manifests when the trickster, in the height of a momentary success or achievement, makes a spontaneous boast that it quickly realizes would be difficult to fulfill. The trickster embodies this flaw and it forms the trope of
the trickster’s adversities. In Kwaku’s case, there is complexity in the title; not to keep his mouth shut seems to point to Bakoo’s restlessness and reflects the trickster’s inevitable “failing.”

Chapter Three

1. One tendency among Caribbean writers is their use of classical mythology alongside African symbols; Derek Walcott, Orlando Patterson, and Harris readily come to mind. Figures such as Poseidon, Sisyphus, Tiresias, and Odysseus appear in their narratives as archetypes of the Caribbean situation. A simple way to explain the presence of these classical mythic figures in Caribbean writing is to see it as the manifestation of the colonial experience. But it is not so simple; Harris, for example, argues for a cross-cultural consciousness, a consciousness that embodies the mythology of all the groups that constitute Caribbean society. Also, in his typology, the inclusion of these classical figures does not necessarily guarantee that they retain their original symbolism; their symbolism is more likely to be reversed or subverted in order to make room for a new thinking. The relevance of a cross-cultural consciousness, as Wilfred Cartey suggests, is to “give credence to the transformative vision that leads to new formations, new possibilities, to a new presence” (402). It is this search for newness that might explain the use of African, Amerindian, and European mythologies in delineating Caribbean experience.

2. This definition is by no means limited to the present discussion. See, for instance, Joel Adedeji’s assertion about the aesthetic principle governing Yoruba theater: “The aesthetics of the Yoruba theater are the total integration, the gestalt of all the art forms in one performance” (63). What he states here for the Yoruba of Nigeria can also be said of several other African societies.

3. Wole Soyinka is a major proponent of this position. In Myth, Literature and the African World, a book that best articulates Soyinka’s theory of African literature, his characterization of African ritual theater seems overly “spiritual” and does not appear to give much attention to the secular and artistic dimensions of this theater. Artistic effects such as lighting, the motions of the performers, and verbal resources are seen as props to “control and render concrete, to parallel . . . the experiences or intuitions of man in that far more disturbing environment which he defines variously as void, emptiness or infinity” (39–40). While this interpretation is mostly valid, especially for an understanding of the ritual archetype, it undervalues the significance of these resources as celebratory of the performers’ creative genius.

4. In her reading of Masters, Hena Maes-Jelinek identifies these two lives of the character, but notes, too: “As a matter of fact, Masters experiences several deaths and resurrections, each of which makes possible his and the narrator’s understanding of yet another slice of experience and casts a different light on, or even undermines, the previous one” (Labyrinth of Universality 302). It is true, though, that the first and second appearances are the crucial ones.

5. The partial image could relate to Antonio Benitez-Rojo’s conceptualization of the Caribbean text as “a consummate performer, with recourse to the most daring improvisations to keep from being trapped within its own textuality” (29).
In each instance (i.e., Harris’s and Benitez-Rojo’s), what is emphasized is a resistance to closure.

6. Harris’s description of Weyl’s death bears an uncanny similarity with Soyinka’s description of Sekoni’s death in his novel *The Interpreters*. Like Weyl, Sekoni, an engineer, is one of the five protagonists in the novel who fight a corrupt government establishment. Sekoni constructs a power grid that offers a cheaper source of electricity to a rural community, but his work is dismissed as junk so that an expatriate’s alternative could be purchased, with the establishment receiving a bribe before signing the contract. Sekoni suffers a mental breakdown as a result. He resigns his position and, on a fateful rainy night, while driving his car, he fails to see an oncoming vehicle that has lost control and is crushed to death. Soyinka, in a passage laden with images of sacrifice, writes: “The rains of May become in July slit arteries of the sacrificial bull, a million bleeding punctures of the sky-bull hidden in convulsive cloud humps, black, overfed for this one event, nourished on horizon tops of endless choice grazing, distant beyond giraffe reach. . . . The Dome cracked above Sekoni’s short-sighted head one messy night. Too late he saw the insanity of a lorry parked right on his path, a swerve turned into a skid and cruel arabesques of tyres. A futile heap of metal, and Sekoni’s body lay surprised across the open door” (155).

