Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner: Folklore, Folkloristics, and African American Literary Criticism

The importance of folklore to black literature is widely acknowledged and documented. Trudier Harris states, in fact, that “African-American folklore is arguably the basis for most African-American literature” (2). While critics have often discussed the significance of folklore in works by black writers, however, they have consistently resisted the inclusion of folklore scholarship in their discussions, often refusing acknowledgment of a discipline that has been well-established since the beginning of the twentieth century. In this essay I consider some reasons for this reticence and suggest some advantages to be gained from broadening the critical sphere of African American literary criticism to include folkloristics.

Several reasons for the omission of folkloristic references and theoretical discourse from African American literary criticism are rather obvious. Criticism of African American texts grows out of an academic tradition that disparages “folk” discourse, and has mirrored many of the perspectives of that legacy. As noted by countless folklorists, literary critics have seldom considered the materials of folklore comparable to literature—or the discipline of folkloristics on a par with their own. These attitudes are undoubtedly rooted in an elitist, Darwinistic perspective that regards expressive forms sanctioned by middle and upper socioeconomic classes as superior, and those associated with lower socioeconomic classes inferior. In general, it is this tendentious viewpoint that has posed such problems for the discipline of folklore within the American academy.

Of course, this attitude is based upon antiquated ideas of who the “folk” are. Often it does not occur to literary critics that “folklore infuses all levels of society” (Hemenway 128); that everyone is the folk, even the critics themselves; and that intellectual snobbery toward groups with less formal education is a part of the superstitions, folk beliefs, and mythology of the upper class. For example, the belief that literature is superior to oral traditions and, thus, that writers are more worthy of serious study than are “folk” artists is just that, a belief, as is the notion that revered academic theorists have more to offer than do “folk” philosophers. In other words, the entire way of thinking, speaking, and writing about literature is folklore, and is connected to a specific social mythology and class aesthetic, arising out of a capitalistic, Western ethos.

In light of this critique, one can easily understand the inherent dilemmas facing scholars of African American literature. In fact, African American intellectuals have historically embodied the dissonance between elite and “popular” or “folk” aesthetics and, in the quest for social equality and upward mobility, have

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often condemned their own traditions in favor of European-derived models. The notion of “blackness” itself has often become a locus of divergent critical perspectives on African American literature. Invariably, serious scholars must confront the contradictions between the aesthetics reflected in “folk” forms and those of the academy—an institutional affiliate of colonialization. One sure product of the American, capitalist class system is that the human resources tapped are very limited. In ascribing to that system by choice of academic perspectives, scholars of African American literature have unwittingly accepted, for instance, that “great” ideas originate in the upper eschelon, which leaves the wisdom of the people on the street corner, of children, of the elderly, etc. virtually unrecognized.

Thus, while critics have had to concede that folklore forms the core of African American literature, it has been a problematic acquiescence. The uneasiness of this acknowledgment is revealed in the absence of folkloristic citations by literary scholars, even those writing about folklore in literature (e.g., Blake, de Weever, and Gray). At times this omission strikes the reader as ignorance resulting from less than rigorous standards of scholarship. Just as frequently, however, the exclusion of folkloristic research seems to be a deliberate choice. Henry Louis Gates, for example, constructs in his *The Signifying Monkey* an entire theoretical paradigm around speech behavior studied primarily by *folklorists*, but *nowhere in his entire book does he acknowledge this field*. He describes Roger Abrahams, known to those of us in the field of folkloristics and self-described as a *folklorist*, as “a well-known and highly regarded literary critic, linguist, and anthropologist” (74). Nor do most other critics acknowledge that a field of folklore scholarship exists. Ironically, Houston Baker writes:

> The contextualization of a work of expressive culture, from the perspec-

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could cite a host of prominent scholars who have made significant contributions to African American folklore but whose names rarely, if ever, appear in literary criticism: for instance, James Mason Brewer, Elsie Clews Parsons, Patricia Turner, Gladys-Marie Fry, John Roberts, Kathryn Morgan, Beverly Robinson, John Vlach, Gerald Davis, and Lawrence Levine, to mention a few.

