

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: BY CUSTOM AND BY LAW: BLACK FOLKLORE
AND RACIAL REPRESENTATION AT THE BIRTH OF
JIM CROW

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Abstract

By Custom and By Law: Black Folklore and Racial

Representation at the Birth of Jim Crow establishes folklore as a contested site in the construction of racial identity during the emergence and solidification of legalized racial segregation at the end of the nineteenth century. By examining institutional interests, popular culture performances, and political rhetoric, I demonstrate how representations of black folklore played a seminal role in perpetuating a public discourse of racial difference. Alternately, my work introduces new scholarship examining the counter-narratives posed by nineteenth-century African American scholars, writers and folklorists who employed folklore in their various academic works and artistic productions as a vehicle to expose and critique post-Reconstruction racial hierarchies.

In chapter one I reveal how constructions of black folklore in ante- and post-bellum popular culture intersected with emergent white folklore studies to provide a taxonomy for codifying racial difference, while simultaneously designating folklore as the medium through which racial representation would be

debated. Chapter two recovers the important, but virtually unacknowledged role of African American folklorists in brokering public and academic access to black folk culture and in providing an alternative to the racist constructions of black folklore prevalent in the post-Reconstruction era. Chapter three re-contextualizes Charles Chesnut's *The Conjure Woman* as both a response to the larger national discourse surrounding black folklore and also as part of a concerted effort among black intellectuals to first expose how perceptions of racial realities were constructed through representations of black folklore, and then to redefine the role of black folklore in African American cultural and literary works.

In sum, my dissertation provides a cultural history of a formative moment in the construction of a late nineteenth century racialized discourse that placed representations of black folklore at its center. My research both recovers the neglected role of early black folklorists and writers in studying and interpreting black cultural traditions and asserts the profound significance of representations of black folklore in negotiating the perceptions and practices that have worked to define US racial ideologies in the nineteenth century and beyond.

BY CUSTOM AND BY LAW: BLACK FOLKLORE AND RACIAL
REPRESENTATION AT THE BIRTH OF JIM CROW

by

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Since completing the dissertation, I have accepted a post-doctoral fellowship with the Africana Research Center at the Pennsylvania State University. I must express my gratitude to Phil Goff, Keith Wilson and Deb McMurtrie at the Center for their support and resources. I appreciate the enthusiastic and critical interest from the professors in the Penn State Departments of English and African American studies, especially Lovalerie King, Bernard Bell, Robert Caserio and James Stewart.

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Introduction

“To move ahead, we constantly reach back for cues. An understanding of the struggles of the past will help us become frighteningly aware that they are not past.”¹

In a January 2006 letter accompanying the NAACP’s National Survey on Race, Gender and Equality in America, NAACP Chairman, Julian Bond, evoked the 1890 debates over racial segregation to characterize our contemporary moment. In this letter Bond asked the readers to “reflect on the deliberate and systematic efforts to disenfranchise minority voters with tactics reminiscent of America’s shameful Jim Crow era.” He continued, stating that “the historic and ongoing quest for equality is today threatened by a distorted, nostalgic view of what the ‘real’ America was like before all these ‘troublemakers’ came along”—or what Bond referred to as a “yearning for an imaginary yesterday.” Finally, Bond cited a Gallup poll to show that the public perception is that minorities outnumber the majority. The poll showed that the average American believes minorities are now over 70% of the population, when in fact, that number is closer to 30%. Bond referred to this as “a perversion of reality where the victims become the perpetrators and minorities become majorities.”² The issues Bond alluded to in his letter—how the white majority’s perceptions of racial ‘realities’ rationalize public policy—are at the heart of my dissertation. Specifically, my work investigates the distinct role that white dominant cultural representations of black folklore, specifically those emerging from the minstrel and plantation traditions, played

¹ Dexter Gordon, *Black Identity: Rhetoric, Ideology and Nineteenth Century Black Nationalism* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), xii.

² Julian Bond, "NAACP's 2006 National Survey on Race, Gender and Equality in America," January 2006, NAACP, Baltimore, Maryland.

in constructing the public perceptions of blacks necessary to sustain the emerging system of racial segregation at the end of the nineteenth century.

“By Custom and By Law”³ is an effort to recover the historical circumstances surrounding the cultural and literary representations of black folklore between 1880 and 1900 and to locate these representations squarely within the debates over racial identity and segregation that defined this period. My dissertation maintains that it is not coincidence that the US system of racial segregation, which would come to be known as Jim Crow, takes its name from a white entertainer’s popular performances of what were ostensibly black folk customs. To the contrary, I assert that at the end of the nineteenth century, questions of racial identity, equality and segregation were debated, in part, through, the medium of folklore. Representations of black folklore and images of black “folk” proliferated on the minstrel stage, in the popular plantation tradition literature and in literature of the “Lost Cause.”³ The institutionalization of folklore studies in the late 1880s through the formation of the almost exclusively white American Folklore Society provided a language for codifying racial difference and added an air of intellectual cachet to a post-Reconstruction racial discourse already saturated with images, representations, and references to black folklore. The combination of the popular minstrel and plantation images of black folklore, along with the scientific framework provided by the newly emerging field of folklore studies, supplied segregationists with a convenient apparatus for legitimizing a system of racial separation predicated on the premise that racial identity

³ As I will discuss in greater detail in chapters one and three, whether subversive or conservative in intent, the minstrel tradition provided visual evidence of outrageous black difference. The plantation tradition valorized Southern patriarchy and supported ‘romantic’ or paternalistic racism. Literature of the Lost Cause, exemplified by Thomas Dixon’s *Leopard’s Spots*, portrayed blacks as lazy, thieving, sexual predators.

could be clearly demarcated, if not through physical appearance, then at least through the observation of what were ostensibly racially-differentiated behaviors, i.e. folk customs.

The African American writers, scholars, activists and folklorists I investigate were intimately aware that white dominant cultural representations of black folklore were an integral part of the elaborate myth of white racial superiority and black inferiority that was necessary for whites to sustain the racial hierarchy. Specifically, I examine the work of the Hampton Folklore Society, alongside Charles Chesnutt's 1899 folklore-inspired text, *The Conjure Woman*, recovering both literary and folkloric responses to these white cultural representations of black folklore. My analysis brings several key questions to the forefront. For instance, how were African American representations of black folklore influenced by larger dominant cultural interests in black folklore from groups such as the American Folklore Society and individuals, such as Joel Chandler Harris? How did African American writers, scholars and folklorists negotiate their desires to present more sincere representations of black folk culture against the public perceptions that constructed black folklore in racist and dehumanizing terms? How does Chesnutt's relationship with the Hampton folklorists illuminate the literary strategies employed to translate folklore into popular fiction? This dissertation responds to these questions by first providing a cultural history of constructions of black folklore in the late nineteenth century, then by recovering the role of African American folklorists and writers in providing alternative approaches to the preservation and representation of black folklore and finally, by suggesting that our readings of folklore in post-Reconstruction African American literary texts must include an understanding of the deep and intricate

relationship between white representations of black folklore and the racial politics at work in fortifying Jim Crow segregation.

* * *

Questioning the Constructions of the Folk in Contemporary Critical Discourse

Our contemporary moment has seen a flurry of attention to the construction of the black “folk” in relation to questions of authenticity and racial identity. J. Martin Favor, for example, begins *Authentic Blackness* with a question. “Who is Black?” Favor asks, querying the reader while referencing the important study by that same title.⁴ Favor uses this question, the veritable calling card of anti-essentialist critiques of “authentic” racial identity, to position his own study of the ways in which literary criticism has constructed an “essentialized” racial identity based on the valorization of the black folk. His project, to the contrary, is to examine how black writers “between the world wars” created alternative versions of black identity as a way to challenge the predominance of the privileged “folk” identity they had inherited from the previous generation of black writers. David Nicholls’ *Conjuring the Folk* also analyzes constructions of the folk by black writers “during the period between the world wars,” examining how these writers mediated their representations of the folk from their position within modern, metropolitan culture.⁵ Both Nicholls and Favor suggest “historically specific” approaches as a corrective to vernacular theories, which both critics argue have served to “essentialize” selective cultural elements and social classes as more authentically black than others. In

⁴ F. James Davis, *Who Is Black?* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

⁵ David Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

“Ideologies of Black Folk,” Hazel Carby argues that the African American literary tradition is dominated by an ideology of the “folk” based on fictional representations that collapse sharecropping and slavery into one idealized past. She further maintains that critics interpret these representations of “the Southern ‘folk’” as “the source of Afro-American literature” that they then reconstruct black culture as rooted in folk culture. Carby maintains that the critical discourse precipitated by Henry Louis Gates and Houston Baker identifies slavery as the defining African American experience and creates a mythology of the rural South as the site of “one mythical rural folk existence.” Like Favor and Nicholls, Carby challenges the romanticization of the “folk” by examining how literary works composed after World War I provide alternative versions of a mythic, undifferentiated, rural, folk existence.⁶

Favor, building on the critical discourse initiated by Carby, expresses his skepticism of “the critical discourse of blackness that places the ‘folk’—southern, rural, and poor—at its forefront.” Favor asks, “How and to what end did such a discourse come into being?”⁷ Favor then locates responsibility for this discourse of authentic blackness in the vernacular theories of the 1980s, assigning responsibility to Baker and Gates, both of whom have become the standard vernacular theorist scapegoats. In line with Favor’s critique, Dwight McBride, in his 2005 publication, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch*, asserts that, as critics, we must seek the origins and look analytically at “the deep

⁶ Hazel Carby, “Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery,” in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 126-29. Carby examines Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* and Arna Bontemps’ *Black Thunder*. While *Jubilee* was not published until 1960, Walker had begun composing the text in the 1930; *Black Thunder* was first published in 1936 and later reprinted in 1968.

⁷ Favor, *Authentic Blackness*, 4.

structure of racialized discourse.”⁸ In response to the call articulated by Favor and McBride, a number of important studies have been published over the last five years that interrogate constructions of blackness, while paying particular attention to representations of the folk. Many of these studies, such as Nicholls’ *Conjuring the Folk*, Barbara Foley’s *Spectres of 1919*, Martha Nadell’s *Enter the New Negroes* and Anne Carroll’s *Word, Image and the New Negro*, locate their analyses in the first half of the twentieth century and are centered on the Harlem Renaissance trope of the “New Negro.” In my doctoral work, I too, take seriously Favor’s question. My work, however, examines the period preceding that in which these critics situate their analyses, a period dictated by a different, if not more constrained, set of historical circumstances surrounding the politics of representing black folklore.⁹

In my examination, for example, I argue that late nineteenth century black scholars, folklorists, and writers created representations of black folklore and depictions of the black “folk” that were not uncritical assertions of an idealized black folk located in a mythical rural past, but instead were “always already” (to borrow Derrida’s phrase) in conversation with dominant cultural representations and often engaged in an overt or implicit critique of a national discourse that constructed the folk as a racialized and politicized “other.” As I argue in the chapters that follow, African Americans’ representations of black folklore in the post-Reconstruction era were not intended to

⁸ Dwight McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 174.

⁹ See Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk*; Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Martha Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Anne Carroll, *Word, Image and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

create a discourse of nostalgia for an idealized past, but to the contrary, were often aimed at disrupting a mythical version of the past that was already being constructed largely through the popular plantation and minstrel traditions.

Another source of debate between the vernacular theorists and their critics revolves around what the anti-essentialist critics allege are the vernacular theorists' attempts to fix what is "authentic" about black culture by identifying the events that define the African American experience, namely slavery and segregation. Bernard Bell, for example, convincingly argues that the "economics of slavery and the politics of racial segregation" are "the major determinants of African American biracial and bicultural identity."¹⁰ It is not within the scope of this present study to engage fully the debate over what, if any, experiences can be said to define what it means to be African American. Instead, taking segregation to be an important even if not "defining" experience of African American identity, my work considers the role that representations of black folklore played in constructing and maintaining racial difference for the purposes of legitimizing racial separation and supporting racial hierarchy.

* * *

Rayford Logan identified the late nineteenth century as the nadir of American racial relations, an ominous designation, as Eric Foner notes, which Logan deliberately bestowed on the post-Reconstruction era, as opposed to slavery, the more likely candidate. Based on his "encyclopedic" research, Logan characterized this period by the unchecked reign of white supremacy and racial violence, the reversal of many of the political and legal advancements made during the Reconstruction era and, most

explicitly, by the Supreme Court decision in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case. Indeed his landmark work, *The Betrayal of the Negro*, marked a vital contribution in the revisionist project, started by W.E.B. Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction*, to provide a more accurate picture of African Americans during the Reconstruction era and the subsequent sacrifice of the Reconstruction gains to the desire for an amiable reunion between the North and the South. As Foner notes, the real contribution of *Betrayal* is not only that Logan reconstructs an obscured legal and political history, but that he establishes in painstaking detail the book's central thesis that "in the relentless purveying of racist iconography and literary images, in distortions of black history and indifference to lynching, race riots, and disfranchisement, *popular culture in effect legitimated and 'naturalized' the system of political and economic subordination.*"¹¹ Logan's work alerted me to the insidious relationship between the black images in popular culture and the fortification of legally-sanctioned racial segregation. My specific interest in this period, however, hinges on the role that folklore played in constructing what Eric Sundquist refers to as "the brutal artifice of racial distinction."¹²

Based on my analysis of post-Reconstruction racial discourse, I found that white legislators and politicians consistently employed the rhetoric of folklore as a way to endorse, by non-opposition, the legalization of Jim Crow. In the debates over segregation, racial difference and equality, the rhetoric of folklore held a premium. It was

¹⁰ Bernard Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 4.

¹¹ Eric Foner, "Introduction," in Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro, from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), xiv, italics added.

¹² Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 225.

variously argued, for example, that legislation could do little to change the folkways, habits, social practices or folk customs that inherently differentiated the races. The very phrase “by custom and by law,” which was popularly used to describe how Jim Crow was accomplished, borrows from folklore studies the term used to denote both the traditional way of doing things and the *things* done in the traditional way. The notion that racial separation and difference is accomplished “by custom” implies both that it is a result of the force of tradition, or in everyday parlance, just the way things are. It also implies however, that racial distinction is evidenced in the “customs” that distinguish the two races. This second use of custom conflates social behavior and racial identity, providing the much needed markers of racial distinction. Justice Brown’s majority opinion in the 1896 *Plessy* case illustrates how the dual meaning operated. When Brown declared that it was legally permissible for the state of Louisiana to act in accordance with the “the established customs, traditions and usages of the people,” he was drawing on the first meaning of the term. When he later stated that “if one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot be expected to put them on the same plane,” he was basing his constitutional interpretation on the second meaning of custom, implying that in the absence of the ability to rely on ‘admixture of blood’ or even appearance, it was blacks’ *behaviors* that distinguished them from whites. This idea was repeated throughout post-Reconstruction discourse, and perhaps most overtly in the Mississippi Supreme Court *Ratliff v. Beale* case. In this case, the court deferred to the 1890 Mississippi State Constitution in supporting its decision upholding poll taxes. The court stated:

By reason of its previous condition of servitude and dependence, this race had acquired or accentuated certain peculiarities of habit, of temperament, and character, which clearly distinguished it as a race from that of the whites--a patient, docile people, careless, landless, and migratory....Restrained by the Federal Constitution from discriminating against the Negro race, the [Mississippi State] Convention discriminated against its characteristics.¹³

In other words, the Supreme Court, and lower courts both before and after *Plessy*, claimed discrimination, in part, on the basis of inherent differences in behaviors, manners and customs that naturally existed among the races. This was the type of maneuvering Chesnut referred to, for example, when he stated that black disfranchisement was accomplished by various methods, devised with “much transparent ingenuity.”¹⁴ As I argue in chapter three, it is this “transparent ingenuity” that Chesnut sought to expose in *The Conjure Woman*.

Recognizing the political significance of black folk customs, members of the black intellectual community decried the misrepresentations of black folklore in popular forms, protesting that literary conventions governing the representations of blacks had been laid out by white writers. In 1893, Anna Julia Cooper noted that most writers who had attempted a portrayal of the life and customs of African Americans were, at best, only marginally acquainted with the individuals whose lives they sought to portray.¹⁵

¹³ *Ratliff v. Beale*. 74 Mississippi 247 (1890).

¹⁴ Charles Chesnut, "The Disenfranchisement of the Negro," in *Charles Chesnut: Stories, Novels and Essays*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Library of America, 2002), 875.

¹⁵ Anna Julia Cooper, "The Negro as Presented in Literature," in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, eds. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 139.

Nevertheless, white writers had become “the arbiters of what was ‘authentic’ about black life.”¹⁶ Cooper was not alone in her interest in “reclaiming” representation of black folklore. In fact, I locate the work of the Hampton Folklore Society at the center of this movement to encourage black representation of black cultural traditions. Indeed when Alice Bacon founded the Hampton Folklore Society, she cited the “customs and traditions” of southern blacks as a principal area of collection. She noted that in the atmosphere of Jim Crow discrimination, this work could not be carried out by white folklorists, but had to be carried out by black folklorists, who, presumably, would see in the customs and habits of blacks “no occasion for contempt or scorn or laughter.”¹⁷

In the critical analyses of constructions of racial difference during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new and exciting work has been produced examining the role of visual images. Anne Carroll’s *Word, Image and the New Negro*, for example, analyzes “multi-media” portrayals of African Americans presented during the Harlem Renaissance, considering how blacks used visual texts in their struggles to define their own representation.¹⁸ The role of dialect and other forms of oral folklore has also received significant attention in assessments of how representations of folk speech were used to signify racial difference. In her study of language, race, and social class in nineteenth century America, Elsa Nettels notes that in the years following the Civil War, “popular literary magazines published hundreds of stories, anecdotes, sketches, poems and installments of novels portraying black characters speaking in dialect.” Nettels

¹⁶ Mary Helen Washington, "Introduction," in *A Voice from the South, Anna Julia Cooper* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xliii.

¹⁷ Alice Bacon, "Circular Letter," *Southern Workman* 22, no. 12 (1893): 180-1.

¹⁸ Carroll, *Word, Image and the New Negro*, 2.

explains that it was “the writers of dialect verse,” such as Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, who “established the conventions governing the portrayals of black characters and their speech.”¹⁹

But what of the persistent references to the “customs and traditions” that allegedly distinguished blacks from whites? In the chapters that follow, I investigate how the ideology of “customs and traditions” functioned as both a marker of black difference and as a legitimating apparatus for the racial status quo. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that dominant cultural representations of black folklore were used as a means of “othering” African Americans. When the American Folklore Society was founded in 1888, for example, it identified four groups that warranted study. Among the four marginal ethnic groups were “Negroes of the Southern States of the Union.” American Folklore Society founder William Wells Newell stated that the folkloric study of Southern Negroes would help furnish “a complete representation of the savage mind.”²⁰ In effect, what folklore studies did was to yoke folklore to racial difference and thereby further support the notion that blacks had folklore, while Anglo-American civilization possessed culture. As an unexpected consequence of the proliferation of the language of folklore studies, however, I have found that many of the black writers and scholars considered in my dissertation realized that the same folkloric framework that was used to classify black behaviors as “folk customs” provided a lens through which to view dominant cultural traditions and practices, as well. Thus not only do the writers and scholars under consideration challenge and re-present images of black folklore, but they

¹⁹ Elsa Nettels, *Language, Race and Social Class in Howell's America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 72-86.

also continually resituate the folkloric lens to consider not just African American habits, customs and traditions, but also to reveal the customs, traditions, and practices that were used to maintain racially-based separation and to show that whites, too, had their folklore.

In folklore studies, the customs, traditions, and practices so frequently referred to in late nineteenth century racial discourse fall under the broad rubric of “customary folklore.” According to folklore scholar, Jan Brunvand, customary folklore involves the modes of behavior, habits of social life and traditional practices that are learned by observation and imitation and ingrained through various forms of social pressure. Unfortunately, as Brunvand notes, “no other category of American folklore has been so frequently referred to, yet so vaguely defined, so ill classified, and so little understood or studied as folk customs have been.”²¹

Brunvand’s assertions generally hold true in African American literary studies, as well. Frequently, in African American literary criticism, folklore and oral tradition are considered synonymous. For example, in the otherwise provocative essay, "African American Folklore: Its Role Reconstructing African American History," Tolagbe Ogunleye consistently and solely equates folklore with oral tradition. In just a few examples, he makes clear that folklore, from his perspective, means only oral folklore. He states, "folklore, also called folktales, includes myths, storytelling, recollections, ballads, songs, rap, and other orally transmitted lore....African American literature is a 300-year old oral tradition."²² Although there is certainly overlap between the three

²⁰ William Wells Newell, "On the Field and Work of a Journal of American Folk-Lore," *Journal of American Folklore* 1, no. 1 (1888): 6.

²¹ Jan Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore*, 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 406.

categories of folklore, which Brunvand identifies as oral, customary and material, the important role of customary folklore in both the historical and on-going constructions of racial identity and racial hierarchy warrants closer attention. The overwhelming emphasis on oral folklore throughout the vast body of criticism on African American cultural and literary traditions, however, has left the study of African American folk customs disjointed; consequently the area of customary folklore has not been subject to the same depth or breadth of critical analysis as various forms of oral folklore. A scholar studying African American oral tradition, for example, can reference a wide body of criticism, ranging from Roger Abrahams's work on African American folktales, Patricia Turner's study of rumors and legends, Sw. Anand Prahlad's numerous studies of proverbial lore; or she could turn to the many critical analyses of oral folklore in literature by scholars such as Gayl Jones, John Callahan and Trudier Harris.²³ Indeed, Bernard Bell's criticism of Gates and Baker is that they funnel their examinations of African American vernacular tradition into one or two privileged (oral) forms, which for Gates centers on the linguistic strategy of signifying and for Baker involves a "blues matrix."

²² Tolagbe Ogunleye, "African American Folklore: Its Role in Reconstructing African American History," *Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 4 (1997): 435.

²³ Roger D. Abrahams, *Afro-American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Patricia Turner, *I Heard It through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Sw. Anand Prahlad, *African-American Proverbs in Context* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996); Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); John Callahan, *In the African-American Grain: The Pursuit of Voice in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Trudier Harris, *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

I am not asserting, however, that black folk customs have gone entirely without comment in studies of African American literature and folklore or that studies of oral folklore entirely ignore forms of customary folklore. In fact, the late-1980s through mid-1990s saw a surge of attention to the black folk custom of conjuration. Baker's *Workings of the Spirit* examined how African American women writers employed conjure as a literary trope that created a space for black women's creativity, while Marjorie Pryse identified conjure and magic as folk forms that facilitated access to ancestral power in black women's writing.²⁴ While these works focus attention on how the folk form of conjure highlights creative spaces in African American women's texts, what is needed is an approach that can simultaneously consider how folklore operates within the text, while also remaining attentive to the ways in which folklore is constructed in relation to a larger social and historical context. In *To Wake the Nations*, for example, Eric Sundquist locates nineteenth century American "race literature" within the context of slavery, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction politics. His readings locate literary representations of black folklore at the center of intersecting social, cultural and political traditions that emerge from these different "epochal" moments. His attention to diverse forms of folklore allows him to see past the reductive construction of black folklore as merely oral tradition; instead he identifies "Jim Crow cultural forms" that emerge from specific historical circumstances and involve dynamic interaction between vernacular traditions, popular culture and political agendas. Sundquist's chapter on Chesnut's 1901

²⁴ Other important works on folk customs, conjure, ritual and magic in African American folklore and literature include Joyce Ann Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests: Defining African-Centered Literary Criticism* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994); John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989); Gladys-Marie Fry, *Night Riders in Black Folk History*, (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1975).

novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*, for example, includes a keen analysis of customary folklore. Sundquist demonstrates how Chesnutt adapts the cakewalk, a Jim Crow cultural form that merges African American vernacular traditions and Southern white “high” cultural forms through a process of parody and adaptation, as a vehicle to comment on the bizarre politics of cultural imitation and racial representation that characterized the late nineteenth century.²⁵

Shifting our perspective to consider the role that customary folklore has served throughout both the black folk and black literary traditions allows us to uncover the important ways that race relations have been mediated through representations of black folk customs and social practices. The years surrounding the *Plessy* decision constitute a formative moment in the history of representing black folklore. During this time, representations of black folk customs held significant social, cultural and political import. An approach to African American literature that is attentive to customary folklore will enable scholars to understand better how post-Reconstruction African American authors participated in an increasingly circumscribed racial discourse; a discourse that was inextricably linked to questions of justice and social equality for black Americans.

²⁵ By the late nineteenth century, the cakewalk had become one of the most prominent features of the black minstrel performances. Also referred to as the “walk-around,” couples in fancy attire would strut around the stage performing elaborate, exaggerated dance steps. The dance performance had origins in African and African American plantation life and exemplified black and white cultural appropriation and re-appropriation. In “Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday,” Ralph Ellison notes the ironic cultural amalgamation that lay at the root of the cakewalk: “[the slaves] looking through the windows of a plantation manor house from the yard, imitated steps so gravely performed by the masters within and then added to them their own special flair, burlesquing the white folks and then going on to force the steps into a choreography uniquely their own. The whites, looking out at the activity in the yard, thought that they were being flattered by imitation and were amused by the incongruity of tattered blacks dancing courtly steps....So, blissfully unaware, the whites laughed while the blacks danced out their mocking reply.” See Ralph Ellison, “Homage to Duke Ellington on his Birthday,” in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 223-4.

In constructing my approach to reading representations of black folklore in the late nineteenth century, I began by expanding the parameters of what was commonly recognized as folklore—looking beyond oral forms to consider customary folklore as well. I also had to move beyond what I refer to as the “linear progression” approach to reading representations of folklore in pre-Harlem Renaissance literary texts. For example, in her forward to H. Nigel Thomas’s *From Folklore to Fiction*, Daryl Dance states that Thomas’s study concludes that early African American writers were “somewhat clumsy” in their incorporation of folklore into their fiction, while later writers were more sophisticated in their integration of folklore into their literary texts.²⁶ Trudier Harris arrives at a similar conclusion in *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. She finds that writers, starting with Chesnut and moving chronologically through James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, included “recognizably historical items of folklore” in their fiction but fell short of truly integrating folklore into the theme and plot of their fictional works. Harris cites Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as the “transitional work between the traditional incorporation of folklore into black texts and a broadening of the conceptualization of folklore in fiction.”²⁷ The chapters of Harris’s text are then devoted to explicating how Toni Morrison’s novels are able to “transform historical folk materials” and create what Harris refers to as “literary folklore.” The claim that early African American writers’ representations of folklore were largely ornamental can also be seen in William

²⁶ Daryl Dance, “Learn it to the Younguns: Passing on Folk Wisdom,” in H. Nigel Thomas, *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), x.

²⁷ Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 3-6.

Andrews's assertion that Chesnutt used folklore in *The Conjure Woman* as merely an authenticating device to validate the tales told by Uncle Julius.²⁸

Although these critics, particularly Harris, offer new approaches to reading the place of folklore in contemporary African American literature, my dissertation resists the temptation to view the representations of folklore in African American literary tradition in terms of a linear progression with early writers incorporating folklore “somewhat clumsily” and later writers seamlessly integrating folklore into their literary works. Instead, the linear progression approach alerted me to the need to *historicize black writers' representations of folklore* and to articulate and use an approach that locates literary works within specific historical, political and cultural contexts.

* * *

In formulating an approach to reading the relationship between folklore and literature in late nineteenth century African American texts, I surveyed the relationship, even if at times estranged, between folklore studies and literary studies. What I found is that critics readings of the literary representations of folklore are often determined by the critical framework the critic employs in approaching the various representations. I consider it worthwhile, therefore, to review the most influential and distinct but overlapping approaches of the last several decades. Contemporary folklore critics have identified three major shifts in the discipline. Most mark the advent of contemporary folklore studies with Richard Dorson's text-centered approaches of the 1950s, which are then followed by the performance theory or context-centered, process-oriented approaches of the 1970s. Since the 1990s, folklore studies has been characterized by the

²⁸ William Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 46.

increasingly self-reflexive orientation that typifies the “politics of cultural representation” approaches. Developing alongside these various folkloristic approaches, African American literary criticism about folklore as a significant aspect of literary tradition reached its highpoint in the 1980s and 1990s with the emergence of vernacular theory. Partly as a response to what were perceived as the shortcomings of the vernacular theorists and partly as a response to the rise of critical race theory and whiteness studies, the current moment in African American literary criticism is characterized by “historically-specific” approaches that analyze how the folk and black folklore are constructed in literature and culture. What I hope to show in this section is that we need not entirely discard earlier approaches for more recent ones. Instead, that by examining both the drawbacks of these various approaches, as well as what each brings to the table, we are better able to construct a methodology that is capable of accounting for the vast and varied ways that folklore, culture and literary texts interact.

Text-Centered Approach

The text-centered approach, as championed by Richard Dorson in the 1950s and 1960s, created a schism between folklore studies and literary studies. Nevertheless, this approach has significantly influenced the direction of folklore studies and, for better or worse, has infiltrated literary critics’ approaches to reading folklore in literature. In a 1950 article in *American Mercury*, Dorson introduced the concept of “fake folklore,” or what would come to be known as “fakelore.” In this article he launched an attack on what he perceived to be the growing popularization and commercialization of folklore materials. Dorson argued that “real” folklore was properly documented oral lore

collected from real people by trained folklorists in the field.²⁹ Dorson introduced his concept of fakelore partially in response to the popularizing of folklore that had taken place in the 1930s and 1940s through the Federal Writers Project and other state and federal initiatives to use folklore as part of nationalist projects. Dorson's need to distinguish between fakelore and folklore was also very much a Cold War response to the perceived threat posed by the Communist Party of the USA's interest in cultivating the protest elements they believed were latent in African American and working class folklore.³⁰ To guard against the "spurious and synthetic writing" that characterized what he considered to be illegitimate interests in folklore, Dorson asserted that folklore scholars needed to isolate folkloric items when they observed them in writing, determine their origins and ascertain the likelihood of the authors having actually obtained the folkloric material from folk or oral tradition.³¹ During the 1954 American Folklore Society symposium on folklore and literature, Dorson asserted that in approaching folklore as it appeared in literature, folklorists should first establish that the authors had drawn the folklore directly from oral tradition. He stated that not until "we can prove that authors have directly dipped into the flowing stream of folk tradition," are we "in a position to discuss whether or not this folklore contributes to a given literary work in any important way."³² Accordingly, the job of identifying, documenting, and explicating folklore was to be carried out by properly trained folklorists and not literary scholars.

²⁹ See Richard Dorson, *Folklore and Fakelore* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 5.

³⁰ See Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison, University of Wisconsin, 1997), 193.

³¹ Dorson quoted in Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 191.

Dorson's desire to distinguish between folklore and fakelore was not only a response to what he perceived as the increasing popularization, commercialization and radical politicization of folklore; he also wanted to establish folklore studies as a separate and independent academic discipline. Regina Bendix notes that Dorson, in seeking to establish the autonomy of folklore studies, had an uncanny way of alienating scholars from other fields; she explains that Dorson accused historians and literary scholars of "ignoring folklore or even of producing fakelore themselves."³³ In the following passage, Bendix shares one incident that encapsulates the disciplinary divide Dorson's sometime caustic approach engendered: "After a particularly disharmonious conference at the Newberry Library, Dorson interpreted the problems in interdisciplinary communications as evidence of folklore's own disciplinary standings. 'If folklore were truly an independent discipline, as I contended, how could it be mastered at one sitting? The reverse situation would never be contemplated, that a historian would pick up anthropology, or a philosopher annex sociology, by reading a book or attending a lecture.'"³⁴

Dorson's text-centered approach left literary scholars and others backing away from folklore studies. The lingering effects of this approach, for example, prompted literary critic Wendy Walter's 1997 assertion that from a folkloric point-of-view, a folk tale would be considered a static and isolated item; therefore folklore studies did not offer literary critics useful approaches to reading representations of folklore in literature.³⁵

³² Dorson, "The Identification of Folklore in American Literature," *JAF* 70 (1957): 5-8.

³³ Bendix, *Search of Authenticity*, 193.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Although Dorson's approaches have been thoroughly challenged and revised by folklore scholars in the intervening decades, his influence can still be felt in the "folklore in literature" analyses in which literary scholars isolate folkloric items, look for documented equivalents, interrogate authorial origins, note extant variants, etc. Interestingly, in the studies by Nigel Thomas and Trudier Harris cited above, both critics employ a text-centered approach in their evaluations of the uses of folklore in earlier African American texts, but then abandon this approach in their readings of later African American writings. For example, in her brief overview of *The Conjure Woman*, Harris states that "Chesnutt drew upon superstitions and other folk practices easily documented in sources such as the seven volume *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*." She contends that Chesnutt's "incorporation of recognizably historical items of folklore established a pattern for folklore in literature traceable through most African American writing."³⁶ Harris then asserts that writers up to Ellison, and including Hurston, were unable to integrate folklore into the theme and plot of their fiction, and that it is not until Morrison that we get a writer who is able to truly translate folklore into literary fiction. While there are shifts in the techniques that writers employ to incorporate folklore into their fiction, I would argue that Harris is able to arrive at a more favorable reading of Morrison's use of folklore due, at least in part, to the method Harris adopts in reading the use of folklore in Morrison's texts. Even the subtle shift in terminology signals Harris's change in approach from a text-centered reading to a process-centered approach. When Harris writes about the earlier texts, she refers to them in terms of "folklore in literature"

³⁵ Wendy Walters, "One of Dese Morning, Bright and Fair, Take My Winds and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," *MELUS* 22, no. 3 (1997).

or “folklore in fiction,” and when she writes about Morrison’s texts, she refers to Morrison’s “literary uses of folklore,” or “literary folklore.”³⁷ Harris states, “Morrison is able to show folklore in process rather than as the static force many other works picture it as being.”³⁸ As I show in the next section, Harris’s readings of Morrison’s texts are characterized by the process-oriented approaches initiated by folklore scholars in the 1970s and 1980s.

From Interpretation and Identification to the Process-Oriented, Context-Centered Approach

In his 1965 essay, “The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture,” Alan Dundes presented his “identification and interpretation” model. This model revised the text-centered approach and served as a precursor to context-centered approaches. Dundes addressed both folklorists and literary scholars in suggesting that folklorists move beyond simply identifying folkloric items either in the field or as compiled from literary sources, and that literary scholars pay closer attention to the role and significance of folklore as it appears and functions within literary texts. Dundes argued that folklorists’ emphasis on identification and documentation caused the folklorists to stop short before “asking any of the really important questions about his material.”³⁹ Dundes held that identification of folkloric material was to serve, not as an end in itself, but

³⁶ Harris, *Fiction and Folklore*, 3

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁹ Alan Dundes, “The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation.” *Journal of American Folklore* 78, no. 308 (April- June 1965): 137.

instead as a means to interpretation. He also asserted that literary criticism was hampered by the lack of identification of folkloric material, contending that “naïve analysis can result from inadequate or inaccurate identification.”⁴⁰ Dundes’s call for attention to the functions of folklore within specific cultural or literary contexts was enthusiastically taken up and expanded by the proponents of the context-centered, process-oriented approach to folklore studies.

In 1972 Dorson observed “a growing movement among energetic younger folklorists in the United States” that could be grouped under the “umbrella-name ‘contextual.’” He noted that they “object strenuously to the text being extrapolated from its context in language, behavior, communication, expression, and performance, overlapping terms they continually employ.”⁴¹ The movement Dorson was referring to was marked by the publication of Americo Paredes and Richard Bauman’s collection, *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* (1972). The contributors to this collection sought a conscious break from the static, text-oriented approaches that characterized the folklore/fakelore dichotomy. Instead, as folklorists Margaret Brady notes, they redefined “folklore performance as communicative interaction emerging within a specific context.”⁴² According to Bauman, the principal concern of the contributors is nothing less than

a full-scale and highly self-conscious reorientation from the traditional focus upon folklore as ‘item’—the things of folklore—to a conceptualization of folklore as

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Dorson, “Introduction” in Dorson, ed. *Folklore and Folklife* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 45

‘event’—the doing of folklore...there is an emphasis upon performance as an organizing principle that comprehends within a single conceptual framework artistic act, expressive form and esthetic response, and that does so in terms of locally defined, culture-specific categories and contexts.⁴³

An important example of this approach to folklore studies is Roger Abrahams’s 1964 work on African American toasts, *Deep Down in the Jungle*. In this study, Abrahams examines how folklore functions within a specific social setting. His work challenges traditional boundaries between genres of folklore and instead refocuses attention on how performers made aesthetic choices and how social context influenced those choices. Additionally, the context-centered, process-oriented approach can be observed in Harris’s readings of Morrison’s literary texts. Harris, for example, does not isolate folkloric genres or look for historical origins; instead she considers folklore as part of Morrison’s novels’ themes, plots and characterizations. Harris employs a process-oriented approach to reading folklore’s function in literary texts when she suggests that the folkloric material reveals community attitudes. Harris states that “instead of simply including isolated items of folklore...[Morrison] manages to simulate the ethos of folk communities...a single belief or superstitious practice, therefore, can reflect an entire community’s attitude toward a character or involvement in a particular event...Through such careful attention to the nuances of folk traditions, Morrison is able to show folklore in process.”⁴⁴

⁴² Margaret Brady, “Back to the Hearth: The Politics of Reflexivity and Representation in Context,” *Western Folklore* 61, no. 3/4 (Fall 2002): 238.