7. Maes-Jelinek views this ability as indicative of Harris’s idea of comedy (“Carnival” 49). Her argument seems to depend on the novel’s use of Dante’s *Inferno* in *Divine Comedy* as a motif. To regard the novel as a comedy may be a stretch on the form, though she rightly notes how the interchange of masks by the characters “unravel[s] deeply buried and unconscious residues of individual and historical experience” (49).

8. Aware of the close affinity between his erasure of the author-character divide and postmodern declaration of the death of the author, Harris makes the following distinction between his technique and postmodernism: “Now I happen to know that some post-modernists would claim that they too advance this notion that the author can be erased from the text. At a certain level I agree with this, but at another level I diverge from it profoundly because in my case, what I am saying is that when the author ceases to be the kind of realistic author which one usually looks for, what one is breaking is the authoritarian model, the author becomes himself a fiction created by his own characters, the authoritarian model is broken and in breaking it, one has become susceptible to a tradition which one has apparently lost” (“Literacy and the Imagination” 82). That openness on the author’s part to lost traditions, to be a channel through which a “lost” tradition “returns [and] nourishes us even though it appears to have vanished,” is the literate imperative (ibid., 86; original emphasis).

9. There is also a biblical antecedent to the classical version of the serpent staff. As Moses leads the Israelites through the wilderness, the people complain about the hardships on the way. God sends fiery serpents to bite the complaining people and many die. But Moses intercedes on behalf of the people and God relents by directing Moses to make a bronze serpent and place it on a staff that those who are bitten and look at the bronze serpent may live (Numbers 21:4–9). The narrative’s promise of life available through the inanimate staff certainly coheres with Harris’s latter-day construct.
10. See Harris’s more recent work *The Dark Jester*, where Jest is also evoked as the primary medium for retrieving the buried history of Atahualpa, an Inca ruler who was deposed and executed by the Spanish colonial Francisco Pizarro. Living almost exclusively from the “City of Dream” (39), the narrator depends on the Jester as guide. “Jest,” the epigraph notes, “is miraculously potent in the most serious of arts which depict reverses in accepted habit in exploring the enigmas of universality” (ix).

11. Even the attribution of “W. H.” to Harris is at best an effort on my part to establish a relationship between the name on the cover of the text and the authorship of the work. It is as likely that they are Harris’s initials as it is coincidental that both entities share similar name initials. I think that Harris’s interest in exploring multiple identities of his characters and the construct of the “Dream-book” could possibly account for this deliberate ambiguity.


14. See also Harris’s essay “Closing Statement: Apprenticeship to the Furies,” where he contends that the “mystery of consciousness” demands moving away from “one-track realism” and forging new texts that “must . . . of necessity seek to cross chasms in reality [and] cross the familiar raw material of existence we would associate with a mere blackboard, for instance, to an element such as a storm or a wave upon which the elements write with the chalk of lightning” (248).

15. See Soyinka’s *Myth*, where he presents an African ontology that aligns perfectly with Harris’s. Note especially chapter 2, “Drama and the African World-view” (37–60). It is worth stating, however, that in this work Soyinka appears to overstate Yoruba spirituality whereby this particular worldview is offered as a prototype of African traditional religions and worldviews. It is also debatable whether all African societies spiritualize their theater and arts in the way he argues here.

16. In the Gospel according to John, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1–44).

17. Harris invests considerable space in deploying carnival tropes in this novel, and in this, his extensive use of carnival reflects what J. Michael Dash describes as a “tempting” part of Caribbean aesthetics because “it so obviously facilitates an exploration of a free flow of time and space as well as the permutations, randomness, and eclecticism that are central to the cultural diversity of the Americas” (128). *Jonestown* elaborately utilizes this metaphor.

18. Harris makes a similar point in his talk titled “Literacy and the Imagination,” where he states: “It is very easy for a society to overturn an oppressor, but it is equally easy for those who overturned the oppressor to become the oppressor in turn. If one polarizes the world dreadfully, the oppressor and the oppressed, then one is no longer in a position to understand who the oppressor is, how he relates to one, who the oppressed are, how the oppressed relate to one. To understand that, one has to rehearse the implications” (85).

**Chapter Four**

1. Although not without its critics, on May 21, 2006, the *New York Times Book*

2. See Elmar Lehmann’s article “Remembering the Past: Toni Morrison’s Version of the Historical Novel” and Justine Tally’s “Reality and Discourse in Toni Morrison’s Trilogy: Testing the Limits” for instances of this historical linearity attached to the named novels.

