Foot Tracks on the Ocean: Zora Neale Hurston and the Creation of an African-American Transcultural Identity

Patricia Coloma Penate

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This project focuses on African American and Afro-Hispanic literature and folklore. Specifically, I employ Fernando Ortiz’s theory of transculturation. Ortiz makes the case that a new Afro-Cuban identity is created with the intermingling of African, Spanish and native inhabitants of Cuba. Using Ortiz’s critical framework as the foundation of my study, I undertake a new critique of Zora Neale Hurston’s portrayal of African American identity. Analyzing Hurston’s work through the model of transculturation, I examine the parallel between her work and that of Lydia Cabrera, a Cuban ethnographer whose work represents Afro-Cuban identity as a transcultural
one. Establishing this comparison, I reflect on the similarities and differences among their strategies of representing Transculturation in African-based identities. I look at their works from a womanist lens to analyze how their female anthropologist status influenced their folkloric portrayals and how they enacted a political agenda that emphasized female agency. I also analyze the oral aesthetic of their texts; in my opinion, Hurston and Cabrera reproductions of the spoken are ways to represent transcultural dialogue. Finally I compare their ethnographic studies of the African-based spiritual systems of Santeria and Voodoo.

INDEX WORDS: African American folklore, Afro-Cuban folklore, Zora Neale Hurston, Lydia Cabrera, Fernando Ortiz, Melville Herskovits, Marvelous real, Santeria, Voodoo, Womanism, Transculturation, and Anthropology
FOOT TRACKS ON THE OCEAN: ZORA NEALE HURSTON AND THE CREATION OF AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITY

by

PATRICIA COLOMA PENATE

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2012
FOOT TRACKS ON THE OCEAN: ZORA NEALE HURSTON AND THE CREATION OF AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITY

by

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Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
August 2012
To those whose tracks have shared mine, who have accompanied me in the path:

To my mother, Bernardi, and my father, Adolfo,

My siblings, Africa, Maria, Julio and Marta,

To my family and friends here and across the ocean,

To my ancestors, who guide me,

Without all of you there won’t be a path…

To Zora and Lydia,

While tracing your tracks, I found mine.
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INTRODUCTION: FOOT TRACKS ON THE OCEAN: ZORA NEALE HURSTON AND THE CREATION OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITY.

Caminante, son tus huellas
el camino y nada más;
Caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar.
Al andar se hace el camino,
y al volver la vista atrás
se ve la senda que nunca
se ha de volver a pisar.
Caminante no hay camino
sino estelas en la mar.¹

Antonio Machado, Proverbios y Cantares xxix

The title of my dissertation, “Foot Tracks on the Ocean: Zora Neale Hurston and the Creation of an African American Transcultural Identity,” signals Zora Neale Hurston, the subject of my research, and the Spanish cultural background of both Lydia Cabrera, the other protagonist of my dissertation, and myself. I adapt the “foot tracks in the ocean” symbol from the last verse of Antonio Machado’s famous 29th proverb: “Caminante, no hay camino, sino estelas en la mar” (Wanderer, there is no road—Only wakes upon the sea). Envisioning the wakes upon the sea is a meaningful figure because it signifies the knowledge to outline and perceive in the present moment where we came from. The title of Zora Neale Hurston’s autobiography, Dust Tracks On a

¹ Wanderer, your footsteps are/ the road, and nothing more:/ wanderer, there is no road:/ the road is made by walking:/ By walking one makes the road:/ and upon glancing back/ one sees the path/ that must never be trod again./ Wanderer, there is no road—/ Only wakes upon the sea.
Road, resonates with Machado’s tracing metaphor: the road is a trail and Hurston the wanderer who aspires to recreate the path. The corridor is the African-American folkloric tradition that Hurston reproduced in her books.

The image of the sea and its wakes signify the transatlantic modernism where I frame Hurston’s work. Through this dynamic aesthetic the wanderer, Hurston, attempts to grab and reproduce those fading wakes that she was losing from her sight, that is, to trace back the cultural insights that brought her and her cultural tradition to the present moment. Reproducing these elements was Hurston’s way to testify, making a written testimony African American oral practice that was often subsumed by a homogenizing and domineering Western tradition. Her anthropological training provided her the scientific tools to insert African American tradition inside the academic global. To parallel Hurston’s representation of transatlantic and transcultural identities I analyze Lydia Cabrera’s Afro-Cuban folkloric enterprise. I use Cabrera’s work to better understand Hurston’s, as well as to broaden the scope of my dissertation in its transatlantic approach. Talking about a tradition they traced back to the African cultural past, these two women defied Western domination in their works. Hurston’s and Cabrera’s representations of African-based identities work against any assumption that aims to minimize these communities’ importance and value.