⁴³ Americo Paredes and Richard Bauman, eds. *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), xi.

The process-oriented approach is well-suited for reading the use of folklore in literary texts, or the “function” of folklore in fiction, and has allowed the formation of a more congenial relationship between folklore studies and literary studies. While certainly refocusing folkloristics to account for the growing interest in situating texts—be they literary, folkloric or otherwise—within a contextual framework, the process-oriented approach has received criticism for reinstating some of the same notions of authenticity that characterized the text-centered approaches. According to Bendix, “the dissolution of genre boundaries, the shift to observing action and enactment, and the acknowledging of the universality of expressive culture, each could have signified an end to the authenticity quest...Yet such insights remained un verbalized.” Instead, Bendix argues that folklorists and others set off in search of ways to capture the folkloric process and to represent the authenticity embodied in the folklore performance. Bendix laments, “if expressive culture lived in the fleeting moment of enactment, then authenticity should have been recognized as experiential, rather than static and lasting.”⁴⁵ What Bendix suggests instead is an approach that is attentive to the politics of cultural representation, but before examining this third and most recent phase in folklore studies, I will consider the overlapping developments in literary studies.

Vernacular Theory

The vernacular theories, articulated most fully in Henry Louis Gates’ “signifying monkey” and Houston Baker’s “blues matrix” and “spirit work,” can be seen as relatives of the identification and interpretation models because the vernacular theories proposed

⁴⁴ Harris, *Fiction and Folklore*, 11

⁴⁵ Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 198-99.

by Gates and Baker turn to the folk materials, tropes, and figures of folk or vernacular expression as interpretive tools for theorizing and analyzing African American literary texts.⁴⁶ In *Figures in Black*, for example, Gates states that “signification is a theory of reading that arises from Afro-American culture.” Gates draws on the folkloric expertise of Dundes and Abrahams in constructing his definition of signifying, and then creates legitimacy for his interpretive model by tracing the ancestral roots of signifying all the way back to the trickster/signifying figure of Esu-Elegbara or Legba from Yoruba mythology. He then offers complex and textured readings of how texts within the African American literary tradition respond and signify on each other while also challenging and revising Western assumptions about black culture.⁴⁷ Alternatively, in his 1984 work, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, Baker suggests that the ideology and techniques of the blues offers an ideal model through which to explicate African American literature. In 1991 Baker defines an additional theoretical model rooted in the folk form of conjuration. Conjure, he argues, offered a productive way to understand the work performed by literary texts, and black women’s writing in particular, which utilized the trope of conjure as a way to create a space where old ideas can be expunged, new ideas created, and healing, or what Baker refers to as “spirit work,” take place. Additionally, Marjorie Pryse’s “Introduction” to the 1984 collection, *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition* employs a characteristic practice of vernacular theory by utilizing a folk form or trope as the basis

⁴⁶ See Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the Racial Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

for literary interpretation. In her introduction, Pryse locates the “magic” of black folk life as the potential sources for creativity in black women’s writings. In reading Hurston’s fiction, for example, she suggests that conjure offers a bridge between the “primitive” authority of black folk life and “literary power.”⁴⁸

In *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, and again in *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches*, Bernard Bell attempts to account for the criticisms of vernacular models; specifically the assumption that one folk form could provide an adequate approach to the diverse body of African American literature and the assertion that African American literature is more influenced by black vernacular culture than Western literary tradition. In revising the vernacular models, Bell draws on a broader range of forms and tropes than Gates, Baker or Pryse, examining hoodoo, conjuring, magic, dance, field hollers, work songs, folktales, ritual and myth. He openly recognizes the “bicultural hybridity” in both the form of the African American novel and in the theorizing about it—or in other words, he recognizes the influences of Western literary and theoretical traditions on African American literature and criticism. Nonetheless, vernacular theorists, particularly in the line of Gates and Baker, have been contested on three major fronts. Critics such as Joyce Ann Joyce, Sandra Adell and J. Martin Favor have variously challenged the vernacular theorists’ reliance on Eurocentric models, the practical applications of their theories and their participation in the essentialist constructions of an “authentic” black identity. Joyce, for instance, advocates for a vernacular theory that is rooted in Afrocentric, rather than

⁴⁷ Gates, *Figures in Black*, 235-239.

Eurocentric models. Joyce identifies Gates and Baker as “black post-structuralists” who have adopted “a linguistic system and an accompanying world view” from post-structuralist and postmodernist paradigms that alienate them from the communities about which they write.⁴⁹ She suggests that “rather than accepting the Euro-American criteria of art, the African-American writer/critic must look within, to self and community, for inspiration needed to shape a characteristically Black art.”⁵⁰

Adell does not necessarily take issue with Gates’s and Baker’s reliance on Eurocentric models nor the level of their social/political commitment to a black consciousness; instead she questions the degree to which their theories enable productive, comprehensible readings of the texts under consideration. Adell asks: “what, if anything has been resolved in the crisis in the study in black writing by Baker’s new technical elaboration of Eurocentric methods, concepts, paradigms, and so on? Does not his eclectic discursivity succeed only in more fully obscuring rather than revealing those modes of expression--the blues, for example, that are most firmly grounded in the black vernacular?”⁵¹ In examining Baker’s critique of Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*, Adell notes that “in order to develop his interpretive strategy, he [Baker] turns first, not to a ‘blues ideology,’ or a ‘blues aesthetic,’ but to an essay by Victor Turner entitled ‘Myth

⁴⁸ Marjorie Pryse, “Introduction,” in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*, eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spiller (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 11.

⁴⁹ Joyce Ann Joyce, “The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism” in *New Literary History* 18 (1987): 335-44.

⁵⁰ Joyce Ann Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests: Defining African-Centered Literary Criticism* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994), 3.

⁵¹ Sandra Adell, *Double-Consciousness / Double Bind: Theoretical Issues in Twentieth-Century Black Literature* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 121-122.

and Symbol.”” After reviewing Baker’s reading of Dunbar vis-à-vis Turner, Adell concludes, “what this has to do with Dunbar’s blues achievement in *The Sport of the Gods* is anyone’s guess, for if it clarifies anything, it is only that Baker is unable to remain within his own archaeological and ideological models.”⁵²

Adell then critiques Gates’s vernacular theories, anticipating the arguments put forth by Favor in *Authentic Blackness*. Both Adell and Favor argue that Gates attempts to identify and isolate “an ‘authentic’ Afro-American literary tradition grounded in the black vernacular.”⁵³ Both critics take exception with Gates’s efforts to locate one unifying principle of black cultural identity based on the vernacular practice of signifying. In a broader sense, however, Favor asserts that both Gates and Baker assign a greater value or a “larger measure of authenticity” to literary representations emerging from constructions of the folk as lower class. As discussed above, Favor maintains that this privileging of folk identity as what is authentic about blackness creates and enforces a literary canon and a literary tradition restricted to black subjectivities that fit into the vernacular theory model.

The valorization of black folk identity as what is authentic and fundamental can, in fact, be observed in much of the literary criticism on the role of the folk and folk forms in African American literature. In his otherwise astute reading of *The Sport of the Gods*, for example, Lawrence Rodgers asserts that Dunbar’s migrant characters would have fared better had they developed meaningful relationships with their Southern black folk community.⁵⁴ Rodgers’ reading of the text is informed by a contemporary critical

⁵² Ibid., 129.

⁵³ Ibid., 120.

assumption that idealizes Southern, rural black community as what is authentic and vital about blackness. Rodgers's reading projects critical assumptions about a healing and powerful Southern folk community which are not supported anywhere in Dunbar's text. To the contrary, Dunbar's novel is ambivalent, at best, about the vitality or unity of a Southern rural black folk community. In the examination that follows I assert that the representations of the folk by the authors and intellectuals I consider were always engaged with the dominant cultural representations of black folklore and the black folk; in fact, their texts often critique the dominant cultural representations that constructed the folk as an exclusively Southern, rural phenomenon.

The Politics of Cultural Representation

As literary critics attentive to the constructions of the folk, both Favor and Nicholls suggest historically-specific analyses that focus on how literary and cultural forms mediate representations of "the folk" in relation to various social and ideological positions. Indeed, much contemporary criticism in folkloristics has called for methodologies that view cultural categories such as "folk" and "modern" as "socially constructed and contingent...subject to the dynamics of class, gender and race."⁵⁵ In a 1993 special edition of *Western Folklore*, for example, Amy Shuman and Charles Briggs, along with over a dozen folklore scholars, considered how the contemporary discourse surrounding the politics of culture and the field of folklore studies has been mutually

⁵⁴ Lawrence Rodgers. "Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*: The Doubly Conscious World of Plantation Fiction, Migration, and Ascent," *American Literary Realism* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 42-57.

⁵⁵ Robin Kelley, "Notes on Deconstructing the Folk," *American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (December 1992): 1408.

constitutive and mutually influential. Like the literary scholars who are attentive to the constructions of the folk, many of the contributors to this special issue maintain the centrality of historical analysis to concepts such as authenticity and tradition.⁵⁶ Additionally, several scholars anticipate the problems that Bendix skillfully exposed in the 1997 work, *In Search of Authenticity*. As Shuman and Briggs state, many contemporary folklore scholars have grown increasingly conscious of the ways that “characterizing cultural forms as ‘traditional’ [or authentic] constitutes a powerful means of imbuing them with social values and authority.”⁵⁷ Essays by John Roberts, Susan Ritchie, Shuman, and Debora Kodish in this special issue not only point to problems of *how* folklore gets represented, but *whose* folklore gets represented, and *who* gets to exercise authority for representing folklore—these were among the central concerns of nineteenth century African American folklorists, scholars and writers.⁵⁸

Finally, attention to the politics of culture and cultural representation has forced folklore studies to re-evaluate its own disciplinary roots, considering the role that folklore scholarship has played in romanticizing the folk and/or in creating the very notions of

⁵⁶ See for example, Beverly Stoeltje’s essay, “Power and the Ritual Genres: American Rodeo” in which she argues for an understanding of rodeo performances in relation to the acquisition and control of the American West; “Power and the Ritual Genres: American Rodeo,” *Western Folklore, Special Issue 52*, no. 2,3,4 (April, July, October 1993): 135-156.

⁵⁷ Amy Shuman and Charles Briggs, “Introduction,” *Western Folklore, Special Issue 52* no. 2,3,4 (April, July, October 1993): 116.

⁵⁸ John Roberts, “African American Diversity and the Study of Folklore,” *Western Folklore, Special Issue 52* no. 2,3,4 (April, July, October 1993): 157-172; Susan Ritchie, “Ventriloquist Folklore: Who Speaks for Representation?” *Western Folklore, Special Issue 52* no. 2,3,4 (April, July, October 1993): 365-378; Shuman, “Dismantling Local Culture,” *Western Folklore, Special Issue 52* no. 2,3,4 (April, July, October 1993): 345-364; Debora Kodish, “On Coming of Age in the Sixties,” *Western Folklore, Special Issue 52* no. 2,3,4 (April, July, October 1993): 193-208.

“authenticity” it now seeks to challenge.⁵⁹ In moving toward this end, a number of revisionist histories of folklore studies have considered how “particular groups got excluded and others essentialized” in the study of folklore.⁶⁰ While works such as Simon Bronner’s *American Folklore Studies* and Rosemary Levy Zumwalt’s *American Folklore Scholarship* are important contributions in revising and elucidating the development of folklore studies in the United States, these works continue to ignore or minimize the important contributions of African American folklorists in their surveys, and thus conversations about the politics of cultural representation continue to be about how African American “folk” are perceived and represented by non-African Americans. By presenting African Americans as always the folk, but never the folklorists, both traditional and revisionist histories of folklore studies continue to perpetuate the idea, as Melvin Wade states, that blacks are considered “peripheral participants in the evolution of their own intellectual history, fully involved in the performing of folklore, but rarely reflective about their involvement.”⁶¹ There is much to be discovered and learned in investigating how African Americans, who might be removed by class and education but linked by culture and ethnicity, negotiated their positions as folklorists collecting African American folklore. Thus, one of the important contributions of my work is to recover the role of black folklorists in collecting and representing African American folklore,

⁵⁹ According to Shuman and Briggs, “folklorists have continued to work against the discipline’s romantic origins and have disavowed uncritical antiquarian efforts to preserve the past.” See Shuman and Briggs, “Introduction,” *Western Folklore*, 109.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶¹ Melvin Wade, “The Intellectual and Historical Origins of Folklore Scholarship By Black Americans: A Study of the Response to the Propaganda of Racial Superiority at Hampton (Virginia) Institute 1893-1939,” Hampton University Archives, unpublished manuscript, 6/14/1982.

specifically considering how early black folklorists negotiated issues of education, class, culture, institutional pressures and “uplift” desires with their efforts to collect and represent black folklore.

My goal is not to debunk earlier approaches to reading folklore in literary and cultural texts, but instead to show that literary criticism surrounding representations / recreations of folklore is often influenced by the critical paradigm employed to read the various representations. The methodology I employ draws on the approaches discussed above, realizing that no one of these paradigms can sufficiently account for the many and varied manifestations of folklore as it appears in various cultural forms and in response to a complex network of ideological and institutional pressures. I do not consider these approaches mutually exclusive. The text-centered approach, for example, allows me to identify folkloric materials as they might have circulated in oral tradition and practice and to consider the possible significance of literary variations on these traditional folkloric items. The context-oriented, process-centered approach refocuses attention on the event, rather than the item of folklore, thereby highlighting the function of folklore within a communal context of performers, participants, observers and over-hearers. Working within this orientation toward folklore, I view conjure not as an item but as a process that operates at the level of belief and is intended to effect change in the behavior and perceptions of the participants. Thus, contrary to Trudier Harris’s claim that Chesnutt did not integrate folklore into his fiction, I find Chesnutt not only included elements of the black folklore he had heard or observed growing up in North Carolina, but he also adapted into fictional form the characteristics of conjure, such as its emphasis on influencing belief systems and transforming behavior, that helped him create the affective

force of *The Conjure Woman*. In this collection, folklore is not a static and isolated feature of the short stories, but instead, it is a way to advance the plot, demonstrate character development, and affect a change in the reader. Additionally, the vernacular theories, even with all their well-publicized faults, refocus attention on black folk culture as providing interpretive strategies for explicating the texts in which these elements of black folk culture appear. The methodology I employ draws on these earlier approaches, while remaining attentive to the ways the folk and folklore are constructed and represented in response to a specific set of social, historical, cultural and ideological circumstances. This rather eclectic methodology 1. allows us to move beyond the “linear trajectory” model of reading folklore in African American literature to an approach that can recognize and begin to account for the complexities of literary mediation of folklore across historical time periods; 2. insists that revisionist histories of folklore studies recognize the role of African American folklorists in the collection and preservation of black American folklore; and 3. forces us to look critically at the role that representations of black folklore in dominant folklore studies and popular culture have played in constructing racial difference and hierarchy.

* * *

In the first chapter I consider how constructions of the black folk in ante- and post-bellum popular culture participated in constructed a racialized discourse that located black Americans at the bottom of a rapidly solidifying racial hierarchy. This chapter seeks to illuminate how popular culture and folklore studies intersected to provide taxonomy for codifying and maintaining racial difference, while simultaneously designating folklore as a medium through which racial representation would be debated.

Chapter two recovers the important but virtual unacknowledged role of African American folklorists in brokering public and academic access to black folk culture and shows how the Hampton Folklore Society intervened in post-Reconstruction racial discourse, validating black folk traditions as an alternative to the racist constructions of black folklore prevalent in the post-Reconstruction era. I then argue that the larger African American intellectual community saw the Hampton Folklore Society's project not just as a collection of folktales, but as a potential stimulus for an African American literary tradition rooted in black folk culture.

Chapter three re-contextualizes Chensutt's *The Conjure Woman*, one of the earliest folklore-based African American texts, in relation to early representations of folklore in emergent folklore studies, as carried out by both black and white folklorists, and in relation to representations of black folklore in both popular culture and the political discourse surrounding racial segregation. I argue that *The Conjure Woman* must be understood as both a response to the larger national discourse, but also as part of a concerted effort among a diverse black intellectual community to advocate for social change and justice by first exposing how "public perceptions" of racial realities were constructed through representations of black folklore and second, by redefining the role of black folklore through African American cultural and literary works.

In the conclusion I turn to Ralph Ellison's 1944 short story, "Flying Home." Written half a century after the legal triumph of racial segregation and after almost five decades of learning and living "the ethics" of Jim Crow, Ellison's short story draws on customary forms of black folklore, such as initiation and ritual, to reveal the continued ways in which the public perceptions supporting Jim Crow were constructed in part

through representations of black folklore. “Flying Home” offers an ideal way of concluding this project since this text identifies black folklore as a continued site of contested racial identity and because it anticipates many of the questions that continue to pervade contemporary critical conversations concerning the role of folklore in the construction of racialized discourse. This dissertation brings these questions to the forefront, while also offering more complex and nuanced ways to read constructions of black folklore in various cultural and literary texts.

Chapter One: Folklore at the Birth of Jim Crow

“Stateways cannot change Folkways”¹

Those who supported the myth of “separate but equal” were quick to adopt the rhetoric of folklore for support and protection. In explaining why the differences of race could not be nullified by laws, Yale sociologist, William Graham Sumner coined his famous adage: “stateways can not change folkways.”² Sumner’s statement represents the proverbial soap that the country, and particularly the Northern politicians and press, used to wash their hands of the segregation issue in the South. That American folklore studies grew up in the fury over racial separation and difference is less a coincidence than a destined aligning of racist ideology with folkloric apparatus. At its founding, folklore studies was already invested in identifying and studying those groups—Negroes, Indians, bordering groups in Canada and Mexico—that existed within America borders and yet apart from American society. That these newly discovered “folk” possessed strange and peculiar habits observed and documented in this emerging field of study provided yet another piece of evidence that legislation could do little to change the habits and customs that defined racial relations.

In this chapter I examine several influences that culminate in the formation of white folklore studies at the end of the nineteenth century, illuminating how and why

¹ Quoted in Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 173.

² Sumner was a proponent of the inevitability of racial difference and hierarchy and a staunch supporter of laissez faire capitalism. He used his research on the folkways of “primitive” peoples to conclude that state policies could not regulate the customary practices that defined US social and racial relations. See William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (New York: Blaisdell Publishing Company, 1906, rtp. 1966).

black folklore became a focal point for the emerging folklore societies. I start by considering folklore studies' better-known origins in the ideology of social Darwinism and cultural evolution. I then rewind the tape a bit further to investigate why white folklore studies, rooted as it was in Darwinian thought, came into being with its gaze fixed intently upon the black folk. I consider how constructions of the black folk in ante- and post-bellum popular culture, as specifically located in the ironic figure of Jim Crow and the subsequent minstrel tradition, fed the national interest in black folklore and fueled white fascination with "authentic" black folks and/or black folk material. By analyzing the role of popular culture and the turbulent racial atmosphere in which the predominately-white folklore societies finally come into being, I reveal how representations of black folklore were used by segregationists and Southern sympathizers to assert racial difference and thereby legitimize US racial segregation in the post-Reconstruction era (1880-1910). Thus this chapter seeks to historicize constructions of racial identity as carried out through representations of black folklore. My subsequent chapters locate African American folkloric and literary representations of black folklore as a response to this historical context, specifically examining the work of the Hampton Folklore Society, as well as Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*.

* * *

The Evolutionary Origins of American Folklore Studies

The tenet proposed in Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), that nature progressed along evolutionary lines from simple organism to advanced man, dominated academic and intellectual conversations from the 1860s through the turn of the century. It was English philosopher and writer, Herbert Spencer, however, who popularized what

would come to be known as social Darwinism. Spencer's main works, *Progress: Its Laws and Causes* and *First Principles*, applied the theories of evolution to societies and cultures, arguing that societies were constantly evolving along a single trajectory and that the new, more evolved society is always better than the previous one.³ These ideas gained immediate and vast currency in American social and political thought and were quickly used to legitimize racism, colonialism and imperialism. Folklore scholar Simon Bronner argues that as Darwin's theories grew and mutated, "evolutionary lines were drawn, from superstitious beliefs to scientific observations, from primitive societies to modern industrial nations."⁴ Bronner further argues that early American folklore studies could not escape the influence of Darwinian theories of evolution. The US, however, did not have the long history of civilization that allowed its European cousins to view their modern status as the natural progression from primitive peasant to modern man. American society, therefore, needed the "Negro" and the "Indian" to exist in a different place and a distant time, a foil to the modern condition.

In his 1888 mission statement for the newly formed American Folklore Society (AFS), co-founder William Wells Newell identified ethnic and regional groups that warranted immediate study by members of the Society. Newell conceded that in "the habits and ideas of primitive races much seems cruel and immoral to us," but he emphasized the necessity of dutifully recording these habits and ideas for in them modern

³ Herbert Spencer, "Progress: Its Law and Causes." *The Westminster Review* 67 (April 1857): 445-65; Spencer. *First Principles* (New York: De Witt Revolving Fund, 1958).

⁴ Simon Bronner, *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 2.

civilization was furnished with “a complete representation of the savage mind.”⁵ Since Native Americans were being exterminated at the hands of American progress, Newell urged his fellow members to “preserve memorials” of their way of life.⁶ Still set within the framework of rendering the savage mind accessible to the civilized, Newell identified the study of black folklore as a pressing scholarly endeavor. Negro lore, he explained, represented “interesting and important psychological problems” for study by the learned Society.⁷ Ostensibly, Newell rejected the idea of using folklore as evidence of cultural evolution on the basis that folklore was not just survivals from a savage stage. Instead, he maintained that “folklore is found to exist among the most intelligent as well as among the rudest part of the population.”⁸

Nonetheless, Newell’s rhetoric, along with larger social interest and intent, made the separation of folklore studies from social Darwinism impossible. The public interest in folkloric materials hinged, in part, on what these materials revealed about the evolutionary stages of human development. Folklore studies offered a way to categorize and order the uncivilized elements that persisted in a civilized society. In 1884 Lee J. Vance stated that “folklore is only concerned with the legends, customs, beliefs of the Folk, of the classes of people which have least been altered by education, which have shared least in progress...this folklore represents, in the midst of a civilized race, the

⁵ William Wells Newell, “On the Field and Work of a *Journal of American Folk-Lore*.” *Journal of American Folklore* [JAF] 1, no. 1 (1888): 6.

⁶ Newell, “On the Field and Work,” 5.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ William Wells Newell, “Folk-lore” in *Johnson’s Universal Cyclopaedia*, v. 3 (New York: A.J. Johnson Co., 1893-97), 453.

savage ideas out of which civilization has been evolved.”⁹ Daniel Brinton, the second president of AFS, reasserted folklore’s association with the study of “survivals,” or relics. While Brinton, like Newell, claimed not to subscribe to the theories of social Darwinism or cultural evolution, he classified cultures in terms of stages of development, from savagery to barbarism, to semi-civilization to civilization and finally enlightenment, with folklore representing the remnants of the earlier stages of development which persisted, however fleetingly, in the face of progress and advancement.¹⁰

Like their American counterpart, European folklore studies, which had seen the formation of the British Folk-Lore Society in 1878, was just as firmly rooted in the concept of folklore as “survivals.” Several of the British Society’s early presidents insisted that folklore comprised “survivals” from an earlier stage of development and identified groups in which folklore persisted.¹¹ In organizing AFS, Newell borrowed organizational principles and theoretical approaches from European folklore studies, maintaining the European emphasis on collecting “survivals,” or “relics.” Nevertheless, Newell sought to distinguish American folklore studies from its European predecessors by finding uniquely American materials to collect. While theoretically consistent with European models, particularly in relation to the emphasis on “survivals,” Newell

⁹ Lee J. Vance, “The Study of Folk-Lore,” *Forum* 22 (1896-97): 249.

¹⁰ Hugo Freund, “Cultural Evolution, Survivals, and Immersion: The Implications for Nineteenth-Century Folklore Studies,” in *The American Folklore Society: 100 Years*, ed. William Clements (Washington DC: The American Folklore Society, 1988), 12-15.

¹¹ Quoted in A.R. Wright, “Presidential Address: The Folklore of Past and Present,” *Folklore* 38, no. 1 (March 1927): 13-39. See for example Wright’s description of Alfred Nutt’s 1898 presidential address. In this address Nutt explained his interpretation of folklore as “elements of culture surviving among the less advanced sections of the community, but discarded by the more advanced.” This sentiment had been similarly stated by previous British Folklore Society presidents including Lawrence Gomme in 1893 and again by Edward Clodd in 1895.

constructed American folklore studies around racial and regional groups specific to American soil. He identified four areas for collection: “a. relics of Old English Folk-Lore...b. Lore of the Negroes of the Southern States of the Union. c. Lore of the Indian Tribes of North America. d. Lore of French Canada, Mexico, etc.”¹² According to Newell, the existence of these regional and racial groups provided American folklorists with the unique opportunity to study “the fast-vanishing relics,” that were “soon be absorbed and lost in the uniformity of the modern world.”¹³

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, folklore became increasingly present in the American social and cultural consciousness. Leading members of AFS held positions at top universities and came from a range of occupations and disciplines. For example, founding members included Francis James Child and George Lyman Kittredge from Harvard, American sociologist Stanley Hall, a host of early anthropologists such as Franz Boas and Frank Cushing, philanthropists such as Isabel Hapgood and Mary Hemenway, as well as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Oliver Wendell Homes and the medievalist Thomas Crane. Joel Chandler Harris and Lafcadio Hearn, both members of AFS, entrenched their literary writings in folkloric materials, and Harris’s “Folklore of the Southern Negro,” published in *Lippincott’s Magazine* (December 1877), and *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880) were major catalysts in promoting the study of African American folklore. As T.F. Crane noted in 1890, “the interest in folklore seems to be steadily increasing in this country.”¹⁴ Fletcher Bassett of the Chicago Folklore Society (a rival to the American Folklore Society) remarked that folklore had become “a

¹² Newell, “On the Field and Work,” 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3,6.

subject of the day.”¹⁵ Branches of AFS were established in Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Baltimore, Chicago, New Orleans, Berkeley, Minnesota, and Montreal.

Proceedings from Society conferences were published in major newspapers; in 1893, the Chicago Folklore Society hosted the World’s Columbian Exposition, an ethnological exhibit which I will return to in greater detail near the end of this chapter.

In his intellectual history of American folklore studies, Bronner offers one reason for this swell of attention to the study of folklore, explaining that it was part of the trend of meeting the problems facing late nineteenth century America “in the safety of a distant past or removed place, rather than in the anxiety-ridden present.”¹⁶ Suffused with evolutionary ideology, folklore emerged out of the chaos and rapid change of the turn of the century as a way to provide scientific structure and rational order in a changing world. Industrial advances and improvements in transportation and communication had quickened the tempo of daily life and increased the quantity of goods and services. These advances also created the middle class perception that “there was an abundance of new goods ready for consumption and an abundance of culture ready for collecting.”¹⁷

What Bronner identifies as an American tendency to confront the modern problems of the rapidly changing present in the safety of a timeless past, however, can be read more specifically as the tendency to meet the problems of the post-Reconstruction racial crisis in the safety of the antebellum past. It was the folklore of the Negro that

¹⁴ T.F. Crane, “Recent Folk-Lore Publications” *Nation* 12 (June 1890): 475-476.

¹⁵ Quoted in Bronner, “Intellectual Climate of Nineteenth Century American Folklore Studies” in *The American Folklore Society: 100 Years*, ed. William Clements (Washington DC: The American Folklore Society, 1988), 6-7.

¹⁶ Bronner, *AFS*, 20

provided a foil against which the modern, evolved, rational society could be measured. Since the Negro seemed to have evolved along different evolutionary lines, the Negro was not figured as an ancestor to the civilized middle class American, but instead was seen as a living example of the primitive stage. As the superimposition of the rhetoric of evolution onto the discourse of black folklore makes clear, the black folk were not just within but apart from American society; they were behind and below modern civilization. The rhetoric of folklore achieved currency in the political and legal discourse of segregation because it was easily translated into support for the separation of the races and the inferior position of blacks.

Additionally, at the turn of the century the black folk emerge as such an easily recognizable folk group, not because folklore scholars has scoured the peripheries of modern society, but because the caricatures and stereotypes of the black folk, for decades, had found a profitable niche in popular culture. At the turn of the century, minstrel caricatures of the black folk proliferated. Minstrelsy funneled the black presence into stereotypes that helped simplify nineteenth century American racial complexities. With its conspicuous treatment and indiscriminate manipulation of black folk culture, coupled with the eventual use of black performers as the conduits of this material, minstrelsy marked black behavior as a subject for folkloric collection. By the time the American Folklore Society was founded, popular culture already had constructed the black folk as so full of peculiar habits and strange behaviors, so distinctively different, that the black folk were an obvious candidate for study by the newly formed folklore societies. It is telling that the system of Jim Crow segregation takes its namesake from a white minstrel whose caricature of a black man was presented as an authentic representation of the black

¹⁷ Bronner, *AFS*, 9.

folk and then performed for the entertainment of white audiences. As a trope that embodies the intersection of legal, social, political and cultural traditions, the strange and notorious career of Jim Crow is worth closer examination.

* * *

Jim Crow, Folklore and Blackface Minstrelsy

*I neeld to de buzzard
An I bou'd to de Crow
an eb'ry time I weel'd
Why I jump't Jim Crow¹⁸*

The career of Jim Crow, much like the stage performances of this supposed black folk character, twists, turns, jumps and jives its way through the nineteenth century. As a folk character made famous by the white minstrel performer, Thomas D. Rice, Jim Crow ushered in a period of blackface performance that thrust the black image into the national and local entertainment spotlight. Rice's depiction of blackness, fraught with complications from the very beginning, quickened a cultural fascination with the black image that culminated in the immense popularity of minstrelsy. This juggling of racial identity eventually elicited enough attention to become a site of appropriation for the forming system of Jim Crow segregation. Tracing the career of Jim Crow reveals how popular culture, folklore studies, constructions of the black folk and social and political agendas all converged around turn of the century questions of racial identity and social order.

The birth of Jim Crow, the stage character, has typically been traced back to an 1828 blackface performance by Thomas Rice. A white actor from New York's Seventh

Ward, Rice supposedly began jumping Jim Crow after a legendary encounter with Jim, the black stable hand. In *On the Real Side*, a study of humor in black entertainment, Mel Watkins recounts the event:

Rice...reportedly saw a crippled and deformed black hostler or stable groom singing and performing a striking but peculiar dance as he went about his work. The actor, recognizing the potential appeal of the song—"Weel about and turn about, and do jis so./ Eb'ry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow"—and the black man's twisted, antic movements, memorized the lyrics and copied the dance.¹⁹

As the widely accepted story goes, Rice added several verses to the song, which he started performing between acts of *The Rifle*, and according to the legend, even bought the old man's clothes to "assure" the authenticity of his performance.²⁰ While the veracity of the encounter remains questionable, the legend has been continually reproduced because it provides a convenient explanation for the threatening appearance of ostensibly black folk material on the local and national stage. However, recent scholarship, as championed by W.T. Lhamon, asserts that this encounter was a fabrication of contemporary white journalists and middle class monthly magazines contemptuous of the popularity of blackface performance and anxious about poor whites

¹⁸ An 1832 version of Jump Jim Crow as distributed at Chesnut Theatre, Philadelphia reprinted in W.T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 1998), 188.

¹⁹ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying and Signifying* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 84.

²⁰ Most accounts in both nineteenth-century reports and twentieth-century scholarship relate a singular encounter between Rice and either Jim, the black holster/stable groom, or Cuff, the levee luggage man. See refutation of this encounter in Lhamon, *Cain* 154, and for additional variants of this legend see Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 84; Robert Tolls, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (NY: Oxford UP, 1974), 28; Eric Lott, "Love and

adopting black cultural material as an expression of dissatisfaction with their own stations in life. Rice moved in culturally amalgamated circles and traveled extensively from New York's Five Points to Cincinnati, Mobile, Pensacola, Washington D.C., Philadelphia and New Orleans. It was during the course of these travels and over the course of several years that Rice figured out how to adapt Jim Crow for the stage.²¹ According to Lhamon, Jim Crow was "hardly a sudden or whimsical event" but instead was rooted in working class affiliations across color lines and a lower class desire to harness the subversive energy surging in black folk culture.²²

Bringing his impersonations of black folk life to the stage, Rice became one of America's best-known comedians, riding the wave of American popular culture's fascination with blackness. But what of this popular culture fetish for ostensibly black folk material? Representing one end of the spectrum, Lhamon argues that this white fascination with black folk culture boiled up from poor whites' identification with the "charisma" that blacks exhibited in the face of oppression and servitude. Lhamon argues that it was the "liberating potential" of Rice's Jim Crow character that made it so wildly popular with poor white audiences on one hand and a ready target for racist appropriation by middle class and elite authorities on the other.²³ Robert Tolls asserts, to the contrary,

Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy," *Representations* 39 (Summer 1992): 41-44.

²¹ The white actor, George Nichols, reported that he had learned Jim Crow in New Orleans in 1830 from Picayune Butler, a black street performer (Lhamon, *Cain*, 181); in *Step It Down*, Bessie Jones tells of having played "Knock Jim Crow" on the Georgia Sea Islands as a child during the early twentieth century (Bess Lomax Hawes and Bessie Jones, *Step It Down; Games, Plays, Songs and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage* [NY: Harper and Row, 1972], 55).

²² Lhamon, *Cain*, 195.

that as slavery grew into a national controversy and free blacks became increasingly present in the public sphere, minstrelsy served to satisfy Northern whites' curiosities about blacks, while also organized the growing black presence into convenient stereotypes. Whether Jim Crow was first adopted by white actors for its cross-racial energy and liberating effects and later warped into a tool for segregationists' agendas, as Lhamon asserts, or if blackface performance was always operating on the basis of demeaning stereotypes, as Tolls contends, one thing is certain: early blackface performances played an integral role in forming the popular perceptions of the black folk. Rice's white contemporaries, for example, did not see him as an originator at all but lauded him as one skilled at impersonating the gestures and language of the black folk.



Figure 1. Thomas Rice as Jim Crow (circa 1830)
Courtesy Harvard Theater Collection, Houghton Library

A London reviewer explained, “We will not say that we like Mr. Rice’s performance, but there cannot be a doubt of its extraordinary reality. The shuffling gait, the strange

²³ Lhamon observes that the early Jim Crow, as portrayed by Rice, “moved like a free man, crowed like a dandy cock, enjoyed the liberty of every public conveyance.” According to

whistle, and the more strange laugh.”²⁴ Rice’s manager, Noah Ludlow claimed that his client’s talent lay in “imitating the broad and prominent peculiarities of other persons, as was evident in his close delineations of the corn-field Negro, drawn from real life.”²⁵ Rice’s contemporaries regarded him not only as a performer of black folk material, but also as an ethnographer, translator and representative of authentic Negro life. Early blackface actors were seen as purveyors, or in their own terminology, “delineators,” of black folk culture; and thus these white actors took control of presenting American popular culture with its images of black folk life. Tolls, however, contends that these “blackface minstrels were not authentic, even in intention. They were not ethnographers, but professional entertainers, whose major concern was to create stage acts that would please their audiences.”²⁶

Until the late 1860s and early 1870s, the major “black presence” in American popular culture wasn’t black at all, but instead reflected white impersonations of black life. While elite sensibilities may have been offended by Jim Crow’s disregard for social decorum and racial categorization, ultimately this stage character’s strange behaviors and bizarre habits helped solidify a sense of social and civil superiority that justified the white elites’ claims to a position further along on the evolutionary scale. By 1840, any liberating and subversive potential that the early Jim Crow performances may have

Lhamon, he broke out of bondage and embodied quick reversals of social order and individual fortunes. See W.T Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003), 36.

²⁴ Quoted in Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, 169.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ In fact, black face minstrels, resentful of implications that they had any black blood in them, began publishing portraits of themselves not in blackface, along side their minstrel characters. This was done, Tolls explains, to establish their identity as performers and as white men. See Tolls, *Blackening Up*, 40.

suggested had given way to the form of blackface minstrelsy producing the damaging stereotypes which openly caricatured and ridiculed black life. Even Lhamon concedes that by the early 1840s, the form of blackface minstrelsy that followed Rice's Jim Crow performances inverted Rice's connections to blackness and made them "abhorrent."

Constance Rourke states, "To the primitive comic sense, to be black is to be funny, and many minstrels made the most of this simple circumstance."²⁷ But by the mid 1800s, minstrel performances had gone beyond being funny, penetrating a national consciousness and shaping an ideology of racial difference and degradation. What white audiences found most comical in the white minstrel performances of black life were the grotesque physical features attributed to blacks and the primitive, childish behaviors parodied for comic value, as the following description of the Virginia Minstrels' performance makes clear:

They burst on stage in makeup which gave the impression of huge eyes and gaping mouths. They dressed in ill-fitting, patchwork clothes and spoke in heavy nigger dialects. Once on stage, they could not stay still for an instant. Even while sitting, they contorted their bodies, cocked their heads, rolled their eyes, and twisted their outstretched legs...their wild hollering and their bobbing, seemingly compulsive movements charged the entire performance with excitement.²⁸

²⁷ Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931), 82.

