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RETRIEVING THE VOICE OF THE ANCESTORS: FOLKTALE NARRATION IN HURSTON'S *MULES AND MEN*

We the darker ones come even now not altogether empty-handed: there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folklore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness. (Du Bois 11-12)

As W. E. B. Du Bois maintains, America's authentic national culture is grounded in its history, popular culture, and the traditions of blacks. This claim is deeply rooted in Du Bois's belief in the theory of *Volkgeist*, a conceptual model developed by the German Romantic philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. The word *Volkgeist* can be translated as "national soul" and it refers to the Herderian vision of the spiritual life of a nation which is expressed in every aspect of its social and cultural life. For Herder, as for Du Bois, the culture of a nation is revealed not only through the literary writings of scholars and academics – it can also be found in the folklore, tales and songs passed on generation after generation.

The Herderian theory of *Volkgeist* permeates Du Bois's thought to such an extent that in his best-known book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) he explicitly paid tribute to Herder's notion of the spiritual life of nations by choosing a title which itself manifestly echoed the German word *Volkgeist*. Furthermore, Du Bois's intellectual indebtedness to the Herderian notion was a common theme throughout *The Souls of Black Folk*: as a matter of fact each chapter is prefaced with a phrase borrowed from a negro spiritual, since Du Bois maintained that spirituals perfectly mirrored the black soul (Appiah 46).

Just as Du Bois maintained that the black soul was perfectly expressed through spirituals, Zora Neale Hurston similarly believed that black identity was to be found in the tradition of folktales. Hence, Hurston's quest for black identity in the black tales could be read both as an act of connection to the voice of their ancestors and a search for the roots of black culture itself.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935) is a book on folklore that aims to demonstrate the intrinsic worth of black folklore and black tales not only as an essential part of black identity, but also as a constitutive part of American culture. Boosted by Du Bois's view of black people as the truest exponents of the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, Hurston's purpose is to collect and record African American folklore in order to substantiate the idea that "it would be a tremendous loss to the Negro race and to America, if we should lose the folklore and folk music, for the unlettered Negro has given the Negro's best contribution to America's culture" (Smith 206).

Hurston's aim was to translate into written words the oral legacy of her ancestors and to "set them [the folktales] down before it's too late" (Hurston 1995, 14). In fact, as her biographer Robert Hemenway stated, one of the reasons that led Hurston to collect the lore of her people was that she felt the burden of "this thought that practically nothing had been done in Negro folklore when the greatest cultural wealth of the continent was disappearing without the world ever realizing that it had been" (108).

Mules and Men, in fact, is the story of Hurston's journey to collect African American lore and culture. The first part, called "Folktales," which is the object of this article, is set in Florida, and it is devoted to African American folktales, songs, folk speech, in-between happenings, and information on Hurston's collecting experiences.

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Hurston's first destination is her native village, Eatonville, which she visited to gather material, especially oral histories dating back to the time of slavery, that she used to listen to as a child. She introduces *Mules and Men* by stating: "I was glad when somebody told me, 'You may go and collect Negro folk-lore'" (Hurston 1995, 9). The biblical aura² of this assertion hints at Hurston's high sense of mission and it gives us an idea of how much she valued the enterprise she was about to embark upon as the tales she wanted to collect and record existed only in oral form.

Notably, storytelling in *Mules and Men* reveals a world beyond bondage, in which black people can imagine themselves as free to think and behave as they choose. In fact, especially in slavery days, folktale narration was a form of apolitical everyday resistance against the oppressive state structure, an alternative space where black people succeeded in asserting their self-hood, even though they were oppressed by whites.

In view of this consideration, the purpose of this study is to analyze four tales, whose narratives suggest a subtle criticism of white supremacy, without directly subverting the master-slave relationship. Moreover, this essay argues that some aspects of Hegel's master-slave dialectic are echoed in the folktales, and highlights some modes of master-slave relationship featured in the stories.

Even if we do not know whether Hurston ever read Hegel, what I attempt to suggest here is that there is a recurring theme referred to by both authors with reference to the master-slave relationship.