To contextualize these folklorists’ recreation of hybrid identities I use the transculturation theory elaborated by Cabrera’s brother in law, the Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz, in 1940. In his theory Ortiz counteracted the concept of acculturation which was at the time the most fashionable term to talk about the formation of hybrid identities. Herskovits, Hurston’s mentor, debated with Ortiz, who criticized acculturation as an unequal approach, and he ques-

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Here I employ the term transatlantic modernism to denote a physical enclave (the Atlantic as a site of cultural exchanges) and to speak about an aesthetic (modernism) from a Western perspective.
tioned the validity of the acculturative terminology. For Ortiz, whereas acculturation spoke about a “cultural adaptability” and a “giving up” that privileged one of the cultures over the other, his proposed term, “transculturation,” emphasized an equal exchange between the cultures from which the hybrid originates. Ortiz’s idea was well received in anthropology’s academia. Ortiz and Herskovits’s knowledge of each other’s interests illustrates my understanding of the Atlantic as a space of multicultural exchanges. Frank Guridy’s recent book, *Forging Diaspora* (2010), historically contextualizes the relationships that these two diasporic identities maintained since slavery times. Guridy examines the different twentieth century cultural exchanges that influenced both of them: educational exchanges, promoted by Booker T Washington’s Institute, and the African-based artistic movements of the Harlem Renaissance in the U.S. and the Afro Cubanism movement on the island. These exchanges do not directly point out exchanges between Hurston and Cabrera, but they do signal a possible contact: directly (I do not have at this particular moment any prove of their personal knowledge), or indirectly (through their relationship with their mentors). What these connections across the American continent represent is a continuous movement and influence between African-American and Afro-Cuban cultures. Acknowledging these relationships proves the agency of these two traditions, as well as, a sense of brotherhood between them.

In chapter one, “The Spy-glass of Anthropology: Hurston and Cabrera’s Anthropological Tools of Authority,” I discuss how Hurston’s and Cabrera’s positions inside anthropology’s critical apparatus are controversial. These two women were not only pioneers in their works, but also debated, using James Clifford’s perspective in *Writing Culture: the Poetic’s and Politics of Ethnographic Writing* (1986), anthropology’s objectifying male and elitist perspective. Originally constructed as a male discipline that represented “other” cultures to its Western public, an-
thopology seemed to obliterate or mute the voices of the portrayed individuals. This obliteration resulted in a totalizing view of the objectified other making individuality not to be an option for those represented. Hurston’s and Cabrera’s role inside this tradition counteracted this male privilege, as well as the traditional notion of ethnographic authorship that avoided the inclusion of the ethnographer’s personal self inside the encounter with the researched culture. This censorship articulated an othering representation of the researched cultures. Their authorial representations attempted to defeat this license including the voices of their informants and the often silenced female other while respecting their individuality, thereby, providing a colorful and multi vocal account of these traditions. I analyze the different strategies of anthropological discourse that appear in the work of these two ethnographers. Examining how they mediate their anthropological voice inside the text, I emphasize how they counteracted anthropology’s authoritative voice and criticize its institution as an objective source of knowledge. I also reflect on how writing about these peoples led Hurston and Cabrera to better know themselves and their personal voices.

In chapter two, “An Act of Becoming: The Transcultural Identity,” I articulate my interpretation of Hurston’s and Cabrera’s ethnographic representations as transcultural. I examine Ortiz and Herskovits’s debate about transculturation and acculturation favoring the first. If Hurston was Herskovits student, would it be possible to argue that she represented African American culture as a transcultural one? Using Fernando Ortiz’s theory of transculturation I look at Hurston’s anthologized essay, “How it Feels to Be Colored Me’” (1928), to analyze how she positions herself inside U.S. nation. Hurston’s emphasis on the importance that her U.S. nationality has for her identity as a black woman parallels transculturation’s nationalistic discourse. It also reflects the Harlem Renaissance “New Negro,” a term that Robert Hemenway in *Zora Neale Hurston, A Literary Biography* (1980) uses to refer to “black people who made clear that
they would not accept a subordinate role in American society” (9). In order to integrate her voice and that of the culture she belonged, Hurston had to emphasize her nationality as an integral part of her African American individuality. This emphasis explains some of Hurston’s political ideas such as her opposition to school’s integration in Brown vs. Board of Education. Cabrera similarly worked to include the voice of the Afro Cuban minority inside the national discourse. Cabrera’s strategy consisted in representing whiteness as an alternative not as a totalizing entity. In her view Afro-Cuban culture was unique in itself and as such it can be compared to whiteness: Afro Cuban culture is integral and does not need to be opposed to a lighter background to be appreciated. Hurston and Cabrera articulate transculturation from within; in order words, they show how African- based people speak about their own reality and how they define the world around them. This understanding expands my anthropological reading of Hurston and Cabrera relating them to contemporary ethnographic studies. I argue that their folkloric constructions elaborate a third space, one that Faye Harrison in The Outsider Within (2008) defines as “denote spaces in which resilience and resistance may engender the articulation of alternative perspectives” (15). This interpretation shows how Hurston’s and Cabrera’s enterprises were advanced for their times.