²⁸ Tolls, *Blacking Up*, 35.

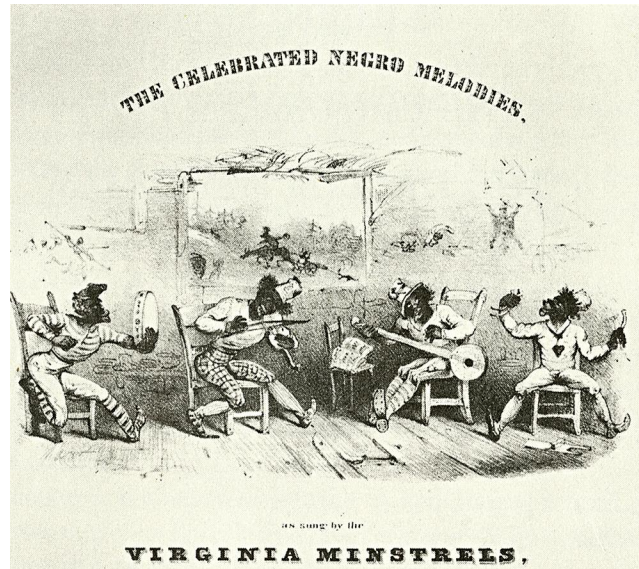


Figure 2. *The Celebrated Negro Melodies, as Sung by the Virginia Minstrels* (Boston, 1843).

Coupled with this visual spectacle of black behavior, minstrel shows also satirized the popular social and political issues of the day. Minstrels in blackface would turn the topics of Emancipation, suffrage, and education into comic routines, at once undermining the seriousness of the issue being satirized, while also insinuating blacks' inability to participate in serious political discussion. Minstrel shows were interspersed with pithy exchanges between actors, dialect-infused speeches, and boisterous song and dance. Watkins explains that "by focusing on and exaggerating the supposed earthy peculiarities of blacks, black-faced mimics provided the simple, folksy entertainment that white audience's demanded and assured them that, indeed they were superior to their enslaved brethren."²⁹ Many shows ended in "plantation extravaganzas," in which the plantation was presented as idyllic and blacks as contented and servile. These representations promoted pro-slavery, and later pro-segregation interests and instilled the stereotypes of blacks as childlike, carefree, and in need of protection. These shows also portrayed

²⁹ Watkins, *Real Side*, 86.

blacks as vastly different from whites, more different perhaps, than even Northern whites had imagined.

Blackface minstrelsy remained wildly popular with white audiences up to and through the Civil War. Its representation of black folk life reflected and solidified public opinion. At best, it showed blacks as natural, primitive and carefree juxtaposed to evolved, modern, and civilized society. At worst, it branded blacks as immoral, stupid, lazy and inferior. Watkins aptly states, “no other mimetic excursion into black cultural life would be as methodically demeaning or as lastingly damaging as minstrelsy.”³⁰ But before minstrelsy would meet its slow decline, with performances staggering on throughout the twentieth century, this peculiar form of entertainment would take another bizarre twist.

* * *

Minstrelsy and the “Real” Black Folk

“Nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself”

-- George Walker, black minstrel performer

After the Civil War, in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction era, minstrel caricatures and stereotypes passed from white performers in black face to black performers. By and large, whites controlled the management and profit of black minstrel troupes and blackface minstrelsy had set the parameters of minstrel performance a decade earlier.³¹ Therefore, when black performers inherited the stage from white people in

³⁰ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 82.

³¹ White-owned companies, such as the Callander Company, dominated the black minstrel industry. They virtually monopolized markets, had the most exposure and made the

blackface they found themselves trapped within the confines of caricature and rewarded for their ability to personify the stereotypes conjured up by white minstrel performances. In the post-Reconstruction era, seeing whites act like blacks was no longer quite as funny or appropriate as it was to see blacks act like whites expected them to act. When black minstrels went before their white audiences, they provided the corporeal evidence that blacks were, at best, different and peculiar and, at worst, grotesque and degenerate. Here was physical proof that blacks were an anomaly to be exploited in popular entertainment and a curiosity to be investigated in the emerging social sciences. Promoters and reviewers emphasized that these were not shows, involving entertainers or performers, but displays of natural, uninhibited black life. Black minstrel troupes were promoted as “the real thing,” “real nigs,” “genuine plantation darkies.” Black performers were able to modify these stereotypes by adding more variety and folk detail, and more significantly, by creating in-group meanings among themselves and their black audiences. The stereotypes and caricatures forged by the white minstrels were too deeply ingrained and culturally useful, however, for the white audiences to discard. Therefore the black minstrels found that, far from creating satirical critique, their performances reinforced the racial stereotypes, adding physical evidence that verified the white audience’s expectations.

most money, and “they illustrated that when blacks became marketable as entertainers, it was white men who reaped the profits.” See Tolls, *Blacking Up*, 211.



Figure 3. Oliver Scott's "Refined Negro Minstrels" (1898)

The print for Oliver Scott's "Refined Negro Minstrels" (figure 3), depicts the medley of stereotypes that had come to dominate the minstrel shows and that captured the public imagination. Jim Crow, Zip Coon and the enduring and infamous Grinning Darkie of the old plantation South ousted the Yankee and the backwoodsman from national prominence. In the Scott print, the dandy poses in a flashy yellow coat, sporting ridiculously thin legs and holding a cane. A Topsy-like character dances around a figure whose spectacles mark him as a caricature of the black intellectual. In the background, standing erect, are five "gentleman" who could be a spoof on the Hampton Student or Fisk Jubilee Singers, both groups known for their dignified and impeccable dress. In front of the student singers is the ever-popular parody of the cakewalk couple: an

inexplicably oversized black Southern “belle” and her diminutive companion. In the foreground, a mammy figure and a variation of the Jim Crow character dominate. The Scott print aptly illustrates how the different possibilities for black identity and representation were mocked and curtailed. The black intellectual, the Northern gentleman, the Southern rural folks, as well as the sophisticates, were all turned into comic relief on the minstrel stage.

It was also protocol for black minstrels to legitimize themselves by playing on the audience’s desire to see real, authentic blacks. To stress that they were real, genuine, authentic Negroes most black minstrels ceased darkening their faces with the burnt cork. The variety of hues among the actual black faces was another authenticating feature that allowed the black minstrels to claim that they were not “uniformly painted imitations” like their white minstrel predecessors, and critics even began to denounce white minstrels as “base imitators” of the real thing.³² The peculiarity of this racial masquerading has not escaped critical commentary. Watkins remarks, “if the sight of whites disguising themselves as blacks and distorting their own music, dance and humor was bizarre, the phenomenon of non-white performers blackening their already dark faces and imitating the grotesque antics of their white impersonators was even more outlandish.”³³

Nonetheless, the cultural obsession with the “natural” and “spontaneous” behavior of these black figures continued to grow, climaxing in 1895 with the arrival of a “Negro Village” in Brooklyn’s Ambrose Park. As Tolls explains, the plantation literally came to New York. The minstrel show, “Black America,” created a plantation fantasy in the midst of the city, complete with Negro cabins, hen yards, chickens, mules and peopled

³² Tolls, *Blackening Up*, 201-2.

with 500 blacks identified as “genuinely southern Negroes...brought direct from the fields.” The show was billed as an “ethnological exhibit of unique interest,” and black were referred to, not as entertainers, but as participants. The show promised, “no imitation, nothing but what is real.” The “Negro Village,” as one viewer commented, “might have been hundreds of miles from civilization.”³⁴

Just two years before the “Negro Village” captivated audiences with images of “genuine plantation Negroes,” the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago had enthralled fair goers with its architectural masterpiece, the White City. The White City, ostensibly named for the white paint that covered every building within the exhibit, showcased the accoutrements of modern civilization. The Court of Honor stood at the center of the city surrounded by the marvels of modern civilization. Enormous white buildings ran along the canals surrounding the Court of Honors and housed exhibits of modern industry, art, agriculture and electricity. Women, after petitioning their exclusion, received one building located on the edge of the White City. Blacks, however, were excluded from the White City altogether. In fact, non-white, non-Western participants were relegated to the Midway Plaisance. German and Irish exhibits were located near the entrance of the Midway, followed by Turkish, Arabic and Chinese “Villages.” Finally, the American Indians and Dahomans were situated at the end of the

³³ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 121.

³⁴ Quoted in Tolls, *Blacking Up*, 263.

Midway.³⁵ As the *Chicago Tribune* unwittingly reported, “What an opportunity was here afforded to the scientific mind to descend the spiral of evolution tracing humanity in its highest phase down to its animalistic origins.”³⁶ As Gail Bederman notes, just as whites “insisted tenaciously that civilization was built on white racial dominance, African Americans were equally tenacious in insisting that civilization was not necessarily white.”³⁷ Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells vehemently objected to the exclusion of blacks from the exposition. In their protest pamphlet, *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition*, they argued that the African American best demonstrated the advances of civilization, having overcome the hardships of slavery to survive and excel, while the white American’s exclusion of black Americans from the exposition only further illustrated that white America lacked the decency and civilization it professed.³⁸

Juxtaposing the White City to the “Negro Village” and the Midway Plaisance reveals by stark contrast that the discourse of civilization was indeed racial. These grand spectacles combined popular entertainment, “authentic” folk, and pseudoscientific discourse to reinforce for the American public that white was synonymous with civilization and black with primitive. Evolutionary ideology coursed through the entire

³⁵ For an historical reconstruction of the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893) see Julie Rose, “The World’s Columbian Exposition,” <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA96/WCE/title.html> (accessed January 2004) or Bruce Schulman, “Interactive Guide to the World’s Columbian Exposition,” <http://users.vnet.net/schulman/Columbian/columbian.html> (accessed January 2004). For an extended examination of the relationship between racial discourse, gender and the discourse of civilization see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995).

³⁶ Quoted in Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 35.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

conversation, providing “scientific” justification that this was indeed the natural order of things.

* * *

Jim Crow: from Minstrelsy to Segregation

Minstrelsy began its slow decline at the end of the nineteenth century; but it left a lasting impression on emerging social, cultural and intellectual institutions. Minstrelsy furnished “the jokes that were told and retold, the songs that were on everyone’s lips, and the vivid, literally living...minstrels in effect evolved a kind of ‘*national folklore*’—a constellation of images, definitions, symbols and meaning that most whites Americans could and did share (italics added).³⁹ By yoking the stage stereotypes to claims of a folk authentic, minstrelsy created a potent black folk image that intrigued the social scientist and provided ready support for the rapidly solidifying system of Jim Crow segregation. While minstrelsy provides an ideal trope for examining constructions of racial identity around representations of black folklore, the ostensibly racially-based differences caricatured in Jim Crow minstrel performances also received literary treatment in works from the so-called plantation and lost cause traditions. While I consider these traditions in more detail in relation to Chesnut’s *The Conjure Woman* in chapter three, it is worth pointing out here that the representations of black folklore in these various forms worked together to circumscribe the range of black representation. The plantation tradition, epitomized in the works of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, gained

³⁸ See Ibid., 38-40; Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 26-28.

³⁹ Tolls, *Blacking Up*, 271. Ironically, Newell claimed that “the importance of the study of popular traditions, through recognized by men of science, is not yet understood by the general public.” See Newell, “Editor’s Notes,” *JAF* 2, no. 4 (1889): 1. While certainly the “general

efficacy through the manipulation of black folklore so that it became an emblem of childish behaviors and “the good ole days before the war.”⁴⁰ The images of happy, industrious and loyal “darkies” and of kind and just plantation owners helped absolve Northern whites of a race issue that by century’s end had come to stand in the way of the profitable reconciliation many Northern and Southern whites now desired. Where the plantation tradition left off, literature of the Lost Cause picked up. Works in this tradition, exemplified by Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots*, provided a storehouse of the more damning stereotypes of blacks as lazy, thieving, and sexually voracious, while idealizing the pre-Civil War South and its lost culture.

Alongside these popular culture representations, early submissions of black folklore to the *Journal of American Folk-lore (JAF)* added an air of scientific authority and objectivity to the public’s beliefs about the black folk. As editor of *JAF* from 1888-1899, Newell was committed to what he called, “the scientific future of the Journal,” and since blacks, “for good or ill, [were] henceforth an indissoluble part of the body politic,” their lore warranted rigorous investigation.⁴¹ Accordingly, *JAF* published over 100 articles and notes on black folklore in its first 25 issues, and Newell assured the readers that, “in conformity with the spirit of modern scholarship,” the folklore materials

public” may not have interpreted popular traditions through scientific models, the role of popular traditions on the stage, in literature, and in political discussions was pervasive.

⁴⁰ Joel Chandler Harris’s “collections” of animal tales were often cited as the impetuous for more sustained attention to black folk tales. Newell, almost certainly, was referring to Harris’s wildly popular *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Saying* (1880), when he stated that “it is but within a few years that attention has been called to the existence...of a great number of tales related to animals, which have been preserved in an interesting collection.” See “On the Field and Work,” 5.

⁴¹ Newell in a letter to Franz Boas quoted in Rosemary Levy Zumwalt, “On the Founding of the American Folklore Society and the *Journal of American Folklore*” in *The American*

presented were of “sufficient scientific status to make them worth recording.”⁴² From its founding days, however, *JAF* betrayed the tension that existed between Newell’s continuous injunctions that the journal submissions focus solely on documenting folklore materials, and the propensity of the contributors to theorize about the materials they presented. Thus, some of the contributions on black folklore are relatively straightforward and strive for a degree of objectivity. Stewart Culin, in his “Reports Concerning Voodooism,” for example, notes that “it is popularly asserted in Hayti and San Domingo that the negroes perpetuate Voodoo orgies, and that cannibalism is still practiced.” Culin, to the contrary, states, “I believe that meetings are held, but do not think they are accompanied with human sacrifices.”⁴³ He then provides a second-hand account of how voodoo rites and rituals were used to secure a marriage, to bring harm to an enemy, and to cause a mysterious death. He imparts these accounts, not as a way to pass judgment on the participants or practitioners, but instead to suggest the importance of belief and performance to the voodoo ritual.⁴⁴

Alcee Fortier’s “Customs and Superstitions of Louisiana,” in contrast, provides just the type of scholarly report that proved useful in documenting the black folk customs

Folklore Society: 100 Years, ed. William Clements (Washington DC: The American Folklore Society, 1988), 8-10; Newell, “On the Field and Work,” 5.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Stewart Culin, “Reports Concerning Voodooism,” *JAF* 2, no. 6 (1899): 232-33.

⁴⁴ Culin explains that after the client “gave the doctor a sum of money equal to about eight dollars,” the doctor returned the bottle filled with a clear tasteless fluid, that seemed to be pure water, and directed him to drink it....within four weeks afterwards [the client] was married to the woman of his choice.” In his account, Culin implies that the client was only given water and that the efficacy of the ritual was owing to the client’s willingness to participate and believe in the ritual. See Culin, “Reports Concerning Voodooism,” 233.

that sustained the plantation ideology and by extension, Jim Crow segregation. Fortier begins his contribution to *JAF*'s second issues by stating:

In order to understand fully the customs of a past age and of plantation life before the war, we must bear in mind that the planters lived in the greatest opulence and possessed many slaves. These were, as a rule, well treated by their masters, and in spite of slavery, they were contented and happy. Not having any of the responsibilities of life, they were less serious than the present freemen and more inclined to take advantage of all opportunities to amuse themselves.

Fortier goes on to explain that New Year's Day on the plantations was an occasion of great merriment and pleasure for the slaves when they would gather around the big house and receive "a piece of ox killed expressly for them, several pounds of flour, and a new tin pan and spoon." "The scene," Fortier goes on to observe, "was most striking, interesting and weird. Two or three hundred men and women were there in front of the house, wild with joy and most boisterous, although always respectful." Recounting a New Year's celebration, Fortier notes that the slaves' "strange and savage music...grotesque and extraordinary faces" provided "great amusement" to the children, and although the tradition was "less entertaining" to the parents, "they never interfered, as they considered that, by well-established custom, New Year's Day was one of mirth and pleasure for the childlike slaves." Fortier concludes that the scene he has documented is "very different...from those described in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' for the slaves were certainly not unhappy on the plantations."⁴⁵ Perhaps not incidentally, Fortier's description of slave life sounds remarkably similar to Irwin Russell's well-known 1878 plantation tradition poem, "Christmas-Night in the Quarters," in which

Russell describes the festivities of an antebellum Christmas celebration on a large plantation: “When merry Christmas-day is done,/ And Christmas-night is just begun;/...The darkies hold high carnival./ From all the country-side they throng,/ With laughter, shouts, and scraps of song.” Russell’s poem continues, explaining the source of the slaves’ unbridled enthusiasm, “Original in act and thought,/ Because unlearned and untaught./ Observe them at their Christmas party:/ How unrestrained their mirth—how hearty!/ How many things they say and do/ That never would occur to you!” Russell explains that the slaves are justified in their celebration because the next day they will return to the fields and resume their diligent service and hard work. In his poem, the slaves continually appeal to “Mashsr” to forgive and “bless” them, since they cannot restrain the inevitable call to dance.⁴⁶

The similarities between Fortier’s folkloric document and Russell’s plantation tradition poem suggest the close, at times, intertwined relationship between early folklore studies and mainstream popular culture, particularly black folklore and popular cultural materials associated with the plantation tradition. In a journal purportedly devoted to the objective and scientific study of folklore, Newell saw fit to publish Fortier’s submission which contained so many assumptions sustaining the post-Reconstruction segregationist platform. Was this an oversight, or were the ideas that Fortier advanced, linking representations of folklore to the politics of the plantation tradition, so pervasive that they were published, evidently uncontested, in a journal devoted to the *scientific* study of Negro folklore?

⁴⁵ Alcee Fortier, “Customs and Superstitions of Louisiana,” *JAF* 1, no. 2 (1888): 136-38.

⁴⁶ Irwin Russell, “A Christmas-Night in the Quarters,” *Poems* (New York: The Century Co., 1888).

In a society fraught with racial tensions it would be difficult to overestimate the impact of the popular representations of the black folk, coupled with the intellectual and “scientific” assessments of black folklore, on turn of the century racial politics. As many cultural commentators, past and present, have observed, demarcating racial difference in light of the increasing biological, social and cultural miscegenation came with a host of attendant difficulties. The judges and legislatures who constructed and supported the “one drop rule” recognized the difficulty of visually distinguishing race, realizing that racial identification had to move beyond physical markers. But if discerning race based on physical appearance was difficult, identifying the color of a person’s blood presented an obvious paradox.⁴⁷ This dilemma required new indicators of racial identity, and those indicators were found in attention to what were, ostensibly, racially differentiated behaviors, i.e. folk customs. There was an insistence, for example, that blacks could not imitate whites; that the behavioral differences, if not inherent, were so ingrained that they had become “spontaneous” and “natural.” Clearly, dominant interpretations of black minstrelsy as inherent and authentic worked to legitimize segregationist agendas by supplying examples of the kinds of uncivilized behaviors which blacks supposedly exhibited as vastly different from civilized white society.

The legal status and civic treatment of African Americans in the United States had been in decline for over a decade when *Plessy v. Ferguson* solidified race as a distinguishing characteristic of citizenship, equality and protection under the law. In *The Quest for Equality*, Robert Harris states that several legislative acts of the post-Civil War

⁴⁷ This was the paradox that Plessy and his lawyers sought to expose. Homer Plessy, who was one-eighth black, had the physical traits of a white man. He and his lawyers argued that because he was visibly white, he was entitled to all the privileges of a white man.

era—the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the Freedmen’s Bureau Act, and the Fourteenth Amendment—were established with the firm purpose of combating unequal “laws, customs and traditions.”⁴⁸ Yet, the U. S. Supreme Court’s majority opinion in the *Plessy* decision, which Harris characterizes as “a compound of bad logic, bad history, bad sociology, and bad constitutional law,” ran counter to these precedents.⁴⁹ Instead, the Supreme Court uncritically accepted “either expressly or implicitly the vogue in social thinking in 1896 as reflected by theories of racial supremacy and social Darwinism.”⁵⁰ In a chorus of redundant legal and political statements, the federal government and the Northern Press absolved themselves of the responsibility to African Americans by repeatedly citing the inability of governmental powers to sway folk customs and practices. The Supreme Court claimed it was powerless in the face of “established usages, customs and traditions of the people.”⁵¹ Justice Henry Billings Brown delivered the Court’s decision, stating, “legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts...[and that] if one race be inferior to the other socially, the constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane.”⁵² Justice Brown claimed that the Fourteenth Amendment “could not have been intended to abolish distinction based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political, equality,” and therefore the *Plessy*

⁴⁸Robert Jennings Harris, *The Quest for Equality: The Constitution, Congress and the Supreme Court* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1960), 101.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

⁵² *Ibid.*

decision was not in violation of this Constitutional Amendment.⁵³ To establish a precedent for the *Plessy* decision, the Supreme Court Justices looked to *Roberts v. City of Boston* (1849). In the Roberts' case, Lemuel Shaw, chief justice of Supreme Court of Massachusetts, delivered the decision upholding social segregation, causally noting that racial "prejudice, if it exists, is not created by law and probably cannot be changed by law."⁵⁴ This sentiment was echoed in the Northern Press. The *Evening Register* voiced "grave doubt if the question of social principles can be settled satisfactorily by legislation," and Rayford Logan notes that like opinions were expressed in similar language by the *Times*, *Enquirer*, *Dispatch*, Chicago's *Tribune* and New York's *World*.⁵⁵

The insistent claims that racial segregation was dictated by nature, by custom, and by social principle, but not by law, continued to dominate the social and political scene well into the twentieth century. Ironically, what *Plessy v. Ferguson* made clear was that racial segregation, racial difference and black inferiority were now legally sanctioned by the United States Supreme Court. In an important but unheeded dissenting opinion, Justice John Harlan recognized that the federal institutions were authorizing a state-by-state travesty: "It is, therefore, to be regretted that this high tribunal...has reached the conclusion that it is competent for a state to regulate the enjoyment by citizens of their civil rights solely upon the basis of race...the thin disguise of 'equal' accommodations...will not mislead anyone, nor atone for the wrong this day done."⁵⁶

* * *

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Eric Sunquist, *To Wake The Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1993), 235.

⁵⁵ Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro*, 175.

Minstrelsy left a legacy of the grinning darkie that blacks would have to contend with for the next century and beyond, but never with more urgency than at the close of the nineteenth century. As national constructions of black folklore and the black folk image were increasingly determined by white supremacist ideologies and segregationist agendas, the black intellectual community pursued strategies to challenge the dominant representations of black folklore and to “reclaim” authority over the collection, preservation and presentation of black cultural traditions. In chapter two I recover the story of the Hampton Folklore Society, the first predominately black folklore institution in America. I argue that the folklore society at Hampton stood at the center of the movement to reclaim representation of black folk traditions and that its work, in turn, created a space for black intellectuals and writers to consider how representations of black folklore could operate as a key component in the fight for social change and justice.

⁵⁶ *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

Chapter Two: The Hampton Folklore Society and The Crafting of a Black Folk Aesthetic

In the late nineteenth century, as the national discourses surrounding black folklore and racial segregation collided, folklore studies was being carried out, not only by the white intellectual societies, but by black folklorists as well. Founded in 1893 at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia, the Hampton Folklore Society was the first folklore institution in America mainly comprised of African Americans devoted to the collection, study and preservation of black American folklore. At a formative moment in both the emergence of folklore studies and the construction of the black folk as an exclusively Southern rural phenomenon, the Hampton folklorists played a crucial role in collecting, preserving and disseminating black folk materials; in doing so, their work provided an alternative to the construction of the black folk taking place in the dominant social, cultural and political spheres. Founded as it was during the height of post-Reconstruction racial oppression and at an institution that at its inception was inimical to such an undertaking, the Hampton Folklore Society provides a truly remarkable case study of a black organization striving for self-determination, self-representation and cultural preservation. Recovering the history of the Hampton Folklore Society provides an indispensable record of the challenges and triumphs that characterized this first organized, large-scale endeavor by black Americans to document black folk traditions.

While folklorists and scholars from 1893 through the present day have drawn from the Hampton materials to supplement other collections, the names and contributions of these Hampton folklorists ring faint. At present there exist only two extended examinations of this organization. As a result of these blind spots, the work of early

black folklorists remains marginalized or absent in studies of black folklore. To repeat Melvin Wade's assertion, blacks, therefore, continue to be viewed as peripheral in the collection and study of their own traditions.¹ By situating the work of the Hampton folklorists in relation to African American efforts to "reclaim" representation of black folk customs and traditions, this chapter seeks to reveal the deep sense of purpose invested in the Hampton project by the larger African American intellectual community,

¹ Melvin Wade, "The Intellectual and Historical Origins of Folklore Scholarship by Black Americans: A Study of the Response to the Propaganda of Racial Superiority at Hampton (Virginia) Institute 1893-1939," (Hampton University Archives, 1982). Folklorists and scholars from 1893 through the present have drawn from the Hampton materials to supplement other collections, yet at present there exist only two extended examinations of this organization. See Ronald Sharps, "Happy Days and Sorrow Songs: Interpretations of Negro Folklore by Black Intellectuals, 1893-1928" (Dissertation, George Washington University, 1991); Donald Waters, *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams: Afro-American Folklore from the Hampton Institute* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Company, 1983). Reprints from Hampton Folklore Society materials originally published in *Southern Workman* appear in collections by Simon Bronner, Alan Dundes and Bruce Jackson. See Simon J. Bronner, *Folk Nation: Folklore in the Creation of American Tradition* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002); Alan Dundes, *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973); Bruce Jackson, *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth Century Periodicals*, ed. Kenneth Goldstein, *American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967). Critical treatment of the Hampton Folklore Society, however, has been almost entirely absent from histories of the discipline of folklore studies. For example, William McNeil's lengthy dissertation on folklore studies prior to 1910 does not mention the folklore society at Hampton even in the chapter on African American folklore. See William McNeil, "A History of American Folklore Scholarship before 1908" (Dissertation, Indiana University, 1980). Susan Dwyer-Shick's dissertation, "American Folklore Society and Folklore Research in America, 1888-1940," does not include a discussion of the Hampton Folklore Society, although it does include a section detailing the second collegiate folklore society, the Harvard Folklore Society, which was founded four months *after* the Hampton Folklore Society. See Susan Dwyer-Shick, "The American Folklore Society and Folklore Research in America, 1888-1940" (Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1979). Rosemary Zumwalt Levy's *American Folklore Scholarship: A Dialogue of Dissent* (1988), likewise contains no discussion of the Hampton Folklore Society's activities. See Levy Rosemary Zumwalt, *American Folklore Scholarship: A Dialogue of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). The void in attention to the Hampton Folklore Society is all the more troubling because many collections of black folklore draw liberally from the Hampton Folklore Society materials, such as those by Daryl Dance, Lawrence Levine, and Newbell Puckett. See Daryl Cumber Dance, *From My People: 400 Years of African American Folklore* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford, 1978); Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1926).

who saw the black folklorists' work, not just as a catalogue of folk remedies and tales, but as a foundation for the re-definition of the black folk image and as a potential stimulus for the creation of an African American literary tradition rooted in black folk culture.

This chapter begins by examining the early folklore work carried out under the tutelage of the Hampton Institute founder, Samuel Armstrong. Armstrong, who sought to eradicate black folklore as part of his plan to educate and civilize his black students, oversaw the initial collection and publication of black folk materials at Hampton. Although muted and veiled, Armstrong's students managed to exercise some authority over representations of the folklore they submitted by including, at the very least, contradictory remarks about the veracity of their accounts, and thereby never fully testifying as to whether Armstrong's plan to expose and eradicate black folklore was working or not. I then examine a period, several years later, when folklore studies was reintroduced at Hampton under the direction of Alice Bacon. During this phase, the students assumed greater authority for representing their materials. The larger black intellectual community also took a vested interest in the work of the Hampton Folklore Society, debating the significance of the Society's work, borrowing materials from the Society's collections, seeking advice on sources of black cultural traditions, and at times, even collaborating on creative projects with Society members. The final section of this chapter suggests that the issues brought to the forefront by examining the folklore project at Hampton—such as how to construct the African American past, how to challenge dominant cultural representations of black folk customs, and how to negotiate the divide between educated blacks and “the folk” whom they sought to represent—expand our

readings of African American literary representations of black folklore. Indeed, in chapter three I argue that the usurping of black folk cultural representation by dominant white cultural institutions is one of the primary subjects of late-nineteenth-century fiction by Charles Chesnut. But first, this chapter seeks to reveal the implications of African Americans' efforts to recover authority for the preservation and representation of black cultural traditions.

* * *

The Civilizing Influence of the Hampton Idea: Samuel Armstrong and the Ironic Roots of Black Folklore Studies at the Hampton Institute

The Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute was founded in April 1868 by former Union general, Samuel Armstrong, with the express purpose of training and graduating black Americans who could attend to the work of "civilizing" former slaves and rural blacks. The belief that blacks possessed the capabilities to be educated, and hence improve their station in life, formed the foundation of the Hampton Idea. Armstrong's aggressive policy toward extricating residual folk elements en route to civilizing his black students, however, was an area of on-going contention. For the members of the Hampton Folklore Society in particular, the legacy of the Armstrong position, which promoted the eradication of black folk culture as a prerequisite for entrance into civilized society, posed a fundamental challenge.

Armstrong's personal background played an influential role in determining the missionary and educational principles which would serve as the cornerstone of the Institute.² Armstrong was born in 1839 in Maui, Hawaii. Armstrong's father, Richard,

² For a biographical sketch of Armstrong's young life in Hawaii through his 25 years as founder and principal of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute see Robert Francis Engs,

had been sent to Maui as a missionary before becoming the Minister of Public Instruction in Oahu. In this role, Richard Armstrong was responsible for creating and maintaining approximately 500 native schools. Armstrong's biographers cite his observations of Oahu's missionary schools as the basis for his design of the Hampton Institute. The young Armstrong internalized his father's emphasis on manual labor as a tool for instilling a Calvinistic work ethic and for transforming the supposedly heathen native population into civilized Christians.³ Based on his early missionary experience, Armstrong placed great emphasis on the idea of moral education. He also adopted for the Hampton Institute the idea of teaching teachers who could then further disseminate the Hampton Idea among the uneducated, and hence, immoral country folk.

Armstrong's Civil War experiences were equally influential in laying the ideological foundation for the Hampton Institute, for it was in overseeing black troops that Armstrong realized that blacks, with proper training, made capable and courageous soldiers. Armstrong's letters during this time show the transformation of conscience he underwent as his wartime service brought him into close and regular contact with black troops. Prior to the war, in a letter to Archibald Hopkins, Armstrong explained that he supported the war out of a sense of Christian obligation but felt no personal commitment to black Americans, "I am a sort of abolitionist, but I have not learned to love the Negro. I believe in universal freedom; I believe the whole world cannot buy a single soul...So I

Educating the Disfranchised and Disinherited: Samuel Chapman Armstrong, 1839-1893 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).

³ For more specific discussions on the influence of his father's Hawaiian missionary work see Mary Frances Armstrong and Helen Ludlow, *Hampton and Its Students* (Chicago: Afro-Am Press, 1969), 38-39; Samuel Armstrong, "Lesson from the Hawaiian Islands," (Hampton, VA: Normal School Printing Office, 1884); Engs, *Educating the Disfranchised and Disinherited*, 73-

go in for freeing them, more on account of their souls than their bodies.”⁴ By the time the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, Armstrong’s position had grown more sympathetic toward the slaves; writing again to Hopkins in 1863, Armstrong exclaimed, “I hope that until every slave can call himself his own, and his wife and children his own, the sword will not cease from among us, and I care not how many evils that attend it; it will all be just.”⁵ In October 1863, Armstrong applied for a position as an officer of Negro troops, and it was in his experience as a major, then a colonel and later a general of the Eighth Colored Regiment that Armstrong’s belief in the potential for black moral improvement was fostered. In a letter to his mother he lauds his troop’s deportment, explaining, “my men fell fast, but never flinched—they fired coolly and won great praise.”⁶ In addition to esteem for his troop’s bravery and competence, Armstrong also acquired an appreciation for the Negro spirituals and slave songs he heard sung among his soldiers, and often remarked upon the “natural eloquence” and “genuine poetry” he had overheard at black gatherings.

These personal experiences, along with his formal associations with the Freedmen’s Bureau and the American Missionary Association (AMA), convinced Armstrong of the need for an industrial school for blacks that could attend to the work of civilizing and training former slaves who could then return to their home communities and continue the work of civilizing other rural blacks. Through his employment with the

74; Francis Peabody, *Education for Life: The Story of Hampton Institute* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1918), 88-89.

⁴ As cited in Peabody, *Education for Life*, 73-74.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

Freedman's Bureau, it became obvious to Armstrong that the Bureau offered only a temporary solution to a long-term problem. In fact, the growing sentiment in the post-Civil War era was that freed blacks now represented a political threat and a national problem. Harvard professor and author of an apocryphal historical account of the Hampton Institute, Francis Peabody, stated that the freed slaves "had to be incorporated in the life of the nation, or remain a permanent menace both to its welfare and its self-respect." He maintained that the only way to ensure "national security was through a comprehensive scheme of education."⁷ The AMA, too, saw the freedmen as a problem to be solved by imparting Christian education and civilization, a sense of order, industry, and self-respect.⁸ Whereas the slaves' humanity was emphasized prior to the war, particularly in abolitionist rhetoric, the post-war rhetoric focused on blacks' alleged deficiencies. Neither Armstrong nor the AMA denied the shortcomings of the freed Negroes, nor did they diminish the potential threat posed by such freedmen; but they did hold fast to their mission of educating and uplifting the race, and as such they necessarily opposed the idea that blacks were *inherently* degenerate. In his report to the Bureau, Armstrong exhorted, "the education of the freemen is the great work of the day. It is their only hope, the only power that can lift them as a people...the South will do nothing for the education of the Negro, the North cannot very long conduct it; they must do it for themselves."⁹

Armstrong's espousal of such a concept—that blacks possessed the potential for mental and moral advancement—brought him into conflict with the "scientific" post-war

⁷ Ibid., xiii

⁸ Ibid., 42.

assessments, as well. Armstrong forcefully articulated his position in direct response to a series of well-known articles on “the African problem” published from 1884 – 1890 in *Atlantic Monthly* by noted Harvard geologist, Nathan Shaler. In *Strange Ways and Sweet Dream*, Donald Waters perceptively argues that Armstrong and Shaler both agreed that black Americans suffered from intellectual and moral deficiencies.¹⁰ Shaler, however, wed those deficiencies to the genetic make-up of black Americans. Armstrong, on the other hand, opposed Shaler’s assertions that black Americans’ intellectual and moral deficiencies were genetic and made the distinction between intellectual faculties and intellectual achievements. According to Waters, Armstrong held that the conditions of slavery had retarded black intellectual *achievements*, but the Hampton Idea was predicated on the belief that blacks possessed equal intellectual *faculties* and with proper education could eventually improve their intellectual standing. Armstrong pointed to the progress of his Hampton graduates as proof. Armstrong also held that slavery had created great moral deficiencies in the slaves by absolving the African Americans of responsibility for their actions and behaviors (the glaring oversights and assumptions in this line of thinking are not lost on African American intellects; Cooper, Chesnut, Dunbar, and even Booker T. Washington all critiqued this point). According to the Armstrong hypothesis, the slaves’ lack of responsibility under slavery resulted in the loss of the faculties of moral reasoning and common sense. Therefore, Armstrong concluded that the Institute’s primary function was to provide educational opportunities to improve the intellectual achievements of blacks and to provide “proper training” to improve their

⁹ Ibid., 92.

moral condition. "Proper training," in Armstrong's estimation, centered on "morals, industry, self-restraint," and included "the power to organize Society, to draw social lines between the decent and indecent."¹¹ Clearly, with the experiences of a slave society still haunting the recent past, questions about what constituted moral behavior, industry and self-restraint bubbled just below the surface, particularly for African Americans, many of whom were but a generation or less removed from slavery.

Armstrong, however, had formulated a definitive philosophy and program detailing the values he considered indispensable and the process through which these values were to be acquired. Armstrong's mission, as embodied in the Hampton Idea, was three-part. Students were to acquire vocational training and an education, primarily industrial, that would provide them with the skills to earn a living in the predominately agricultural and trade-based Southern economy. In Armstrong's model of education, industry was stressed, not strictly in terms of production, but in terms of productiveness. The second part of the Hampton Idea maintained that through industrial training, students would learn the proper values of industriousness, honesty and diligence; as such, Armstrong's program also functioned as a moralizing and civilizing force, teaching values and building character. Finally, after receiving a Hampton education, the students were to return to their home communities and become teachers to those who had remained behind. What happened in practice, however, perhaps due to the ubiquity of the demeaning stereotypes of the black folk, is that the Hampton Idea came to define the

¹⁰ Nathaniel Shaler, "The Negro Problem," *Atlantic Monthly* 54 (1884); Nathaniel Shaler, "Race Prejudice," *Atlantic Monthly* 58 (1886). For a detailed account of the exchange between Shaler and Armstrong see Waters, *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams*, 13-17.