The choice of Hurston by literary critics furthermore indicates an apprehension about non-textual expressive communication, and the literary insistence on conceptualizing folklore as textual. Hurston was also a novelist, a writer, and even her folklore work is highly literary. Her revival owes a great deal to the normative values of the academic “cult” in which the literary word becomes fetishistic and is practically worshiped. Hence her work is not only more palatable to literary scholars, but poses less dissonance for them than do studies that have a more overt social-science orientation. In discussing Toni Morrison’s use of folklore, Harris writes:

In the process, she creates what I refer to as literary folklore. By “literary” I do not mean to pursue the argument developed by some folklorists that folklore is no longer folklore by the mere fact of its appearance in literature, that it ceases to be folklore because it has been lifted from the oral culture and is now in a static, objectified, nondynamic form. Since folklore can be recorded and collected, “written down,” so to speak, without violating its authenticity, I maintain that it can also be incorporated into literary texts without compromising its original quality. Blues lyrics in *Invisible Man* are no less folkloric because Ellison included them in his novel. (7)

The argument here invites us to ignore social, political, and theoretical factors that add up to very legitimate reasons to distinguish between literature and folklore. A disparity of power and influence exists between the world of literature, academe, publishing, and critics, on the one hand, and that of oral tradition and folk and community processes, on the other. As Daniel Barnes notes, “The text of a folktale is not ‘the folktale’: but the transcription of an oral performance” (9); “we reduce, as it were, folklore to the level of literature . . .” by assuming that “. . . the legend or tale in question is a text to be collated against the text of a novel or story” (8).

The concept of folklore as textual has been under attack and, to a large extent, discredited since the emergence of the performative and contextual approaches in folkloristics around 1972. In his seminal article “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context,” Dan Ben-Amos argues that, “accordingly, it is not the life history of the text that determines its folkloristic quality but its present mode of existence” (14). Ben-Amos contends that the determination should be based on the communicative context in which texts occur. This shift in perspective has tremendous implications for the study of literature and folklore. As Robert Hemenway observed in 1979, the notion of “folklore in literature” reflects a misunderstanding of what folklore actually is, how it operates in culture, and what has been going on in the discipline of folkloristics during the past twenty-five years. Hemenway writes:

We have to accept the fact that an author does not use folklore. Consciously or unconsciously, an author represents, adapts, or transforms phenomena that existed as folklore during a prior communication event. What one studies is folklore and literature; the location of the analysis is the interface between the two. (130)

Folklore is worlds away from representational texts found in collections. Rather, it is a part of the body, the unconscious and conscious mind, the spirit, the air that is breathed, the smells, sounds, sensations, and the totality of elements found in given moments of dynamic social interaction. It is a corporeally based, expressive, and artful language and system of thought of which spoken or written words are only a part.
In the main, African American literary criticism has as yet posed no serious challenge to the foundations upon which Western academic "religion" rests. In spite of the trend toward the use of folklore as a basis for theory (see Baker, Long, Blues; Gates; Harris), the Eurocentric conceptual framework within which these theories are formulated remains the same. As I have noted, this framework dictates a hierarchical relationship between forms and classes. My point here is not to encourage the creation of a new literary "denomination"—e.g., Afrocentrism or Africana Womanism—but instead to suggest how far-reaching and complex the pursuit of folklore is; in fact, it is a much larger and more fundamental phenomenon than are literature and academe. The discourse of literary critics concerned with folklore is comparable to writing about history as if historians and their research were somehow outside of the subject of their scrutiny. Or, as the Zen proverb goes, "The fish in the water cannot see that they are wet." For literary scholars simply to acknowledge the influence of folklore on their own thinking, research methodologies, and analysis would undermine the conventional way of approaching literature and shift radically the nature of the field.