In the second part of my study I analyze the strategies that Hurston and Cabrera use to portray transculturation: orality, African-based spirituality, and the articulation of a woman’s standpoint. These three maneuvers are closely related and continuously influence each other: orality, for example, is an important aesthetic for the authors. It plays an important role in African-based religious systems, and it is an important tool for women’s self-definition. Analyzing these transcultural tools is a plural exercise in itself which reflects the continuity and coherence of African American and Afro-Cuban identities.
In chapter three, “The Front Porch and La Fuente Viva\(^3\): Orality as a Transcultural Discourse,” I address how orality, the emphasis on the oral over the written, characterizes the aesthetics of both ethnographers. Privileging the oral and the multiple narrators that take part in storytelling works to accurately represent and emphasize the communal nature of these African-based traditions. Stressing the plurality of storytelling deconstructs Western notions of unique truth that give a unique subject full authority over an account. I examine the rich vocabulary that Hurston and Cabrera use in their writing to illustrate how they respect and portray their informants’ particularities. The transmission of the oral through writing transforms their ethnographic compilations in examples of what Trina V. Fever defines as oral-print texts: “text that interweaves the forms and aesthetics of oral storytelling and print fiction” (Trina V. Fever 3). In my analysis I link orality to West African beliefs, such as the power of nommo which provides words the capacity of bringing things into life. Reclaiming the similarities between Santeria and voodoo reflects how the oral text technique is a transcultural strategy.

In chapter four, “Crossing the Bridge: African-Based Spiritualities Articulating the Marvelous Real,” I analyze the groundbreaking research of the two authors in the study of African-based spiritual systems. Zora Neale Hurston’s book *Tell My Horse* (1937) and Lydia Cabrera’s *El Monte* (1954) are compilations about voodoo and santeria practices. These two religions are clear examples of transculturation as they combine elements from Christianity with African spiritual practices. In their books Hurston and Cabrera analyze the commonalities in these religions. They agreed on how voodoo and Santeria add a supernatural dimension to reality. This integration of the supernatural is coherent with African understanding of divine powers, or vodon, as energies that access and transform our common sense of reality. In *Mules and Men* Zora Neale

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\(^3\) I borrowed the term ‘la Fuente viva’ (the living source) from Amy Nauss Millay’s study of the effect of orality in Twentieth-Century Spanish American Narrative in *Voices from the Fuente Viva* (2005)
Hurston states that “Belief in magic is older than writing. So nobody knows how it started.” (183) and Lydia Cabrera in El Monte emphasizes the great importance that magic has for the Afro Cuban population: “magic is the great preoccupation of Afro Cubans; to have control of the hidden and powerful forces” (9). Magic is above all a spiritual practice that, according to both authors, has been transformed into spectacle by those who feel threatened by its power. In order to properly speak about magic in its spiritual meaning, I employ Alejo Carpentier’s term “the real marvelous.” Carpentier defines this term in The Kingdom of this World (1949) as “an unexpected alteration of reality, from an unusual insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality, or from an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by means of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of ‘limit-state’” (10). This transformation of reality responds to a series of sacred ritualistic performances that are orally transmitted. Hurston and Cabrera proclaim their assurance in this particular practice and their researches are testimony of its validity. Testifying the knowledge and training needed in order to “cross the bridge”, metaphor that represents entering into the marvelous dimension and accessing the supernatural, Hurston and Cabrera reiterate the important value given to the marvelous real. In their explorations of this supernatural sphere of reality they include other successes such as divination and possession. Hurston and Cabrera also address the active role women have in these traditions. In my analysis I emphasize the importance that orality has for preserving these spiritual systems which do not have written sacred books and the important role that women have. I conclude that their analysis of Voodoo and Santeria are in themselves transcultural, showing a consistent pattern of exchange between these spiritualities.

In the concluding chapter, “The Personal is Political and Female Too,” I reflect on Hurston’s and Cabrera’s enterprises which are multilayered representations of transcultural iden-
tities from within. I emphasize how women receive special importance in these authors’ enterprises. In their ethnographies Hurston and Cabrera articulate a woman’s standpoint. In this way they make visible female subjectivity, perspective that was often ignored from traditional anthropological accounts. Hurston and Cabrera represent the polyphonic nature of African descended identities; they capture how each individual speaks about his or her reality. Folklore in these two authors’ compilations becomes what Maurice Halbwachs in *On Collective Memory* (1992) defines as a collective framework of memory: “the result, or sum, or combination of individual recollections of many members of the same society” (40). The similarities between Hurston’s and Cabrera’s enterprises encapsulate what I call a “transcultural consciousness”; the understanding of how nowadays African American and Afro Cuban traditions have a common cultural origin in Africa that is influenced by how they mediate the cultural reality around them.
CHAPTER ONE: THE SPY-GLASS OF ANTHROPOLOGY: HURSTON AND CABRERA’S ANTHROPOLOGICAL TOOLS OF AUTHORITY.

From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn’t see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that.

Zora Neale Hurston *Mules and Men*

In the above epigraph Hurston likens her knowledge about the influence of African American cultural tradition in folkloric tales to a tight chemise. A chemise is a piece of female clothing that can be worn outwardly as a blouse, or inwardly as underwear. Hurston uses the word ‘chemise’ here because of its association with tightness, making undergarment the likely metaphor at work. This rhetorical device signals the closeness between her cultural background and her gender. The cultural and feminine axes are both intrinsic and extrinsic to Hurston’s identity: a chemise is a garment that is worn in a private, intimate way and it can only be seen if you do not wear clothing over it; for a chemise to be seen you need to remove other outfits. Gaining distance from her native surroundings was for Hurston a way to examine the chemise without removing it. Anthropology worked as a scientific apparatus in which she evaluated the relationship between her personal self (tight chemise) and the cultural frame she writes about, in order to objectively represent her cultural tradition. Hurston’s training as an anthropologist allowed her to examine her personal/ cultural self from the perspective of her ethnographic self with both selves comple-
menting one another; in other words, the knowledge of one helped her to understand the other and vice versa.