¹¹ Samuel Armstrong, "Principal's Report," in *Annual Reports* (Hampton, VA: Normal School Printing Press, 1890), 8.

moral, educated and civilized black student against the immoral, uneducated and uncivilized black folk. Nothing more aptly illustrates the civilizing effects of a Hampton education than the images in *The Hampton Album*, a photographic essay created by Frances Johnston between 1899 and 1900 for the 1900 Paris Exposition.¹² This pictorial exhibit consisted of 44 pictures representing the transformation from a folk to civilized people that Hampton students underwent as a result of their education and training.

In the opening photograph, “The Old Folks at Home,” (figure 4) an elderly black couple is shown in their rude surroundings with only functional kettles and earthenware lining the mantle and resting upon the cabinet. A shawl hangs from iron hooks in the corner and the walls are lined with newspaper. The woman wears a checkered handkerchief on her head and dons a gingham apron. The couple eats at a bare table, their eyes averted from the gaze of the camera. “A Hampton Graduate at Home” appears on the adjacent page. The placement of the two photographs is clearly intended to illustrate the dramatic difference between “The Old Folks” and “A Hampton Graduate.” In contrast to the austere and barren setting in “The Old Folks,” “A Hampton Graduate” shows a middle-aged man and his wife with their three children sitting in a well-lit dining room around a covered table. The wall is decorated with a landscape painting and a few well-placed decorations sit on top of the piano. Aside from the decorative, as opposed to functional objects, that adorn the house, the two-story Hampton graduate’s home also implies a certain class status and economic income.

¹² Frances Johnston, *The Hampton Album: 44 Photographs from an Album of the Hampton Institute* (NY: Museum of Modern Art/Doubleday, 1966). Photographs from this series also appeared on the cover of *Southern Workman*. “The Old Folks at Home,” for example, was featured on the cover of *Southern Workman* 30.10 (October 1901).



*"The Old Folks
at Home."*

Figure 4. "The Old Folks at Home"



*"A Hampton Graduate
at home."*

Figure 5. "A Hampton Graduate at Home"

The next two sets of photographs in the collection reiterate the distinction conveyed in the first pairing. One set shows "The Old-Time Cabin," which is, again, a rude structure that is unpainted and unadorned, juxtaposed with "A Hampton Graduate's Home," which is a well-manicured, two-story, white house with contrasting black shutters, intricate woodwork and a covered porch. The next set shows "The Old Well," a rudimentary contraption created with trees, long branches, a rope and buckets opposite

“The Improved Well,” a metal push-lever water pump sitting atop the covered waterhole. The photographs, along with their oppositional placement and respective captions create a palpable dichotomy. The folk signify the old, out-dated, primitive ways and are the antecedents to the educated students who embody the modern, fashionable and civilized future.

The rest of the photographs in the series show Hampton students engaged in a variety of educational activities. Beginning with the youngest students, immaculately clad in petticoats, caps and bonnets, the photographs show children saluting the flag, studying plant life, learning domestic skills and receiving holiday lessons. Later pictures represent the older students situated in a variety of academic settings, affecting the most orderly, attentive and studious postures. The photographic narrative leaves the viewer with an image of the students as contained, industrious, and well-behaved. This photographic essay captured the essence of the Hampton Idea, meticulously illustrating the civilizing effects a Hampton education could have even on the most country folk.

As this photographic essay shows, the Hampton Idea calcified the dichotomy between the folk and the educated, the immoral and the moral, the ignorant and the civilized. To move into the category of moral and civilized required not only education and training but also the relinquishing of the old folkways for the new civilized habits and customs. At both the ideological and practical levels, the embedded assumption was that the ways of the white Northern missionaries were synonymous with morality and civilization, and blacks were instructed to emulate the white Northern missionary models of behavior. Armstrong declared that the black students had come to Hampton, “a tabula rasa so far as real culture is concerned,” but that he would return them back to the world,

not as “polished scholars,” but as “guides and civilizers, whose power shall be that of character and example, not of sounding words.”¹³ At the practical level, the questions about what and how the black students should learn were decided entirely by Armstrong and the other white teachers and leaders. Hampton’s board of trustees, along with all its teachers, were white. Robert Eng found that, even though there were numerous prominent black leaders residing in Hampton, some who possessed considerable formal education, they were “never consulted on how best to proceed” with the design or instruction of the Hampton Institute.¹⁴

Equally apparent was that the Hampton Idea participated in solidifying the concept of the folk as ignorant, immoral, Southern and rural, while also reinforcing the plantation tradition image of the black folk as a relic of the past and an exclusively antebellum phenomenon. For Armstrong nothing more clearly represented the intellectual and moral deficiencies created by the system of slavery than the foolish superstitions and old-fashioned beliefs preserved in black folklore. Armstrong, however, maintained a hierarchical view of black folk traditions. The Negro spirituals and slave songs, for example, comprised the commendable form of black folklore, and the value of the Negro music caused Armstrong to pause in his usually aggressive scheme of educating and civilizing. In a letter to his wife, Armstrong pondered the melodic beauty, as well as the cultural and historical value of Negro music, stating, “Few people have any idea of the deep and essential music there is in these people...these songs are but the cry of their desolate hearts unto their God—once uttered in long agony of their oppression

¹³Quoted in James Anderson, "The Hampton Model," in *New Perspectives on Black Educational History*, eds. Vincent Franklin and James Anderson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978), 69n16.

and now sung by their children as the songs of their home and nation.” The music, he explained to his wife, “makes the matter of civilization a puzzle...Should we educate them out of all this that was needed to carry them through slavery.”¹⁵ Armstrong’s comments to his wife betray an often muted awareness that the process of “civilizing” the former slaves and free blacks was not without cost. In his letter, Armstrong acknowledges that educating blacks, according to his model, also meant distancing blacks from valuable aspects of a legacy that preserved the story of their struggles from slavery to freedom.

Perhaps as a way to continue his scheme of education while addressing the problem he wrote about to his wife, Armstrong created the Hampton Student Singers, a student group that performed refined versions of plantation songs at capacity concert halls around the county, and in the process, raised money for the construction of new buildings at the school.¹⁶ As historical accounts of the Hampton Student Singers attest, to many white observers, Negro spirituals or plantation songs represented a deep, even if uncultivated, religiosity. The songs testified to the slaves’ capacity for moral uplift; and their melody, rhythm and lyrics were often interpreted as evidence of the slaves’ natural pathos and humility, expressing not coded cries of dissatisfaction or secret desires for escape—as later commentators would assert—but instead embodying deep acceptance and sorrow over the harsh conditions of slavery.

¹⁴ Engs, *Educating the Disfranchised and Disinherited*, 147.

¹⁵ As cited in *Ibid.*, 76-7.

¹⁶ The Hampton Student Singer took as their motto, “Singing and Building,” because the funds raised during their performances went to the construction of new buildings on the Hampton campus. See M .F. Armstrong and Ludlow, *Hampton and Its Students*, 127.

For Armstrong, the Hampton Student Singers came to represent the best that could be achieved through the Hampton Idea. As Hampton Institute teacher, Helen Ludlow wrote in 1874, “the peculiar strength of the Hampton Chorus is the faithful rendering of the original slave songs.” Ludlow notes that the students became proficient in “cultivating their voices to a degree capable of executing difficult German songs with a precision of harmony.” Ludlow continues, explaining that choir director Thomas Fenner had “succeeded in preserving...that pathos and *wail* which those who have listened to the singing on the old plantations recognize as the ‘real thing.’”¹⁷ At least one consequence of the touring performance of the slave songs was that it taught, cultivated and trained black Americans to perform the “real” traditions of African Americans, traditions which tied blacks to the antebellum South and traditions that many whites interpreted as evidence of blacks’ sad but simple perspective on the hardship and suffering that characterized slavery and freedom. According to folklore scholar, Regina Bendix, the assumed anonymity and authenticity of the spirituals allowed the white observers to sympathize in a general way with the suffering of the ex-slaves, while not attributing individuality or creativity to the black performers. Northern whites, Bendix asserts, “could confess to [black music’s] emotional appeal and profess to their feelings of affinity” with the music of an anonymous collective that emerged out of an idealized past and expressed a transcendent spirituality.¹⁸ Equally telling is Ludlow’s response to what she identifies as the often asked question: “Has not a constant appearance for many months before the public injured their [the Hampton Student Singers] characters or changed their tastes?” To this question, Ludlow responds that “they have...behaved

¹⁷ Ibid.

surprisingly well. School discipline has been kept up through all their wanderings; the greatest care has been taken of their manners and morals, and their health...They all appear to be as loyal to right work as the students at Hampton.”¹⁹

Thus, for Armstrong, the rendering of the spirituals allowed him to preserve what he deemed to be the valuable legacy and authentic expression of black folk spirituality, while also allowing his school to profit from the performances. In turn, the performances highlighted the school’s mission, illustrating that blacks possessed the raw materials ripe for cultivating; within the strict parameters of the Hampton model, the Hampton Student Singers would not be derailed by lofty ideas or aspirations acquired during their travels but would remain humbly devoted to the school’s mission of moral uplift. Ironically, many blacks in the post-Civil War era had begun to see the spirituals and slave songs as a “badge of slavery” and adamantly resisted performing them. According to Robert Eng, the Hampton students’ dissatisfaction with performing the slave songs grew increasingly vocal after Armstrong’s death in 1893 and culminated in a 1927 student strike in protest of having to perform the slave songs for white visitors.²⁰

If plantation songs comprised the acceptable form of black folklore, Armstrong identified Negro religions, preachers, and most of all, conjure practices, as forms of wholly unacceptable black folklore, the brand of folklore that his teachers were to “spy out” and eliminate. Armstrong explained that there was “plenty of religion” among both

¹⁸ Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity* (1997), 91.

¹⁹ Armstrong, Fenner, and Ludlow, *Hampton and Its Students*, 128-32.

²⁰ Allen, Garrison and Wares observed this tendency while collecting songs from freedmen for *Slave Songs of the US*. The authors note, “it is often indeed no easy matter to persuade them to sing their old songs, even as a curiosity, such is the sense of dignity that has

his students and their families, but that it was “too often a religion that regards more the emotional part of nature than the moral, and so aids little in the work of checking the evil tendencies of these growing lives.”²¹ He made it the work of the Hampton Institute to educate the folk ignorance out of the students. Armstrong exhorted, “if the height of ignorance and deadly superstition still rests upon the race...it should be the chief concern and effort of every more fortunate individual of the race not to hide the foul burden, but to lift it...To them [the young teachers] we say again and again: You cannot be the friends your people need, unless you are brave enough to tell them their faults, and work, not for their thanks, but for their good.”²² The black students, once they had acquired the requisite traits, were expected to venture forth in the missionary tradition spreading the Hampton Idea of civilization and proper behavior throughout the rural South. According to Engs, “Armstrong intended, quite literally, to educate the entire black race by creating those who would be its leaders and teachers.”²³ Once the Hampton students received proper intellectual and moral training, they could then venture out into the rural communities to expose and eradicate the folk ignorance and superstitions that lingered among their uneducated students, friends and family members, as aptly shown in the following posed photograph.²⁴

come with freedom.” See William Francis Allen, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York,: A. Simpson & Co., 1867), x. See also Engs, *Educating the Disfranchised and Disinherited*, 77.

²¹ S. Armstrong, "Principal's Report," in *Annual Report* (Hampton, VA: Normal School Printing Press, 1885), 28-29.

²² S. Armstrong, "Editorial Reply," *Southern Workman* 7, no. 5 (1878): 35.

²³ Engs, *Educating the Disfranchised and Disinherited*, 78.

²⁴ Photo reprinted from Peabody, *Education for Life*, 240.



THE SPIRIT OF HAMPTON

Figure 6. "The Spirit of Hampton"

Ironically, Armstrong's seek-and-destroy attitude toward most forms of black folklore laid the foundation for Hampton's earliest collections of black folklore. In 1878, as part of his project of exposing and eradicating folk ignorance, he began to solicit reports on black folklore from his students and recent graduates which he then published in *Southern Workman*. Two rather unexpected outcomes result from Armstrong's early folklore project. First, Armstrong's circulation of the "deadly folk superstitions" elicited protests from other educated black teachers who resented what their Hampton education had taught them to see as their race's depravities being displayed to the general public. In a letter to the editor, Hampton teacher W.I. Lewis argues against publishing the folklore reports in *Southern Workman*, pleading, "I fail to see what is gained by your repeating this dark legend of a by-gone day. Experience teaches that unless we are reminded of excellencies, we will ourselves hardly become excellent... you will find it best, in many instances, to omit the mentioning of such things."²⁵ Armstrong's editorial

²⁵ W.I. Lewis, "Letter," *Southern Workman* 7, no. 5 (1878): 35.

response negates Lewis's appeal that *Southern Workman* only focus on the achievements of the students and teachers—a very Hampton-esque position—stating that “no great wrong or folly of mankind has ever been got rid of without public exposure, yet none has ever been exposed without a pained outcry for concealment.”²⁶

Second, in attempting to “civilize” the young black students and teachers away from their folk traditions, Armstrong was continually baffled by the persistence of folk beliefs among his educated students. In a project intended to expose the absurdity of black folklore, many of his students expressed a continued belief in their folk practices. One student, in a submission on conjure doctors, concluded his paper by stating that “I believe in the conjure Drs. [sic] and all this that I have written I can vouch for myself.” Armstrong replied that “two years more in the school will change his ideas.”²⁷ Despite his confidence in the “civilizing” power of the school, Armstrong must have been especially miffed by the prevalence of conjure doctors among rural blacks and the persistence of the belief in conjuration among his students. Even Armstrong had to concede that many of the students maintained a belief in folk practices, such as conjuration, but were reluctant to share them with the public. In his commentary on the entrenched belief in folklore, Armstrong noted that “nothing is harder to eradicate from the mind than early-acquired superstition, and there is little doubt that many who are less frank in its acknowledgement are by no means free from it.”²⁸ Armstrong's comments suggest that students suppressed their views toward black folklore out of fear of being deemed ignorant; therefore, even in letters where students provide first- and second-hand

²⁶ S. Armstrong, "Editorial Reply," 35.

²⁷ "Conjure Doctors in the South," *Southern Workman* 7, no. 4 (1878): 30.

accounts of conjuration practices, many conclude with an obligatory disclaimer, formulaically identifying the folk practices as ignorant and then disavowing any personal belief in such practices. For example, one student shares a narrative account of a conjure woman providing a cure for another woman who had been sick “for a whole year” and unable to walk. After taking the cure, the woman got better and was soon able to walk again and “has been walking everyday since.” The student confirms that “this is the truth, what I saw with my own eyes.” However, at the conclusion of the letter, the student adds, “You can judge from this how ignorant they are to believe in such things.”²⁹

This student letter illustrates the orientation toward black folklore that students had to display in order to participate in Armstrong’s system of moral education. As Armstrong explained, “a natural hesitation—partly fear, and partly shame—was felt by many of our students, at the idea of thus revealing the superstitions of their people, until they were made to perceive the motive and importance” of such work.³⁰ In other words, the students were encouraged to reveal the folklore of their homes and communities so long as it was part of the necessary process of exposing and removing it from the black community. Membership into the civilized class demanded the renunciation of these cultural traditions, especially the folk beliefs and practices associated with conjuration. In Armstrong’s estimation, the conjure doctor was the personification of all that was backward, immoral and uncivilized. He attributed the belief in conjuration to what he identified as the Negro’s “love of the supernatural and dense ignorance of the laws of

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.,31.

³⁰ Ibid., 30-31.

living, a more excitable nature and nearly as loose a hold on life.”³¹ The conjure doctor stood as an affront to Armstrong’s system of manual and industrial labor, which operated not for the sake of profit but instead as means to building moral character. In all but one of the student letters, the writers identify the conjure doctor as being one of the only people in the black community who is paid, quite handsomely and in cash, for his or her services. Additionally, each of the letters demonstrates the conjure doctor exercising a great deal of agency, offering the people either a cure for a physical ailment or a mixture to be used for influencing the behavior of another. Armstrong viewed the agency of the conjure doctor as both a real and a symbolic challenge to the influence of the moral Christianity he was trying to instill in his students and propagate among the rural blacks. Armstrong asserted that the belief in conjure threatened not only blacks’ ability to cross over into civilization, but that it also threatened the very existence of the Negro race, explaining that the student letters revealed “the work that must be done among them if they are to be raised to civilization or even saved from extinction.”³²

The Hampton Idea, as conceived and executed by Armstrong, was bound in the ideologies and rhetoric of civilization so pervasive in post-Reconstruction discourse. In tying the education of the freedmen to a comprehensive program based on moral training and the attainment of civilization, Armstrong assumed the moral superiority of white, Western, Christian civilization while invalidating black culture and black values. Given the time and the circumstances, Armstrong’s position was hardly unique. His aggressive mission to replace black culture with “civilized” mores and his proximity to the black

³¹ Samuel Armstrong, "Editorial Introduction to Student Papers on Conjuring," *Southern Workman* 7, no. 4 (1878): 26.

³² "Conjure Doctors in the South," 30.

community, however, made his position an especially influential one. By the time of his death in 1893, Armstrong had built his Institute, consisting of over twenty buildings, employing 80 staff members and enrolling almost 700 students. By 1893, Hampton could boast that it had produced 797 teachers who had taught 129,475 children. With 25 years at the helm of the Hampton Institute and as the architect of the Hampton model of education, Armstrong left an indelible mark, not only on the Institute and all those who attended its classes and taught at its schools, but also upon the construction of the folk as Southern, rural, black, uneducated and immoral in opposition to the civilized who were, by contrast, Northern, white, educated, Christian and moral. Additionally, Armstrong's view of black folklore supported a hierarchy that deemed Negro folk songs valuable, while damning conjuration as dangerous and immoral. In Armstrong's final estimation, black folklore was seen as an impediment to, and thus a necessary even if somewhat regrettable casualty in the advancement of the race. After Armstrong's passing, Hollis Frissell, Armstrong's successor, launched a national campaign to gain support for Hampton's plans for implementing regional systems of black industrial education throughout the South. According to James Anderson, in the years following Armstrong's death, and in spite of criticism that their model perpetuated a system of white dominance and black subordination, the Hampton Institute was determined to advance its industrial model of education by garnering the support of both Northern and Southern whites. As Hampton Board of Trustees member Robert Ogden wrote, "The main hope is in Hampton and Hampton ideas. Our first problem is to support the School; our second to make the School ideas national."³³

³³ Anderson, "The Hampton Model," 90-91.

By the time of the changing of the guard from Armstrong to Frissell, anti-black racism, supported by social and racial Darwinism, customary and legal segregation and popular culture caricatures of blacks and black folklore, had hit a new bottom. Perhaps as a result of Armstrong's own eradication policy toward black folklore, by 1893 Hamptonians were beginning to bemoan what they perceived as the loss of black folk heritage through both the misrepresentations of black people in popular culture and literature, as well as through willful forgetting on the part of educated blacks. Frissell, for example, lamented that the descendants of freed slaves tended to disavow the remnants and reminders of slavery and thus allowed "a priceless inheritance," borrowing the phrase Armstrong had coined, to slip away. Consistent with the position supported by his predecessor, Frissell felt that the loss of spirituals and plantation songs, which "reprised something of the best that was in them," was particularly regrettable.³⁴ What prompted the resurgence of a folklore movement at Hampton in the years after Armstrong's death is uncertain. In *What the Negro Thinks*, future Hampton Folklore Society member Robert Moton states that Frissell had to answer claims that Hampton had become a "literary penitentiary." Perhaps Frissell felt that a folklore society would answer those charges by cultivating attention to what he may have presumed would be safe black culture, i.e. the socially acceptable plantation songs and spirituals. Based on the previous work on black folklore under Armstrong, Frissell had no reason to suspect that a group devoted to the collection of black folklore would be inconsistent with the Hampton Idea. Additionally, scholarly attention to black folklore, from groups such as the American Folklore Society and the Chicago Folklore Society, and notable figures such as Joel Chandler Harris and George Washington Cable, may have validated folklore

³⁴ As cited in Sharps, "Happy Days and Sorrow Songs," 30.

studies and created exigency for the formation of a Hampton folklore society. The only certainty, however, is that the Hampton Folklore Society was formed at the behest of one of Hampton's most respected teachers, Alice Bacon. Significantly, unlike Armstrong, Frissell did not take a controlling interest in the folklore work that commenced at Hampton in 1893. For at least the first seven years of Frissell's reign, the pursuit of black folklore studies was carried out under the stewardship of Alice Bacon and the Hampton Folklore Society.

* * *

Alice Bacon and the Founding of the Hampton Folklore Society

The Hampton Folklore Society was founded in 1893 by Alice Bacon, a white Northern woman who had come from New Haven, Connecticut to teach at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. Daughter of prominent abolitionist and Yale Divinity School theologian, Leonard Bacon, Alice Bacon's involvement with the Hampton Institute began early. At twelve years of age she was sent to Hampton to stay with her sister Rebecca Bacon, who was then serving as Armstrong's assistant principal. Although still an adolescent, the young Alice attended class with the Institute's seniors and taught arithmetic and spelling to the juniors. Her stay at Hampton was cut short, however, when Rebecca Bacon resigned in 1871 over a disagreement with Armstrong's fundraising strategy.³⁵ Nevertheless, this early experience cemented Bacon's commitment to her profession and to education for African Americans. Bacon later wrote, "During that year, I formed a purpose of becoming a teacher, and a teacher of

³⁵ Armstrong capitalized on his connections with wealthy Northern families such as the Bacons and the Woolseys in his fundraising drives and implied that Rebecca Bacon had endorsed his solicitations, when, in actuality, he made such insinuations without her knowledge. See Waters, *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams*, 5.

Negroes.”³⁶ In 1882, after passing the Harvard preliminary examination for women and the advanced examinations for mental and moral philosophy, Bacon applied for a position at the Hampton Institute, where she worked for five years. In 1888, Bacon accepted an invitation from her friend and former house guest, Countess Oyama, to teach at the Peeresses’ School in Japan. Through her experiences in Japan, Bacon gained a valuable perspective on American ideas about “civilization,” a perspective that would prove significant when she returned to Hampton for the third time. After living in Japan, Bacon observed, “there is certainly a high type of civilization in Japan, though differing in many important particularities from our own.” In his study of nineteenth century accounts by Americans living in Japan, Robert Rosenstone asserts that for Bacon, her observations of Japanese cultural and social traditions made the very concept of *civilization* “impossible to define.” As Bacon explained, “I do not know what it means now as well as I did when I left home.”³⁷ This would not be the first nor the last time Bacon would question the imbedded assumptions latent in the prevailing ideas about civilization. In 1897 Bacon lamented what she referred to as the “process of civilizing into regular written forms” the traditional Negro songs. Specifically, Bacon criticized Hampton’s music department, stating:

we hear again and again of some one who has recently come into the school with such beautiful new plantation songs, and then they are taken down by the music teacher, and the choir is drilled in the rendering of them, and the whole school in

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Alice Mabel Bacon, *Japanese Girls and Women*, Revised and enlarged ed. (Boston, New York,: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919); Alice Mabel Bacon, *A Japanese Interior* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1894); Robert Rosenstone, "Learning from the 'Imitative' Japanese:"

time follows the choir's interpretation of them, and in a short time that song, with time and tune and spirit altered, becomes a totally different thing.³⁸

When Bacon returned to the Hampton Institute for the third and final time, she continued her role as teacher but also founded Dixie Hospital, a small hospital and training school for blacks, took on the editorship of the broad-reaching Hampton Institute publication, *Southern Workman*, and founded the Hampton Folklore Society. In various ways, each of these activities brought Bacon face to face with ingrained ideas about the preeminence of white American civilization. For example, in operating Dixie Hospital, named for the horse which she had used to transport some of the hospital's first patients, Bacon was able to examine the folk medicines and remedies considered valid among her black patients. Eventually, Bacon's professional curiosity about black folk medical practices gave way to a disciplined, organized endeavor to collect and study black folk traditions. The influence of Bacon's continual encounters with folk alternatives to "modern" medical practices is evidenced in the Hampton Folklore Society's emphasis on folk medicines and remedies. While Bacon's personal experiences laid the foundation for her attention to black folk ways, the creation of the folklore society at Hampton had to meet and overcome a number of challenges. First Bacon realized that in the atmosphere of racial distrust exacerbated by the rise of Jim Crow discrimination, there were too many obstacles for white fieldworkers to successfully collect personal and intimate lore from rural blacks. Therefore Bacon, assisted by the white staff at the Hampton Institute, recruited members from the black community to join the project; eventually the Society came to consist of about thirty members, mostly African Americans who were students or

Another Side of the American Experience in the Mikado's Empire," *American Historical Review* 85, no. 3 (1980): 577.

graduates of the Institute and who lived in or near Hampton, Virginia, although some of the Society's folklorists came from more distant towns throughout the South.

The fledging folklore society at Hampton faced other challenges, as well. As shown in chapter one, minstrelsy presented "authentic" black folklore as a source of derision and ridicule. Social theorists employed black folklore as evidence of blacks' degenerate evolutionary status, and politicians and law-makers hid behind folklore-related rhetoric in supporting racial discrimination and segregation. In addition to the negative perceptions of black folklore being cultivated in the general public, the folklorists at Hampton also worked against the philosophy espoused by their home institution. While both Armstrong and Bacon's Hampton folklorists felt the pressing need to collect black folklore, the ends to which these entities sought to collect these materials were vastly different. The ideology upon which General Armstrong had founded the Hampton Institute, which led to the earlier folkloric work at Hampton, sought to expose and eradicate the folk ignorance that lingered in rural black communities. Thus the Hampton folklorists, who were to engage in the "serious and reverent" collection of black folk traditions and were to see in folk beliefs and customs "no occasion for scorn or contempt or laughter," had to base their Society on ideas and approaches other than those which had led to Armstrong's folkloric work 15 years earlier.³⁹

In finding support for the fledging folklore society, Bacon called upon several resources that fell beyond the walls of the Hampton Institute. In a very general way, Bacon found her inspiration for the folklore society in the series of articles Shaler had

³⁸ Quoted in Sharps, "Happy Days and Sorrow Songs," 75-76.

published in *Atlantic Monthly* (cited above) in which he called for the collection of additional data in assessing the condition of the Negro. Bacon credited Shaler for “originally suggesting the idea to us,” but in determining the focus and orientation of the folklore society, she was in no way devoted to Shaler’s ideology or to his suggestion that the group focus on investigations related solely to admixtures of “pure” and mixed blood traits.⁴⁰ Instead, in finding validation for the academic pursuit of black folklore, the project at Hampton gained more sustained support from the American Folklore Society. In an 1893 letter, American Folklore Society president, William Wells Newell assured the group that their “plan is one which will receive all possible support from our Society;” the two societies did, in fact, enter into an on-going relationship in which they attended each other’s conferences and meetings, published in each other’s journals and openly exchanged collected materials. Additionally, because the general perception was that the folklore of Southern blacks was in dire peril of disappearing, both Newell and Bacon felt that the pressing need was to collect the folklore before it was lost forever—the work of interpreting and analyzing it would have to be done at a later date by individuals qualified in the “scientific” study of such materials. Newell, however, overstepped his bounds when he suggested that the Hampton folklorists merely attend to the work of collecting the materials and suggested that they might “desire to send the material collected up here [to the American Folklore Society] for examination and

³⁹ Alice Bacon, "Circular Letter," *Southern Workman* 22, no. 12 (1893): 180-81.

⁴⁰ In a letter to Bacon, Shaler suggested that the group consider the following: “First: are there any survivors of the later importations of blacks from Africa? If so, where are they? Can their children of pure blood be identified? Second: What portion of colored people...are of mixed blood? Third: Are there any families among the Negroes characterized by straight hair...I suspect the existence of some Arab blood among our Negroes.” See "Department of Folklore and

perhaps part of it could best appear in the *Journal of American Folk-lore*.”⁴¹ Newell also hoped that the Hampton Folklore Society would eventually become the Virginia branch of the American Folklore Society, but the Hampton folklorists insisted on publishing in Hampton’s *Southern Workman*, on maintaining their autonomy, and on keeping their status as a society of and for the Hampton Institute. Additionally, although the Hampton Folklore Society, with the backing of the American Folklore Society, provided the students with a vehicle for the organized study of black folklore, the ideological orientation of the Hampton group made a clean division between observing/collecting and interpreting/analyzing impossible. Thus the Hampton Folklore Society diverged from the American Folklore Society in several important ways.

In an effort to distinguish folklore from literature, and the American Folklore Society from the Chicago Folklore Society, Newell repeatedly defined folklore as unwritten oral tradition and oral lore. “Oral tradition,” Newell argued, characterized the various subcategories of folklore: “By folk-lore it is to be understood oral tradition,” or information and belief transmitted from generation to generation “by word of mouth and without the intervention of writing.”⁴² According to folklore historian Rosemary Zumwalt the American Folklore Society “developed a more restricted definition of folklore.” Because folklore was considered part of anthropology, and not literary studies, Newell and fellow American Folklore Society founding member Franz Boas reasoned that anthropology comprised the study of culture, broadly defined, and folklore

Ethnology," *Southern Workman* 22, no. 12 (1893): 179-80. For more on Shaler’s influence see Waters, *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams*, 33-34.

⁴¹ "Department of Folklore and Ethnology," 179.

represented the study of the *oral* aspects of culture. In contrast, the Chicago Folklore Society housed folklore studies within literary studies, considering literary studies to be concerned with written traditions, while folklore accounted for both verbal art *and* traditional life ways.⁴³

Although directly associated with Newell and the American Folklore Society, Bacon's approach was more closely aligned with that of the Chicago Folklore Society, and she specifically referred to the customary, as well as oral aspects of black folklore. According to Bacon, oral folklore took its shape from a group's unwritten body of knowledge, while customary folklore revealed the traditional modes through which folklore is transmitted among members of the group. Oral folklore could be most readily identified as the proverbs, rhymes, jokes, tales, and songs of a folk group; the text of these oral forms could easily be transcribed, indexed and compared. Customary folklore was more difficult to recognize and collect. Folk customs and habits had to be observed as they circulated among the folk and as they were passed from one group member to another. Contemporary folklorists now readily acknowledge the inseparable nature of customary and oral folklore; however, considering the historical context in which she made her claims, Bacon's insistence on the collection of "the customs and traditions" of black Americans by black Americans was extraordinary. In the post-Reconstruction era, black folk customs were often constructed in degrading and stereotypical ways, and thus the Hampton folklorists' specific attention to customary folklore was politically significant. Bacon was insisting that there was a level of complexity and meaning in

⁴² William Wells Newell, "Folk-Lore," in *Johnson's Universal Cyclopedia* (New York: A.J. Johnson Co., 1893-97), 453; W. W. Newell, "The Study of Folk-Lore," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences* 9 (1890): 134.

black folk traditions that was not discernable to even the most well-intentioned whites; many of the black folklorists had cited as their motivation for joining the Society, the distortions of black folk customs, habits and behaviors that were taking place in popular cultural representations of black folklore. Black folklorists at Hampton, therefore, sought to save black folklore from ridicule by presenting the collected folkloric items within a contextualizing framework. They recognized that black folklore had to be understood in relation to the context in which it existed. This meant that they had to pay attention to the surroundings and ask questions about when the materials were performed, for whom and by whom. Most importantly, the Hampton folklorists felt that black folklore had to be collected by individuals familiar with black modes of behavior and habits so that the collectors could get beyond the public persona and/or the public stereotypes that served to obscure the legitimacy of black folklore. Thirty years later, Zora Neale Hurston would explain this practice in the introduction to her folklore collection, *Mules and Men*: “The theory behind our tactics: ‘the white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. Alright, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. I’ll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go way. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song.’”⁴⁴

* * *

⁴³ Zumwalt, *American Folklore Scholarship*, 6.

⁴⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men in Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, ed. Cheryl Wall, *The Library of America* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 10.

The Work of the Hampton Folklore Society: "The truth is it was the first time I had ever given any serious thought to anything distinctively Negro."

--Robert Russa Moton upon first arriving at the Hampton Institute

According to Donald Waters, in founding and operating the Hampton Folklore Society, Bacon was assisted by white members of the Hampton staff, such as Leonora Herron, the school librarian, who served as the Society's secretary, and Susan Showers, head of the night school and later a teacher at the Calhoun Colored School, who contributed folkloric materials collected from her students. The body of the Hampton Folklore Society, however, consisted mainly of African Americans. Fred Wheelock, class of 1888, served as president, and former Hampton student and successful businessman Frank D. Banks (1876), who had graduated a year behind Booker T. Washington, served as vice-president. Most participating student members were from the Hampton Institute classes of 1898 and 1899. There were also former students, such as well-known culinary expert Portia Smiley, who submitted materials from Boston, Massachusetts. Many of the members of the Hampton Folklore Society went on to take various prominent positions within the African American community; these individuals include Vassar Barnett, who became the circulation manager for the newspaper Pauline Hopkins edited, *The Colored American*, and Robert Russa Moton, who succeeded Booker T. Washington as the second principal of the Tuskegee Institute. Still other members, such as JW Fitch and the poet and minister, Daniel Webster Davis, neither attended nor graduated from the Hampton Institute but participated in the Society's activities nonetheless.⁴⁵ Additionally, materials were submitted to the Society's collection and

⁴⁵ Information on contributing and participating members compiled from Hampton Institute, *Twenty-Two Years' Work of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute at*

published in the “Folklore and Ethnology” section of *Southern Workman* by such prominent intellectuals as Anna Julia Cooper, William Scarborough and Heli Chatelain.

In his 1991 dissertation, “Happy Days and Sorrow Songs,” Ronald Sharps observes that the student and graduate members of the Hampton Folklore Society formed a tight-knit group. They worked together, went into business together, sent their children to Hampton, remained involved in the activities of the Hampton Institute, and, as Sharps notes, “even tended to marry other Hampton graduates.” Because many of the members of the Hampton Folklore Society remained involved in the activities of the Hampton Institute, and because many of them spoke affectionately toward the Institute’s founder, Sharp’s concludes that “industrial education had fashioned the Hampton group *and* determined their approach to folklore.”⁴⁶ While Sharps’s project begins the much-needed work of recovering biographical information on the Society’s members, focusing specifically on Banks and Wheelock, the materials he presents do not support his assertion that the Hampton Folklore Society’s collection was dictated by the Hampton Idea as embodied by Armstrong. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The folklore project was not synonymous with the Hampton Idea. Public documents as well as private letters reveal that the students at Hampton consistently challenged the racial politics latent in the Hampton Idea. In 1885, for example, Society member, Vascar Barrett drafted a resolution objecting to the white faculty’s appropriation of the black students’ kitchen. In 1889, Barrett, joined by fellow Society member, Fred Wheelock and others issued

Hampton, Virginia (Hampton: Normal School Press, 1893); Waters, *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams*; Sharps, "Happy Days and Sorrow Songs" and the “Hampton Folklore Society” file in the Hampton University Archives, Hampton Virginia.

⁴⁶ Sharps, "Happy Days and Sorrow Songs", 83,102, italics added.

another protest against the Institute's segregated eating facilities.⁴⁷ Although the students may well have embraced the opportunity and the mission offered by attending the Institute, they were still aware of the sometimes overt, sometimes muted racial politics that not even the Hampton Institute or its founder could escape. The student members of the Hampton Folklore Society generally remained involved in the activities of the Hampton Institute long after they had either graduated or moved on from Hampton, but they did not uncritically accept the ideas or practices of the Institute and were willing to challenge its founder and his successor when they felt the Institute violated their rights as students and as a race.

While the Hampton Institute was certainly no hotbed for radical racial protest, nor a bastion of racial progressivism, the Hampton Folklore Society did offer a space where students, ex-students, graduates, associates and others could come together for the preservation and study of black folk culture. Again, according to Bacon, the premise of the Hampton Folklore Society was that it offered "a remarkable opportunity for the study of folklore and ethnology among the American Negroes." Bacon saw the project as essential in documenting black history, particularly black folk history, which she felt was disappearing in the face of education, "civilization" and advancement. While skeptical of any unqualified valorization of "civilization," Bacon was, at times, guilty of adopting a social Darwinist perspective. Like most of her contemporaries in the academy, Bacon could occasionally fall back on the premise that blacks were still in the childlike phases of evolution and that their folklore was evidence of their simpler, less evolved social/cultural system. Her sometimes ambivalent stance on this issue is reflected in her assertion that black folklore was the "child-like, but still reasoning philosophy of a race,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 84 n129.

reaching after some interpretation of its surroundings and its antecedents.”⁴⁸ In other words, she validated black folklore as the black race’s system of values, morals, and social principles, but she could not entirely evade the prevalent nineteenth century tendency to evoke the hierarchical view toward cultures and races laid out in the tenets of social Darwinism.

Nonetheless, Bacon rightly predicted that the folklore of Southern rural blacks would be of immense value to future historians in preserving a part of American and African American history that might otherwise go undocumented. In working toward this end, Bacon detailed eight areas for investigation: folktales, customs, traditions of ancestry, African folk speech and survivals of such in the US, ceremonies and superstitions, proverbs and sayings, songs with words or music or both, and she added a nod to Shaler by including a request for any information on pure African versus mixed bloodlines. Bacon saw many far-reaching implications for such work. Most immediately, she felt that the project aided in preserving the black folk materials that would be essential to future historians. She also felt that the folklore project could provide much needed data to evaluate the theories about the black social condition at the turn of the century. Additionally, Bacon and the Hampton folklorists felt the project revealed the inner life and humanity of black Southerners, which often remained hidden from the gaze of white onlookers. Finally, Bacon saw that the project could help bridge the gap between the educated black students and the black rural folk. Bacon’s overarching goal was to see the folklorists’ work “contribute much that shall be of real and permanent value in seeking among men the understanding of their fellowmen as well as in furnishing materials for the future historian of the American Negro,” a goal

⁴⁸ Bacon, "Circular Letter," 180.

dramatically different than the objectives Armstrong had detailed for the earlier folklore work.