The master-slave dialectic is the common name for a famous passage of "Lordship and Bondage" (Hegel 1977, 111), a section of *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) where Hegel explains that a struggle for recognition arises from the encounter between two self-conscious beings. Taken to its extreme, this dialectic movement could lead to a "struggle to the death" in which one of the two consciousnesses eventually subjugates the other. The myth of the two warring self-consciousnesses can be read as the relationship between master and slave. At first the subjugated consciousness (alias the slave) appears to be dependent on the master. However, in the long run, the master's self-consciousness becomes dependent on the slave for recognition. Thus, the inferiority of the slave is questionable:

The *truth* of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman. This, it is true, appears at first *outside* of itself and not as the truth of self-consciousness. But just as lordship showed that its essential nature is the reverse of what it wants to be, so too servitude in its consummation will really turn into the opposite of what it immediately is; as a consciousness forced back into itself, it will withdraw into itself and be transformed into a truly independent consciousness. (...) However servitude is not yet aware that this truth is implicit in it. (Hegel 1977, 117)

Evidence exists that Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* mirrors the chief events of Hegel's time. In particular, the formulation of the master-slave dialectic seems to have been influenced by the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804); the slave revolt in the French colony of Saint-Domingue culminated in the elimination of slavery and the founding of the Republic of Haiti (Buck-Morss 22).

Moving on to *Mules and Men*, one tale that denigrates the claims of whoever "stoutly maintains a material inferiority of the Negro race" (Boas 83), is entitled "Why Negroes are Black," narrated in the store porch in Eatonville, where storytelling commonly takes place.

Hurston thus initiates us into her world, the black world: "As I crossed the Maitland-Eatonville township line I could see a group on the store porch. I was delighted. The town had not changed. Same love of talk and songs" (1995, 13). Suddenly a woman asks the audience, "Do y'all know how come we are black?" and she starts telling her story about the origin of blackness.

She explains that when God was making up humans He did not finish them all at once. There was a day when He gave out the eyes, so all nations came up and got the eyes, another day He gave out the teeth and so on until one day, eventually, He gave out color. "So seven o'clock dat mornin' everybody was due to git

² See for example "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that *you might go* and bear fruit", John 15:16 (My emphasis).



they color except de niggers. So God give everybody they color and they' went on off. Then He set there for three hours and one half and no niggers. It was gettin' hot and God wanted to git His work done and go set' in de cool" (Hurston 1995, 33-34), so He asked the angels to look for the black people.

The angels eventually found the black people sleeping on the grass under the tree of life. The angels woke them up and told them that God wanted them. They all jumped up and ran up to the throne and they were so scared they were missing something that they began to push one another, bumping against the angels, and they even pushed the throne all to one side. "So God hollered 'Git back! Git back!' And they misunderstood Him and thought He said, 'Git black,' and they been black ever since" (Hurston 1995, 34).

This story is part of the etiological tales allowing blacks to free their imagination and to give their own explanations about the cosmos in order to understand it. The aforementioned tale, specifically, illustrates the origin of blackness and at the same time it questions the racial prejudice.

Even before colonization and slave trade were practiced, blackness was regarded as a stain and as a staple ingredient in images of wildness, evil, class difference. Black skin was thought of as evidence of an indelible 'natural infection' that could contaminate whiteness (Loomba 203- 225). As Du Bois observes, the plague of the twentieth century lies exactly in the fact that the color of the skin is made the basis for claiming the inferiority of black people and for denying a vast majority of the population the right to share the opportunities and privileges of civilization (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903). White people, Du Bois asserts, use color prejudice, even though there is scientific and biological proof that bodily phenotypes cannot be made the basis for dividing the world into races (Appiah 106).

As a matter of fact, at the time Hurston was writing *Mules and Men*, discrimination was still part of everyday life and blackness was considered a distinctive mark of inferiority. Du Bois had already paved the way to the calling into question of the race concept (Appiah 52), but Hurston found an original way of challenging this assumption.

In the search for her roots, she retrieved her ancestors' etiological tales in connection with the meaning of blackness to discover that they were imbued with subversive potential. Thus, she demonstrated that in a context of racial oppression blacks were able to create a space for themselves: *Mules and Men* should be interpreted as Hurston's attempt to broadcast to the world that the "negro farthest down," as she calls it, has much to contribute in terms of imagination to American culture. In Du Bois's words, it is neither a matter of Africanizing America, for America has "too much to teach to the world and Africa" (Appiah 60), nor a matter of bleaching the black soul into a flood of "white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world" (Appiah 60). As Hurston later explained in *Characteristics of Negro Expression*: "Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making" (Gates and McKay 1045). Therefore, her revival of folktales uncovered a rich legacy of material which, once revisited and reinterpreted, was able to give a context to support black people in their quest to redefine their identity.