3. This connection receives full play in Morrison’s series of lectures on American cultural history, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. See especially chapter 1: “Black Matters,” where she outlines the dimensions of the unspoken relationship.

4. See Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey*, where he argues that the trope of the “Talking Book” is the “ur-text” of African American narrative tradition (xxv, 127–69).

5. To his credit, John N. Duvall’s biocritical work on the early novels of Morrison avoids this fallacy in his study of the connections between Morrison and William Faulkner. The goal is not to “measure Morrison on the yardstick of a Faulkner,” Duvall states; instead, by examining the intertextuality, “one can validly read not only Faulkner’s influence on Morrison, but also Morrison’s influence on Faulkner—how her fiction and literary criticism may cause one to rethink Faulkner in a fundamental way” (75).

6. Since I am interested in examining Morrison’s performance of African American folklore in her novels, I have tried to steer away from exploring other aspects of her writing. Certainly, there is validity to an “Americanist” reading of Morrison. Historically, both black and white and, indeed, all the other races have, through their unique cultural traditions, combined to form what is termed American literature. Thus, such readings of Morrison that have tried to show Morrison’s contribution to or place in the American literary tradition are legitimate. However, one must be ready to scrutinize such explorations to identify whose purpose is served, as Morrison’s remark enjoins.

7. One problem with Lipsitz’s definition, however, is that the history he identifies as emanating from this counter-memory is still lineal, even though he sees it as “supplying new perspectives about the past” (162).

8. April Lidinsky’s essay “Prophesying Bodies: Calling for a Politics of Collectivity in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” vigorously discusses the collectivity of rememory in this novel. Beyond the connection Paul D and Sethe make through their common experience, Lidinsky notes that communal rememory also “dissolves power’s vertical compartmentalization of knowledge, temporality and identities” (207).

9. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy correctly places the emphasis on Milkman’s inward journey rather than the economic quest when he asserts, “Milkman begins his odyssey putatively in search of this bag of gold, but this gold has been transmuted. What Milkman seeks is family knowledge” (315). Compare with the argument Marianne Hirsch makes in “Knowing Their Names,” where she sees Milkman’s gold hunt as gender-determined when contrasted with Pilate’s motive for keeping the bag (83).

10. This reading of Pilate’s figure in the novel warrants emphasis because it challenges a tendency among some literary critics of the book to overstate her
image as the spiritual life force in the narrative. Gayl Jones, for instance, calls her the novel’s “fount of fantastic imagery” (172). There is no doubt that among the living Dead family, Pilate is a contrast to the materialistic and self-centered attitude of her relatives; however, once this attribute is placed within the larger context of the novel’s engagement with the notion of history, its significance is radically diminished.

11. Morrison certainly has a personal investment in this incident and its ramifications in the novel. In an interview with Cecil Brown, she reveals that her mother did not have a birth certificate, while her aunt had one that did not bear her name but simply the racial description, “Negro Child” (461).

12. In contrast with the genealogy of Macon’s name, consider how he, still illiterate, names his daughter Pilate. The younger Macon recalls how his father, in grief after losing his wife in childbirth, “had thumbed through the Bible, and since he could not read a word, chose a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome; saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees” (18). Faced with what seems an impossible task, he imposes his tactile and imaginative abilities on the lifeless letters, freely associating his known world as a farmer with the simple shapes of the alphabet.

13. W. Lawrence Hogue, in Race, Modernity, Postmodernity, interprets the relationship between Solomon, Milkman, and the question of flight in terms of gender. Milkman’s “discovery” of his ancestral line, Lawrence argues, though celebratory of African oral historical tradition, nevertheless “reflects a social order grounded in phallocentricism, his own egocentricism, and Western logocentricism” (44). The song that preserves the account of Solomon’s flight represents this social order and does not glorify the patriarch since it is actually “a voice that bemoans . . . loss” (44). In other words, Solomon liberates himself at the expense of his wife, Ryna, and children, including Jake (Macon Dead). Trudier Harris makes a similar case when she asserts, “The celebration of flying simultaneously highlights Ryna’s insanity and the fatherlessness of Solomon’s twenty-one sons. . . . Flying, then, becomes a selfish celebration of the freedom of an individual judged against the enslavement of twenty-two people” (Fiction 106). For Marianne Hirsch, what may be considered “[h]eroic soaring is also antiheroic evasion” (78).

14. See also Marilyn Sanders Mobley’s “Call and Response,” in which she views the opening scene as a foregrounding of what would happen later in the story (51).