In launching her plan, Bacon sought the support of the Hampton students and graduates first, explaining that while she had received numerous letters and aid from white Northerners, “all of these would have been of no use, if the plan had not already received hearty approval of some of our own graduates. To them we went before laying the plan before any outsiders and from them we received promise of aid when the work should be inaugurated.”⁴⁹ True to her word, the Hampton Folklore Society belonged to the Hampton students and former students. They held the officer positions, they ran the meetings, they submitted the majority of the materials included in the collection and they represented the Hampton Folklore Society by participating in outside meetings, such as those held by the American Folklore Society. Bacon also created the Hampton Folklore Society as an open forum, with letters of support, contributions of folkloric materials, guest lectures and special meetings incorporating a range of scholarly perspectives into the Society’s regular activities. She welcomed participation both from within and outside of Hampton’s gates, sending out circulars welcoming contributions from “any intelligent Negroes who are interested in the history and origin of their race.”⁵⁰

As a result of Bacon’s inclusive approach to the Hampton Folklore Society, it came to incorporate a diverse range of interests and orientations. Beyond the extensive rationale that Bacon outlined for the formation of the folklore society, the student and former student members were generally driven by an important additional motive: to save black folklore from appearing ridiculous. This motivation was influential in determining

⁴⁹ "Department of Folklore and Ethnology," 180.

how the students presented the materials they collected as they attempted to provide a more genuine representation of black folklore. Robert Russa Moton, in particular, experimented with contextualizing frameworks in which to present collected materials.

Moton was a devotee of Negro folksong before and after his participation with the Hampton Folklore Society. As an original member of the Hampton Quartet, Moton, along with Hampton folklorist, William Daggs, was part of a group of 17 Hampton students who, under the direction of Thomas Fenner, performed polished versions of plantation songs throughout the North as a way to raise funds and sway public sentiment. Ironically, in his 1921 autobiography, *Finding a Way Out*, Moton explains that he had come to the Hampton Institute “to do things differently...to sing, to speak, to use the language, and of course, the music, not of colored people, but of white people.” Upon arriving at Hampton, Moton was disturbed to hear students singing Negro spirituals. “They were negro songs,” he explains, “and we had come to Hampton to learn something better...and then too, I objected to exhibiting the religious and emotional side of our people to white folks.”⁵¹ As Moton explains, he had adopted the public perceptions of black folklore, particularly those portrayed in the minstrel tradition; as a result, he had a conflicted attitude toward black folk culture. On the one hand, having observed the treatment of black folklore in popular entertainment, Moton shunned the students’ performances of the songs as embarrassing and degrading. On the other hand, as Donald Waters points out, Moton felt the contradictory need to protect the folksongs from the potential scorn of white audiences.⁵² While at Hampton, Moton worked out a resolution

⁵⁰ Bacon, "Circular Letter," 181.

⁵¹ Quoted in Waters, *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams*, 44.

to this conflict. He recalled that his perspective began to shift when Armstrong validated black folklore at a Sunday evening meeting:

He spoke in his own forceful manner to the students about respecting themselves, their race, their history, their traditions, their songs, and folk lore in general. He referred then to the Negro songs as a “priceless legacy,” which he hoped every Negro student would always cherish. I was impressed with him and with his address, but I was not entirely convinced. However, I was led to think along a little different line regarding my race.⁵³

Moton then joined the Hampton Quartet, and as such became a living participant in the performance of the one black folk tradition, the Negro spiritual, that was valued and revered above, even to the exclusion of, all other forms of folklore as a practical and ideological foundation for the Institute. In this role, Moton witnessed the ability of Negro folklore to bear witness to the struggles endured and overcome in slavery. He also observed the power of Negro spirituals to gain public support for the Hampton project, in both a moral sense as well as in the form of financial contributions. These experiences led Moton to a deeper respect for black folk traditions, and he eventually argued that these songs were “life itself,” a manifestation “of the human soul.”⁵⁴ Moton also became committed to preserving black folklore from public ridicule by conducting critical investigations of its social value and by presenting black folk traditions in their historical and lived context.

⁵² Ibid., 44-5.

⁵³ Robert Russa Moton, *Finding a Way Out : An Autobiography* (Garden City,: Doubleday Page, 1921), 61.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Sharps, "Happy Days and Sorrow Songs", 106.

Painfully aware of the damage done to black folklore by presenting it out of context, Moton held that there was a complexity to black folklore beyond what most whites perceived. He observed that the “imitations by white ‘nigger minstrels’” made “the religious experience of the Negro a joke for white audiences...bring[ing] the whole subject of Negro music into contempt and derision.” Moton asserted that the minstrels portrayed “some of the wilder or more ridiculous shouts or religious songs of the Negroes” and joined them “with irreverent and incongruous choruses.”⁵⁵ Conscious of the damage done to black folklore by removing it from its context and presenting it to the white audience as a source of entertainment, Moton became committed to presenting black folklore as part of a larger social and communal system. What Moton’s attention to recovering the context of the folkloric materials allowed him and his fellow black folklorists to do was to collect as well as to analyze and interpret black folk materials. In presenting “corn songs” to the members of the American Folklore Society, for example, Moton contextualized the performance of the songs by explaining that “they were used largely to expedite the labor at the great annual corn shuckings...the rhythm sets the time of the work on which all are engaged, and the beating of feet, the swaying of the body or the movement of the arms may be retarded or accelerated at will by the leader.” In recognizing and documenting the customary behaviors that accompanied the music and lyrics, Moton was able to theorize that the songs functioned as part of the “plantation discipline and may be said to have had an economic value in carrying on the productive labor of the South.”⁵⁶ Having battled his own internalized perceptions about black folklore, Moton was able to encourage a re-evaluation of black folklore that was not

⁵⁵ Robert Russa Moton, "Negro Folk-Songs," *Southern Workman* 24, no. 2 (1895): 30-32.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

filtered through dominant popular culture constructions, but was more attentive to the environment and circumstances in which the materials were traditionally performed.

Even in his later writings and work, Moton continued to insist on the necessity of context in understanding black folklore, and he occasionally took on the role of purveyor of black folk culture. In “The Major,” Walter Brown recalls,

he [Moton] seemed at his best when leading in the singing of spirituals...At the opening of each school year, and especially for the benefit of the new students, it was his custom to tell the origins of the spirituals—how they came into being and the conditions from which they sprang—and why the spirituals should be cherished.⁵⁷

In 1901 Moton started a second Hampton Quartet which continued to perform Negro folksongs for general audiences. Outside of the academy, close friend and stage performer Richard Harrison solicited Moton’s counsel in regards to his performance of “De Lawd” in “The Green Pastures,” to “make sure his representation of Negro religious background would not become burlesque.”⁵⁸ In his later writing, *What the Negro Thinks* (1930), Moton explained that blacks often created a smokescreen around their practices and beliefs as a way of defending against unwanted attention from white members of Society. For this reason, Moton argued, the white American cannot and does not know the Negro, although he often professes that he does. Moton further explained that this assumption, epitomized in the phrase, “I know the Negro,” “has been commonly employed to support the opinions and sustain ...the existing customs and practices which

⁵⁷ Walter Brown, "The Major," in *Robert Russa Moton of Hampton and Tuskegee*, eds. William Hughes and Frederick D. Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 75.

give to the Negro a different status in social and civic life from that occupied by his white neighbors.” Quite to the contrary, Moton asserted that, “there are vast reaches of Negro life and thought of which white people know nothing whatever, even after long contact with them, and sometimes on the most intimate terms.”⁵⁹ Thus, through his years of formal and informal study of black cultural traditions, Moton grew even more firm in his conviction that black folklore revealed African Americans’ inner life and fundamental humanity.

The Hampton folklore collection incorporated diverse materials representing a range of orientations but brought together by a commitment to the stated and understood goals of the larger project.⁶⁰ For many of the members, as in Moton’s case, the unstated motive to address what they felt were the misrepresentations of black folklore propelled them to collect materials that would counter the images of blacks perpetuated on the minstrel stage. Members who sought to portray positive forms of black folklore in a favorable light found plenty of support for their project. As noted above, Hampton was quite literally built on the financially successful performances of Negro plantation songs

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁹ Robert Russa Moton, *What the Negro Thinks* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1929), 1.

⁶⁰ In *Strange Ways, Sweet Dreams*, Waters argues that in order to establish the validity of the Hampton Folklore Society and to dispel scholars’ continued skepticism about the Hampton collection, it is necessary to establish that the Hampton folklorists were “serious and unified in purpose.” I heartily agree with Waters that most participants in the Hampton Folklore Society acted in accordance with the Society’s official mission, which was to attend to the collection of black folklore in the spirit of scientific inquiry, and that many members were compelled by a second, implicit motive, which was to keep black folklore from appearing ridiculous. Under that rubric, however, the members of the Hampton Folklore Society were still remarkably diverse rather than uniform in their orientations toward black folklore, and it is that diversity of interests that makes the collection representative of a wide range of folkloric materials.

and spirituals. These forms of folklore supported the Hampton agenda and the collection, preservation and performance of them was promoted.

For other members, however, the framework articulated by founder, Alice Bacon, which urged the members to attend to serious and scientific study of folklore, was enough to convince them to collect materials that fell beyond the bounds of acceptable black folklore. In a submission on conjuration, for example, contributing member, Daniel Webster Davis disavowed the practices of the conjure doctor as “evil” and “superficial,” but then explained that in the interest of intellectual curiosity, he “succeeded in engaging [a conjure doctor] in what was...an exceedingly interesting conversation and from which we learned many things concerning the mode of operation of the conjure doctor.”⁶¹

Davis then proceeded to provide a detailed account of the methods, appearance and apparel of the conjure doctors. Additionally, in response to criticism for the Society’s publication of Irishman stories (African American tales in which the Irish characters appear foolish and gullible), Bacon apologized that “our desire to reproduce exactly for scientific purposes the stories as they are told in the South should have shocked the sensibilities of our readers.” However, Bacon reminded her audience of the Society’s mission:

We hope that the readers of the *Workman* bear in mind...that the work we are trying to do...is not to afford popular or entertaining reading, nor is it to depict an ideal of any kind for the attainment or elevation of our pupils or graduates, but it is an effort to give with absolute accuracy as we can secure, the stories,

⁶¹ Daniel Webster Davis, "Conjuration," *Southern Workman* 27, no. 12 (1898): 251-2.

superstitions, sayings and songs of the illiterate Negroes, in the hope that we may all in this way learn a little more about their lives and ways of looking at things.⁶²

Having reminded the audience that the Society's mission lay not in the favorable presentation of folklore, nor in entertaining the reader, Bacon goes on to publish two more Irishman stories in *Southern Workman's* very next issue. While many of the members presented acceptable forms of black folklore in a favorable light as a way to counter the images presented in the popular culture, Bacon's scientific approach also provided the members with a framework through which to consider less acceptable forms of folklore. Thus the Hampton collection of folklore came to represent a diverse range of folkloric materials.

* * *

The Collection

The Hampton folklore collection expanded the parameters of what was considered black folklore. It included accepted forms of folklore, such as spirituals, religious lore and animal tales, but it also drew heavily on the less reputable forms, including numerous examples of superstitions, signs and conjuration. A broad swath of folklore categories and genres are represented, and the materials vary in both form and content. Some entries provide lists of folkloric items with no contextualizing comments, such as the lists of superstitions and riddles submitted by J.W. Bendenbaugh from Bradley, South Carolina.⁶³ Other items are framed with elaborate context ranging from personal narratives to commentary on performance situations to evaluative remarks. Examples of these submissions include the personal narrative from Chole Cabot Thomas of Boston,

⁶² Alice Bacon, "Editorial," *Southern Workman* 28, no. 6 (1899): 201.

Massachusetts (whose mother's first cousin was Phillis Wheatley), Moton's presentation and functionalist explanation of corn shucking songs, and Davis's critical discussion of conjuration. The collection represents several categories of oral folklore, such as rhymes, riddles, animal tales, folk tales, warning tales and songs, and even includes some examples of material folklore, such as the list of items possessing special spiritual or magical qualities. Consistent with the Society's stated goals of incorporating customary folklore, roughly half of the examples falls into the category of folk customs and social practices and include courtship rituals, rites of passage, games, superstitions and conjuration.

While it is beyond the scope of this present study to provide more than a cursory overview of the Society's extensive collection, two works that do offer detailed analyses of the collection are Waters's *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams* and Sharps's *Happy Days and Sorrow Songs*. Interestingly, Waters and Sharps read the same materials in markedly different ways. Waters argues that before Southern blacks could put their norms into practice, "they, like all people, had to discuss and evaluate them with respect to particular situations."⁶⁴ Referencing various parts, Waters illustrates how Southern blacks used folklore to present norms of behavior, to evaluate those norms in given situations, and then to persuade members of the community to follow those norms. After establishing community norms and values, Waters asserts that signs, superstitions and conjuration enforced the behavioral norms. Waters's analysis of the Hampton folklore collection challenges the premise of Armstrong's Hampton Idea, which linked the "folk"

⁶³ "A Contribution from South Carolina," *Southern Workman* 23, no. 3 (1894): 46-7; "Contributions from Correspondents," *Southern Workman* 23, no. 12 (1894): 209-10.

⁶⁴ Waters, *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams*, 55.

with immorality/amorality and the “educated” with morality, by showing that the folk communities in which these materials circulated had established their own ethical systems for evaluating, instilling and perpetuating values, norms and beliefs.

In contrast, Sharps argues that the materials in the collection can be read as direct support for the tenets embedded in the Hampton Idea. In his analysis, the morality presented in the collection was an expression of the Hampton principles of business, labor and economic development. For example, he argues that work songs are included in the collection because they support the Hampton Idea of industrial education. While some of the members’ desires to present black folklore in a positive light may have led them to collect materials that could be read as support for the Hampton Idea, the materials in the collection as a whole far exceed the bounds of the Hampton Idea. For example, Sharps acknowledges that according to the Hampton Idea, “the great stumbling block to this development in the race was superstitions;” therefore, Sharps’s analysis necessarily leaves unaccounted for the pervasive presence of superstitions, signs and folk beliefs.

Sharps’s and Waters’s varied interpretations of the Hampton collection stem, in part, from the ideological ends to which scholars have employed the various materials, but also from the diversity represented in the range of the materials presented. Different parts of the Hampton collection tell different stories. For example, conjure practices are variously represented as evil hoaxes perpetrated by practitioners who derived their powers from the devil, while other times conjuration is presented as a beneficial act carried out by doctors who have been divinely ordained. Taken as a whole, the Hampton folklore collection documents an elaborate system of values and folk knowledge

representing a cross-section of rural black communities throughout the South. Some materials can be read as reinforcing the values latent in the Hampton Idea, as Sharps contends, while other materials blatantly contradict those values. At the most fundamental level, what the collection reveals is a collage of communities that did have an elaborate system of values, morals, ethics, traditions and beliefs that were communicated and negotiated through their various forms of folklore.

* * *

Bridging the Gap: The Mutual Influence between Black Intellectuals and the Hampton Folklore Society

The Hampton Folklore Society not only expanded access to a broader range of black folk materials than had previously been made available, but the Society also created an important forum where members of the black intellectual community asserted, contested and debated the cultural, ideological and political significance of black folklore. At the end of the nineteenth century there was an increasing interest on the part of black intellectuals, Hampton folklorists included, in not only the collection of black folklore by black folklorists, but also in the increasing political significance contained in representations of black folklore. From the Hampton Folklore Society's inception in 1893, until its disbanding circa 1900, many of the country's most prominent African American intellectuals established either formal or informal relations with the Hampton Folklore Society. Booker T. Washington wrote to Bacon that he "heartily" approved of the plan and stated that "we [Tuskegee] shall be glad to do anything in our power to assist you, and our graduates will also do what they can."⁶⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois and Anna Julia

⁶⁵ "Editorial Introduction and Student Papers on Conjuring," *Southern Workman* 7, no. 4 (1878): 179-80.

Cooper maintained personal correspondence with folklore society member Robert Moton, and Du Bois requested Society secretary Leonora Heron's expertise on identifying the origins of specific folk songs collected and documented in Hampton's *Cabin and Plantation Songs*.⁶⁶ The most sustained involvement in the Society's activities, however, came from the American Negro Academy (ANA), which was founded by Alexander Crummell, named by Paul Laurence Dunbar, and counted among its members DuBois, Kelly Miller, and William Scarborough.

The ANA philosophy, like the Hampton Idea, formulated its position on black folklore in relation to prevailing concepts about civilization. In "Civilization, the Primal Need of the Race," an 1898 address to the ANA, Crummell argued that the Negro race needed to be uplifted through the cultivation of civilization among the masses as carried out through the agency of the educated and cultured men of the race.⁶⁷ The ANA's position on the need to uplift the masses as measured through the barometer of civilization bears marked similarities with Armstrong's position on uplifting the masses through the cultivation of character. The ANA, however, stressed the attainment of culture, arts and literature as central to the uplifting of the race and argued against the absorption of blacks into white American civilization. The ANA mission declared that black people had a distinct contribution to make to civilization and humanity, that race identity needed to be maintained and that it was incumbent upon cultured and educated black men to promote race pride and dignity. In general, the members of ANA sought to

⁶⁶ Leonora Herron, Letters, February 12, 1903; March 20, 1903, Hampton University Archives, Hampton, Virginia.

⁶⁷ Alexander Crummell, "Civilization, the Primal Need of the Race (1898)," in *The American Negro Academy Occasional Papers, 1-22*, ed. American Negro Academy (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 4.

build a racial consciousness rooted in black folklore and black achievements, and they saw black civilization as moving along a continuum parallel with, and not as a precursor to, white Western civilization.⁶⁸ In fact, in an 1893 letter to Bacon expressing his support for the creation of the Hampton Folklore Society, Crummell explained that he had long-sought to secure interest and support for an “African Society” devoted to “the preservation of traditions, folk-lore, ancestral remembrances, etc.” In his formulation, black folklore issued forth from the ancestral source, which he identified as Africa, and provided black Americans with a lineage, a culture and a tradition in which to locate black civilization. He expressed his hope that the Hampton folklore project would remind students of the “family ties” that connected them, not to the Anglo-Saxon, but to their “kin over the water.”⁶⁹ In his 1896 Hampton Institute Founder’s Day address, Crummell took his message of race pride and identification directly to the Hampton Students, imploring the students, “Don’t forget that a *race* is a family....Do not suffer any advantages, in the present or the future, to lead to forgetfulness of race feeling and race devotedness!”⁷⁰

In addition to Crummell, both Scarborough and John L. Love regularly addressed the Hampton folklorists, participated in their conferences, and contributed materials to

⁶⁸ For example, in “The Conservation of the Races,” Du Bois argued for the recognition and cultivation of black civilization as emerging from “common history, common laws, religion, similar habits of thought and a conscious striving together for certain ideals of life.” He urged black people to develop black literature, black art and black culture which were “not a servile imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture, but a stalwart originality which shall unswervingly follow Negro ideals.” See W.E.B. DuBois, “The Conservation of the Races,” in *The American Negro Academy Occasional Papers, 1-22*, ed. American Negro Academy (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 8, 10.

⁶⁹ “More Letters Concerning the ‘Folk-Lore Movement’ at Hampton,” *Southern Workman* 23, no. 1 (1894): 5.

their folklore collection. Love was not only active as a corresponding member of the Hampton Folklore Society, but he also established the Asheville Folklore Society in North Carolina. Scarborough, the first black member of both the American Philological Society and the Modern Language Association and a Wilberforce Professor of Classics, contributed folkloric materials to the Hampton collection, addressed the Hampton Folklore Conference in 1896 and presented at the Conference of Hampton Graduates that same year. He published numerous articles on Negro dialect and in 1899 published “The Negro in Fiction as Portrayer and Portrayed” in *Southern Workman*. In general, the ANA felt that black folk tradition and the literature that incorporated such traditions should advance its goals of creating and demonstrating a distinctive African American civilization. In fact, as I discuss in chapter three, Scarborough criticized both Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar for not moving their representations of black folklore beyond the confines of the plantation tradition. What Scarborough called for were works that did not reproduce what the ANA considered degrading or embarrassing folk images, but instead works that were able to “weld the new life to the old,” and that could overcome the difficulty of “finding [one’s self] always confronted with the past of his race and the woes of his kindred.”⁷¹ In working toward this goal, Scarborough and Crummell contributed, and encouraged the Hampton folklorists to collect materials that documented African folklore and that established a proud lineage for black Americans distinct from that of white Anglo-Saxon Americans. In many ways, Anna Julia Cooper’s position, like Scarborough’s, incorporated the general tenets of the ANA. Her assertion

⁷⁰ Alexander Crummell, “Founder’s Day Address,” *Southern Workman* 25, no. 3 (1896): 48.

of a racial consciousness rooted in black folk culture and distinct from white Western civilization was right in line with the ANA viewpoint. Unlike Scarborough, however, whose position remained within the bounds of the ANA philosophy, Cooper interrogated the very idea of civilization and in doing so challenged altogether the prevailing constructions of the civilized versus folk.⁷² In articulating her position on the

⁷¹ William Scarborough, "The Negro in Fiction as Portrayer and Portrayed," *Southern Workman* 28, no. 9 (1899): 358-62.

⁷² In "Anna Julia Cooper and the Black Orator," Todd Vogel poses a question that has skirted the perimeters of Cooper studies over the past two decades, "Was Cooper an 'elitist'...Or did she use her fancy language to change the ways race works in the country?" In his essay, Vogel concludes that Cooper was a master rhetorician who "reforged the masters' tools...[to create] an alternative social theory for the nation." He further asserts that Cooper sought to change the conditions of African American men and women by changing public sentiment and perceptions. To do this, Vogel asserts, Cooper had to enter the dominant cultural discourse on its own terms, and then through rhetorical maneuvering, alter and invert the terms of the discourse. Contrary to Vogel's analysis, Kevin Gaines puts forth a less generous interpretation of Cooper's work. In "The Woman and Labor Questions," Gaines contends that Cooper's work is rooted in "Western ethnocentrism, staunch religious piety and late-Victorian bourgeois sensibility." He argues that out of the multiplicity of Cooper's voices "emerged that of a Southern, nativist apologist for antilabor views." While I would agree with Gaines that Cooper's position on labor unions, as expressed in one essay, "What are we Worth?" (1892), was troubling in that it perpetuated a divide between the black and white working classes that dated back to at least the Reconstruction period, I also assert that Cooper's position reveals a commitment to the black working class and a fear, justified or not, that white labor unions and foreign workers would infringe on the already limited labor market available to blacks. Furthermore, Gaines begins to recognize, but does not fully acknowledge, the rhetorical maneuvering that black women had to do to gain a public voice. For instance, Gaines asserts that black women "negotiated their seemingly anomalous public presence by endorsing the gender conventions of the dominant culture." Gaines's analysis continually stops short of acknowledging the critiques embedded in the critical strategies that Cooper and other black women adopted to gain a hearing in the public discourse. For example, when Cooper constructs blacks and women as a "moral force" that can counteract the power of what she refers to as "this money-getting, dollar worshipping civilization" (quoted in Gaines 142), her rhetoric essentializes women and blacks, but only as a way to create authority and then to critique what was being perpetuated under the guise of civilization. For further analysis of Cooper's rhetorical strategy see Todd Vogel, "Anna Julia Cooper and the Black Orator," in *Rewriting White: Race, Class and Cultural Capital in Nineteenth Century America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 86; Hazel Carby, "In the Quiet, Undisputed Dignity of My Womanhood": Black Feminist Thought after Emancipation," in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 95-120; Shirley Logan, "Anna Julia Cooper" in *We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteen-Century Black Women* (Carbondale : Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 113- 126. For a critique of Cooper's "elitist" position, see Kevin Gaines, "The Woman and Labor Questions in Racial Uplift Ideology:

significance and function of black folk tradition, Cooper argued that black folklore did not need to be cultivated and elevated to the level of literary achievement by Western standards, but rather that the African American literary tradition was in dire need of being liberated from those standards, and that black artists and writers should instead turn to black folklore to find the material, inspiration and models for crafting a black literary tradition.

* * *

African American Folklore as Stimulus for African American Literature

“I heard recently of a certain great painter, who before taking his brush always knelt down and prayed to be delivered from his model and just here as it seems to me is the real need of deliverance for the American black man.”

–Anna Julia Cooper⁷³

In response to the formation of the Hampton Folklore Society, several of the country’s most prominent intellectuals, both black and white, expressed the desire to see the work of black folklorists serve as a stimulus for national literature. In expressing her support for the Hampton Folklore Society, Cooper asserted, “such a work is calculated to give a stimulus to our national literature.” The Reverend William Tunnell believed the work of the Hampton Folklore Society would make a “substantial contribution to our literature.” George Washington Cable also lent his praise, stating, “I consider it one of

Anna Julia Cooper’s *Voices from the South*,” in *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 128-151.

⁷³ Anna Julia Cooper, "Paper by Mrs. Anna J. Cooper," *Southern Workman* 23, no. 7 (1894): 133.

the most valuable plans yet proposed for the development of that literary utterance...essential for the colored people...to work out a complete Emancipation.”⁷⁴

It was Cooper, however, who offered the most clearly articulated vision for the role that folklore could play in stimulating African American literature. In fact, throughout the Society’s seven year existence, from 1893-1900, Cooper maintained regular correspondence with the Society, developed a close personal friendship with Alice Bacon, submitted materials to the Society’s collection, addressed the Hampton folklorists in a meeting held in her honor, and helped establish the Washington Negro Folklore Society, of which she became the corresponding secretary. She also held an interim editorship of Hampton’s *Southern Workman*, and as such oversaw the monthly publication of the Society’s Folklore and Ethnology column.

Throughout her involvement with the Hampton Folklore Society, Cooper offered not only her services, but also repeatedly addressed the cultural and ideological significance of the Society’s work. In an 1894 speech Cooper delivered to the Hampton folklorists, she fervently argued for the validation of black folklore as a source for African American literature—a source that did not *and could not* originate within the racist discourse on black folklore prevalent in the post-Reconstruction era. In this address Cooper challenged the cultural dominance assigned to Western civilization, urging the Hampton folklorists not to recast the dominant ideas that constructed black folklore in racist and dehumanizing terms. She then challenged the supposed dichotomy between folk and educated classes, asserting that, when honestly considered, the material the folklorists sought resided not in some far off place but in their own memories. Finally, Cooper argued that the Society’s reclaiming of black folklore could promote an

⁷⁴ "Letters Concerning the 'Folk-Lore Movement'," 5.

African American literary tradition that challenged the cultural dominance assigned to Western civilization by offering a black literary aesthetic freed from the dictates of Western literary models.⁷⁵ The address marks a key intervention into the increasingly circumscribed post-Reconstruction discourse surrounding black folklore and illuminates not only a critical moment in the formation of a black folk aesthetic, but also reveals what was at stake in this movement by black Americans to reclaim representation of black folklore.

Cooper's earlier writings had evinced an interest in the role black folklore could play in the creation of African American literary and creative expression. In her 1892 essay, "The Negro as Presented in American Literature," Cooper argued that what was needed to counter the images of black folk circulating in popular culture was to gather the folklore of everyday black people, to contemplate and understand it and then to incorporate it into artistic creation. She insists that "if one had the insight and the simplicity to gather together, to digest and assimilate these original lispings [sic]...there is

⁷⁵ Cooper's academic training in Western classics makes her criticism of the Western civilization and Western literary models somewhat curious, unless one considers Cooper's social activism alongside her intellectual training. According to Hazel Carby, Cooper saw the intellectual advancement of blacks and women as essential to their role as shapers of public sentiment, and she believed that education should "empower women so that they could shape an alternative course to a future society which would exercise sensitivity and sympathy toward the powerless and oppressed." In addition to Cooper's position on education, Carby further maintains that Cooper "felt that the dominant white power structure existed in 'sublime ignorance' of the needs or desires of blacks," and Cooper never missed an opportunity to lambaste the rhetoric of civilization, which she repeatedly identified as merely a euphemism for colonization, racism and imperialism. Cooper's merging of grassroots activism, her commitment to improving social conditions for women and working class blacks, and her devotion to both classical and industrial education laid the foundation for her assault on US notions of civilization and supported her interest in black folk culture as a source for socially-engaged, African American creative expression. See Carby, "In the Quiet, Undisputed Dignity of my Womanhood," 97, 102.

material here as original and distinctive as ever inspired Homer.”⁷⁶ Cooper’s position was not an entirely new one. In *The Voice of the Folk*, Gene Bluestein asserts, “since the eighteenth century every discussion of folklore and folk song has presupposed an integral relationship between national literary traditions and the body of folk art produced by unsophisticated or even illiterate people.” For Europeans, Bluestein continues, “the terms of this relationship between folklore and literature were relatively easy to define”: folk were the peasants and the more educated and civilized needed the “folk wisdom,” or folk presence, to define themselves.⁷⁷ As I discussed in chapter one, however, for the United States, the folk/non-folk dichotomy must be understood in relation to US racial politics. On the one hand, folklore was being used to support ideologies of social evolution, which held that folklore belonged to the primitive or savage classes [read: black] and was shed as one moved up the ladder of evolution. On the other hand, folklore also served as ammunition for segregationist agendas that capitalized on the distorted images of black folklore, particularly those that circulated in the minstrel tradition, to show just how different blacks really were from whites. Cooper realized that to use folklore as evidence of the progression toward civilization was to remain trapped within the hierarchies that supported racial oppression. She also knew that to rely on the folk images that were perpetuated in popular culture was to allow the dominant culture to remain in control of black representation. The impetus for Cooper’s aesthetic was the desire to encourage

⁷⁶ Anna Julia Cooper, "The Negro as Presented in American Literature (1892)," in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 136.

⁷⁷ Gene Bluestein, *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 1-2.

educated African Americans not to turn away from black folklore, but instead, to expose how folklore had been constructed in dominant cultural forms.

The immediate problem Cooper faced was how to validate widely discredited black folk traditions as aesthetically and culturally valuable. What Cooper suggests is an exorcism of the dominant myths that worked to belittle black folk traditions and a ritual reclamation of the folk traditions that had been largely devalued. Many cultural and literary critics since Cooper have reiterated this aspect of an African American literary aesthetic. In the 1960s, Black Nationalist Larry Neal stated, “the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology.” At the other end of the political spectrum, post-modernist Clarence Major in “A Black Criterion” called for black writers to break away from the confines of white standards.⁷⁸ In his 1976 essay “Frame and Dialect,” John Edgar Wideman asserts that “the evolution of the black voice in American literature [can be viewed as] attempts of various writers to free themselves from a frame which a priori devalues black speech.”⁷⁹

In her attempt to “free” the black folklorists from an ideological system that “devalues black speech,” and I would add black folk traditions and customs in general, Cooper began her address to the Hampton folklorists by striking at the very foundations of the social evolution ideology that held white, Western culture as the pinnacle of all civilization. Cooper granted that Anglo Saxon civilization certainly “overpowers” other

⁷⁸ Larry Neal and Clarence Major quoted in Bernard Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 227, 255.

⁷⁹ John Edgar Wideman, “Frame and Dialect: The Evolution of the Black Voice in American Literature,” *American Poetry Review* 5, no. 5 (September/October 1976): 34-37.

cultures, but her talk serves as a warning to those enraptured by the “splendor of Anglo Saxon achievements.” Instead of allowing Anglo Saxon civilization to reign in its uncontested dominance, she redefined its preeminence in terms of rampant materialism, industrialization and imperialism, noting, “Its steam servants thread the globe. It has put the harness on God’s lightning which is now made to pull, push, pump, lift, write, talk, sing, light, kill, cure...securing with magic speed and dexterity fabulous wealth, honor, ease, luxury, beauty, art, power.”⁸⁰ Cooper then railed out against a system in which all achievement is measured in relation to Western ideals and values, sarcastically remarking, “to write as a white man, to sing as a white man, to swagger as a white man, to bully as a white man—this is achievement, this is success.” Instead of aspiring to attain Western civilization, Cooper argued that “emancipation from the model is what is needed,” and implored African Americans to free themselves from the Anglo Saxon standards by which their own traditions were judged primitive and lacking. In this way, Cooper distinguished her approach from an ANA or “New Negro” position by asserting that folk traditions did not need to be stylized into “civilized” or Western forms.

The distinction between Cooper and the ANA can be seen as a matter of influence. For example, the Du Boisian position advanced in *The Souls of Black Folks* argued for the cultivation of folk materials into high cultural forms that would be on par with the best of Western formal art. In contrast, for Cooper formal art was in desperate need of the influence of folk forms and values, and folk traditions—although not as

⁸⁰ As cultural historian, Mia Bay contends, nineteenth century African Americans contested white supremacy by “stripping white theories of black inferiority down to the self-interested and dehumanizing stories that gave them life.” In this way, Bay asserts, African Americans were able to show that “white Americans deemed blacks a lesser species only to rationalize their own exploitation and abuse of people of color.” See Mia Bay, *The White Image*

sophisticated as formal arts—were aesthetically valid in their own right. Cooper also acknowledged, however, that there was tremendous pressure to present black folklore in the arts and popular culture only as it reinforced the public’s preconceived notions, and she recognized that black folklore was considered valid only when “the approved style [was] affected.”⁸¹ Nevertheless, Cooper delivered an impassioned plea for the black folklorists to turn to their own culture for inspiration rather than rely on popular constructions of black folklore, and she implored them to collect and present folklore based on their own observations, memories and experiences.

Cooper’s proposal meant, among other things, reconciling the “socialized ambivalence” that for many African Americans centered on their association or disassociation with black folk tradition.⁸² As discussed above, for example, Hampton folklorist Robert Moton had stated that the treatment of black folklore by white minstrels had led many blacks to despise their own traditions. Moton explained that he had internalized the images of black folklore that circulated in the minstrel tradition; as a result, he initially shunned black folklore as embarrassing and degrading. Cooper’s other writings suggest that she was keenly aware of this process, and in her address to the Hampton folklorists she stressed memory as a way to access black folklore that was not over-determined by the dominant misrepresentations. Cooper passionately believed that if the students silenced and repressed these memories, then they allowed the prevailing myths that erased the slave past to persist. Thus, Cooper redefined the Hampton folklore

in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas About White People, 1830-1925 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9.

⁸¹ Cooper, "Paper by Mrs. Cooper," 133.

project from a venture of gathering and documenting folklore to a site where the students' memories of their communities' folklore and traditions could be recalled and validated, and where an alternative version of the past, and of the "folk," could be fostered.⁸³

Cooper enacts this process of privileging memory by undercutting the seemingly impenetrable dichotomy between educated and folk, asserting to her audience that folklore resides not in some far-off remote place, but in "the whispered little longings of his soul." Cooper's position thus directly contradicted the philosophy espoused by General Armstrong. While Armstrong saw the "rooting out" of folk ignorance as a necessary process in the education of rural blacks, Cooper was adamant that the "so-called educated Negro, under the shadow of this over-powering Anglo-Saxon civilization," should not become "ashamed of his own distinctive features."⁸⁴ Cooper reminded her audience that what they're talking about is not just folklore, but family history. She removed the students from their role of "ethnographer" and reminded them

⁸² For a discussion of "socialized ambivalence" as it relates to the African American literary tradition see Bell, *The Contemporary Novel*, 68, 81.

⁸³ My use of "sites" of memory here is a deliberate allusion to the impressive collection, *History and Memory in African American Culture*, in which Robert O'Meally and Genevieve Fabre borrow Pierre Nora's concept of "lieux de memorie," or "sites of memory" to characterize how African Americans have maintained and articulated memories as a way to challenge dominant claims to an authoritative or universal history. In the first essay in the collection, Melvin Dixon asserts that these "sites have been used by African American writers...to enlarge the frame of cultural reference for the depiction of black experiences by anchoring that experience in memory—a memory that ultimately rewrites history." See Melvin Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," in *History and Memory in African American Culture*, eds. Genevieve Fabre and Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 20; Fabre and O'Meally, "Introduction," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Fabre and O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Helen Lock, in "Building Up From Fragments," similarly argues that orally-derived perceptions of memory constitute "a powerful alternative means of negotiating with the past." See Helen Lock, "Building Up from Fragments': The Oral Memory Process in Some Recent African-American Written Narratives," in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, eds. Michael Hoffman and Patrick Murphy (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 297, 299.

that this project was personal; they were not objective observers. In this way, she impressed upon the Hampton folklorists that they were collecting their own and their communities' intimate, everyday traditions and customs, not just data to be analyzed by social scientists or relics of a primitive past that served as evidence of social progress.