The impulse toward a political use of folklore by critics is another possible reason to eschew folkloristic and other ethnography-oriented studies. Because contemporary folklore research tends to focus more on the diversity of individual taste and innovation than on the homogeneous taste of the "masses," it may be at variance with the agendas of some literary critics. The agendas of which I speak seek to position critics and selected writers as spokespersons for the "masses." Folklore becomes for these scholars symbolic and historic representations of the consciousness and aesthetics of the group, not real-life processes, strategies, or dynamics so deeply embedded in individual lives that they cannot be readily extracted. This idealization and romanticization of the "folk" serves as the basis for some academicians' self-constructed mythology and identity politics. Baker writes of the blues, for example, that "what emerges is not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole" (Blues 5).

Baker's comment represents what historically has been, and remains, the prevailing viewpoint of academicians. From this outdated perspective, "folklore" and "the folk" are mystified, and a focus is placed on the group's regurgitation and transmission of "lore" that has life independent of any individual. Literary scholars write about "Black," "Negro," or "African American" blues, spirituals, or other traditions in the same way that historians write about "Black" history—indeed, as folklorists wrote about the folk in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Lest scholars forget, this way of conceptualizing and writing about African Americans is born out of political rhetoric, a testimony to the historical struggle for civil liberties, equality, and dignity. Its focus is on the African American experience as a singular, monolithic phenomenon, rather than on widely diverse particularities of experience, revolving around a central historical matrix.

From this homogeneous point of view, the folk constitute a mass consciousness and mind, the straw out of which the gold of lore is spun. But this Darwinian perspective retards the identification of and research on specific "folk" artists and disguises an ignorance of African American culture with scholarly rhetoric. It implicitly equates folk with traditional, denying the
extent of individual creativity and innovation that folklorists study as a matter of course. For many literary scholars, *folk* becomes primarily a class designation, and *lore* a referent to unconsciously transmitted traditions that persist over time.

Influences of these attitudes are reflected in critical studies as well as in anthologies of African American literature. One might think at first glance, for instance, that Gates’s convincing argument for signifying as the central rhetorical trope in African American culture would lead to a fairer, more emic assessment of folk culture and, thus, have more than cosmetic implications for future scholarship and anthologies such as the 1997 *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. But closer inspection of Gates’s *Signifying Monkey* reveals that, however radical the theory might seem, his concepts of “folk” remain consistent with those of the past. Although studies of signifying as oral *performances* are considered, this examination is ultimately in the interest of focusing on *texts*. The expressive modes of the “folk” are given honorary status in the context of written texts, and although the trope of signifying is used as the basis for an all-encompassing rhetorical strategy for African American communicative practices, the trope becomes subsumed in the theoretical discourse of literary criticism, informed largely by European theorists. Important distinguishing features between the worlds of writing and orality are ignored, and none of the vast literature on this topic is mentioned (see Foley, *Immanent, Singer*; Ong). And while Gates should be commended for framing his discussion of signifying within the larger context of African mythology, he remains unwilling to view that system as a viable theoretical one in its own right, relying instead on in-vogue literary theories to explain it. One cannot, for example, do justice to Ishmael Reed’s writing without having a solid grounding in and understanding of the African-derived religion of Vodou, and one cannot gain such a knowledge without extensive reading of ethnographic and folkloristic materials. The critic who approaches *Mumbo Jumbo* should be as versed in the mythology and practices of Vodou and other New World African religions as the Western critic is in Greek and Christian mythology; otherwise, the meaning of rhetorical strategies such as signifying cannot be fully comprehended.

Ignorance about elements of African, European, African American, and European American folklore leads to an inability to conceptualize African American literature in its broadest context, or to develop theoretical models that will be the most illuminating. Many essays about blues and literature provide good illustrations. For instance, Sherley Anne Williams’s otherwise excellent essay “The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry” presents several critical misconceptions about the blues that impair her analysis and that a familiarity with folkloristics might have resolved. The first of these is the notion that blues can be analyzed as “a verbal—as distinct from a musical—genre” (73). I wonder how a sung, poetic genre, among a group of people whose core aesthetic is that music is at the nucleus of every kind of expression, can ever be considered distinct from music. Another serious problem with the essay is the notion of blues as non-sacred music, a popular view more reflective of an American Christian perspective than of the reality of how the blues have been conceptualized within African American culture. The concept of blues theology is eloquently discussed by Jon Michael Spencer; but, more importantly, folkloristic and ethnographic works on such phenomena would help literary critics to imagine African American expressive forms within the larger context of African-influenced philosophical perspectives. Many emic systems can be viewed as highly developed theories that are in many ways antithetical to Western
thought. To view blues or other folklore forms within the framework of New World African religious philosophy would necessarily transform critical perspectives.