15. See Jacqueline De Weever’s “Toni Morrison’s Use of Fairy Tale, Folktale and Myth in Song of Solomon” (131–44), and Diane Kim Bowman’s “Flying High” (10–17), among others.


17. Farah Jasmine Griffin, in “Who Set You Flowin’?”: The African-American Migration Narrative, goes further to see the song not as a history of the Dead family but as a text embodying the gamut of African American experience. In her words, “Embodied within the lyrics are a documentation of the diversity of African ethnicities and religions that converge on the American continent, the horror of fragmentation and destruction of black families and black bodies, and their economic
exploitation—all in a plea to the ancestor, Solomon, who flew off and left these bodies on these hostile shores” (176). Similarly, Susan Willis regards Milkman’s quest as leading him to the discovery of the “twin texts of history: song and genealogy.” “In so doing,” Willis continues, “he reconstructs the dialectic of historical transition, where individual genealogy evokes the history of black migration and the chain of economic expropriation from hinterland to village, and village to metropolis” (271). On the other hand, Marc C. Conner rightly notes that Milkman’s memorization of the song is an act that “brings him toward both self and communal awareness [through] an encounter with a language that defies representation,” that is, writing (61). Certainly, this is a song laden with historical significance; yet its importance is attained through the agency of orality as a way of undermining the oppressive overdetermination of literacy in a society that has sought to block the African American’s access to the written word.

18. See Nancy J. Peterson, “’Say Make Me, Remake Me’: Toni Morrison and the Reconstruction of African-American History.” Peterson argues that Morrison’s notion of history is unconventional, attributable to her “improvisational exploration of alternative concepts and forms for reconstructing African-American history” (202).

19. A striking similarity exists between the youths’ taunt of Esther and the didactic tale of a blind old woman and her youthful tormentors that Morrison uses to frame her Nobel Prize lecture. In each instance, the burden of proof is on the blind woman, but whereas Esther allows the fathers to exploit her privileged position as elder (and thus her presumed wisdom), the woman cited in the lecture exercises her place as conscience of her community and transforms the encounter to a positive one (see http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html).

20. Again, unlike Macon, who imposes his will on the contours of the letters that form his daughter’s name, insisting on the name despite its oddity, Esther’s “finger memory” cannot suffice. It may well suggest that Morrison grants moral power to Macon while Esther is rebuked for failing to speak truth to power.

21. Paul Connerton suggests that members of a community form communal memory through the interlocking of individual histories (16–17).

22. See Richard Bauman’s Story, Performance, and Event (esp. 49–52) for a discussion of the narrative practice described here. The fact that Bauman’s analysis pertains to oral storytelling seems to further vindicate the appropriateness of applying performance rhetoric in interpreting Deacon’s speech. Morrison, too, suggests such a connection by including gestural and emphatic phrases in the twins’ story.


24. At the Disallowing, the people of Fairly refused the trekkers residence but had provided them with supplies and money to aid them on their journey. The men, in their pride, left the items where the offer was made and continued on their journey. What the men do not know is that the women sneaked back to gather the food to feed their little children to save them from starving to death. Once the reader gets this information, it becomes clear that this is a rupture of the master narrative, or rather, that there exists an alternative narrative, surreptitiously stored in the memory of the women. This narrative remains silenced; yet
since half of the members of the 8-R (the women) know it, this alternate narrative has the potential to disrupt the men’s narrative.

25. The conflict surrounding Patricia’s efforts to account for those whose names have been erased from the history of Haven/Ruby seems to validate one of the “disputes” in Jean-François Lyotard’s The Differend. The book continues Lyotard’s discourse on the dialectics of “master” narratives and “local” narratives, here configured as conflict between “little stories” and “History.” Using the cultural practices of the Cashinahua, Lyotard states, “The little stories received and bestowed names. The great story of history has its end in the extinction of names (particularism). At the end of the great story, there will simply be humanity” (155). In other words, it is in the interest of a hegemonic power to suppress dissent through the elimination of narratives that challenge its authoritarianism. Patricia’s action of writing a different narrative falls within Lyotard’s argument that “the perpetuation of narratives of origin by means of repeated narratives” is the key to the consolidation of political power (147). But so much has changed since Lyotard’s definition of these terms that they have become almost opprobrium in contemporary usage. I believe that Morrison is aware of this change, and that is why she pursues Patricia’s agenda guardedly.