According to critics James Clifford and Edward Bruner, anthropology was in its early days the study of “other” (different from our own) cultures. Originally a Western discipline, anthropology entails the study of cultures that are seen as “other”\(^4\). In representing these researched cultures, ethnographers must be aware of how they represent themselves in order to secure an objective perspective in their anthropological study. In his article “The Ethnographic Self and the Personal Self,” Edward Bruner analyzes the evolution of ethnographers’ portrayals of themselves in their writings: “Until the past few decades the majority decision was to sharply segment the ethnographic self from the personal self…. Any work that inserted the self in the account of the other deviated from the standard realist mode and was considered inappropriate” (3). He further explains that the traditional dichotomy between the personal and ethnographic selves was also a split between anthropology and poetics, and that such division led to a rupturing of the discipline (5).

Bruner’s argument about the traditional views in anthropology that considers the inclusion of the ethnographer’s person in the text as ‘out of place’, ‘feminine’ and non objective, generates a dichotomy or conflict that he further analyzes. He explains that the reason for such separation is that, “The distancing of ethnographic subject from native object was essential to an older model of ethnography, for how else could we be the impersonal authoritative voice empowered to represent the other?” (4) Describing a culture different from his or her own, the traditional ethnographer objectifies the explored culture and represents it as inferior. Negotiating the definition of subject, as the person writes, and object, those being written about in ethnographic

\(^4\) I borrow the term ‘other’ from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* where this word refers to the imaginative Western construct of cultural identities that diverge from Occidental ones. In this construction the imagined identities appear to be feminine and childish, leading in this way to their objectification.
texts, influenced the representation of the ethnographer’s self in the transcript. The assertion of the ethnographer’s identity outside the text resulted in an objectifying perspective of the examined culture and the ethnographic subject was presumed separate from the represented other (object).

In her reflection about her ethnographic identity and her personal self, Hurston highlights the requirements of traditional ethnography: “It was only when I was off in college, away from native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that” (1). Hurston alludes to the necessity of having distance in order to examine the “tight chemise” that encapsulates the complexity of her culture. Her metaphor signals the difficulty that she confronts examining her ethnicity in an anthropologically objective way. The intentional election of the chemise entails a critique of both the traditional anthropological model of author-object (studied culture) representation, echoing Bruner’s point about the ethnographer’s self, and of the colonializing views of the studied cultures as feminine and inferior. In her article “From ‘Spy-Glass’ to ‘Horizon’” Karen Jacobs explains that through the use of the chemise “Hurston is clearly playing on the to-be-looked-at-ness of the female body in all its erotically charged materiality there” and that “Hurston has dodged the problem of embodiment altogether- the black female body must stand as both marker and interpreter of cultural meanings against more prevalent significations” (329). The prevalent significations Jacobs identifies are the traditional requirements of ethnography that Edward Bruner previously analyzed: the distancing of the ethnographic personality from that of the personal character leading to the subject object dichotomy. Pointing out her womanhood, Hurston implies what she is and what she is not. She refers not only to her gender, but also highlights the specificity of her perspective against a traditional ethnographic model: that of a
female anthropologist who at the same time is a member of the culture she writes about. She refers to this angle as the “spy-glass of anthropology”, which according to Jacobs “evokes not only the penetrating male gaze of science but also the imperial white gaze of colonialism, both of which inform the ambiguous history of anthropology and its consolidation as a discipline in the 1920s and 1930s” (330). The opposition between Hurston’s female view to anthropology’s male look and her own membership in the researched culture not only generates a conflict in anthropological representation by challenging its traditional (male and Western) mode, but also questions its validity to portray an objective impression of the studied culture when excluding the female view and the perspectives of the members inside.

Jacobs asks a poignant question: “Would the black female viewer be subject when aspiring to organize her world through that lens?” (330). This inquiry reflects on Hurston’s situation as a female anthropologist. She was aware that her gender played a key role in her ethnographic enterprise: her encounters with anthropology’s male gaze appear in her portrayal of the dichotomy between her female personal self and the male prism of anthropology’s spy-glass. This is illustrated in the opening lines of Their Eyes Were Watching God:

Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men…Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly. (3)

Hurston relates gender to perception: “men observing ships at a distance” implies that they are not only separated from them, but also that their view involves detachment. Male
dreams are external; that is, they involve the achievement of something that is outside them. In this way, men transform them into objects. Men’s dreams are also objects of time and “they come and go with the tide;” in other words, they are temporal. On the other hand, women’s relationship to those ‘ships’ is a powerful one: they determine what is remembered and what is not. Women do not transform those ships into objects because they are internally related to their nature, and do not require an objectifying distance: they have, according to Hurston, a relationship with them based on certainty. These truths are articulated according to what the woman-subject remembers and does not remember. Since dreams are goals that women want to achieve, one’s personal relationship to them is fundamental. Observed from a distance they are objects of our desire, but when (remembered)/ wished women pursue them and the dream stops being a vision and becomes a reality. That is why, according to Hurston, women’s relationship to their imaginations entails their recognition as truth: they act according to them and transform them into reality. Men’s relationship with their dreams is sequential whereas women’s is lasting. The protagonist of this novel, Janie, embodies this notion: the horizon is her dream and no matter where she is, she always looks at it and finally achieves it. The female is defined by the dream and its accomplishment. In my interpretation I link Hurston’s gender relation to distance in this quote, to a depiction of anthropology as a male-gendered discipline. As such, traditional anthropology requires an objectifying distance in its cultural representations.