If we refer to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, the slave is dependent on his master only insofar as he considers his status as a subordinate "other" towards his master, thus agreeing to be seen by his master as an object rather than as a subject, i.e., as a thing, rather than as a thinking, self-conscious being (Hegel 2008, 128-157). However, the slave progressively realizes that through his work he can shape nature into products for his master. For Hegel, the consciousness of objects necessarily implies some awareness of the self, as a subject. Thus, through work, the slave achieves self-consciousness, whereas the master becomes wholly dependent on the products created by his slave. "In this experience, self-consciousness learns that life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness. In immediate self-consciousness the simple 'I' is absolute mediation, and has as its essential moment lasting independence" (Hegel 1977, 115). Hence, following Hegel's formulation, an act of self-consciousness is needed to overcome the master-slave logic. What I suggest here, is that the tale "Why Negroes are Black" represents an act of self-consciousness, as it shapes black identity differently so as to take the canonical understanding of blackness beyond the limits of the white master's stereotyped vision.

Other formulations of the master-slave dialectic are evident in the tales narrated in the Polk County section. At this point in the book, Zora has left her native hometown, Eatonville, in order to move to Polk County, where the community looks upon her with suspicion when she introduces herself to her new informants.

The inhabitants of Polk County at first seem reluctant to welcome her, since they see her as a wealthy



stranger due to her expensive car and dress: “The car made me look too prosperous. So they set me aside as different” (Hurston 1995, 63).

In order to reduce distance so as to feel accepted by the community, she has to hide the very nature of her visit, and she has to lie about her identity, saying that she is a “fugitive from justice, 'bootlegging.' They were hot behind me in Jacksonville and they wanted me in Miami. So I was hiding out. That sounded reasonable. Bootleggers always have cars. I was taken in” (Hurston 1995, 63).

What's more, Hurston eventually gains the acceptance of the community and faith by singing some verses of “John Henry,” a song that is usually sung in the jooks and other social places:

'Ah'll play it if you sing it,' he countered. So he played and I started to sing the verses I knew. They put me on the table and everybody urged me to spread my jenk, so I did the best I could. (...) By the time that the song was over, before Joe Willard lifted me down from the table I knew that I was in the inner circle. I had first to convince the "job" that I was not an enemy in the person of the law; and, second, I had to prove that I was their kind. 'John Henry' got me over my second hurdle. After that my car was everybody's car. James Presley, Slim and I teamed up and we had to do "John Henry" wherever we appeared. (Hurston 1995, 67-68)

Once Hurston has gained the community's confidence she can tell the inhabitants what she really wants, tales: “Cliffert Ulmer told me that I'd get a great deal more by going out with the swamp gang. He said they lied a plenty while they worked. I spoke to the quarter boss and the swamp boss and both agreed it was all-right, so I strowed it all over the quarters that I was going out to the swamp boys next day” (Hurston 1995, 68). Zora goes into the swamps together with the crew of workers and on their way to the mill, as well as in the work camps, the storytelling session about slavery days begins.

These stories depict strategies for dealing with a master's oppression and at the same time portray the situation of workers in the South, the climate of surveillance and their reactions to being treated as mules. The men of the swamp crew tell their tales under the perpetual shadow of their white bosses: “We better hurry on to work,” says Jim Allen as the crew heads for the mill, “befo' de bukra³ get in behind us” (Hurston 1995, 76).

What follows is an incredible account of their daily life: like mules, the men working in the camps are moved from one work location to the next, never informed of the white boss's plans. Frustrated by this dehumanizing situation and by the inability to openly defy their bosses, they react by telling tales where “the black hero John surpasses the white oppressor either in terms of intelligence or strength: the men often use traditional tales or tales about the ‘slavery days’ to criticize white power figures and to reassert their own humanity” (Meisenhelder 271). In fact, the central character of these tales manages to escape thanks to his ability to outwit the master.

From Hurston's description of John's character in the glossary of *Mules and Men*, we understand that he bears the name of a hero in black folklore: “Jack or John (not John Henry) is the great human culture hero in Negro folk-lore. He is like Daniel in Jewish folk-lore, the wish-fulfillment hero of the race. The one who, nevertheless, or in spite of laughter, usually defeats Ole Massa, God and the Devil” (Hurston 1995, 229).

One of the tales where the black hero outsmarts his master is “Ole Massa and John Who Wanted To Go To Heaven.” This tale contains many elements of a powerful criticism of white power. First, John's apparent self-denigration and feigned foolishness helps him to succeed in his purpose; second, the slave outwits his master verbally – not only through escape or brutality; and third, the tale represents an attempt to dismantle the racist stereotypes whereby black people were considered as animals, unintelligent and nonhuman, and merely objects in their master's hands who were not worthy of rights nor deserved to be treated better than livestock.