It is unfortunate that critics do not more often integrate the opinions of writers into their theories, for writers are often quite articulate about their philosophies, and are frequently more familiar with alternative systems of thought than are critics. I know of no critic, for example, whose knowledge of African-derived religious systems equals that of a writer such as Ishmael Reed. In fact, critics commonly display hostility toward the aesthetic explorations of African American writers, a puzzling attitude from those who make their living off of the artists they may openly scorn. By way of illustration, we can note the venomous tone of Gates’s comments about Imamu Baraka: “... race as the controlling ‘mechanism’ in critical theory reached its zenith of influence and mystification when LeRoi Jones metamorphosed himself into Imamu Baraka, and his daishiki-clad, Swahili-named ‘harbari gani’ disciples ‘discovered’ they were black” (“Preface” 56).

One of the most obvious features of African American literature is its insistence that we live in a spiritual universe, that human lives are continually touched by invisible powers, and that wholeness must emerge from community rituals. In contrast, the “religion” of the academy embraces rationalism, skepticism, materialism, and competitiveness as its highest virtues. How then can we imagine that the most illuminating critical tools will ever arise out of the thinking of the Western academy? I posit that those serious about the development of African American literary theory pursue the diverse philosophical and esoteric trails left by the creators of the literature, terrains that are typically subservive of academic values. Such pursuits will invariably lead critics to place less emphasis on distinctions between “folk” and “elite” artists, but will augment our understanding of processes, craft, and mastery of different genres and forms. They will also lead to more international connections and frames of reference, distinct from those of the mainstream.

A careful look at the tradition of African American poetry, for instance, reveals a close affinity between it and other New World African ceremonial and ritual practices. To a large extent, poets can be considered priests, shamans, and healers who draw upon the wellspring of African American spiritual traditions, music, incantations, etc. in the processes of creating and communicating with their audiences. African American literary criticism should seek to validate this ethos rather than continuing to view it through lenses that can only debase it. Is it too radical to suggest that critics immerse themselves in the same philosophical waters as the artists whose work they critique and, in doing so, assist in developing a field that is as deeply creative, exploratory, and in dialogue with as full a range of intellectual and spiritual forces as the art is?

African American literary criticism will remain indebted to Gates for his bold examination of signifying and its importance to the study of black literature. But the importance of this study should be seen in the context of other efforts to discern what is unique about black discourse, and the consequent implications for theoretical analysis. In fact, a similar spirit inspires Stephen Henderson’s Understanding the New Black Poetry (1973), which, in many ways is more revolutionary than Gates’s work, primarily because it seeks to articulate a theoretical orientation that emerges from African American poetics, not privileging the written, literary, or academic. But perhaps the most revolutionary effort to date has been Janheinz Jahn’s Muntu, which appeared first in 1958. In this work, Jahn attempts to describe an African-based philosophical system that characterizes not only African, but also New World African, societies; and
he applies this theoretical system to a wide range of artistic genres. The strength of Jahn’s efforts lies in his reliance on ethnographic works as well as in his transcontinental perspective on literatures written by people of African descent, two elements strangely absent from much of today’s African American literary criticism.

Anthologies of African American literature reveal the same limited scope of vision as do scholarly studies. While they have sometimes acknowledged the debt that the literature owes to oral traditions, they have consistently reflected the dominant attitudes toward the two forms. Customarily, examples of oral tradition have been included as precursors to literature, substantiating an evolutionary model. One is tempted to view the inclusion of folklore texts in recent African American anthologies of literature as a progressive gesture (see Donalson; Gates and McKay; Hill); however, folklore texts were included in anthologies published much earlier (e.g., Henderson, Understanding). Nor is the incorporation of “popular” forms unique, for this was a common practice during the seventies, when literary anthologies embraced songs by artists such as Bob Dylan and “poems” from diverse ethnic oral traditions. Granted, some anthologies (e.g., Henderson; Hill) insinuate a more equal acceptance of folklore expressions than others, but in most cases, folklore is treated as “oral literature,” a pejorative concept. To reduce folklore to texts helps to justify the exclusion of folklore and ethnographic works from consideration and subverts the need to make distinctions between these two kinds of communicative practices a pertinent area of discussion and debate.