Hurston, like Janie, participates in her culture. Active involvement in her cultural community erases the ‘prescribed’ distance of traditional ethnographic writing. Bruner’s article questions the validity of traditional ethnographic writing in its emphasis on the objectifying distance between the ethnographer and the researched tradition. In Bruner’s opinion this detachment does not grant space for the researched culture’s participation in its own representation. According to
Sam Pack’s article “How They See Me vs. How I See Them: The Ethnographic Self and the Personal Self” the personal relationship between the ethnographer and his object of study is “critical to understanding the nature of the research as a whole. To be sure, the form that a particular ethnography takes emerges in discourse” (105). Defining the nature of the relationship between ethnographer and the examined culture as a ‘discourse’, Pack defends a participative interchange between them, in this way the two take part in the portrayal of the entity being analyzed. Pack additionally explains:

An ethnographic interview, for instance, is a highly personal encounter that is shaped by the interpersonal exchange between the ethnographer and the informant. The speaker will only reveal what he or she wants the researcher to know. Therefore, the quality and depth of the relationship between the two individuals determines what will be said. (105)

An ethnographic enterprise that addresses the closeness between ethnographer and informant emphasizes the agency that both have in the ethnographic exchange. According to Pack interpretation is an essential element in an anthropological study because it affects all the elements involved in the examination: “Not only is the ethnographic subject interpreting the native object, but the informants are also interpreting the ethnographer” (108). Given the ‘double via’ of ethnographic representation Pack concludes the following about his own ethnographic experience: “In the course of learning about them, I also learned more about myself. Gradually, the ethnographic self and the personal self merged into one” (120). Observing the examined culture is a learning process for Pack since he finds out about his own culture while studying a different one.

For Janie, the protagonist of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, freedom comes when she fully participates in her culture and through this participation she discovers ‘the horizon’ and be-
comes one with her community and traditions. The symbol of the horizon reflects a far distance from where she stands, representing the dreams she pursues. Identity and horizon become blended into Janie’s individuality once she has found her own existential circle, one that begins in her inner self and generates expanding circular energy involving her ethnicity and cultural tradition. The horizon, icon of Janie’s aspirations, expands her existence far beyond her persona, embracing the community and its cultural tradition. For Hurston, on the other hand, the study of the researched culture guided her to the discovery of her own essence, that of the tight chemise, making it possible for her to ‘reconcile’ her two selves. As an anthropologist, rather than studying and examining African American culture as an exotic entity, Hurston deepened in the familiar: her own culture.

1.1 The “exotic” and the familiar.

Hurston’s relationship to the study of African American culture, as ethnographer and as its member, exemplifies the crisis in ethnographic authority generated after the redistribution of colonial power around 1950. Hurston was simultaneously an ethnographic subject and object. Her double positioning influenced her cultural and folkloric representations. Hurston was formally trained as an anthropologist: she studied under the guidance of Franz Boas, the “father of American anthropology”, who influenced Hurston’s anthropological methodology. The method that he proposed encompasses, according to Karen Jacobs, “the participant-observer method, cultural relativism and a critique of the comparative method” (330) and as this author continues to explain: “Boasian anthropology provides a fully realized conceptual basis from which to revalue African-American expressive form, but it requires a problematically objectifying distance from its selected objects of study to do so” (330).
Addressing the problem entailed with participant-observant method, James Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture* (1988) relates it to the crisis in ethnographic representation that emerged when the European colonial period ended after World War II. Preceded by the modernist movement of the 1920s in which “a truly global space of cultural connections and dissolutions has become imaginable: local authenticities meet and merge in transient urban and suburban settings…The ethnographic modernist searches for the universal in the local, the whole in the part”(4). Modernism, a movement characterized by its multiplicity of perspectives, attempted to grasp in the local the universal meaning needed to comprehend existence, giving agency to define the universal from its local point to individual expressions. This collective search based on a synecdoche is limited, according to Clifford, by its departure from a totalizing Western perspective:

Whenever marginal people come into historical or ethnographic space that has been defined by the Western imagination, entering the modern world, their distinct histories quickly vanish. Swept up in a destiny dominated by the capitalist West and by various technologically advanced socialisms, these suddenly “backward” peoples no longer invent local futures. What is different about them remains tied to traditional pasts, inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new but cannot produce it. (5)

Clifford signals a limitation of agency for those objectified to determine a ‘local future’ because their particular perspectives become lost or marginalized within the totalizing and globalizing view of the dominant West. This globalization does not give space to multiple cultural perspectives. When a Western perspective is the determinant of the global future, it is not concerned with the future of local cultures as they might construe it; by using a global angle, the

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5 Clifford refers to poet William Carlos Williams when talking about ‘the ethnographic modernist’ and specifically addresses the issue of distance in ethnographic writings.
multiple cultural variants that are encapsulated within that totalizing view see their possibilities of self-expression and self-determination limited. Modernity excludes other views of reality when determined by Western parameters. What Clifford questions is the impossibility for those local cultures to define their future when their views about their present and future selves can only be defined or found in past roles. When marginalized people do not find a ‘particular model’ for their future, they tend to assimilate Western models and they struggle to find an identity tied to their past history and background.