26. Even this piece of information is inconclusive. In Patricia’s view, “His [Zechariah’s] foot was shot through—by whom or why nobody knew or admitted, for the point of the story seemed to be that when the bullet entered he neither cried out nor limped away” (189). This is yet another example of the novel’s careful presentation of composite opinions that show the elusiveness of a single version of communal memory.

27. Isaiah 40:3.

28. I have put “other” in parentheses because even though the narrator constructs herself as a storyteller who knows her characters, the structure of the novel itself appears to disprove it. The authority of her narrative voice is considerably undermined by the insistence of the other characters to speak for themselves, oftentimes exposing the error in the narrator’s presumptuousness. She, too, like her characters, is an evolving subject in the narrative. Hence, Denise Heinze correctly describes her as “a voice that is both speaker and text, the book itself” (182).

29. Michael Cooke, who has identified works that “make no bones about their business, which is black experience,” has noted this tendency toward specificity in historical inquiry (210). In their quest for meaning, these works are “infused with a deliberateness and specificity of enquiry into the past that would seem to make investigation a form of action” (224).

30. It is because of this deconstruction of the narrator that Heinze refers to Jazz as “a metafictional fiction” (181). See also Philip Page’s essay “Traces of Derrida” in which he analyzes the novel as a postmodernist work because of its avoidance of dualities and the use of elliptical phrasing of meaning, among other attributes (57).

31. Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, in “Women Who Run with Wild,” bases much of her discussion of the novel on the connection of the work to the theme and structure of jazz music (623–46). Eusebia L. Rodrigues, in the same journal issue where Mbalia’s essay appears, takes the analogy further through an analysis that
virtually transforms the novel into one jazz score (733–54). On the other hand, Alan Munton expressly dismisses such a comparison. “The substantive error lies in thinking of jazz as a language similar in kind to spoken human language,” Munton contends. “It is true that jazz is often described as a language,” he continues. “Spoken language and the ‘language’ of jazz differ fundamentally, and it is possible to determine the latter from the former” (235–51). See also Caroline Brown’s essay in which she draws parallels between the history of jazz, its social and political impact in the United States, and the art of Morrison’s Jazz. Fred Wei-han Ho, who sees the music as embodying both the European concert tradition and West African rhythmic patterns, takes a more pragmatic approach to the subject. Noting Morrison’s interplay of written and oral forms in her works, Ho’s position could be considered more reflective of Morrison’s narratology.

32. I use this term in an African context where it is a taboo to unmask a masquerade in public. It is not that the identity of Jazz’s narrator is in dispute, but it is the “horror” a reader feels in encountering a narrator whose role in the story is called into question. The evaporation of the narrator’s omniscience is akin to the unmasking of an ancestral spirit’s presence in broad daylight.

33. John Young has done a remarkable job of finding in Morrison’s performance of the audiobook version of Jazz the quintessential demonstration of the African American “talking book.” Whereas part of the “tricks” in Jazz is the contrived intimacy between the reader and the narrator (or, physically, the book), listening to Morrison lend her voice to this narration, Young shows, returns the novel back to the oral basis of the “talking book” (196).

Chapter Five

1. See also Toomer’s letter to Sherwood Anderson, where he proposes a magazine project that would “consciously hoist, and perhaps at first a trifle over emphasize a Negroid ideal. A magazine that would function organically for what I feel to be the budding of the Negro’s consciousness” (Rusch, Reader 85). The later emergence of writers such as Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes could be seen as the blooming of this “Negroid ideal.”

2. It is not clear whether in fact Byrd is punning on the common legal code found in many states during the slave era that specified that the status of a child born to a black woman even by her white master must follow the “condition of the mother.”

3. See “Looking Behind Cane” by David Bradley for a more sympathetic interrogation of the ambiguous connection between Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance.


5. Here it is useful to recognize the recent seminal work by Chezia Thompson Cager wherein she offers a holistic reading of Cane based on what she calls the “Vertical Technique” (1). The approach explains the narrative sequences in Cane according to major moments in African American historical experience. Cager’s analytical tool comes closest to capturing the organicity of cane because the
“Technique” is premised on two notions, first, recognizing that diaspora Africans “come from comprehensible cultures with complex linguistic forms and a repertoire of gestures that accompany those forms” (13), and, second, evoking the African concept of time, which is cyclical (13–15). The former explains the multiple forms in the text, while the latter offers a plausible explanation for Cane’s “plot.” What is not addressed in the study is the centrality of the oral artist as “text maker” and the text, as well.