Although Call and Response avoids the evolutionary model suggested by The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, in which folklore is situated as a primitive precursor to written genres, Hill’s anthology still reveals a perspective that is firmly rooted in the conventional notions about what literature is and how it should be read, interpreted, and critiqued. Jahn seems to understand some of these implications of textual presentations of African American folklore. He writes, for example, that the blues lie at the boundary of African culture, where residual African elements pass over into American. They are always in danger of crossing the boundary but are held back by their musical traditions and mode of singing. Where, however, the song becomes a poem which is no longer sung, but written and printed, Africa is hardly a memory. (225)

Folklore texts in literary anthologies are akin to Muzak versions of B. B. King, Bob Marley, or Jimi Hendrix performances played in an elevator, department store, or doctor’s waiting room, and anthology editors should recognize the inherent problems with such textualizing and work actively to minimize them. The inclusion of CDs is simply not sufficient to convey the complexities of spoken and musical genres. A most striking feature of recent anthologies is the absence of any unique perspective on African American literature that would distinguish their theoretical framework from those of mainstream anthologies. The editors suggest that there is more interrelatedness among the folk, popular, and literary threads of African American traditions than of mainstream traditions, but they do not go so far as to reflect a resultant, distinct theoretical perspective on these forms. It is, furthermore, puzzling that current anthologies seem less theoretically expansive than some earlier ones. Addison Gayle’s 1969 anthology of essays black expression, for instance, contains an entire section of essays on folk culture; in contrast, contemporary anthologies include short sections of folklore texts.

Perhaps when Robert O’Meally stated that “the effective teacher of Afro-American literary tradition must be something of a folklorist . . .” (153-54), he was thinking of a familiarity with the most fundamental tools of
folklore—e.g., basic terminology, Stith Thompson’s motif and tale type indexes, and other basic reference works for different genres—and keeping an eye on the primary journals of the field. But the implications of this statement go beyond this basic familiarity and the simple awareness that African American authors tend to rely on folklore in their work to a reconceptualization of the place of literature in cultural studies. Thus far, no one has developed the perfect descriptive term to encompass the full range of expressive and artistic behaviors, without privileging folklore, literature, or popular culture. Nevertheless, I am suggesting such a perspective here.

If one considers that the expressive and artistic behaviors of any group are interrelated (and perhaps more so in some cultures than in others), it only makes sense to use as comprehensive an approach as possible, rooted not in the pre-established belief that one form is superior, but in the affirmation of the creative and aesthetic principles that give rise to these diverse forms in the first place. These principles should be as much the subject of our critical inquiry as any specific form. I suggest that, based on the range of materials included in anthologies and alluded to in critical studies, the focus should be more expansive than “literature.” Instead, our concern should be the study of the African American body and voice and their multitudinous artistic expressions. Music, sound, and spirit should be the basis of our theorizing, and the multi- and poly-vocality the foci of our methodologies. Submerged somewhere in all of this is the debate over the political and social autonomy of African Americans within the confines of the United States, an issue I do not wish to belabor here. However, my comments certainly point to the crisis of a widespread ignorance about and irreverence for our folk artists and traditions, and also to the absence of internal institutions to preserve and promote our own culture. If we take seriously the commonly expressed idea that African American expressive arts represent the most authentically American folklore, and are at the core of American “popular” culture and aesthetics, then it would seem imperative to elevate the inventors and creators of these forms to canonical status. It is high time that literary critics extend invitations to the folk and folklorists to dine at their private dinners, to begin learning our names and engaging in a discourse of mutual exchange, and even to come and “take dinner” at our humble tables once in a while. Otherwise, “folk” artists remain in the same position relative to academe as do the dispossessed, neglected, enslaved, and marginalized relative to the mainstream. Workhorses. Doormats. Metaphorical Sampsons chained to the pillars of the academic temple. Otherwise, African American literary criticism goes on sitting on the metaphorical pot, neither getting off nor pissing. The field of African American literary criticism should insist that its scholars have an intimate knowledge of specific works by folk artists and an understanding of the processes, aesthetics, and strategies of particular oral and material genres—as well as a familiarity with diasporic philosophical traditions. A general knowledge of the blues is not enough. The critic should be familiar with the distinct regional and historical styles of blues, some of the major innovators and lyricists of these different styles, and the philosophical systems that guided creators and performers. At the same time that scholars argue for university courses on African American literature, they should also battle for classes on the blues and other African American communicative practices.