Interestingly, Cooper's plea that the Hampton folklorists draw their folklore from their own remembrances anticipated the process that many would come to adopt in gathering their folkloric materials. For example, at the conference held in her honor, and directly following her address, Society president Fred Wheelock opened the meeting for the telling of Negro folktales. After Society member H.J. Patterson shared a tale he had heard in South Carolina, the other members began to recall and recount tales they too remembered: "Mr. Patterson had hardly finished speaking when Mr. F.D. Banks, Vice President of the Hampton Folklore Society, came forward to tell a tale that was, he said, one of the very first that he remembered hearing in his childhood."⁸⁵ After Banks and several other members came forth to share newly recollected folklore, another member, William Claytor, "was on his feet, and coming to front of the room." Claytor prefaced his contribution with the following remarks, "As I have been sitting here listening to these stories, quite a collection of stories have come back to me that I had once known and almost forgotten."⁸⁶

Indeed, memory would become a defining aspect in the Hampton folklore collection, and Daniel Webster Davis confirmed Cooper's assertion that when properly considered, the folklorists and their "informants" would likely find that the materials they

⁸⁴ "Letters Concerning the 'Folk-Lore Movement'," 5.

⁸⁵ "Folklore and Ethnology," *Southern Workman* 23, no. 8 (1894): 149-50.

sought were a living part of their memories. Davis explained that he had a great deal of difficulty in collecting material on ring plays because many of the people he spoke with claimed that they “had forgotten the old ring plays.” Once Davis had “recalled them to their memory,” his informants began to share lively reminiscences of the rings plays they had once enjoyed. Davis also used his 1897 poetry collection, *Weh Down Souf*, to contemplate issues of remembering and forgetting. One poem in particular, “Signs,” shows an educated young girl who attempts to cast off her traditional folk ways to adopt a more modern and sophisticated manner. Yet, almost unconsciously, the girl enacts an old folk superstition by making a cross in the road when she has to turn around on her way to school and return home for something she forgot. The poem suggests the persistence of folkways even in the face of education and civilization and provides yet another example of Cooper’s assertion that black folklore was not just an abstract concept but a part of the students’ lives that connected them with a not so distant folk past. Cooper clearly wielded a certain degree of influence within the Society. Bacon commented that Cooper’s visits were “a source of great encouragement to us here and an incentive to do our own work as thoroughly and conscientiously as possible.”⁸⁷ For the Hampton folklorists, Cooper’s perspective offered a way to bridge the divide between the educated black students and the rural “black folk” by calling on the students to search their memories for songs, tales and traditions that were part of their own upbringing.

In the closing remarks in her 1898 address to the Hampton folklorists, Cooper turned her attention from the need to validate and collect black folklore to the need to draw on black folklore as a stimulus for creative expression. “Creative instinct,” she

⁸⁶ “Folklore and Ethnology,” *Southern Workman* 23, no. 10 (1894): 179-80.

explained, “must be aroused by a wholesome respect for the thoughts that lie nearest.” She continued, “this to my mind is the vital importance for him [the black American] in the study of his own folk-lore.” She then urged her peers to cultivate the “songs, superstitions, customs, and tales” of the black folk tradition as the basis for their creative expression. As she explained in regards to the poems of Homer, a group’s literature should not just provide a record of the achievements of only its most accomplished members. Homer’s poems, she asserts, are considered valuable precisely because they give an account of the “homely customs and superstitions as well as [the] more heroic achievements” of the Greeks.⁸⁸ In these closing remarks, Cooper articulated the basis of a black folk aesthetic that could incorporate the everyday customs and practices of rural blacks alongside the heroic narratives of the more prominent members of the race. Cooper’s speech envisions an African American literature working in tandem with the black folk materials collected by black folklorists. While Cooper ended her talk without elaborating on what an African American literature rooted in black folk culture would do, in her other writings, particularly “The Negro as Presented in American Literature,” she expounded upon the role of black folklore in literature and the role of African American literature in her program of social change.

In the introduction to *A Voice of the South*, Mary Helen Washington identifies Cooper as a “literary critic” who was “uncompromising in her denunciation of white control over the black image.” Washington notes that Cooper “took on such nineteenth century establishment figures as William Dean Howells, Joel Chandler Harris and George

⁸⁷ “Folklore and Ethnology,” *Southern Workman* 23, no. 4 (1894): 65-66.

⁸⁸ “Folklore and Ethnology,” *Southern Workman* 23, no. 7 (1894): 133.

Washington Cable.”⁸⁹ In fact, one of Cooper’s primary complaints was that white writers had co-opted representation of black folklore. Cooper felt that neither Joel Chandler Harris, nor any other white man or woman could offer the perspective into the inner life, thoughts, habits and customs of the black Americans as empathetically and truthfully as could someone of African American descent. Cooper did not claim that Harris’s work was invalid, but only that the African American perspective on black life in America was woefully absent from the national discourse. Cooper states that what she hopes to see “is a black man honestly and appreciatively portraying both the Negro as he is and the white man, occasionally, as seen from the Negro’s stand point.”⁹⁰ What is significant here is that Cooper saw a black literature rooted in personal experience and collective memory and then stylized through imagination, as not only representing aspects of the African American experience, but more important, as providing commentary on white American society. In Cooper’s estimation, the function of African American literature was not to copy white American or European models, nor was it to create a distinct African American literary tradition to showcase the achievements of prominent African Americans. Instead, the folklore—the customs, beliefs, stories and traditions—that this literature embodied provided testimony of African American experiences, and as such, inherently critiqued what Cooper referred to as “the great gulf between its [America’s] professions and its practices.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Mary Helen Washington, “Introduction,” *A Voice from the South*, Anna Julia Cooper (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xliii.

⁹⁰ Cooper, “The Negro as Presented in American Literature,” 159.

⁹¹ Cooper, “Ethics of the Negro Question,” in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, eds. Lemert and Bhan, 206.

In many ways, Toni Morrison's 1987 essay, "The Site of Memory," articulates the relationship Cooper had conceived between folklore, memory, imagination and fiction. In this essay, Morrison states that memory provides her with an alternative way to enter the interior lives of her characters. Explaining her creative process, Morrison states, "first of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I write and in what I find to be significant."⁹² Morrison insists, however, that the process of creating literary fiction still requires imagination and craft: "It's a kind of literary archeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply."⁹³ Morrison's narrative strategy in *The Bluest Eye* illustrates the way this sequence functions. The folkloric elements in the story—the proverbial comparisons, the folk speech, the gossip, the schoolyard songs, the fragments of stories and the naming practices—all serve to stimulate memory and propel the narrative. Because the folkloric elements are fragments, however, it requires subjective reconstruction, or acts of imagination and craft, to piece together Pecola Breedlove's tragic story. Additionally, Morrison uses folklore to tell an alternative story that ultimately critiques the myths of middle class respectability perpetuated by dominant cultural tales such as the Dick and Jane story.

Indeed, Cooper's aesthetic is reflected in the persistence of the folk, or ancestral, presence that continues to surface, haunt and sustain the narratives of later writers.

Reconciling the relationship between memory, dominant ideologies and forms, and folk

⁹² Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1987), 111.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 112.

tradition has become a recurring trope for achieving literary wholeness, uniting a sense of self and community and achieving personal and/or socio-political or socio-psychological liberation.⁹⁴ Velma, the protagonist in Toni Cade Bambara's 1980 novel, *The Salt Eaters*, alludes to this process when she states, in terms reminiscent of Cooper's address, that she had been determined not to "become anesthetized by the dazzling performance of someone else's aesthetic...but amnesia had set in anyhow."⁹⁵ In Bambara's story, it is only through oral and customary folk practices that Velma is restored to wholeness. In Lloyd Brown's 1951 prison novel, *Iron City*, folklore and memory allow the prisoner Henry Faulcon to reconstruct a past that he had been unable or unwilling to examine. Faulcon's ability to recover, not a logical or realistic past, but one built on folktales, myths, personal narratives, work songs and blues, allows him to achieve psychological and spiritual freedom even as he remains physically within the confines of the prison. As literary theorist Helen Lock asserts, "many recent African-American written narratives have sought to propose an alternative approach to the past by foregrounding the functioning of oral memory both thematically and structurally: not to recall a fixed original or singular truth but to reconstruct and regenerate (inter)subjectively many kinds of truth."⁹⁶ Indeed, negotiating different forms of memory is the thematic and structural foundation of Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*; Gaines pits a history teacher's desire for an "authoritative" oral history of slavery against Jane Pittman's subjective and collective memory of her life and times. After the school

⁹⁴ Bell refers to this aspect of the African American novel as "the quest of African Americans for personal and social freedom, literacy, and wholeness." See Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel*, 3.

⁹⁵ Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (1980; rpt New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 258.

teacher resigns to settling for a collectively-recalled oral history, recounted and revised by Miss. Pitman *and* her neighbors and relatives, he accepts that what he will present to the reader is the essence of Jane's story, even if not the verbatim narrative. While Lock identifies the negotiation of memory as a central thematic and structural element of recent fiction, I would argue that as early as 1899, Cooper's contemporary, Charles Chesnutt, drew on the black folk customs of storytelling and conjure as a way to juxtapose alternative versions of the past and introduce varying concepts of reality.⁹⁷

By suggesting that black writers draw upon black folk traditions as inspiration for a distinctive, or "liberated," African American literary tradition, Cooper anticipates Gayl Jones's assertion that the break from Western literary tradition was made possible when black writers turned to the African and African American forms of oral and aural tradition. While Jones locates this break from Western literary models with 1960s and 1970s writers, such as Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni and others, I would assert that the melding of black folk traditions and Western literary influences to create a distinctive hybrid literary form began much earlier.⁹⁸ Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar are often relegated to the confines of minstrelsy by critics who are not specifically examining literature of the post-Reconstruction period. I would argue, however, that both these writers employed the content, themes, styles, and conventions of black folk traditions to inaugurate a distinctive literary form that did not recapitulate, but instead signified on and critiqued, the two dominant nineteenth century popular forms:

⁹⁶ Helen Lock, "Building Up from Fragments," 299.

⁹⁷ Charles Chesnutt, *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line*, ed. William Andrews (New York: Penguin Books), 65.

minstrelsy and plantation tradition literature. The aesthetic Cooper articulated is given creative and forceful expression, as writers from Lloyd Brown to Toni Morrison, from Toni Cade Bambara to Ernest Gaines, continually call on black folk tradition and memory as powerful sources for the creation of a history and a past on which to build a more just future. But perhaps no work more fully responded to Cooper's call than that of her contemporary, Charles Chesnutt. In the next chapter I turn to Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, showing how this text functions as an example of the black folk aesthetic Cooper had articulated.

⁹⁸ Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 179.

Chapter Three: Conjure Justice: Charles Chesnutt and the Stolen Voice

Chesnutt's decision to employ folklore, specifically conjure, as the basis for his 1899 collection of short stories, *The Conjure Woman*, took place within a politically, socially and culturally charged context; one that saw questions of racial identity and equality converge around representations of black cultural traditions. Chesnutt engaged this debate on its own terms when he enlisted black folklore as a medium through which to reveal and ideally, transform, his audience's ingrained perceptions about American racial relations. In the first section of this chapter, I explore how conjure granted Chesnutt access to the reading public through a form of folklore not as popular as the Negro folksong, nor as ubiquitous as the folktale, and whose contours had not yet been mined for new and mysterious folkloric elements. If gaining a popular audience were Chesnutt's only objective, one could, like William Andrews, argue that Chesnutt employed conjure simply to authenticate the folktales told by Uncle Julius. An examination of Chesnutt's non-fiction essays, however, reveals that Chesnutt was well-aware of how black folklore was being exploited to support racial stereotypes. Thus, I demonstrate that his decision to employ the black folk form of conjuration as a powerful mode of affecting change responded directly to the important role that the images of black folk and the rhetoric of folklore were playing in the public debates over equality and racial identity. By consciously choosing to represent black folklore, Chesnutt not only entered into debate with the dominant establishment, but also placed his literary work firmly within the larger movement by African Americans to reclaim representation of black folklore as crucial to a program of social change.

In the second section of the chapter, I argue that Chesnut's use of folklore was part of a larger project in which black intellectuals and scholars such as Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and William Scarborough debated the role of black folklore in crafting an African American literary tradition. I situate Chesnut's writing in relation to the goals of certain segments of the black intellectual community that wanted to see black folklore serve as a basis for African American literature. These black scholars hoped that the efforts of the black folklorists, specifically those working at the Hampton Institute, would provide alternative access to black folk culture and thereby help foster a literary tradition freed from the confining representations of black folklore prevalent in nineteenth century popular culture.

In the third and final section of the chapter I analyze how *The Conjure Woman* provides an important example of an early text that consciously and artfully combined standard literary conventions with the content, themes, tropes and strategies associated with black folk tradition. Significantly, even Chesnut's ingenious use of conjure as a literary device remains fundamentally at the service of his primary objective—to bring to light the truth about American's racial past and to alter his audience's perceptions of the present racial situation. In sum, Chesnut skillfully evokes folklore in his fiction as a way to participate in, and even redirect, post-Reconstruction conversations about race, color, equality and justice. Because of its richness and complexity, *The Conjure Woman* has elicited much productive critical attention. Yet there have been no sustained examinations of Chesnut in relation to the larger movement within the African American intellectual community to create an African American literary tradition rooted in black folk culture, even though Chesnut's work is one of the earliest expressions of this

movement. This chapter is an effort to introduce a corrective to Chesnutt studies so that the author's prevalent use of folklore within his fiction can be better understood in relation to the various institutional pressures and interests that mediated representations of black folklore at the end of the nineteenth century.

Since the earliest reviews, responses to *The Conjure Woman* have been varied. Many of Chesnutt's contemporary reviewers lauded his fidelity to what they assert is "reality," while others condemned him for creating a portrait of a time (slavery) and a place (the South) which they felt he did not have authority to depict. In one particularly scathing review from the *Richmond Times*, the reviewer contends, "it would scarcely seem that Mr. Chesnutt could be a competent judge or critic [of slavery's effects on black], he never having lived South until the period of Reconstruction...He can safely leave the South and her institutions...to less biased and more familiar pens than his own, while he might do well in using some of his legal talents to redress the legislative wrongs and blots of the Reconstruction Period." This review, rather than speaking to the merits or flaws of *The Conjure Woman*, toes the socio-political line of the plantation tradition, alleging that the problems of the South are best left to be addressed by the South, and adding for good measure a common dig at the brief tenure of black politicians during Reconstruction. At the other end of the spectrum, a piece in the *San Francisco Chronicle* celebrates Chesnutt as a "new Southern writer" who "touches the Southern negro without exaggeration." Still other reviewers sidestepped the question of race relations and slavery altogether, considering instead the folkloric value of the collection. "It is more interesting and instructive," insists a writer for the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, "if we put aside all questions regarding slavery...and look upon the seven short tales united

under this attractive title as a contribution to the folklore of the country.” Still others attack Chesnutt’s literary skill, with one *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune* reviewer condemning Chesnutt’s collection as having “not a redeeming quality.”¹ While the *Cincinnati* review goes to the furthest extreme in lambasting Chesnutt’s literary talent, it was far more common for sympathetic reviewers simply to note that Chesnutt’s portrayals of Southern life and black folklore were in the tradition of, but inferior to, Harris’s Uncle Remus tales. Even ANA member William Scarborough missed the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman* was a critique, rather than a rendering, of the plantation tradition, interpreting Chesnutt’s use of the storytelling figure, dialect and black folklore as a redaction of plantation tradition conventions.² There was the occasional reviewer, however, who was able to discern the deeper meanings in the tales. The *Boston Transcript*, for example, observes that “a distinctly tragic tone, deepening in intensity, may be heard all through the calm recital of the old negro,” and concludes that Chesnutt’s “mastery over his subject” guards against excessive humor or pathos.³

Recent critics have been generally more attentive to the nuances of Chesnutt’s use of black folklore, paying particular attention to how Chesnutt adopts the characteristic of

¹ “Literature, Music, Art, and Social and Personal Notes,” *Richmond Times*, 9 (July 1899), 9; rpt. in Joseph McElrath, ed. *Critical Essays on Charles W. Chesnutt* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 42; “A New Author of Good Stories of Southern Negro Life,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 (January 1900), Sunday supplement, 4; rpt. in McElrath, *Critical Essays*, 47; “Literature,” *New York Commercial Advertiser*, 20 (June 1899), 5; rpt. in McElrath, *Critical Essays*, 43; Nathaniel Stephenson, “The Reviewer’s Table,” *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, 13 (May 1900), 32; rpt. in McElrath, *Critical Essays*, 55.

² William Scarborough, “The Negro in Fiction as Portrayed and Portrayed,” *Southern Workman* 28, no. 9 (September 1899): 358-362.

³ “Boston Evening Transcript,” 22 (March 1899), part 2, p. 10; rpt. in McElrath, *Critical Essays*, 30.

various forms of oral folklore as structural and thematic devices. Before turning to some of the more productive analyses, however, it is necessary to revisit one of the more problematic tendencies in Chesnutt criticism. As alluded to in my introduction, many critics adopt a linear approach to reading folklore in African American literature, assuming that early writers' representations were necessarily rudimentary and primarily ornamental, while folklore in the hands of later writers became an integral part of the narrative. William Andrews, for example, asserts, "the doctrine of conjuration didn't greatly concern Chesnutt; probably his main purpose vis-à-vis the conjure material was to endow Julius with enough knowledge of recondite folklore to make him an absorbing and believable African American character." Andrews further contends that Julius's recitation on conjure "simply heightened the verisimilitude of the old man and the tales he indulges in."⁴ Houston Baker, Trudier Harris, Gayl Jones and Marjorie Pryse all credit Chesnutt with establishing black folklore as subject matter for African American fiction, but they all also assert that it is not until later writers such as Hurston, Ellison and Morrison that black folklore actually becomes a sophisticated element in black fiction, integrated into the narrative and able to represent more accurately an "authentic" black folk consciousness.⁵ This sort of analysis results from a lack of attention to the deliberate and self-conscious ways Chesnutt intended for his text to interact with a larger discourse on black political rights and cultural representation. Robert Hemenway's 1976 essay,

⁴ William Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 46.

⁵ Houston Baker, *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 78-79; Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 3; Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, eds, *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*

“The Functions of Folklore in Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*” was among the first to offer a complex reading of the role of folklore in *The Conjure Woman*, examining how Chesnutt’s variation on traditional elements of folklore advance the plot and contribute to the meaning of the story. Later critics such as Sandra Molyneaux and Karen Beardslee, continue this line of criticism, considering how oral tradition—“dialoguing aiding-memory” and the folktale, respectively—negotiates relationships between the characters in the story and preserves an alternative version of the past. The most nuanced and encompassing reading of Chesnutt’s literary works, however, remains Eric Sundquist’s authoritative 1993 study, *To Wake the Nations*.⁶ This historically-grounded study of mid- to late-nineteenth-century fiction situates Chesnutt’s use of folklore both within the context of black folk culture and in relation to the larger national discourse on the “color line.” Whereas Sundquist puts Chesnutt’s work in conversation with literary texts by Twain, Harris and Cable, my project locates Chesnutt within the larger movement to recover and re-present black folk traditions on the part of black intellectual communities. Additionally, while much of the secondary criticism on *The Conjure Woman* focuses on recovering the important role of oral tradition, in this chapter I argue that black folk customs had undergone equal ridicule in popular culture and that Chesnutt was deeply

(Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1985), 11; and Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 1.

⁶ Robert Hemenway, “The Functions of Folklore in Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 13 (1976): 283. Sandra Molyneaux, “Expanding the Collective Memory: Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman Tales*,” in *Memory, Narrative and Identity*, eds. Amritjit Singh, Joseph Skerrett, and Robert E. Hogan (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994); Karen Beardslee, “Living to Tell, Telling to Live: The Oral Tradition and the Storyteller in Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*,” in *Literary Legacies, Folklore Foundations: Selfhood and Cultural Tradition in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001); Eric Sundquist, *To Wake The Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1993).

aware of the ways that depictions of black customs and behaviors had become an integral part of the debates over Jim Crow segregation. Thus, my work recognizes Chesnutt's relationship with the black intellectual community and his use of customary, as well as oral, forms of folklore as new and productive areas for expanding Chesnutt scholarship.

* * *

"Why Could Not A Colored Man...Write As Good A Book" –Chesnutt, 1880

When in the late 1880s, Chesnutt made the conscious, deliberate, and as yet, unaided decision to employ conjuration as the basis for his first three conjure stories, he had already identified himself as a purposeful writer.⁷ As expressed in his journal, Chesnutt hoped to secure a profitable niche among the reading public, while altering his audience's attitudes about race. Chesnutt's decision to draw on elements of black folklore in his fiction to reach a wider reading audience was not surprising, for even while the status of blacks had continued to deteriorate since the end of Reconstruction, public interest in black folklore had steadily increased. According to Bruce Jackson, "the interminable love affair between the American reading public and the image of the antebellum South was taking hold at just about the same time the Negro was demoted from freedman to serf. A chattel is not a fit subject for literature, but a serf, it seems, is."⁸

⁷ Chesnutt's editor, Walter Hines Page, suggested that Chesnutt compose more conjure tales like "The Goophered Grapevine," to be published as a collection of short stories. Within seven weeks Chesnutt returned to Page with six more conjure tales, four of which, "The Conjuror's Revenge," "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," and "Hot-Foot Hannibal" would join the earlier compositions, "The Goophered Grapevine," (1887) "Po' Sandy," (1889) and "Mars Jeem's Nightmare" (1889) to become *The Conjure Woman*. Two of the stories, "Tobe's Tribulations," and "A Victim of Heredity" were not accepted by the publisher and Chesnutt instead published them in *Southern Workman* and *Self Culture Magazine*, respectively.

⁸ Bruce Jackson, "Introduction." *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), xxiii.

Accordingly, writers such as a Joel Chandler Harris, Albion Tourgee and George Washington Cable, the first a member of the American Folklore Society and the latter a member of the Chicago Folklore Society, capitalized on the newly discovered storehouse of folklore materials to craft literature that would satisfy public interest and earn the authors popular acclaim. The success of these authors convinced Chesnutt that black folklore could provide the appropriate medium through which to reach a wider audience. Commenting on the success of *A Fool's Errand*, Chesnutt remarked that Tourgee's book is about the "manners, customs, modes of thought" of the South. Chesnutt further observed that "nearly all of [Tourgee's] stories are more or less about colored people, and this very feature is one source of their popularity." In an 1880 journal entry, Chesnutt thus posed his now famous question, "why could not a colored man...write a far better book about the South than Judge Tourgee or Mrs. Stowe has written?" As his early journal entries show, Chesnutt realized that there was a piqued public interest in folklore and that his position as "a colored man, who has lived among colored people all his life," placed him in an advantageous position to translate for mass consumption the folkways of Southern blacks.⁹

In addition to capitalizing on this valuable insider position as a way to distinguish his perspective from that of writers such as Tourgee, Chesnutt also sought to distinguish himself from Harris by claiming that whereas Harris focused on the more accessible animal lore and folktales, he took up the less accessible lore surrounding superstitions and conjuration. Chesnutt notes, for instance, that "Mr. Harris has, with fine literary discrimination, collected and put into pleasing form, the plantation stories which dealt

⁹ Helen Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: A Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 20.

with animal lore, but so little attention has been paid to those dealing with conjuration, they seem in fair way to disappear, without leaving a trace behind.”¹⁰ Chesnutt promoted his work not solely on the basis of his insider perspective, but also because his insider position gave him access to the customs and practices that were not as easily discernable by outside observers. He added urgency to his project by suggesting that the customs and practices that he seeks to collect are increasingly passing from usage, and if not preserved, may be lost from the record altogether.

While Chesnutt’s attention to conjure was certainly motivated by a desire to gain more advantageous positioning within the white Northern literary market, the exchanges between him and his editor show that Chesnutt was also under external pressure to maintain the conjure tale motif. Walter Hines Page, Chesnutt’s editor at Houghton, Mifflin and Company, unequivocally asserted that the public desire for black folklore, especially pre-bellum black folklore, was not yet satiated. And while Chesnutt had sworn off Uncle Julius and the dialect tale after writing only three of his conjure tales, explaining to Albion Tourgee, “I think I have about used up the old Negro who serves as mouthpiece [for the conjure stories], and I shall drop him in future stories, as well as much of the dialect,” Page had other ideas.¹¹ Page felt that Chesnutt’s conjure stories had

¹⁰ See Charles Chesnutt, “Superstition and Folklore of the South,” *Modern Culture* 13 (1901): 231-35; rpt. Alan Dundes, ed. *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 371. In a much later essay, “Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem,” (1930), Chesnutt notes, perhaps with tongue and cheek sarcasm, that while Harris’s tales are “avowedly folk tales,” Chesnutt’s stories are the fruits of his own imagination. Obviously contradicting his earlier claim that his own tales are rooted in childhood recollections of Southern black folk tradition, Chesnutt, in this later writing, may be implying that while the public had accepted Harris’s tales as “authentic,” Chesnutt, to the contrary, was willing to acknowledge the creative adaptation inherent in any literary representation of black folklore, while also recognizing that claims of “authenticity” were often used to manipulate the public fascination with representations of folklore that reinforced their expectations.

¹¹ Chesnutt qtd. in Andrews, “Introduction,” *Conjure Tales*, x.

the potential for commercial success and urged Chesnutt to produce more stories which maintained the conjure element. Chesnutt complied with Page's injunction, but he did not simply reinforce the stereotypical images of the black folk that were being circulated in the popular press and on the stage. As several of Chesnutt's non-fiction essays, such as "What is a White Man?," "The Disfranchisement of the Negro," and "The Courts and the Negro" attest, Chesnutt possessed a deep awareness of how the rhetoric of folklore and the distortion of black folk customs were being co-opted to support segregationists' agendas.

Chesnutt's investment in making visible customs and traditions as they exist across color lines is documented in his many indictments of the folkways and "stateways" that governed race relations. In "What is a White Man?," for example, Chesnutt exposes how legal process and folk practice are employed in attempts to fix racial identity, pointing out that the South Carolina Supreme Court determined that *juries* would decide a person's racial identity. The court stated that "the question whether persons are colored or white, where color or feature are doubtful, is for the jury to decide by reputation, by reception into society, and by their exercise of the privileges of the white man, as well as by admixture of blood." Chesnutt duly notes, however, that when it comes to the question of interracial marriage, the division between the races takes on a more urgent, even hysterical, tone. In Georgia, for example, not unlike Mississippi, Maryland and Virginia, "the marriage relations between white persons and persons of African decent is forever prohibited, and such marriages shall be null and void."¹² Chesnutt assures the reader that courts so inclined could easily extend this provision to

¹² Chesnutt, "What is a White Man?" in *Charles Chesnutt: Stories, Novels and Essays*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Library of America), 840, 842-43.

even the least evidence of African blood; therefore, whereas one might be considered white if one possessed a majority of white blood in terms of civil rights, one was assuredly black if he or she possessed *any* black blood when concerning questions of marriage.

Denouncing the disfranchisement of blacks at the close of the nineteenth century, Chesnutt recognized that the racist law makers, denying blacks civil and social rights during the nadir, sought immunity from public scrutiny on the basis that they were merely conforming to established folk traditions and group practices. He asserts, for example, that black “disfranchisement is accomplished by various methods, devised with much transparent ingenuity, the effort being in each instance to violate the spirit of the Federal Constitution by disfranchising the Negro, while seeming to respect its letter by avoiding the mention of race or color.” Elsewhere, Chesnutt states that “the most important and far-reaching decision of the Supreme Court upon the question of civil rights is that in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.”¹³ As I have discussed in chapter one, the Supreme Court upheld segregation of public conveyances by asserting that the Federal Government was merely making legal a distinction between the races which already existed due to “the nature of things,” and that the Constitution could not be expected to ensure equality between the races “if one race be inferior to the other socially.” Chesnutt observes that when the assertion of legal distinctions based on race was challenged, the Courts deferred to the established “usages, customs and traditions of the people,” stating that the *Plessy* case was decided “with a view to the promotion of their comfort and the

¹³ Chesnutt, “The Disfranchisement of the Negro” in *Charles Chesnutt*, ed. Werner Sollors, 870; Chesnutt, “The Courts and the Negro” in *Charles Chesnutt*, ed. Werner Sollors, 901.

preservation of public peace and good order.”¹⁴ Racial identity, it appeared, was no more than firmly asserted social belief, and the laws determining racial distinction were duly intended to follow the racial customs of the day. While Chesnutt was committed to revealing the Court’s actions regarding racial segregation as customary in their own respect—merely well-supported superstitions—it had become equally apparent that the Courts remained unwilling to secure for blacks the full citizenship and just treatment granted in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments. Thus, the justice blacks sought would have to come from somewhere else.

* * *

*Chesnutt and the Hampton Folklore Society: “Seeking After Truth in Whatever Guise”*¹⁵

By the 1890s, black folklore had become too over-determined in the social, political and cultural spheres for African American writers to draw on it uncritically. If Chesnutt planned to employ black folklore in his fiction as a way to challenge racial injustice and alter his audience’s views about race relation during the nadir, clearly he would have to draw on a folkloric source that did not originate from within this racist discourse. Just as Cable, Harris, Page and Tourgee had translated into the literary realm the growing interest in black folklore, Chesnutt too was part of a wider movement among African Americans that saw growing interest by blacks in the preservation of their own traditions.¹⁶

¹⁴ Chesnutt, “The Courts” in *Charles Chesnutt*, ed. Werner Sollors, 902.

¹⁵ Chesnutt qtd. H. Chesnutt, *Pioneer*, 114.

¹⁶ According to Bruce Jackson, “With the last decade of the [19th] century we move into modern times. The Negro discovers the value of his folklore himself and, as the ‘Folk-lore and Ethnology’ series [produced by the Hampton Folklore Society] in *Southern Workman* indicates, begins to take seriously his own cultural heritage.” See Jackson, *Negro and His Folklore*, xxiii.

Since 1878, Chesnutt's contemporaries at the Hampton Institute had been publishing black folk materials in *Southern Workman*. These early materials centered on conjure practices and, like Chesnutt's 1901 essay, "Superstition and Folklore of the South," they establish the prevalence of conjure practices in the everyday lives of Southern blacks. Ironically, these early Hampton materials, under the direction of Samuel Armstrong, were intended to identify pockets of folklore that persisted in the face of education and civilization. The prevalence of conjure doctors constituted a particular affront to the civilizing efforts of Armstrong's Northern missionaries. In later years, however, the Hampton Folklore Society greatly expanded the scope of black folk materials collected and enlisted much more diverse approaches and orientations in gathering their materials. In the context of these later collections, black folklore ceased to be grist for the minstrel stage or material for plantation literature; instead black folklore, and particularly black folk customs, was considered vital to the preservation and documentation of black culture. Many black leaders took a vested interest in the work of the Hampton Folklore Society and in the role that black folklore could play in supporting their various agendas. Situating Chesnutt's work in relation to the work of the black folklorists at Hampton suggests an alternative approach to black folklore, one that not only focuses attention on the important and varied roles of conjuration in black folk tradition but also is equally attentive to the many challenges of representing black folklore in an atmosphere fraught with racial stereotypes of African Americans.

Like many members of the Hampton Folklore Society, Chesnutt spent years teaching at remote county schools in the South. At age 15, he curtailed his own schooling and began teaching to supplement his family's income. In 1877, Chesnutt was

appointed first assistant and teacher of the State Normal School in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Two years later he journeyed to Washington, DC in search of more challenging and profitable work. Disappointed that he was unable to secure a job as a stenographer, a field in which he had been self-training for the previous three years, Chesnutt returned south and accepted a post as principal of the Normal School. Because teaching jobs were one of the few vocations available to educated blacks, Chesnutt's career path at this point was quite traditional. In many ways, his experiences mirror those of his contemporaries at Hampton, as well as scores of other educated blacks working to "uplift" the less fortunate of the race. According to Donald Waters, "After the Civil War, nothing more symbolized the hopes of freedmen for a new life in the United States than their desire to read and write. They presumed that if they were educated to literacy, they could share in the promise of American civilization."¹⁷ While Chesnutt and the folklorists at Hampton initially may have been motivated by this impulse to educate and uplift, both gradually realized that their positions as teachers among rural black Southerners put them in a unique position to collect what was recognized, either immediately or retrospectively, as black folklore. As Robert Moton describes in his autobiography, however, before he could seriously attend to the collection and study of black folklore, he had to first recognize and then overcome the images of the black folk in the popular media that had led him to despise his own traditions. Moton explains, "this meant a readjustment of values that was not particularly easy for a raw country lad." Through various incidents in his autobiography, Moton narrates the process through which this "readjustment of

¹⁷ Donald Waters, *Strange Ways and Sweet Dreams: Afro-American Folklore From the Hampton Institute* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1983), 41.

values” took place.¹⁸ Moton’s participation in the Hampton Folklore Society, for example, offered him an opportunity to consider sympathetically black folk traditions as part of a larger group devoted to the collection and preservation of black folklore. Additionally, in many of the meetings between the AFS and the HFS, Moton acted as an ambassador of black folk culture, performing and providing commentary on various black folk traditions.

Chesnutt’s journal entries from 1870 – 1888 show a similar shift in his relationship to black folklore. In his early 1870 entries, Chesnutt is outraged at the persistence of superstitious beliefs and practices among the rural blacks in Fayetteville and Charlotte, North Carolina:

Well! Uneducated people are the most bigoted, superstitious, hard-headed people in the world! These folks down stairs believe in ghosts, luck, horse shoes, witches, and all other kinds of non-sense, and all the argument in the world couldn’t get it out of them.¹⁹

Later, in a journal entry dated March 16th, 1880, when Chesnutt considers the critical acclaim and popular success of Albion Tourgee’s *A Fool’s Errand*, he begins to realize that there is something valid and instructive about black folklore, and that his own position among, yet apart from, the black folk gives him a valuable insight and authority

¹⁸Moton describes the weekly religious meetings as a place where traditions and customs were instilled. He also singles out one particular year as a work-student at Hampton, which he describes as an “initiation into an entirely new life, new surroundings, new people, different races, new standards, new ideas and ideals.” Moton explains, “I assimilated, perhaps unconsciously, many of these ideals. While I learned many valuable lessons from books during this first year, they were insignificant compared with the indescribable something which I gathered outside of books, very real at Hampton, and very real to me, too, which I cannot accurately describe in writing, but which was nevertheless very pronounced and very definite.” See Robert Moton, *Finding a Way Out*, (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1920), 62, 70.

to represent black folk culture. By 1899, Chesnutt embraces the literary value of black folklore, utilizing conjuration practices as the basis of *The Conjure Woman*. By 1901, in “Superstition,” Chesnutt constructs himself as a participant-observer-folklorist touring the South, interviewing Southern blacks about their folk customs, documenting the traditions and providing informed commentary for his *Modern Culture* audience.

In the experiences of both Chesnutt and Moton, their education created a rift between them and the communities in which they taught. Their formal education, along with the portrayals of black folklore in the minstrel tradition and plantation literature, had caused both men to regard black folk traditions with distanced humiliation and disgust. For Chesnutt, there was also the keen awareness that these caricatures of the black folk as degenerate and primitive buttressed segregationists’ claims that blacks were inherently inferior to whites. Both men, however, were encouraged by the interest expressed on the part of certain dominant white cultural institutions to reconsider the value of black folk traditions. For Moton, that attention came from the American Folklore Society and arrived in the form of support for, as well as a vested interest in, “Negro” folklore. Chesnutt was inspired by the sympathetic and profitable portrayals of black folklore that characterized the works of Harris, Tourgee, etc. The interest expressed by these white academic and intellectual institutions provided a viable space for the serious consideration and treatment of black folklore. Nevertheless, what has been overlooked in both the scholarship of folklore studies and African American literary histories is the relationship between the work of these early African American folklorists and the early representations of black folklore in literature. Neither Chesnutt nor the Hampton

¹⁹ H. Chesnutt, *Pioneer*, 14-15

folklorists can be understood solely in relation to the dominant white institutions. Instead they must be understood in relation to black cultural institutions and also to each other.

On a very tangible level, the Hampton Folklore Society provided wider access to Southern black folklore that was previously undocumented and unpublished. The materials collected by the Hampton folklorists represent the first organized effort by a group of predominately black folklorists to collect and document black folklore. Selected materials collected by society members were often reprinted by the American Folklore Society in the *Journal of American Folklore*, and thus made available to a wide audience of intellectuals. Chesnutt would have had access to the full range of Hampton materials through their primary publication outlet, *Southern Workman*. In fact, Chesnutt was publishing in the same journal in which the Hampton Folklore Society regularly published its folkloric collections, member papers and Society proceedings from 1893-1905; “Lonesome Ben” (1900), “The Partners” (1901), “The Free Colored People of North Carolina” (1902) and the conjure tale, “Tobe’s Tribulations” (1900) were all published in *Southern Workman*.²⁰ Additionally, *Southern Workman* also published an 1899 review of Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*. Chesnutt’s letters and journal entries indicate that he paid copious attention to the sources that published and reviewed his writings.²¹ In various letters to his daughters, for example, he directs their attention to reviews of *The Conjure Woman*; in one journal entry he notes, “one of my stories,

²⁰ Although records indicate that the Hampton Folklore Society was defunct after 1900, *Southern Workman* published an additional six folklore submissions between 1902 and 1905.