_Their Eyes Were Watching God_ illustrates this struggle. Janie’s first husband, Logan Killicks, so attached to the past, treats Janie as if she only served to work and does not give her space to search for her identity in the horizon. Janie’s second husband, Joe Starks, personifies how marginalized individuals that are encoded in a globalizing Western cultural perspective adopt Western parameters to be respected and valued. Starks’s way of defining his masculine role and identity centers on pursuing wealth and authority as the mayor of Eatonville; as such he prohibits Janie from participating in the community. In Starks’s view Janie’s communion with the folk lowers her social status; in his mind Janie’s standing as the mayor’s wife distinguishes her from the community, putting her in a superior level as if she were an object to be admired. Tea Cake, Janie’s third husband and the embodiment of what society does not expect, the unconventional marriage of a socially respected woman to a much younger man, a character whose roots are within the folk culture and community. Society’s critique of Janie’s third marriage is a class and cultural issue. A woman like Janie, the widow of Joe Clark, reaffirms her personality and identity quest in her integration with the folk. Hurston portrays Janie’s impossibility of articulating a present colored uniqueness within a globalizing Western perspective in her first two marriages. Representing a local uniqueness counteracts the Western attempt to universalize
meaning according to its dominant perspective. Hurston’s celebration of Janie’s involvement in the Black communal culture after marrying Tea Cake represents this opposition: by asserting and celebrating who she is inside her community, Janie articulates an individuality that opens space for a ‘local future’ that does not agree with the Western, governing view of universality.

In *The Bluest Eye* (1970) Toni Morrison also articulates this issue of the inability of finding suitable ‘future models’ for a community that has lost its connection with its roots. The imposition of Western models on the psyche of an innocent girl, Pecola, leads to her isolation and retreat into madness. Madness is the metaphor for Pecola’s impossibility of finding a model continuous with her cultural frame. In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as a Foundation” Morrison continues to explore this conflict between the public sphere, the socially imposed Western ways, and the private domain, the one of the community. Morrison addresses the importance that the presence of the ancestor has in preserving the integrity of the communal and individual character because of this figure’s relation to tradition, memory and legacy. The existence of the forebear sustains the community by providing a valid model, independent from public requirements, that opens the doors for the future. In this novel the clash between the private and public spheres drives Pecola insane: the impossibility of having blue eyes makes her retreat into unreality. Madness illustrates the hopelessness of integrating a divided self. Morrison illustrates her notion of ancestry in *Song of Solomon* (1977) where the protagonist’s aunt, Pilate, inspires in her nephew, Milkman, a search for family history that once discovered and understood ends up explaining the causes of this family dysfunction. Echoing Morrison’s view about the importance of ancestry, Anne Ancelin Schützenberger’s psychoanalytic book *The Ancestor Syndrome: Transgenerational Psychotherapy and the Hidden Links in the Family Tree* (1998) underscores how the traumas and behavior that characterize the conduct of a family’s generations affect the
present day life of its descendants; in other words, how we behave in the present is influenced by the behavior of our ancestors. Morrison and Schützenberger highlight the value of lineage from a spiritual- existential and psychological point of view.

This conflict between the private and the public affects other areas. In his 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Langston Hughes explores the quarrel that arises when a black artist breaks public expectations and achieves his freedom independently from white standards. The writer explains that in order to be an artist a person has to be true to his or her essence:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America--this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible. (1)

The American standardization that Hughes identifies in his essay refers to marginalized peoples inability to define their imagination and their future inside the whiteness that has been imposed on them. The dominant culture defines and forces standards: the concepts of beauty and art respond to foreign models and the marginalized identity subjected to unfamiliar values struggles between its private and public self. This homogenization under whiteness leads to a rejection of blackness that interrupts the path towards wholeness. Hughes also asserts:
So I am ashamed for the black poet who says-"I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet- as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world. I am ashamed, too, for the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features. An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose. (2)

In order to climb up that mountain, one needs to be aware of where one comes from. Hurston’s 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” parallels Hughes’s claim about the need to assert one’s identity according to individual circumstances. She celebrates the coexistence of her American nationality and her racial status in her persona and art:

But I am not tragically colored. There is not great sorrow damned up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter- skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less.(2)