6. Because of the large presence of oral cultures in Africa, Eileen Julien, in her book on orality and African literature, has similarly pointed out a fallacy among some critics and researchers who seem to essentialize orality as an African attribute and regard writing as “disjunctive” to the African. Such critics, Julien notes, “assume almost invariably that there is something ontologically oral about Africa,” a false assumption (8). On the American scene, Harryette Mullen warns that “any theory of African-American literature that privileges a speech based poetics, or the trope of orality, to the exclusion of more writerly texts will cost us some impoverishment of the tradition” (670–71).

7. There is an illuminating example of this external interjection in the personal narrative of Elizabeth Tonkin, a folklorist carrying out fieldwork among an ethnic group in Liberia. The following excerpt reveals the consequence of attempting to view the artistic exchange as other than ordinary: “In the same village as Blamo Kofo [a griot] lived Nimene Gbei, a woman who was proudly called Territory Singer, Blenyeno (song woman). . . . It was difficult to get a recording from her, since she was always busy, working on her rice farm. . . . When I persuaded her, she was obviously put out by having to perform cold, not in the ambiance of a party audience . . . and she also paused to demand money. Nevertheless, it was a thrilling performance for me, who understood few of the words. Anybody who could come to the house turned up to listen and I wish I had provided lots of drinks, but apart from costs I was troubled at the time at how I would record her audibly in party circumstances!” (45). The disappointment here is that Tonkin appears to understand the importance of capturing performance in its natural environment, but she lets economic considerations and her sense of order stifle what apparently could have been a great performance.

8. See Gerald L. Davis’s I Got the Word in Me and I Can Sing It, You Know, where he describes phrase sermophones such as “preach it,” “thank you, Jesus,” and “carry me, Lord” as “generally used in a supportive manner to affirm an observation of the preacher or a particular event in the Church or sermon” (99). They also affirm the shared spiritual and social experiences between the preacher and the congregation.

9. Robert G. O’Meally defines the Amen Corner as “that section of a congregation, positioned near the pulpit, where older members sit and lead the church in responses to the service” (69–70). Most sermophones begin from the Amen Corner.

10. In a version of the African American Tar Baby folktale, the animals finally catch Rabbit and proceed to hang him. Rabbit begs them to throw him on a briar patch instead. The animals wonder why Rabbit would prefer dying under such painful circumstances, but they oblige him anyway. What the animals do not know is that the patch is a familiar tuft to Rabbit, and so when they throw him
down, he survives and scurries away laughing. Carma plays the same trick on her husband by planning the site of her feigned suicide among cane leaves, a venue that is quite familiar to her.

11. In her reading of the lyrical aspects of this story, Kimberly Banks argues that the three-line refrain (“Red nigger . . . fact’ry door”) is a call for political and moral action, especially as the black community fails to rise in defense of Tom against the white lynching mob. Banks concludes her analysis by stating, “The decision to represent lynching in lyrical terms prompts readers to see lynching as a loss of social power” (463–64). Granted, Banks reads the story alongside two other texts, and her reading dwells more on the gender and racial power struggle between the two men over Louisa than a consideration of the narrative aesthetics of the text.

12. Note, for example, Okpewho’s rendition of the text of two legend performances in African Oral Literature. Okpewho accounts for the words of the narrator, Charles Simayi, and equally includes interjections by members of the audience, side comments, laughter, murmuring, and even the whimpering of a baby in that audience as a way of conveying the event as an ongoing dialogue between the artist and his audience (183–201). In formal written drama, such inclusions would fall under the general rubric of “stage directions.” Although Toomer does not format the “introductory narratives” that lead to the dialogues as such, they share an affinity with the extensive narratives on characters and settings that pass for “stage directions” in Wole Soyinka’s plays.

13. Though his definition is more specific to his reading of Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s novels, F. Odun Balogun’s definition and application of the term “multigenre” closely relates to the notion I am expressing here. He sees a multigenre novel as “one within which several literary genres, traditionally separated as incompatible or linked only in subordinative relationships, co-exist on equal footing, and in which, at the same time, the essential characteristics of the traditional novel . . . are carefully preserved” (5–6).

Afterword

1. Nigerian pidgin for “Were they like these?” which is practically the same in meaning as “Ever see teet’ as dese?”
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