In this tale the master, hearing John praying God to come and take him to heaven, decides to go to John's shack pretending to be God: “Ole Massa say 'It's me, John, de Lawd, done come wid my fiery chariot to take you away from this sin-sick 'world'. Right under de bed John had business. He told his wife: 'Tell Him Ah ain't

³ West African word meaning white people (Hurston 1995, 76).



here, Liza.' At first Liza didn't say nothin' at all, but de Lawd kept right on callin' John: 'Come on, John, and go to Heben wid me where you won't have to plough no mo' furrows and hoe no mo' corn. Come -on, John'" (Hurston 1995, 72-73).

Eventually John comes out and says: "'O, Lawd, Ah can't go to Heben wid you in yo' fiery chariot in dese ole dirty britches; gimme time to put on my Sunday pants'. 'All right, John, put on yo' Sunday pants'."

John hangs around just as long as he can, changing his pants, but when he goes back to the door "the big white God in disguise is still standing there. So he says again: 'O, Lawd, de Good Book says in Heben no filth is found and I got on dis dirty sweaty shirt. Ah can't go wid you in dis old nasty shirt. Gimme time to put on my Sunday shirt!'. 'All right, John, go put on yo' Sunday shirt'."

John tries to waste as much time as he can in order to change his shirt too, but when he goes back to the door, the master is still on the doorstep. It must be kept in mind that when the master knocks at John's door pretending to be God, John pretends to believe his master's deceit. Here, having nothing else to change, John finds another clever stratagem: he says he is ready to go to heaven, but since the radiance of the master's countenance is so bright, he can not walk by him. So he asks the Lord/master to stand back just a little bit. The master steps a little bit away but John goes on: "'O, Lawd, you know dat po' humble me is less than de dust beneath yo' shoe soles. And de radiance of yo' countenance is so bright Ah can't come out by you. Please, please, Lawd, in yo' tender mercy, stand back a li'l bit further'" (Hurston 1995, 74).

The old master steps back a little bit more but John goes on again with feigned self-denigration in order to obtain his purpose: "'O, Lawd, Heben is so high and wese so low; youse so great and Ah'm so weak and yo' strength is too much for us poor sufferin' sinners. So once mo' and agin yo' humber servant is knee-bent an body-bowed askin' you one mo' favor befo' Ah step into yo' fiery chariot to go to Heben wid you and wash in yo' glory--be so pleased in yo' tender mercy as to stand back jus' a li'l bit further'" (Hurston 1995, 74). The master steps back more and more till John manages to escape.

This sharp-witted tale apparently exemplifies the personal conflict between John and Old Master, but on a larger scale it denounces the injustices of slavery.

John's tales could be interpreted as an act of self-consciousness (Hegel 1977, 117), in that they bring into view the tactics and strategies that enslaved people employed to gain some control over their own lives.

In order to overcome the destructive psychological effects of white oppression, John's tales symbolize an attempt to close the gap between slave and Old Master because, as Hurston demonstrates, "the conflict between the desire to see oneself as human and the pressure to accept white definitions of oneself as a mule is an intense one" (Meisenhelder 274).

John's tales thus remind black men of their humanity despite the animal-like existence the master imposes upon them.

Moreover, in "Ole Massa and John Who Wanted to Go to Heaven," Ole Massa's impersonation of the Lord represents the master's assumption of godlike control over the slave's life and death, but thanks to John's intelligence this assumption is ridiculed. Therefore, these tales are evidence of black men's genial imagination in storytelling: the act of clever defiance helped the slaves endure and survive both physical and moral oppression. The very narration of such stories demonstrates the psychological freedom that black people could enjoy even while being defined by whites as mules.

Furthermore, storytelling brings the past history of resistance to oppression and violence into the present; the apparent benign and apolitical presentation of folk tales is a powerful validation of black people's struggle for self-affirmation and survival. The spiritual freedom experienced through hearing these stories is of paramount importance, as these tales of "John fighting a mighty battle without outside showing force, and winning his war from within, are meaningful victories showing a Black hero really winning in a permanent way for he was winning with the soul of the Black man whole and free" (Meisenhelder 275). In fact, the title *Mules and Men* refers to the exploitation of black labor, the harsh economic reality, and the power exerted by white masters over blacks. However, in John's tales, it is ultimately a black man who wins over a white man.

Apart from the tales about slavery days, there are some others depicting a black hero created outside the mental frame of white oppression. Heroic black deeds are narrated in the relaxed context of fishing, where workers go after work.