An anthology compiled from this new perspective would, first of all, not be titled African American Literature. Second, it would not contain empty texts of folklore genres, lumped togeth-
er and discussed in brief introductory comments. Rather, it would contain ethnographic excerpts of particular performances by specific individuals, involving descriptions and analysis of performative dynamics occurring at a specific moment. By such contextual organization, and through more elaborate explanations, readers would come to understand more fully how folklore is lived and what the relationship of texts might be to the dynamics of interpersonal communication. Editors would indicate that meanings cannot be gained from texts alone, that folklore always involves elements of innovation and tradition, and would explain how folklore is related to works of literature on more than a textual level. Finally, it would be made abundantly clear that folklore is a contemporary, dynamic phenomenon, integral to every person’s life, not a holdover from some earlier, primitive stage of development.

We might turn to the sections in Call and Response titled “Slave Proverbs” and “Slave Proverbs and Their African Parallels” by way of illustration. First, simply listing a number of proverbs provides no substantial assistance to the student seeking to learn how proverbial speech figures into African American literature. Second, the editors’ organizational implication is that proverbs are obsolete forms that have no relevance in today’s society—an unforgivable distortion of one of the most beautiful and widespread folklore genres. There are literally thousands of bibliographic references on the topic of proverbs in literature (see Mieder and Bryan) and even an annotated bibliography devoted solely to studies of African and New World African proverb use (see Mieder). The basic argument of my 1996 book African American Proverbs in Context is that proverbs should not be read as literary texts and that meaning can only be interpreted as proverbs are used in context. My essay on proverbs in Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day offers an analytical glimpse into how proverbs function in one particular work of literature.

I envision segments of an anthology in which African American proverb masters are highlighted in the same way that literary artists are, and in which examples of their art (proverbs spoken in context and the speakers’ comments on their proverb use) are featured. I also envision critical works that demonstrate an intimate knowledge of such folk masters and their art. Furthermore, I imagine that same kind of focus on specialists in other genres—for example, storytellers (Crowley; Morgan; Bauman), toasters (Abrahams; Jackson), quiltmakers (Fry, Night Riders), healers (Brown), rappers (Keys), singers and musicians of various kinds of music (Evans), dancers (Hazzard-Gordon; Emery), and ministers (Titon; Rosenberg; Davis). To the extent that African American literature evolves out of a different philosophical and aesthetic system than does literature of the mainstream, the field of criticism should be equally divergent. Such suggestions as I have discussed could form the basis for a revolutionary kind of literary criticism, one that would distinguish African American studies and also inspire the approaches taken to literatures of other groups.

1. Although there is as yet no generally recognized methodology for studying folklore and literature (Barnes 6), there is nevertheless a plethora of writings on the subject, many of which touch on concerns of scholars of African American literature (e.g., Dundes and special issues of folklore journals devoted to this topic, including Southern Folklore Quarterly from 1979).

2. For example, Daryl C. Dance’s 1978 collection Shuckin’ and Jivin’: Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans might be mentioned, whereas her groundbreaking 1987 study Long Gone: The Mecklenberg Six & The Theme of Escape in Black Folklore never is.


Barnes, Daniel R. "Toward the Establishment of Principles for the Study of Folklore and Literature." *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 43 (1979): 5-16.


Blake, Susan L. "Folklore and Community in *Song of Solomon*." *MELUS* 7.3 (1980): 77-82.