²¹ Chesnutt was so attentive to the sources in which his works were published that he once uncovered a short story that he suspected was a plagiarized version of his story, “How Dadsy Came Through.” In a letter to his editor, he discloses the evidence to support his claim, including details from the stories, publication dates, journal styles, etc. See H. Chesnutt, *Pioneer*, 54.

‘Tobe’s Tribulations,’ a bullfrog conjure story came out in *Southern Workman* this last week”²²

In addition to Chesnutt’s exposure to the work of the Hampton Folklore Society, the members of the HFS were also clearly aware of Chesnutt’s work. For example, in the *Southern Workman* review of *The Conjure Woman*, the reviewer(s) expound on Chesnutt’s use of conjure, analyzing his tales in folkloric terms. They make special note of the differences and similarities between Chesnutt’s representations of folklore in his tales and their own findings based on their fieldwork.²³ They credit Chesnutt for “taking up the contemporary new line of the conjuration superstitions of the Negroes,” but the reviewers are also quick to point out areas where they find that Chesnutt has taken considerable literary license, stating, “it seems to us as if at times he had embodied in his stories, not simply the conjuring powers ordinarily attributed by the Negroes to their local practitioners, but many of the magical tricks that belong rather to the witches and wizards of European and Asiatic folklore.” They explain that “from our own study of the matter we have been led to think that the distinctly Negro belief in the power of the ‘conjure woman’ did not include the transformation of her victims at will into trees, beasts, birds, etc., but was confined mainly to the power of working evil through sickness, or ordinary bad luck of one kind or another...How far this enlargement of the ‘conjure woman’s’ powers is the use of literary license on Mr. Chesnutt’s part, and how far it is his superior knowledge of Negro folk-lore, we would be very glad to know.”²⁴ In legitimately

²² Ibid., 111, 155.

²³ Although the review is unsigned, the folklore-specific content and collective narrative voice suggest that the article was written as the Hampton Folklore Society’s response to *The Conjure Woman*.

questioning Chesnutt's use of folklore in his tales, the reviewers remind the readers of an important point: Chesnutt's conjure tales did not constitute a collection of folklore, nor were they a compilation of folk tales. Chesnutt drew on a variety of folklore sources in crafting *The Conjure Woman*. He incorporated disparate folklore elements from the British wondertale tradition to African magic, and he adorned his conjure tales with elements created from sheer imagination. The fact that Chesnutt was submitting work and being reviewed in the one journal devoted to publishing black folklore as collected by black folklorists does, however, establish *Southern Workman* as a common ground where blacks interested in the preservation of their own traditions met and interacted. Not incidentally, members of both the Hampton Folklore Society and the American Negro Academy (ANA) were attentive to the ways that Chesnutt's literary efforts supported or detracted from their organizations' goals.

For the ANA, Chesnutt provided evidence of African American achievement in literature. He had copious publications and his works often agitated for racial justice and equality. At the urgings of Du Bois, ANA founder Alexander Crummell reluctantly invited Chesnutt to join the Academy. When the offer was finally extended, Chesnutt graciously declined. Ostensibly, Chesnutt's lack of formal education motivated Crummell's reluctance, and Chesnutt stated that he could not accept because he had not achieved literary merit to warrant the ANA's invitation. More likely, Chesnutt and the ANA had different ideas about how black cultural traditions should contribute to African American literature. The ANA felt that black folk tradition and the literature that incorporated such traditions advanced its goals of creating and demonstrating a distinctive African American civilization. As Chesnutt's biographer, Frances Keller has

²⁴ "Review," *Southern Workman* 28, no. 5 (May 1899): 194-95.

stated, Chesnutt's belief that racial distinctions would eventually be submerged in the face of amalgamation put him at odds with the ANA position.²⁵ More specifically, ANA member William Scarborough alleged that neither Dunbar nor Chesnutt was able to move their representations of black folklore beyond the confines of the plantation tradition. Scarborough's position represents the New Negro tendency to view representations of black folklore and dialect as a bow to the convention of plantation tradition and a compromise of literary merit for popular appeal. What Scarborough's critique and Crummell's resistance make clear is that members of the ANA had a specific vision of what kinds of folklore warranted literary treatment and what the nature of that treatment ought to be. They favored works that did not reproduce folk images they found to be degrading or embarrassing, even if the authors were reproducing those images in order to critique them. Ironically, Hampton folklorist Robert Moton urged Institute president Hollis Frissell to bring Chesnutt and Dunbar, to campus to counter attacks, coming primarily from ANA members, that Hampton did not support the intellectual aspirations or academic advancement of its students.

The Hampton Folklore Society and the ANA were not the only groups that showed an interest in how Chesnutt's support could bolster their organization's agendas. Both Booker T. Washington and Du Bois sought Chesnutt's endorsement in advocating for their disparate solutions to the deteriorating racial conditions at the end of the nineteenth century. While Chesnutt maintained life-long communications with both men, he felt that their attention to economic and/or educational routes to full citizenship was fundamentally misdirected. For example, in expressing his opinion on the classic

²⁵ Frances Richardson Keller, *An American Crusade* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young UP, 1978), 256.

Washingtonian-Du Boisian debate over whether industrial or higher education would do most to help black secure their legal rights and political freedom, Chesnutt undercut the entire premise of the argument, asserting in a 1903 letter to Washington that “neither sort of education has anything directly to do with the civil and political rights of the Negro—these [rights] would be just as vital and fundamental if there were not a single school of any kind in the southern states.”²⁶ For Chesnutt, securing constitutional rights regardless of color, class, or educational level was paramount. Since the rights granted in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments had not been protected, Chesnutt exhorted that it was the duty of “colored people...to seek these rights in whatever forum touches them,” and to inspire “among white people a sense of justice, humanity and of fair play” so that they might willingly concede these rights.

In articulating his divergence from the platforms of both Du Bois and Washington, Chesnutt comes much closer to the position Cooper had articulated. Both Chesnutt and Cooper held that the racial situation at the end of the nineteenth century mocked American ideals about justice, civilization and moral progress. They both continually critiqued the racialized discourse that extolled civilization and equated it with whiteness. In fact Cooper, like Chesnutt, argued that the treatment of the Negro stood as a foil to the nation’s professed ideas about liberty, justice and equality. While both felt that the need for change rested squarely on the shoulders of white society, they also asserted that the greatest responsibility of the Negro artist was to critique the gap between society’s professions and its practices and to inspire a sense of justice that would induce Americans to live up to their own ideas. Cooper, in “The Negro as Presented in Literature,” called for a black artist who could not only “honestly and appreciatively

²⁶ Ibid., 250.

portray” the black man, but who could also represent the white man as seen from the black man perspective. Cooper felt that to affect a change in race relations it was not only necessary to present the inner life and humanity of African Americans, but also to make apparent the custom and beliefs that structured the white man’s perceptions of the world. In this respect, Cooper’s and Chesnutt’s strategies inform each other in important ways. Rather than proceed with a direct onslaught of numbers and statistics that testified to the horrible conditions for blacks, as was Ida B. Wells’s strategy for example, both Cooper and Chesnutt sought to work within the dominant discourse, affecting a change in white society’s perceptions of blacks and redefining the terms of the debates over racial equality. Reading Chesnutt’s literary works in relation to Cooper’s various aesthetic and political statements has helped me recognize the ways Chesnutt utilized folklore to challenge prevailing stereotypes, present a more sympathetic portrayal of African Americans—who generally had not been very well-represented in the dominant culture—and to refocus attention on the “folklore” of white society that sustained the system of racial inequality.

* * *

Charles Chesnutt’s Conjure: “What the Negro needs more than anything else is a medium through which he can present his case to thinking white people”²⁷

Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman* responds to Cooper’s aesthetic by first dramatizing the way folklore, memory and imagination interact to tell a story that challenges the dominant narrative. In my readings of *The Conjure Woman*’s seven short stories, for example, I show how Julius’s “recollections” are a combination of folk tale and imagination meant to effect a change in—or conjure—his audience. Chesnutt not

only wanted to recover an alternate version of the past, but he also sought to expose the ways folklore operated in post-Reconstruction racialized discourse, specifically taking aim at the racial constructs that emerged out of the minstrel and plantation traditions. In “Mars Jeem’s Nightmare,” for example, Chesnutt’s skillful manipulation of the terms of this discourse respond to another of Cooper’s tenets by providing an increasingly critical perspective on a white Northerner’s investment in the minstrel and plantation stereotypes of black “folk” and black culture. Finally, Chesnutt validates, but does not valorize, the power of black folk traditions both within the context of Julius’s tales and as a larger narrative strategy.

In “Superstition and Folk-lore of the South,” one of the earliest essays by a black writer on conjure practices, Chesnutt relates an encounter with Uncle Jim Davis, a “professional conjure doctor,” whom Chesnutt visits in hopes of obtaining a charm to bring good luck and to keep him from losing his job. As a professional man of letters who availed himself of all plausible avenues to achieve financial success, Chesnutt, in this tongue-in-cheek example, accepts the aid of the conjure doctor to exert a level of “supernatural” control over the circumstances that dictated his job security—circumstances that were too often over-determined by external forces. After relating this transaction, Chesnutt immediately turns to a conjure story told to him by the conjure doctor that involves “the fate of a lost voice.”²⁸ In the tale of “the stolen voice,” the conjure doctor takes on increasing significance as the traditional, but limited arbiter of social justice. In the story, a woman’s voice is so beautiful that it lures away another

²⁷ Ibid., 249.

²⁸ Chesnutt, “Superstition and Folklore of the South,” rpt. Dundes, ed. *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, 375.

woman's man. In response to this rebuff, the "jilted woman," through proxy, manages to "steal" the first woman's voice. The woman whose voice is stolen appeals to the conjure doctor for justice. The doctor intercedes and identifies the "guilty person," but he is unable to restore the stolen voice to its rightful owner. In unmistakable legalese, Chesnutt relates that the conjure doctor sought out the woman who had stole the voice and "charged her with the crime which she promptly denied." Chesnutt further explains that after "being pressed," the woman "admitted her guilt," at which time the doctor "insisted upon immediate restitution." As the story of the stolen voice continues, Chesnutt reveals that the conjure doctor, unfortunately, wields only limited powers. When the doctor insists that the voice be returned to its rightful owner, the woman who stole the voice "expressed her willingness, and at the same time her inability to comply—*she had taken the voice but did not possess the power to restore it.*"²⁹

Throughout the essay, Chesnutt validates his position as a purveyor of black folk culture by establishing that his representations of black folklore are products of his personal experiences and recollections. Chesnutt's personal interactions with the conjure doctor who shares the story with him shifts Chesnutt's position from outside observer to inside participant. This is in contrast to Harris and Cable, for example, who claim to represent black folk life, but who do not necessarily have that insider perspective. While the black folk voice may have been appropriated by Harris, Cable, Tourgee and Page, or worse yet, by blackface minstrels, it would be unreasonable to expect that any of these entities would be able to "restore" voice to the black folk. Chesnutt, by constructing himself as "insider," establishes himself as a conduit for representing or "giving voice" to the black folk.

²⁹ Ibid., 376, italics added.

In “Charles Chesnutt and the WPA Narratives,” John Edgar Wideman argues that from the colonial period through the late nineteenth century the black voice in American literature was characterized by its comic quality and childlike content. He further contends, “negro dialect...was a way of pointing to difference...[and] *difference* in the dialect tradition clearly signaled deficiency.” Wideman asserts that Chesnutt chose not to avoid “incriminating dialect,” but rather he became a “major innovator” of another strategy: the framed narrative. Wideman explains that this tale within a tale approach allows Chesnutt to blend “literary and oral traditions without implying that the black storyteller’s mode of perceiving and recreating reality is any less valid than the written word...Chesnutt’s frame displays the written and spoken word on equal terms or at least as legitimate contenders for the reader’s sympathy.”³⁰ Sandra Molyneaux, in her reading of Chesnutt's conjure tales, also argues that dialect speaking caricatures have “stolen” the African American voice. Like Wideman, Molyneaux focuses on how Chesnutt's use of oral tradition recovers the African American voice by restoring dignity and purpose to black oral traditions and by revealing how orally-transmitted traditions kept history alive and promoted social cohesion.³¹ While both Wideman and Molyneaux focus their readings on Chesnutt’s use of black oral tradition, the role of conjure is of equal consequence. As the “stolen voice” tale reveals, the conjure doctor serves as an important intermediary between the one whose voice is stolen and the one who has stolen the voice.

³⁰ John Edgar Wideman, “Charles Chesnutt and the WPA Narratives: The Oral and Literate Roots of Afro-American Literature,” in *The Slave’s Narrative*, eds. Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 60.

³¹ Molyneaux, “Expanding the Collective Memory,” 166.

In his five volume collection on hoodoo, voodoo and conjure, Harry Hyatt states, “To catch a spirit, or to protect your spirit against the catching, or to release your caught spirit—this is the complete theory and practice of hoodoo.”³² If the black voice was what needed to be freed from dominant cultural representations, then conjure was the vehicle through which Chesnutt sought to liberate it. Documented repeatedly throughout the Hampton collection, the highly symbolic rituals of conjuration offered rural blacks, and occasionally whites, a way to influence aspects of their daily lives which otherwise seemed beyond rational control.³³ The conjurer doctor was one skilled at reading the traditional signs, and as he presided over the conjure rituals, his or her power to affect change was mirrored in his manipulation of symbolic icons. She or he was a master of verbal and non-verbal persuasion; by influencing a person's beliefs, he or she could influence an individual's health, behavior or general well-being. The methods of the conjure doctor varied from place to place, sometimes requiring the mixture of a potion, other times the ceremonial burying or digging up of bottles or roots. But more significant than any formula or incantation was the degree to which the parties involved were willing to place their faith in the power of the conjure doctor: “Never mind what you mix...it will be powerful or feeble in proportion to the dauntless spirit infused by you, the priest or priestess.”³⁴ In one instance a patient reports seeking the assistance of a conjure doctor in

³² Harry M. Hyatt, *Hoodoo, Conjuraton, Witchcraft, Rootwork: Beliefs Accepted by Many Negroes and Whites Persons These Being Orally Recoded among Black and Whites*, 5 volumes (Washington D.C.: Distributed by the American University Bookstores, 1970), epigraph to vol. 1.

³³ See, for example, "Conjure Doctors in the South," *Southern Workman* 7, no. 4 (April 1878): 30-1; "About the Conjuring Doctors," *Southern Workman* 7, no. 5 (May 1878): 38-9; "Conjuring and Conjure-Doctors," *Southern Workman* 24 no. 7 (July 1895): 117-18; "Some Conjure Doctors We Have Heard Of," *Southern Workman* 26, no. 2 (February 1897): 37-38.

finding a cause and remedy for her chills. After paying for the doctor's services, the conjurer prepares a "walking boy," or a bottle in which the doctor surreptitiously places a living creature so that it will roll around on the floor, thereby directing the conjurer to the source of the chills. The patient explains that she knows the doctor has animated the bottle and that the ceremony is done to impress her, but she states, "as I had good faith in the 'doctor,' the chills vanished."³⁵ As this example from the Hampton collection shows, conjure required a willingness to suspend disbelief and to accept the conjure ritual as constitutive of a symbolic, rather than mimetic approach to reality. For Chesnutt, conjure was an ideally-suited medium through which to carry out his project of altering his audience's perceptions about race, while inspiring a sense of fairness and justice among his readers. Conjure, as shown through the evolving relationship between Julius and Annie, allows Chesnutt to present an alternative reality apprehended through an alternative epistemology. In the following analyses of the seven short stories that comprise *The Conjure Woman*, I consider how folklore operates both within the context of the individual stories, and also how the text, as a whole, works together to form a conjure ritual that induces in the audience the kind of transformations inherent in the art of conjure. Thus Chesnutt moves beyond simply critiquing the contemporary conventions governing the representation of black folklore, and instead he engages in narrative experimentation, creating a conjure aesthetic through which to explore how he might persuade his audience to understand and respond to the US racial situation differently.

³⁴ Marry Owen, *Among the Voodoos* (1881) qtd in Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 189.

In *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt creates a framed narrative in which the first narrator, John, a Northern businessman, recounts observations gathered during his foray into Southern land speculation. During their sojourn in North Carolina, John and his wife, Annie, encounter Uncle Julius, who, in each of the seven short stories, assumes the role of narrator to tell a conjure tale describing plantation life during slavery. The narrative frame, however, reveals that John's view of the South is colored by the plantation tradition and by his own privileged position as outside observer. This is the challenge Uncle Julius McAdoo faces. Prior to recounting the first of his seven conjure tales, Julius acknowledges that he does not expect Annie and John to believe his stories, explaining, "I would n' spec' fer you ter b'lieve me 'less you know all 'bout de fac's." Like Janie explains to her friend Pheoby in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "'tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it," Julius, too realizes that he needs to provide a context for his audience before he can expect them to comprehend the meaning of his story.³⁶ Julius, however, is not just telling a story and he is no ordinary storyteller. His story is not meant merely to entertain, but also to challenge and transform the ideas and beliefs of his audience. In a conscious layering of symbols, Julius begins his conjure initiation of John and Annie with a tale about conjure's profound power to affect individual, communal and social well-being. Julius knows the power of this ritual lies, in part, in his ability to give a convincing performance.³⁷ Therefore, Julius does not just tell the story, but instead seemed to be

³⁵ "Chills Cured," *Southern Workman* 28 no. 8 (August 1899): 314-15.

³⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937, rpt. New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1990), 7.

“living over again in monologue his life on the old plantation.” As Julius is taken back to the old days, he begins his tale by reaffirming popular constructions of the black folk, stating “ef dey’s an’thing a nigger lub, nex’ ter ‘possum, en chick’n en watermillyums, it’s scuppernon’s.” This early description echoes the images of blacks prevalent on the minstrel stage. Julius uses these images to capture his audience’s attention, and by first confirming their expectations, he lowers their resistance to the rest of his story.

The first story, “The Goophered Grapevine,” is one of the most frequently analyzed and anthologized of all Chesnutt’s short fiction. Chesnutt states that the origin of the story was a folk tale he had heard from his father-in-law’s gardener; and in 1895 the Hampton Folklore Society documented a folk belief that tied a man’s physical attributes to the power of a grapevine.³⁸ In the tale, Julius tells of Mars Dugal, a plantation owner who commissions Aunt Peggy, a free black conjure woman living on the edge of town, to “goopher,” or conjure, his grapevines so that any slave who eats from them would be dead within a month. The goopher is successful, and Mars Dugal turns a considerable profit for that year. Julius relates, however, that Mars Dugal found it quite amusing that he paid Aunt Peggy only ten dollars for her services and yet was able to produce fifteen gallons of wine. Julius explains that Mars Dugal was heard “laffin’ wid de oberseah fit ter kill,” saying that he had made “a monst’us good intrus’ on de ten

³⁷ In *Re-Situating Folklore*, Frank de Caro and Rosan Jordan explain how folklore involves and models a dynamic narrative strategy: “because there is a ‘teller’/performer and an actively participating ‘audience,’ folkloric communication involves an element of performance and a degree of direct feedback influencing the performance in process...it continually evolves in response to its performance context [and] those ‘items’ performed commonly undergo change in the course of being transmitted.” See Frank de Caro and Rosan Augusta Jordan, *Re-Situating Folklore: Folk Contexts and Twentieth-Century Literature and Art* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 2.

dollars he laid out on de vimya'd." Perhaps as a result of his insolent greed, and certainly a commentary on the exploitation of Aunt Peggy's services, after this episode, Mars Dugal's fortunes begin to change. When Henry, a new field hand, unwittingly eats from the goophered grapevines, Mars Dugal, not wanting to lose his new slave, takes Henry to see Aunt Peggy. Peggy provides Henry with a conjure potion that saves his life but that has the additional side effect of tying Henry's physical well-being to the state of the grapevine. In the spring, as the vines emerge and ripen, Henry's hair grows into large bunches on top of his head, and he grows strong and vibrant. As the vines begin to wither and die at the end of the season, however, Henry's health deteriorates. After noticing this bizarre metamorphosis over several years, Mars Dugal realizes that he can make a profit on Henry by selling him for fifteen hundred dollars in spring when he is growing strong, and then buying him back for only five hundred dollars at the end of the season when his health is failing. This goes on for several years, until one day "a stranger" arrives on the plantation, a "Yankee" from the North, who commences to teach Mars Dugal how to cultivate the vines and thereby double their output. Mars Dugal does everything the Yankee advises, but, as Julius explains, "dat Yankee done dug too close under de roots," and as a result the vines wither and finally die for good. As expected, Henry's health declines as well, and as the last vine "turned yaller en died, Henry died too."³⁹

The telling of the first tale accomplishes several interconnected objectives. As promised, Julius imparts the history of the plantation to the new comers. The old ex-

³⁸ Chesnutt, "Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem" in *Charles Chesnutt*, ed. Werner Sollors, 907; "Signs and Superstitions," *Southern Workman* 24 no. 5 (May 1895): 78.

³⁹ Chesnutt, *Conjure Woman*, 12

slave's history, however, conforms to popular myths of the "ole South," at only the most superficial levels and only as a way to create interest. In *To Wake the Nations*, Eric Sundquist asserts that through conjure and storytelling, Julius brings "'de old times' of slavery forward into the post-Civil War present and splinter[s] the prevailing structure of plantation mythology."⁴⁰ The story Julius disrupts the myth of the benevolent plantation owner. In Julius's tale, Henry's health was tied to the whims of Mars Dugal, who cared not at all about Henry's well-being and only considered how he could most efficiently increase his profits. Julius's version of the story exposes the brutal realities of the plantation economy. Chesnutt posits Julius's combination of "memory" and "imagination" as valid sources for an alternative history of life on the plantation, a history that exposes the greed and exploitation that drove an insatiable desire for higher rates of return and increased profits on the part of both Southern slaveholders, as well as Northern entrepreneurs.

By including references that parallel the current circumstances, Julius also makes clear that his story is not a history that can be neatly contained in the past. Julius creates the Northern Yankee in the story to represent John, and he hopes that John will learn from the destruction that the Northern Yankee brought to the plantation and decide not to buy the land. As John tells us, however, he "bought the vineyard, nevertheless, and it has been for a long time in a thriving condition, and is often referred to by the local press as a striking illustration of the opportunities open to Northern capital in the development of Southern industries."⁴¹ John later learns that Julius too had generated "respectable revenue" from cultivating the neglected vines, and John guesses that perhaps Julius's

⁴⁰ Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 359.

story was intended to dissuade John from purchasing the vineyard. While John is able to glean the most overt motive for Julius's story, he misses the more subtle commentary on the ills of exploitation. For just as Mars Dugal reaped an inordinate return on the pittance he paid Aunt Peggy for her services, John hires Julius and assumes that Julius's employment as a coachman more than compensates for Julius's loss of the vineyard.

Though Julius is unable to accomplish his primary objective of thwarting the sale of the plantation, he exerts at least a semblance of control over his current circumstances by securing employment with John, and in this way he can continue "conjuring" Annie and John. In fact, Annie's response betrays the first sign that Julius's conjure may be working and that he may be able to affect a change in her perceptions. For as Julius tells us, when he concluded the story, Annie "doubtfully, but seriously," inquired whether or not the story was true.

By the introduction of the second story, John has comfortably claimed his stake of Southern territory. As John explains, the old McDugal plantation has now become "my vineyard in central North Carolina" and Julius, "our colored coachman." In taking the position as coachman, Julius has surreptitiously taken on the role of guide, and as such he assumes responsibility for introducing Annie and John to the new and unfamiliar terrain. In the second tale in the collection, Julius relates the heart-wrenching story of Sandy, a field hand whom Mars Marrabo lends out to several of the neighboring plantations. While Sandy is being "lent out," his wife is sold to a speculator. When Sandy eventually takes up with a new wife, he resolves not to be "lent out" among the neighboring plantations again. Driven by the experiences of being "lent out" and the fear of being separated from his family, Sandy implores his new wife Tenie, who is also a conjure woman, to turn him

⁴¹ Chesnutt, *Conjure Woman*, 13.

into a tree so that he will not be sent away from her again. She complies, but even this desperate act does not free Sandy and Tenie from hardship. When Marrabo decides to build a new kitchen, he sends his men to chop down the large pine tree, which, of course, turns out to be the tree into which Sandy has been transformed. The wood is then used to build Marrabo's new kitchen, but the kitchen is eventually torn down and the wood from the kitchen is used to build the very school house that John and Annie are considering tearing down to build their new kitchen. Julius explains that Tenie was so overcome when she discovers the tree has been cut down, that she spent her final days closed up in the school house, grieving the loss of her husband, and she eventually dies of a broken heart.

John's wife Annie responds to the extreme actions that individuals were driven to take in order to preserve their families during slavery, exclaiming, "What a system it was...under which such things were possible....Poor Tenie!" Annie, whom John describes as being "of a very sympathetic turn of mind," is receptive to the affective nature of the stories and sympathizes with Tenie as a woman, a wife, and a person. John, to the contrary, is stuck questioning the impossibility of a man being turned into a tree, and "in amazement," asks his wife, "are you seriously considering the possibility of a man's being turned into a tree?" Later John continues questioning his wife's credulity, half-asking, half-stating, "You would n't [sic] for a moment allow yourself...to be influenced by that absurdly impossible yarn which Julius was spinning to-day?"⁴² As the frame of the narrative reveals, John possesses the type of abstract reasoning that Cooper had critiqued in "The Negro as Presented in Literature." In this essay, Cooper argued that "it is only when we ourselves are out of tune through our pretentiousness and self-

sufficiency, or are blinded and rendered insensate by reason of our foreign and unnatural ‘civilization’ that we miss her [nature’s] meanings and inadequately construe her multiform lessons.”⁴³ John’s rational and literal belief system requires a verifiable and concrete representation of the past. His mode of understanding remains on the logical and unemotional plane of reason, and it inhibits him from sympathizing with the characters in the tale or from seeing how Julius’s story might provide him with the “truth” of the plantation past and the reality of the present moment.

Julius’s conjure does, however, succeed on two levels. First, as we come to find out, Julius’s object was to forestall the destruction of the school house so that he could use it for his church meetings. Not surprisingly, Annie decides that she is no longer interested in using the wood from the school but prefers her kitchen be built from all new lumber. Thus Julius is able to save his church’s meeting place. Second, Annie has become a willing initiate. She has agreed to suspend disbelief and accept Julius’s stories as symbols that point to a deeper reality—a reality that can not be expressed mimetically, but that must be apprehended through the interpretation of symbols and metaphors. As Robert Hemenway argues, the key to understanding the relationship between the characters “is not the trickster scheme, since Julius’s tricks are often transparent, but...their [the characters’] attitudes toward the folk belief of ‘conjure.’”⁴⁴ Through Annie’s willingness to participate in the conjure ritual, Julius is able to introduce her to a

⁴² Ibid., 23-24.

⁴³ Anna Julia Cooper, “The Negro as Presented in American Literature,” in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, eds. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 135.

⁴⁴ Hemenway, “Functions of Folklore,” 287

new understanding of the past and thereby convince her to adopt a different course of action in the present.

At the beginning of the third story, John continues to employ his ethnographic lens as a way to understand Julius. He observes that Julius displays a deft familiarity with everything related to the history and care of the land John has recently acquired. Again, however, he misconstrues the nature of Julius's knowledge and familiarity, suggesting that Julius's "simplicity" accounts for his understanding of the vast topography and that his habit of considering himself the "property" of another accounts for his personal attachment to the land. In his assessments of Julius, John has proven that his impressions are unreliable. Nevertheless, John continues to evaluate Julius and the plantation environment with such cool self-assurance, and is so thoroughly invested in his own perceptions, that he presents his observations as through they were undisputed facts. In yet another brilliant layering of narrative perspective, Chesnut's characterization of John allows the reader to view John as the unaware observer; thus Chesnut resituates the folkloric lens to consider not just Julius's customs and habits, but also to reveal the customs, traditions, and practices that permeated dominant white cultural groups and were also used to maintain racially-based separation and hierarchy. "Mars Jeems's Nightmare" pointedly illustrates how the stereotypes that worked to assign certain racialized characteristics to blacks were, in large part, a by-product of the popular white imagination, thereby exposing the degree to which the white imagination was "behind" the popular constructions of the black folk.

In framing the story, John explains that he "discharges" Julius's nephew Tom, because of his "laziness, his carelessness, and his apparent lack of any sense of

responsibility.”⁴⁵ As readers we have already been taught that John’s perceptions are not only unreliable but that they are structured by the popular stereotypes of blacks. John judges Tom on the basis of his unreliable impressions and draws a stereotype from the Lost Cause tradition to characterize Tom as lazy and shiftless. As the frame of the story reveals, Tom has not been dealt with fairly. While Julius cannot make John switch places with Tom, he can teach John the meaning of the folk saying, “it’s best not to judge a man until you’ve walked a mile in his shoes.” Julius then imparts to John and John’s wife Annie, a tale about Mars Jeems, a plantation owner who works his slaves so mercilessly that the slaves appeal to Aunt Peggy to “wuk her roots” on him. Aunt Peggy prepares a powerful conjure mixture that induces Mars Jeems to have “a bad dream.” In the dream Mars Jeems becomes a slave and is made to experience first-hand the brutality and humiliation of slavery.⁴⁶ As Eric Sundquist explains, “in the momentary imaginative space of this story, Mars Jeems is made a slave. Whipped and brutalized in recompense for the history of his own plantation brutality...Mars Jeems’s nightmare...is a recapitulation of both the physical and cultural denigrations of slavery.”⁴⁷

In one particularly telling scene, the overseer encounters the transformed Mars Jeems. Put off by what he perceives as the new slave’s uppity mannerisms, the overseer

⁴⁵ Chesnutt, *Conjure Woman*, 6.

⁴⁶ In the first story, it was disclosed that Aunt Peggy is not only a conjure doctor, but as Julius explains, “dey say she went out ridin’ de niggers at night, fer she wuz a witch ‘sides being’ a conjuh ‘oman” (Chesnutt, *Conjure Woman*, 26). In the Hampton collection, hags are especially terrifying figures since they invade a person during sleep, when he or she is least able to defend himself or herself. Once the besieged individual falls asleep, the witch or “hag” takes over the person’s being, “riding” him or her through the night, causing extreme mental and physical duress. Upon awaking, the affected individual is typically worn down and susceptible to whatever actions the hag seeks to induce.

⁴⁷ Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 371.

insists that the new slave call himself Sambo. In this scene, Chesnutt implies that the caricature of the pretentious slave putting on airs is really the product of a performance by the Southern land owner. The overseer, however, insists that the new slave perform the role, not of the uppity negro, but of the docile and submissive Sambo, representing yet another stereotypic black identity, this time one created and enforced by the overseer. This scene reveals the degree to which the stereotypes of the black folk were not rooted in reality, but instead were products of an anti-black racist system meant to limit the scope of African American representation. As a result of what is interpreted as his insolent behavior, the new slave suffers the humiliation of being whipped and sold without any mode of recourse—a not so subtle mirroring of John’s decision to fire Tom. When Mars Jeems is finally turned back into the plantation owner, his harsh attitude toward the slaves has softened. Julius punctuates the tale with an explicit statement of the moral: white folks who are strict and hard are liable to have bad dreams, but those who are kind and good are sure to prosper in the world. Again, having figured things out, John sarcastically remarks that the moral of the story is obvious and declares, “I am glad, too, that you told us the moral of the story; it might have escaped us otherwise.”⁴⁸

At the end of Julius’s tale it is John’s wife, Annie, not John, who re-hires Tom. She has understood the meaning of the tale; increasingly, Julius and Annie form an “in” community based on their shared knowledge and understanding of the stories’ deeper meanings. John’s literal and rational approach bars him from participation in Julius’s and Annie’s more subtle and emotive community, and his “know-it-all” attitude makes his ineptness at gleaning the inner meanings of the various situations all the more comical. Chesnutt transforms a stereotypical image from the minstrel stage that characterized

⁴⁸ Chesnutt, *Conjure Woman*, 38.

blacks as utilizing elaborate rhetoric without understanding the meaning and implications of their own words. Increasingly, John, not Julius, becomes the comic figure; John's boisterous professions only further reveal his own ignorance of the subtleties that characterize each situation. In an ingenious twist of characterization, the real minstrel figure in the stories turns out to be John, not Julius.

Through "Mars Jeem's Nightmare," Chesnutt exposes the constructs that were used to characterize Julius, and blacks in general, during the post-Reconstruction era. He critiques the degree to which authority for representing the black folk and black folk culture had been co-opted by white "outsiders," and, through his characterization of John as an entrepreneur, he reveals that white Northerner's investment in these constructs. Just as Thomas D. Rice's Jim Crow performances were not a true delineation of black folk life, but instead a product of the Irish immigrant's imagination, so Julius turns out to be a plantation type only in the limited perspective of the Northern industrial capitalist.

At this point in *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt has posited memory as an alternative source for plantation history. He has established the various aspects of conjuration as powerful elements of his literary strategy, and he has exposed the more insidious mechanisms at work in post-Reconstruction racialized discourse. As Sandra Molyneaux argues, "each story both responds to the preceding and anticipates the next, and the whole moves forward in a recursive pattern that gathers the chaotic past into a hopeful future."⁴⁹ While I would qualify Molyneaux's assertion about a "hopeful future," I agree that the tales, taken as a whole, form a ritual performance in which the characters have a chance to learn from and apply what was presented in the previous tale to their

⁴⁹ Molyneaux, "Expanding the Collective Memory," 165

future situations. The next story, “The Conjuror’s Revenge” does just that, giving John and Annie further opportunities to grasp the lesson that Julius is trying to teach them.

“The Conjuror’s Revenge” is probably the least appreciated of *The Conjure Woman* stories. Many critics argue that this tale represents a lapse in Julius’s character, securing only his individual needs and failing to address the needs of the larger community. Karen Beardslee contends that it is the one story where Julius is out for his own self interest: “Julius has made known another side of himself—the shrewd, self-serving side.” Arlene Elder comments that the tale amounts to “trickery to accomplish a totally material gain,” and she concludes that “Julius momentarily loses his identity for cheapening his art.” William Andrews views “The Conjuror’s Revenge” as an “aesthetic failure” because Julius fails to reach his white audience.⁵⁰ I argue, however, that this tale can be consider a “doubling back” in the ritual performance—a necessary review of lessons John has still not learned.

In this story, Chesnutt pits opposing forms of knowledge against each other. When John decides he wants to buy a mule, Julius tells him a story about Primus, a slave who had been turned into a mule by a conjure doctor who mistakenly believes Primus stole his shirt. Realizing his mistake, the conjurer, in his dying breath, attempts a ritual to transform Primus back into a human. With the exception of Primus’s foot, which remains a mule’s hoof, the conjure is successful. Julius concludes the tale with a nonchalant recommendation that John not carry out his plan to buy the mule, since Julius could not bear to drive what could be one of his transformed relations. Instead, Julius

⁵⁰ Beardslee, “Living to Tell,” 77; Arlene Elder, “Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Art or Assimilation?” in *The “Hindered Hand:” Cultural Implications of Early African-American*

notes that there is a worthy horse for sale in town. After making his inspection of the horse and negotiating down the price, John decides to buy the horse. “But alas for the deceitfulness of appearances,” John exclaims when the horse dies a short time later. John is again dismayed when he notices Julius wearing a new suit of clothes “that very next Sunday” and surmises that Julius and the horse salesman were in cahoots on the sale. This tale is significant because it shows, as John exclaims, the “deceitfulness of appearances.” In the concluding frame of the tale, Julius explains that he is “tellin’ nuffin but de truf,” and even though he did not see the conjurer in the tale perform the transformation of Primus, he knows that the story is true because he “be’n hearin de tale fer twenty-five yeahs.”⁵¹ Julius is trying to teach John that oral tradition often conveys “truths” not contained in standard histories or obvious appearances. The lesson that John still needs to learn is that what he reads in his “missionary reports” and what he sees with his own two eyes do not necessarily bring him closer to the truth. Assuming the role of conjurer, Julius tries to change the way John perceives the world. While Julius secures material gains through the telling of the tale, he does so not out of selfishness but instead to reach John where he would seem to be most vulnerable, his wallet.

In “Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny” Julius gives John a chance to put into actions the lessons he has learned about the “deceitfulness of appearances.” John again assumes his role as privileged observer, offering a precise explanation of the function of the rabbit’s foot and the value it holds for slaves and free blacks. But again, John’s sense of having “figured things out” leaves him blinded to the item’s deeper meaning; he concludes, “your people will never rise until they throw off these childish superstitions and learn to

Fiction (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), 159; Andrews, *Literary Career of Charles Chesnutt*, 60

live by the light of reason and common sense.” The tale that Julius relates reveals the low opinion that “reason and common sense” hold in Julius’s estimation. In the tale, Kunnel Pen’leton trades a slave mother, Becky, away from her child to acquire a race horse. The Kunnel alleges, “Well, I doan lack ter, but I reckon I’ll haf ter.”⁵² Then, under the guise of protecting Becky’s feelings, he tricks her into leaving her son behind so that he does not have to witness the painful breakup. Aunt Peggy eventually intervenes and turns Becky’s son into a mocking bird so that he can visit his mother and whistle songs to comfort her. After several painful years, Becky and her son are reunited, and the conjure woman lifts the spell so that they can live out their days together. Not surprisingly, the concluding frame reveals John still unable to see beyond the surface of the tales.