These tales reveal a freed imagination and show a different kind of black cultural creativity that grows outside the range of white control. The figure of Jack/John also appears in this fishing section, representing the black hero who fights against mighty animals in the tale “How the Lion Met the King of the World.”

Here John does not fight against his master, but against the bear and the lion for the title of “King of the World.” The magnitude of the fight is of cosmic proportions and John finally proves he is the King of the World. After defeating the grizzly bear, he encounters a lion that shouts at him: “Stop! (...) They tell me you goes for de King of de World!.” John looks at the lion and tells him “Yeah, Ah'm de King. Don't you like it, don't you take it. Here's mah collar, come and shake it! (...) The lion sprung on John. Man, you ain't seen no such fightin' and wrasslin' since de mornin' stars sung together. De lion clawed and bit John and John bit him right back” (Hurston 1995, 131).

John eventually defeats the lion, and the tale ends with the animal admitting that John is the King of the World: “Brer Lion, how you know you done met de King?', 'Cause he made lightnin' in my face and thunder in my hips. Ah know Ah done met de King, move over” (Hurston 1995, 131).

This story demonstrates the dominance of man over the animal kingdom and underlines the fact that humankind's dominance over all animals is meant for all humans, including blacks. John is above animals since he dominates them. Thus, the construction of a black hero replaces the white master's understanding of black men as mules, challenging the claim that black is tantamount to nonhuman and unintelligent.

Moreover, in Hegel's terms, it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won. In the chapter devoted to “Lordship and Bondage,” Hegel affirms: “the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle. They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being for themselves to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won” (Hegel 1977, 114). I think that this view is well expressed in the aforementioned tale, where the black hero risks his life in the powerful struggle for supremacy over the bear and the lion, thus attaining the certainty of self-affirmation.

Another tale that resonates with the Hegelian master-slave dialectic is entitled “Why the Sister in Black Works Hardest.” This tale actually takes us a step further, since it analyzes gender inequality within racial inequality. In a world controlled by whites, the black man is the Hegelian slave; however, the power relations change within the black community, where the black man switches to the role of the master towards the black woman: “De white man tells de nigger to work and he takes and tells his wife” (Hurston 1995, 77).

Thus, the story presents a double pattern: on the one hand, it positions the black man in relation to the white man; on the other, it sheds light on the black female condition in relation to both the white master and the black man. According to the tale, God originally put work in a box. Ignoring the content of the box, the white master orders the black man to pick it up, but the black man, in turn, orders his wife to do so: “After God got thru makin' de world and de varmints and de folks, he made up a great big bundle and let it down in de middle of de road. It laid dere for thousands of years, then Ole Missus said to Ole Massa: 'Go pick up dat box, Ah want to see whut's in it'” (Hurston 1995, 76). The old master, seeing that the box looks heavy, calls the black man asking him to fetch the big bundle on the road. The black man, in turn “been stumblin' over de box a long time (...) tell his wife: 'Oman, go git dat box'” (Hurston 1995, 76).

So the black woman runs to get the box and says: “Ah always lak to open up a big box 'cause there's nearly always something good in great big boxes.” The black woman grabs the box and as she opens it up, she discovers that it is “full of hard work. Dat's de reason de sister in black works harder than anybody else in de world” (Hurston 1995, 77).

This very telling excerpt might be associated to the duplicity embedded in the title *Mules and Men*. The power relations at issue are in fact encapsulated in a double metaphor whereby the word “mules” is associated to both the exploitation of black men's labor, and to black women's work. However, the black woman bears a double burden because of a double oppressing system: in the large-scale context of slavery she is treated as a mule by the white master and at the same time she has to overcome the adversities within the family context, where it is the black man who treats her as a mule. Also in *Their Eyes Were*



Watching God (1937) Hurston claims that “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (Hurston 1978, 29).

In conclusion, Hurston's interrogation of her ancestors' tales discloses their radically subversive potential. While featuring the master-slave dialectic, folktale narration demonstrates how people empower themselves against an oppressive institution through narratives depicting everyday resistance to the master. Folktales actually stand out as alternative spaces of imagination where reality can be re-written so as to reassert black identity.

Undoubtedly, *Mules and Men* has contributed to establishing Zora as a person who has recognized the value of what she witnessed, and retrieved the voice of her ancestors to preserve their heritage and lore from oblivion as well as offering a significant insight into the past of black American people. Thanks to Hurston's highly valuable work, a huge part of the African American cultural heritage will not be lost.

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