Alternately, we learn that Annie, who has been in ill-health, finds the story satisfying. She responds to her husband’s disbelief, “the story bears the stamp of truth, if ever a story did.”⁵³ In the concluding frame, Annie and Julius begin working in concert. When John persist in questioning the role of the rabbit’s foot, which was conspicuously absent from Julius’s tale, Julius refers John to Annie, “I bet young missis dere kin ‘splain it herse’f.” Annie obliges, “I rather suspect...that Sis’Becky had no rabbit’s foot,” and Julius concludes, “Ef Sis’ Becky had had a rabbit foot, she nebber would ‘a’ went th’oo all dis trouble.”⁵⁴ The final scene of the story reveals that Annie has taken Julius’s rabbit foot into her possession, and from that day forward, her physical condition begins to improve. Annie has allowed herself to undergo the conjure ritual, and it restores her to

⁵¹ Chesnutt, *Conjure Woman*, 49

⁵² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

health. The conjure works on Annie because she is willing to believe in it. Her attitude toward black folklore has been changed, and she and Julius, if not friends, have developed a relationship based on mutual respect. In contrast to “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” “Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny” models the type of audience reception Chesnutt hoped to achieve with his readers. Chesnutt uses conjure as a literary device which he employs to mediate relations between his characters and as a vehicle for their change—the characters’ transformations a metonymy for the larger transformations Chesnutt hoped to produce within his audience.

The second to last tale in the collection, “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt,” relates the trials and tribulations of Dan and Mahaly, a young slave couple who try to protect their relationship but instead end up destroyed by it. When Dan accidentally kills a free conjure man’s son, he appeals to Aunt Peggy for a conjure to protect him. She provides him with a “life charm,” but eventually the vengeful conjure man tricks Dan into relinquishing the charm and then transforms Mahaly into a cat and Dan into a wolf. Under instructions from the unscrupulous conjure man, Dan kills the cat in an effort to save his own life; when he learns that he has really killed Mahaly, he pines away his remaining days at the foot of Mahaly’s grave. As Julius explains in the frame of the story, the woods that John wants to clear are very woods where Mahaly was buried and where her ghost still lingers. The overt function of the tale is to keep John from clearing the woods where, we come to find out, Julius maintains the bees for his profitable honey market. More significant than Julius’s material motives, however, is that conjure is shown to be a powerful, but limited, means of controlling fates and that Julius’s stories are remnants of a past that continues to haunt the present.

The last tale in the collection, “Hot-Foot Hannibal,” reiterates several of the themes treated in the previous stories. As with all the preceding stories, Julius’s tale is meant to influence the ideas and actions of the white characters in the narrative frame. “Hot-Foot Hannibal,” for instance, relates the courtship woes Mabel, Annie’s sister from the North, and Malcolm, a younger Southern “gentleman.” The young white couple has placed their impending union in jeopardy by succumbing to petty games and jealous rivalries. Julius, therefore, shares a conjure tale about a love triangle that ends in disaster for a young slave couple.

In the conjure tale, Hannibal, a conniving plantation hand tries to lure a young slave girl named Chloe away from her beau, Jeff. By creating a tar baby-like decoy, Hannibal convinces Chloe that Jeff has been unfaithful. Although the story speaks to the recurring theme of not being able to rely solely on what an individual perceives with his/her eyes, it also comments on the capricious couple's lack of respect for the power of the black folk customs they attempt to employ. While they obtain a charm from Aunt Peggy that puts a hex on Hannibal, once the conjure is successful, they forget to return to charm to Aunt Peggy, as instructed. Additionally, Chloe commits another fatal faux pas by appealing to the slave master’s system to redress a community wrong. When Chloe discovers what she believes to be Jeff’s infidelity, she reports him to the slave master and sets in motion a series of events that lead to Jeff’s being sold down river and his eventual suicide. Throughout the story, Chloe has the chance to utilize the power of black folk traditions, both in the form of conjure and by reading the cultural signs. The well-known tar baby folk tale should have reminded her about the “deceitfulness of appearances” and warned her about the prevalence of trickery and the power of illusion. But Chloe is a

“jealous” woman who turns not to the power of black folk tradition, but to the slave master’s system, a system predicated on the denial of her freedom and humanity. As with all of Julius’s stories, the conjure tale relates an incident from the past to provide commentary on a current situation. In the concluding narrative frame, Mabel, Annie’s sister, has learned from Chloe’s hardships and she decides to put aside her jealousy and reunite with Malcolm. Eventually the young couple marries, and they suggest Julius come to work for them. Julius declines, however, and instead remains with Annie and John.

Critics generally read this story as a reflection of Julius’s selflessness in uniting the young white couple and his willingness to stay with Annie and John. Molyneaux, for instance, argues that Julius “contents” himself to stay on with Annie and John, continuing to try to effect a change in their perceptions. Peter Caccavari proffers a more extreme reading, suggesting that “bonds of affection” keep Julius tied to Annie and John and that the tale is about Julius’s ability “to sympathize with a white Southerner and to see the love of white couples to be the same as that of black couples.”⁵⁵ I disagree. Instead I view the last tale as the culmination of a ritual developed through Julius’s progression of tales; each tale building upon the previous tale until the final story ends with the reunion of the North and the South at the expense of the slave past. While Annie’s potential for change saves *The Conjure Woman* from the more pessimistic endings of a naturalist-informed text, like *The Sport of the Gods*, and it is true that “Hot-Foot Hannibal” is the only conjure tale that leaves unclear what Julius’s motives are or what he has to gain, the

⁵⁵ Molyneaux, “Expanding the Collective Memory,” 174; Peter Caccavari, “A Trick of Mediation: Charles Chesnut’s Conflicted Literary Relationship with Albion Tourgee,” in *Literary Influence and African-American Writers*, ed. Tracy Mishkin (New York: Garland Publishers, Inc., 1996), 147-8.

final tale, more than anything, provides Chesnutt's closing commentary on the deteriorating racial conditions for African Americans in the post-Reconstruction South. In "The Ethics of the Negro Question," Anna Julia Cooper writes that "Northern capital is newly wed to Southern industry and the honeymoon must not be disturbed...[and] the negro is being ground to powder between the upper and the nether millstones."⁵⁶ Chesnutt's final story illustrates this point, for while the young white couple may be happily married and building a life together in their new Southern home, Julius's conjure tales continue to haunt the landscape. Stories of broken homes, broken black bodies, slave mothers separated from their children, lost loved ones, suicide, trauma, pain and desperation form an ominous backdrop for the white couple's amiable reunion. Mixed with an old storyteller-conjurer's weary humor, the tales, taken as a whole, embody the age-old blues adage: "laughing to keep from crying."

As I have shown in this chapter, *The Conjure Woman* exemplifies some of the key strategies of using black folklore as a way to work within a dominant literary tradition while simultaneously challenging that tradition. In each story, Chesnutt's employs black folklore to expose the many intertwined literary, cultural and pseudo-scientific conventions that set the parameters of black representation; but Chesnutt also goes beyond simply exposing the politics of cultural representation. Instead, Chesnutt creates a conjure aesthetic through which to present an alternative perspective on US racial realities. Like writers before and after him, Chesnutt turns to the figures, forms and materials of black folk tradition as a way to break from the strictures of prevailing literary conventions. Ultimately, it is conjure, the black folk form used to effect change, that

⁵⁶ Cooper, "Ethics of the Negro Question," in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, eds. Lemert and Bhan, 209.

allows Chesnutt to reveal and, ideally, alter, his characters' and audience's perceptions of nineteenth century racial realities.

Chesnutt was not alone in his efforts to recover the power and literary value of black folklore and challenge dominant representations of African Americans. Many of his contemporaries addressed related issues. Paul Laurence Dunbar, in particular, was engaged in a very similar project, attempting, like Chesnutt, to reveal the conventions that dictated black cultural representation. While Dunbar maintained relations with the Hampton Folklore Society and produced a number of conjure tales, he gives his most convincing critique of the dominant cultural representations of blacks in his 1901 novel, *The Sport of the Gods*, where he relies on the black folk custom of masking. Throwing together several conflicting narratives about blacks, the novel's narrator adopts a satirical perspective to unmask the constructedness of each of the various representations of black folk and black folklore. Although this strategy is closely aligned with Chesnutt's, Dunbar was far less optimistic about the ability for black folk culture to create a viable space for black representation within the context of the over-determined post-Reconstruction racialized discourse. Dunbar's reputation in respect to his relationship with black folklore has fared even worse than Chesnutt's, but I would argue that it is important to bear in mind the realities of racial life at the close of the nineteenth century. Chesnutt, Dunbar and their contemporaries witnessed the end of the hopes and possibilities that characterized the Reconstruction period and experienced the onset of the long, rigid reign of Jim Crow segregation. Even Chesnutt was not unequivocal about the power of black folk culture, and tales like "Dave's Neckliss" reveal the fine line between

embodying popular caricatures in order to invert them, versus adopting stereotypes only to end up strangled by them.

Other tales, like Chesnutt's "The Passing of Grandison," however, cleverly show how one can provide a frighteningly convincing performance of the stereotypes and conventions that characterized blacks as a means to achieve freedom. In this tale, Grandison plays the role of the faithful servant, declining several "forced" opportunities to escape from his slave master's son. Unbeknownst to the master's son, Grandison's loyalty is merely a performance that later enables him to secure an escape to freedom for him and his whole family. Texts such as these by Chesnutt and Dunbar form the crux of what Gene Jarrett refers to as "Noo Nigger" realism (a reference to Chesnutt's "Mars Jeem's Nightmare"), or texts that adopt the conventions of the minstrel tradition in order to invert them.⁵⁷ Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* works within, but also steps beyond "noo nigger" realism by thoughtfully and thoroughly integrating black folklore as part of the literary strategy. In this way, *The Conjure Woman* anticipates later works that recognize the literary power of adapting black folklore as a source for fiction. Thus, Chesnutt was an innovator, not only in the ways Wideman suggested—that he merges oral tradition and standard literary convention—but also because he draws on the strategies exemplified in black folk *customs* as a way to order his fiction. As I argue in the conclusion, Ralph Ellison's 1951 short story, "Flying Home," relies not only on African American oral tradition but also builds a literary strategy based on black folk customs. As with *The Conjure Woman*, Ellison's short story is a ritual performance meant to bring about the transformation of the characters and audience alike.

⁵⁷ Gene Jarrett. "We Must Write Like the White Men': Race, Realism and Dunbar's Anomalous First Novel" in *Novel* (Summer 2004): 303-325.

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At a moment when representation of black folklore was increasingly determined by racist agendas, Anna Julia Cooper, Charles Chesnutt and the Hampton Folklore Society defined an approach that placed authority for representing black cultural traditions into the hands of the black folklorists and black writers. Taken together, their work laid the foundation for a black folk aesthetic that privileged memory, challenged the dominant representations of black folklore and found in the customs, traditions and practices of the rural blacks a story that most of the nation had tried to forget.

Conclusion: “We Don’t Remember Enough”: Customary Folklore in Ralph Ellison’s “Flying Home”

Whereas blacks in the 1890s witnessed the emergence and solidification of Jim Crow segregation, African Americans in the 1940s experienced the hardening of Jim Crow into a rigid social system that infected almost every aspect of American life. As the US entered World War II, Jim Crow put on display for the world the obvious and inherent contradictions between a US society purportedly based on democracy and the reality that the US, in its treatment of black Americans (and other minority groups), was and had always been, profoundly undemocratic. This was the hypocrisy Anna Julia Cooper in the nineteenth century had identified as the distance between America’s professed ideas and its practices. This was the contradiction that Chesnut sought to expose through his representations of black *and* white folk customs in *The Conjure Woman*; and this was the dilemma, as Ralph Ellison stated, that created the “endless sacrificial rites of moral evasion” necessary to justify the myths of white superiority and black inferiority. As Ellison notes, these “sacrificial rites” included the misrepresentations of blacks enacted through “folktales, jokes and then popular stories.”⁵⁸ These rituals of race, or what blues scholar Barry Lee Pearson has referred to as “the customary politics of race relations,” comprised a type of American folklore necessary to conceal the discordance between American ideas of democracy and the domestic treatment of African Americans. Ellison recognized that black folklore was a contested site across which definitions of both black and white identity were negotiated, and he approached black folk culture with the belief that African American cultural forms embodied a deep humanity that challenged the prevailing stereotypes. As Ellison

explained, “Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro’s willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than to allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him.”⁵⁹

Like Cooper and Chesnut before him, Ellison refused to relinquish uncontested control of black representation to dominant culture. Quite to the contrary, he declared his role as an African American artist to make apparent the rituals that enacted racial distinction and to reclaim the humanizing and transcendent value of folklore. In various ways, Ellison’s life and career helped him develop a deep critical awareness of the significance of black cultural traditions. During his early childhood in Oklahoma he observed rich and diverse black communities. Ellison relates that in the summers, some of the neighborhood children would return to the South to pick cotton, and they returned with stories of community, songs, dances and jokes, “our Negro jokes—not those told about Negro by whites.” This Ellison states, “was something to affirm and I felt that there was a richness in it.” Additionally, Ellison’s apprenticeship in classical music and jazz had a profound impact on his seemingly improvisational, but highly structured literary style. In regards to literary influences, Ellison explains that he learned the potential value of folklore to his literary compositions from authors such as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Lord Raglan: “writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance.”⁶⁰ It was through his work with the “Living Lore”

⁵⁸ Ralph Ellison, “Going to the Territory,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John Callahan (New York: Random House, 1995), 777-78.

⁵⁹ Ellison, “The Art of Fiction: An Interview,” *Shadow and Act*, 172.

unit of the Federal Writers Project (FWP), however, that Ellison was brought face to face with much of the African American folklore that would form the basis for both his short stories as well as for *Invisible Man*. Based on her voluminous research, Barbara Foley convincingly argues that through the numerous interviews he conducted with the FWP, Ellison was exposed to the various vernacular voices, political perspectives and folklore of recently-migrated Harlem residents. It was probably from storyteller Leo Gurley, for example, who told of the “legendary trickster hero named ‘Sweet-the-Monkey’ with the power to ‘make hisself invisible,’” that Ellison derived the organizing motif for *Invisible Man*. Foley further contends that it was Ellison’s involvement with the Left throughout the 1930s and 1940s that lead to his “preoccupation with folklore as a site of resistance.”⁶¹ Indeed, the Left provided institutional support for Ellison’s use of folklore as a medium through which to contest dominant ideologies.⁶² As his biography demonstrates, Ellison was immersed in circles where the significance of African American folklore was being theorized.⁶³ Owing to these experiences, Ellison, perhaps

⁶⁰ Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” in *Shadow and Act* (1953; rpt. New York: Random House, 1964), 58.

⁶¹ Barbara Foley, “Ralph Ellison as Proletarian Journalist,” <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~bfoley/foleyreleft2.html>, (accessed July 2006), 3,4.

⁶² In 1930 Harry Haywood published the US Communist Party’s position on African Americans. In his statement, Haywood asserted that blacks in the South comprised an oppressed majority with the right to political and economic control, while blacks in the urban North had the right to full and equal integration into society. In *The New Red Negro*, James Smethurst explains, “an important corollary of the Black Belt Thesis, as the Communist position became known, was that African Americans had a distinct national cultural that was rooted among the black farmers, sharecroppers, and farm laborers in the South and that needed to be defended and encouraged.” As Smethurst notes, while the CPUSA’s position may have been severely flawed in its sentimentalizing of rural black culture, it did encourage the cultivation of a radical consciousness rooted in black folk culture. See James Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930 – 1946* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 24.

more than any other writer, was able to articulate a keen awareness of the role that folklore, and customary practices in particular, played in sustaining Jim Crow segregation.

Many of Ellison's non-fiction essays are devoted to exposing how US rites and rituals worked to repress the vital contradiction that Jim Crow posed to America's democratic ideals. In these works, Ellison underscores the importance of learning to read customary folklore, both as social phenomena and as literary and cultural representations. In "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," for example, Ellison takes Stanley Edgar Hyman to task for a lecture he gave on the relationship of black folk tradition to African American literature. Ellison faults Hyman for approaching African American folklore through the "darker" entertainer." In Ellison's analysis, the "darker" entertainer, despite its "blackness," is not "Negro American." On the contrary, Ellison contends that the "darker entertainer" is white and "derives from the Anglo-Saxon branch of American folklore." The function of this caricature of black folklore, Ellison asserts, was to "veil the humanity of Negroes."⁶⁴ In addition to identifying the "darker entertainer" as a product of American folklore, Ellison takes aim at "Hollywood's" role in perpetuating "anti-Negro" images. In this essay, Ellison asserts that Hollywood films, the most notorious being *The Birth of a Nation*, provide "entertaining rituals through which [the] myth [of Negro inferiority] could be reaffirmed." Again, Ellison points to the ways that these cultural representations of "black folk" are a product of the white imagination and

⁶³ One need only thumb through Eric Sundquist's *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* to get a sense of the importance of black folklore to Ellison's literary projects and to see a sampling of the rich and varied vernacular sources that Ellison drew upon in crafting his literary works. See Eric Sundquist, *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Boston: Bedford books of St. Martin's Press, 1995).

are intended to justify the system of Jim Crow segregation. Ellison concludes, “obviously these films are not about Negroes at all; they are about what whites think and feel about Negroes.” In regard to twentieth-century, white American literature Ellison asserts that it is not merely a matter of how literary works reflect “white racial theories,” but how the works participate in “molding the attitudes, the habits of mind, the cultural atmosphere and the artistic and intellectual traditions that condition men dedicated to democracy to practice, accept and, most crucial of all, often blind themselves to the essentially undemocratic treatment of their fellow citizens.”⁶⁵ Ellison identifies the representation of blacks in American literary texts as part of a symbolic ritual: “ritual because the Negroes of fiction are so consistently false to human life that we must question just what they truly represent, both in the literary work and in the inner world of the white American.” Like Chesnut, Ellison asserts that the stereotypes of the Negro are a product of the white imagination and thus an essential part of an intricate American racial mythology. According to Ellison, “whatever else the Negro stereotype might be as a social instrumentality, it is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between...his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not.”⁶⁶ Ellison’s non-fiction essays provide insights into the ways in which customary folklore operates in white American society to enact and perpetuate an often unconscious belief system rooted in white supremacy and anti-black racism. In response to the dominant cultural representations of black folklore, Ellison’s literary

⁶⁴ Ellison, “Change the Joke,” *Shadow and Act*, 47, 49.

⁶⁵ Ellison, “Twentieth Century Fiction,” *Shadow and Act*, 27.

works often reveal the insidious uses of customary folklore in rationalizing and perpetuating the Jim Crow racial system. Ironically, his literary works also illustrate the possibilities customary folklore offers as a way to transcend the limits of the American racial order.⁶⁷ In this way Ellison's fiction demonstrates the important role that customary folklore played in both supporting a system predicated on racial difference, and in creating the possibilities for transcending that system. In the section that follows, I investigate how Ellison represents the role of customary folklore in negotiating African Americans' relationship to a racialized system that challenged their humanity and relegated them to the role of second class "citizens."

To elaborate on the definition provided in my introduction, customary folklore, as Jan Brunvand explains, often involves "a verbal component, and sometimes even a material component, [but] customary folklore is essentially a matter of tradition, habit and behavior." Customary folklore includes but is not limited to superstitious practices, rites of passage, rituals and initiation. More specifically, Brunvand defines folk custom as "a traditional *practice*—a mode of individual behavior or a habit of social life—transmitted by word of mouth or imitation, then ingrained by social pressure, common usage, and parental or other authority."⁶⁸ As folklore scholar Dan Ben-Amos asserts, customary folklore, "the actual customs, rituals and other observances, are representative

⁶⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁷ Bernhard Ostendorf points to this dual function of folklore, asserting that when folklore is used to maintain the status quo by perpetuating unconscious patterns of behavior, its force is "conservative and sedentary." Ostendorf also notes: "at the same time folklore may be liberating in another aspect. While restrictive in conceptual freedom, it emancipates the senses and liberates through rituals of catharsis." See Bernhard Ostendorf, "Ralph Ellison's 'Flying Home': From Folk Tale to Short Story" *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 13 (1976): 187.

of the mode of thought that underlines them.”⁶⁹ For Ellison this was the allure of customary folklore; it offered him a way to critique the process through which American ideas about race were instilled. As Ellison explains, “in any society there are many rituals of situation which, for the most part, go unquestioned...the rituals become social forms, and it is one of the functions of the artist to recognize them and raise them to the level of art.”⁷⁰ In his fictional works and essays, Ellison implored his readers to question these rituals and to scrutinize Jim Crow customs as a way to expose the underlying modes of thought that, for example, allowed the United States to fight fascism abroad while practicing racism at home.

With some exceptions, the most notable being “A Party Down at the Square,”⁷¹ Ellison’s short stories typically explore how African Americans have endured the “rugged initiation into the mysteries and rites of color.”⁷² “A Boy on a Train,” for example, relates a black child’s initiation into harsh racial realities as he becomes aware of how white society regards him as different and inferior. “Why...did white folks stare at you that way?” he wonders as white men stare at him from the platform as the train pulls away from the station.⁷³ Why didn’t the butcher give him a piece of candy he asks himself, as the white butcher comes to his car to get candy from his supply for the white

⁶⁸ Jan Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore*, 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 369, 406.

⁶⁹ Dan Ben-Amos, “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context,” *Journal of American Folklore* 84, no. 331 (January 1971), 6.

⁷⁰ Ellison, “The Art of Fiction: An Interview,” *Shadow and Act*, 174-5.

⁷¹ “A Party Down at the Square” for example, is a powerful short story that narrates a lynching from the perspective of an adolescent white boy.

⁷² Ellison, “The World and the Jug,” *Shadow and Act*, 136-7.

children? And why did his mother cry that way, he wonders, watching his mother weep after the butcher, unbeknownst to him, molests his mother on one of his trips to retrieve his candies from their train car? In this story, the boy responds to the rites of this racial system with defiance. He rejects the customs and the beliefs they embody. He determines not to forget this trip, to be strong, to be “a man,” and one day, to “kill this mean thing that made Mama feel so bad.”⁷⁴ While the boy rejects the racial order, Ellison’s story reveals the ways in which the racial system still prevails in changing the boy. Although still a child, he must become “a man.” The story ends with the child wanting very much to kiss his mother, but instead he believes he “must show the proper reserve of a man now.”⁷⁵ Thus even as he resists Jim Crow, its unconscious and insidious rituals exert control over the person he will become.

Ellison’s 1944 short story, “Flying Home,” poses an alternative dilemma. In this story Ellison asks what happens when one does not reject the value systems and beliefs of white Jim Crow America, but instead internalizes those ideas and pursues them as one’s own. “Flying Home” is an ideal text for examining the important role of customary folklore both as a part of Ellison’s larger social and cultural critique, and as a function of his literary strategy. In “Flying Home,” Ellison represents how customary folklore indoctrinates unconscious ideas about one’s place in an American racialized society. At the same time, Ellison also integrates the structure and elements of ritual as part of a literary strategy that leads to the character’s ultimate liberation.

⁷³ Ellison, “Boy on a Train,” in *Flying Home and Other Stories*, ed. J. Callahan (New York: Random House, 1996), 16.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

“Flying Home,” like most proper myths, begins in medias res. As the story unravels through a series of tales and personal recollections, we come to learn that the childhood experience of racial limitations and terror have induced Todd, the main character, to seek an escape from society’s racial confines by investing his hopes, his dreams and his identity in an airplane he sees on exhibit at the state fair. The airplane symbolizes that which eludes him: the wealth, the privilege and the freedom he associates with the white children. When Todd finally realizes his childhood dream and becomes a military pilot, he seemingly achieves that which he desires. He’s allowed to fly the plane of his childhood dreams, *but only* for training purposes in the segregated services; never allowed to own it, and not allowed to fight in combat. Ellison, himself a former student of the Tuskegee Institute, knew well both the hope and disillusionment that characterized the presence of African American pilots in the military.⁷⁶ While the accomplishments and recognition of African American pilots symbolized an opportunity to assail Jim Crow, racial segregation continually thwarted those hopes. According to social historian Jerrold Packard, “African Americans almost universally regarded the Jim Crow that permeated the military as one of the greatest humiliations of American life.”⁷⁷ Thus Todd experiences the irony of the American dream as inflected through the conventions

⁷⁶ While the federal government, in 1939, instituted pilot training programs at several black colleges, including Tuskegee, the black pilots were only allowed to train as support services and were prohibited from combat. Many whites refused to serve with the black corps and prejudice, cloaked as questions about skill and effectiveness, kept the black pilots in training long after their white counterparts had been sent into combat. When the black pilots were finally sent into combat, they remained in segregated units. Ironically, due in part to their extra training (and in many cases to a desire to prove their proficiency), the black units were exceptional in battle: “by war’s end, the all-black 332nd bomber escort group—of which the Tuskegee airmen were a part—could claim a perfect record. In 1,578 missions and 156, 552 sorties, they never lost a single bomber.” See James Ciment, *Atlas of African American History* (New York: Media Project, Inc., 2001), 138.

of Jim Crow. As Packard explains, “the highest-class black, the most educated black, the black learned in his profession of law or medicine or academia was required to respond to a white person of any social class as his superior...not to do so represented a potentially life-threatening breach of the...social order.”⁷⁸ In other words, a black man or woman could never be good enough, by the standards of a Jim Crow society, to escape racial confines. Todd learns this painful lesson on one of his flights, as he soars higher and higher, only to crash into a buzzard, a symbol both for blackness and Jim Crow, which lands him in a field in the middle of Alabama.⁷⁹

When Todd is brought to physical consciousness (a foreshadowing of Todd’s coming psychological and spiritual awakening) by an older black man named Jefferson, all Todd can think of is getting his plane back to the airfield ““before his officers were displeased.””⁸⁰ Jefferson, however, tries to aid Todd by attending to the more immediate danger of being discovered by Graves, the homicidal white Southern owner of the field. But Todd rejects Jefferson’s help and instead struggles to make sense of his situation by

⁷⁷ Jerrold Packard, *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 178

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 166

⁷⁹ Chikwenye Ogunyemi refers to the buzzard in “Flying Home” as “the jim-crowism of the air force [that] has made him [Todd] see the truth of his life.” Lynn Sadler provides a detailed analysis of the bird imagery in “Flying Home,” making the connections between the buzzard as a symbol of both blackness and Jim Crow. Sadler’s analysis also considers the bird imagery in the broader context of black culture, recognizing in Ellison’s imagery allusions to Charlie “the Bird” Parker, a jazz musician whose nickname “derives from being in prison, i.e., from being a ‘yardbird.’” See Lynn Sadler, “Ralph Ellison and the Bird Artist” *South Atlantic Bulletin* 44, no. 4 (November 1979): 24-25; Chikwenye Ogunyemi. ““The Old Order Shall Pass””: The Example of ‘Flying Home’ and ‘Barbados’” *Studies in Short Fiction* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 25. Additionally, the buzzard is a creature that must find a way to sustain life from death; the association of Jim Crow with buzzard imagery in “Flying Home” suggests that life-sustaining black folk culture persists in spite of, and in some ways, perhaps due to, the destructiveness of the system of Jim Crow segregation.

grasping at his old ways of knowing. He looks at his watch for the time, seeks the gauges of the airplane for his location, and clings to his responsibility to get the plane back to the airfield. But Todd's old ways of knowing don't jibe with the reality of his current situation. He has no ready made response to make sense of his crisis. What's more, he can not rely on Jefferson because he understands Jefferson only through the dominant cultural stereotypes of the black folk. He is so invested in the dominant cultural mythology about race that the racist ideas about blacks have become his ideas. Todd thinks to himself, "humiliation was when you were always a part of this old black ignorant man. Sure, he's all right. Nice and kind and helpful. But he's not you." Todd sees Jefferson as a smiling "darky," a direct descendent of the Uncle Remus style plantation stereotype.

Ironically, it is Jefferson who assumes the role of healer, mentor and guide, taking Todd through the ritualistic process in which Todd's old ways of knowing and seeing are exorcised. As Ben-Amos notes, a ritual is often denoted by textual or verbal cues that designate the events as distinct from other forms of social interaction.⁸¹ Thus, Jefferson marks the beginning of his ritual with a standard folktale about two buzzards that exit the carcass of a dead horse and come out greasier than it they'd been eating barbecue. Todd becomes physically ill, a symptom of his rejection of black folk wit and wisdom, and charges Jefferson of the obvious. "You made that up," Todd accuses, revealing his inability to participate in a folk exchange mediated through the tall tale or "lie."

Nonetheless, Todd's openness to the transformation that ritual portends is evidenced when Todd spies a buzzard sailing graceful behind the tree line. Todd silently

⁸⁰ Ellison, "Flying Home," in *Flying Home and Other Stories*, ed. J. Callahan, 148.

asks, “Why did they make them so disgusting and yet teach them to fly so well?” Able to hear his unasked question, Jefferson responds, “It’s like the time when I was up in heaven,” and thus begins Ellison’s literary rendition of the “Flying Fool” folktale.⁸² The tale, however, is not just an item of oral folklore.⁸³ In “Africanisms and the Study of Folklore,” Beverly Robinson argues for “examining tales in the context of other expressive genres.” According to Robinson, the multiple, rather than single, genre approach allows critics to arrive at more in-depth understanding of the way folklore functions as part of a larger cultural dynamic.⁸⁴ In “Flying Home,” the performance of the tale is part of a secular ritual through which individual and communal identity is communicated. Throughout the telling of the tale, for example, Todd engages in the in-group custom of call and response. Initially Todd’s comments are silent and self-centered. “It’ll be in the newspapers,” Todd thinks as Jefferson shares how he went to heaven, sprouted wings and impressed the other angels with his high speed flying antics. As the tale progresses, Jefferson relates being called before St. Peter for flying with one wing. Jefferson approaches St. Peter, and enacts the appropriate performance of humility, “‘Yessuh,’ I says, scared-like. So St. Peter says... ‘from now on none of that there one-wing flyin’ ‘cause you gittin’ up too damn much speed!’” Todd thinks to himself, “‘and with one mouth full of bad teeth you’re making too damned much talk.’”⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ben-Amos, “Folklore in Context,” 10

⁸² Ellison, “Flying Home,” in *Flying Home and Other Stories*, ed. J. Callahan, 156.

⁸³ For variants of the “Flying Fool” tale, see: Daryl Dance. *Shuckin’ and Jivin’: Folklore From Contemporary Black Americans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 13-14.

⁸⁴ Beverly Robinson, “Africanisms and the Study of Folklore,” *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 214-5.

Todd, though not ready to verbally articulate his response, begins to call on the customary practice of signifying and insult to participate in a traditional form of folk exchange.

In addition to being the training ground in which Todd learns to wield the survival tools of African American tradition, the tale is also the medium through which Jefferson responds to Todd's situation. In adapting the ritual into literary form, Ellison borrows the technique of symbolic representation. Jefferson's tale is clearly parallel to Todd's situation. Jefferson flies with one wing, for example, because of the limitations placed on the black angels in heaven. When Jefferson manages to excel, despite these attempts to hinder his performance, another mandate is set forth, this time in an effort to *ensure* that he will not continue to succeed. At the end of the tale, Jefferson is again brought before St. Peter. This time Jefferson's luck has run out:

“Jeff, you and that speedin’ is a danger to the heavenly community. If I was to let you keep on flyin’ heaven wouldn’t be nothing but an uproar. Jeff you got to go!’ ... ‘They rushed me straight to them pearly gates and gimme a parachute and a map of the state of Alabama.’”⁸⁶

When the meaning of the tale burst upon him, Todd is so overcome with anger at the realization that he is the flying fool. Todd thought he could soar away from the stereotypes of the black folk into freedom, but traditional wisdom has just shown him that he too is a character in white society's folk tale. Todd had seen Jefferson as the shuffling, smiling Sambo, when in fact it was he who had played the role of Sambo, saying yes to a performance of blackness dictated by a racist society. Todd's near fatal

⁸⁵ Ellison, “Flying Home,” in *Flying Home and Other Stories*, ed. J. Callahan, 159.

flaw was that he bought into a white racist society's ideas about blackness, and, as Lynn Sadler argues, "makes his race invisible by believing in the stereotypes produced by whites about its members."⁸⁷ Thus Todd contributes to the negation of blackness, or its invisibility, by accepting, and then trying to escape, white misperceptions about blacks rather than realizing the destructiveness of these ideas.

Having gone through fear, humiliation, anger and guilt, Todd begins walking through the pain of his own story. He has learned through imitation. Jefferson has told his story, now Todd must tell his. Jefferson's is the folktale. Todd's is the first person recollection. Having established a communal connection with Jefferson, Todd begins to stake out his individual identity. African scholar, teacher and healer, Malidoma Some explains that a ritual performed by a community liberates a certain energy that makes it possible for other rites to happen at the family and individual levels as well: "this means that these rituals are interdependent even though they look separate."⁸⁸ Todd's recognition of how his identity has been inscribed allows him to see Jefferson differently. Todd has learned the important survival skill of being able to understand the difference between what is said and what's understood. He is now able to see Jefferson, as well as himself, not through the dominant cultural stereotypes, but instead through a sense of identification and shared humanity. The narrator tells us:

Todd shook as with a chill, searching Jefferson's face for a trace of the mockery he had seen there. But now the face was somber and tired and old. He was confused. He could not be sure that there had ever been laughter there, that

⁸⁶ Ibid., 160.

⁸⁷ Sadler, "Ralph Ellison and the Bird Artist," 24.

Jefferson had ever really laughed in his whole life... He heard Jefferson sigh wearily, as though he felt more than he could say... And for a second he felt the embarrassed silence of understanding flutter between them.⁸⁹

Jefferson has called on their established shared knowledge to create a silent follow of communication between them. The transformative act of consummating Todd's initiation comes when Jefferson relates that Graves has killed five black men. When Todd begins to inquire why Jefferson remains in the South where his life is held in such a precarious balance, Jefferson poignantly responds, "You black, son... You have to come by white folks too." In this richly ambiguous statement, Jefferson reminds Todd of the lesson that his ill-fated flight and painful crash have just shown him. Jefferson's life is held in a precarious balance in the South, but would leaving the South and "flying away" to the North really free one from the ubiquitous reach of US racial realities? In the end, Todd is transformed, not by trying to measure up to the standards of a white Jim Crow society that regards him with contempt and disgust, but by confronting the degree to which he had internalized that society's ideas. Only through the death of his old perceptions and the new recognition of his cultural heritage is Todd finally freed from the limiting racial constructs. In "Some Questions and Some Answers," Ellison explains that he did not believe that "as we win our struggle for full participation in American life we will abandon our group expression. Too much living and aspiration have gone into it, so that drained of its elements of defensiveness and alienation it will become even more

⁸⁸ Malidoma Some. *Ritual: Power, Healing and Community* (Portland: Swan Raven & Company, 1993), 27.

⁸⁹ Ellison, "Flying Home," in *Flying Home and Other Stories*, ed. J. Callahan, 161-62.

precious to us, for we will see it ever clear as a transcendent value.”⁹⁰ Ultimately, Ellison valued black folklore, not because it essentialized our differences, but because it testified to a common humanity.

* * *

The images of the black folk have been manufactured, manipulated, and marketed by dominant popular culture and exploited for institutional uses for everything from supporting legal segregation to crafting post-Depression nationalism. African American writers have consistently responded to these institutional uses of folklore through the incorporation of folklore within their own texts. Certainly there is a long history of oral tales that express the consciousness of this black folk resistance, but it is the silent commentary of customary folklore, like “music without words,” that runs forcefully through African American texts from the post-Reconstruction conjure tales to short stories written at the height of Jim Crow segregation.⁹¹ In “Flying Home,” for example, the dominant, popular cultural images of the folk that sustained American mythologies about race are challenged through the long-standing customary practices of initiation, ritual, call and response, and most important, learning, through observation and imitation to read cultural and communal signs. Through careful attention to the representations of customary folklore, Ellison suggests that it is the role of the black artist to reveal the manipulation of the black folk image and then to reclaim the individual and communal humanity that challenge that image.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that reading and interpreting African American folklore as represented in various literary and cultural texts requires far more

⁹⁰ Ellison, “Some Questions and Some Answers,” *Shadow and Act*, 270.

than simply identifying “historically-recognizable” items of folklore. Instead, I have demonstrated that we must first expand our definition of what we consider to be African American folklore, looking beyond oral forms alone to consider the important cultural work of customary folklore as well. I have also argued that dominant cultural representations of black folklore have played an integral role in constructing, sustaining and perpetuating the US system of racial segregation. Thus, our analyses of various representations of folklore must remain attentive to the historically-specific contexts from which these representations emerge. It is my hope that the approach I have demonstrated in the preceding pages will allow us to think more critically about how representations of black folklore have been used to construct a discourse of racial difference. Alternately, it has also been the goal of my dissertation to introduce new scholarship examining the counter-narratives posed by African American scholars, writers and folklorists who integrated folklore in their various academic and artistic works, thereby challenging the structures of post-Reconstruction racialized discourse and presenting alternative perspectives on the realities of African American life in Jim Crow America.

⁹¹ Ellison, “Boy on a Train,” in *Flying Home and Other Stories*, ed. J. Callahan, 18.

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