Hurston’s celebration and affirmation of her racial status transforms her into what Robert E. Hemenway in Zora Neale Hurston, A Literary Biography (1977) defines as ‘New negro’: “black people who made clear that they would not accept a subordinate role in American society” (9). Hurston’s statement about the world belonging to the “strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less” is not only a reaffirmation of her identity as a black person, but also an impulse to hold on in order to celebrate life. Hurston clings to the idea of living and celebrating life in its unique expression. Hemenway further analyzes this celebration: “Zora Neale Hurston arrived in
New York after considerable thought about who she was and where she came from; while other Harlem artists might grope for identity, she impressed all by being herself” (11). Hemenway ties Hurston’s commemoration to her origins, to her growing up in Eatonville, Florida, which greatly influenced her confidence, as the biographer explains:

The sources of the Hurston self-confidence were her hometown, her family, and the self-sufficiency demanded of her after she left home for the world. Eatonville, Florida, existed not as the ‘black backside’ of a white city, but as a self-governing, all black town, proud and independent, living refutation of white claims that black inability for self-government necessitated the racist institutions of a Jim Crow South.(12)

Hurston embraces and celebrates her individuality in solving the conflict between the public and the private. This step allows her to transcend her individuality and embrace communal identity. Asserting one’s individual status and uniqueness helps a person decide what she or he is, contributing, in this way, to the collective effort. Hemenway also points out: “She remembered Eatonville as a place of great peace and happiness, identifying that happiness as a function of her family and communal existence” (10). Throughout her writing Hurston proclaims the importance that the community has to give coherence to one’s present character in its relation to past history and ancestry. Addressing the importance of the individual she assigns each person with agency because the individual plays a fundamental role defining the integrity of the community. This idea of the individual deeply rooted in the people, or vice versa, the communal rooted in every individual, characterizes African culture’s sense of collective identity. In African societies the community helps to define individual identity. bell hooks’s idea of self-recovery in Talking Back (1989) parallels this reconciliation between the public image or expectations and the private self that these writers discussed. For her, declaring subjectivity is the first step toward recovering
from subjugation: “The act of becoming subjects is yet another way to speak the process of self-recovery” (56). Self-recovery signals the identity as subjects achieved after this resolution and this movement leads the person to “speak in a new way” (56). Hurston’s effort to assert her personality proclaims not only her identity as a subject, but also the political agency it brings. The individual becomes political as a subject. This agency directly influences the destiny and status of the community. Janie’s identity progression from her object status while being Starks’s wife to her subject one while living with Tea Cake illustrates this transformation. In a similar way to Janie, Hurston becomes a subject of her folkloric compilations: her knowledge and approach to African American culture transforms her role from anthropologist to that of one of the participant subjects.

In her relationship to her community and in her anthropologist status Hurston plays a dual role. This positioning creates tension in her anthropological methods: Franz Boas’ school required a redefinition of the anthropologist’s persona in the participant-observation methodology. According to Clifford this technique “obliges its practitioners to experience, at a bodily as well as an intellectual level, the vicissitudes of translation”(54). If ethnography is (according to Clifford) the translation of experience into textual form, the participant-observation methodology entails a problem in authorial representation when linked to the notion of anthropology as a “privileged, sanctioned source of data about exotic peoples” (24). According to this view traditional anthropology gives the anthropologist authority privilege over the people being researched; therefore, the analyzed people have no power over the ethnographic report.

Clifford extensively questions the ability of outsiders to examine properly people’s cultural language: “If ethnography produces cultural interpretations through intense research experiences, how is unruly experience transformed into an authoritative written account?” (25). The
use of the term “unruly” refers to actions performed by the members of the researched community that are outside the anthropologist’s domain. These actions include body language and meaningful acts that are considered text. Paul Ricoeur analyzes them in his article “The Model of Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text.” In his editorial the author exposes his temporal notion of discourse: “Discourse is always realized temporally and in a present, whereas the language system is virtual and outside time…it refers to its speakers by means of a complex set of indicators such as the personal pronoun…the ‘instance of discourse’ is self-referential” (92). Idiom, in contraposition to discourse, lacks “a world just as it lacks temporality and subjectivity; discourse is always about something…It is in discourse that the symbolic function of language is actualized” (92). Lastly the philosopher differentiates language from discourse: “Whereas language is only the condition for communication, for which it provides the codes, it is in discourse that all messages are exchanged. In this sense, language has not only a world, but an other-another person, an interlocutor to whom it is addressed” (92). These “unruly” elements are valuable for members of the same culture, since they contribute to the message in a way that transcends the printed words. In examining a culture, an anthropologist should be aware of these discursive performances.

The differences between language and discourse highlight the correlation between experience and dialogue. To understand speech, in Ricoeur’s terms, ‘you have to have been there’. Hurston acknowledges this idea when Janie, at the end of Their Eyes Were Watching God, has finished telling her life story to Phoebe and affirms “It’s uh known fact, Phoebe, you got tuh go there tuh know there” (285). Janie’s message parallels Ricoeur’s notion: you have to be there in order to understand it. The transformation of discourse into text is preceded by a participatory elocution or exchange among the participants. Dealing with Hurston’s dual role as subject and
object it is clear that she was an active discursive participant. She was aware of the fact that: “Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest” (Mules and Men 2). This emphasis on the “underprivileged” status of the informants is consistent with Clifford’s argument about anthropological fieldwork as a “privileged” source of data about the people being researched. The contrast between the “privileged” status of anthropology as a source and the “unprivileged” status of Hurston’s informants evidences, in my opinion, Hurston’s awareness of her status as a subject and object in her research and emphasizes her self-proclaimed status as both. As she continues to state in the introduction to Mules and Men:

> And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, ‘Get out of here!’ We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing (2)

Hurston reiterates the control that the informants have over the questioner, and she implies that it is a way of asserting power:

> The theory behind our tactics: ‘The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind. I’ll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song. (3)

The double meaning behind the informants’ tactics exposed in Hurston’s statement leads to different interpretations. On the one hand she declares that knowledge is power and domination. By disguising the truth about them, according to Hurston, black people control what others
(white people) infer about them. Her statement about writing being different from black people’s thoughts asserts the oral quality of African American culture which uses storytelling to transmit knowledge in opposition to the Western tradition which emphasizes writing as the source of knowledge; Hurston also criticizes the imposition of this system. Ricoeur’s analysis of discourse plays here an important role: understanding black people’s discursive skills is essential to interpret their interactions and the connotations they involve. What the informants think about is different from what they write; that is, thinking is not always correlated to writing, the imposed Western way of fixing history and knowledge. Hurston includes her persona in the text through the use of the pronoun ‘We’. As discussed by Ricoeur in his analysis of discourse, the subject in discourse asserts authority by using a referential pronoun, in Hurston’s case, ‘we’.

In her folkloric accounts she uses a discursive method to tell stories in which different narrators participate. They become the questioners and the informants. There is not a unique authoritative figure. According to Clifford informants are “crucial intermediaries, typically excluded from authoritative ethnography. The dialogical, situational aspects of ethnographic interpretation, tend to be banished from the final representative text” (40). As evidenced in the second tale of Mules and Men, Hurston continually emphasizes the presence of different informants:

The very next afternoon, as usual, the gregarious part of the town’s population gathered on the store porch. All the Florida- flip players, all the eleven- card layers. But they yelled over to me they’d be over that night in full. And they were.

‘Zora,’ George Thomas informed me, ‘you come to de right place if lies is what you want. Ah’m gointer lie up a nation”

Charlie Jones said, ‘Yeah, man. Me and my sworn buddy Gene Brazzle is here. Big Moose done come down from the mountain’. (19)
In this folk tale Hurston describes the atmosphere previous to the story’s account and introduces the different people that are taking part in it. She also provides information about some of the terms like “eleven-card layers” and “come down from the mountain”. Her clarification about the meaning of these expressions legitimates a different way of saying things, a different language. Being a participatory entity, or a triggering subject (she favors the telling of tales through her willingness to participate and document them), inside the account’s dynamic, Hurston gives insightful observations about her people: she highlights their love of “talk and song” (7). Such insights are examples of Hurston’s dual role: she participates in the stories and presents information in an anthropological way. Anthropological accounts require detachment from the described action. Hurston’s apparent distance from the information results from a mediation between her two roles. Critic Lynda Hoffman Jeep in “Creating Ethnography: Zora Neale Hurston and Lydia Cabrera” reflects on Hurston’s separation from the text:

An ethnography that recreates a culture, while at the same time inscribing the self, requires from the investigator both physical distance and intense proximity. Recreating a culture can be a conscious attempt by the ethnographer to bring again to life in writing that culture which he or she has experienced firsthand. A recreation of culture differs considerably from a sometimes sterile, analytical description of a people or group. (1) Hoffman-Jeep’s differentiation between recreation and description clarifies one of the particularities of Hurston’s ethnographic enterprise: Hurston’s vivid reproduction of the atmosphere in which the storytelling takes place together with the reproduction of its discourse is an active and conscious recreational exercise. Hoffman-Jeep adds:

The dichotomy of distance and proximity may entail physical travel to a specific geographic site and/ or an intellectual or emotional ‘journey’ through memory, in order to es-
tablsh the psychological distance prerequisite for achieving perspective and, oddly enough, what we call insight. Crucial here is the paradoxical and yet fundamental role that physical and emotional distances play in facilitating insight and recognition, while simultaneously promoting a scholar’s self-construction. (1)

In her fictional novels Their Eyes Were Watching Good and Jonah’s Gourd Vine Hurston transforms distance into a metaphor for the personal growth of her protagonists. For Janie searching for the horizon is a quest to find who she is and where she belongs. To John Buddy Pearson, the protagonist of Jonah’s Gourd Vine, distance is “the only cure for certain diseases…I know a man who could put lots of distance between him and this place before time, even wearing his two best suits- one over the other. He wouldn’t fool with baggage because it would hold him back” (99).

On her exploration of Hurston’s personal relationship to distance Hoffman-Jeep claims that Hurston “became intrigued by her own culture while studying in a culturally alien setting, armed with the theoretical framework of a scientific discipline” (4). Hurston’s enrollment in the study of anthropology not only signified her displacement from the South, but also meant the achievement of a new perspective on African American culture. Hemenway agrees with this claim and adds:

When Hurston became fascinated with anthropology, she acquired the relatively rare opportunity to confront her culture both emotionally and analytically, both as subject and as object…Hurston came to know that her parents and their neighbors perpetuated a rich oral literature without self-consciousness, a literature illustrating creativity seldom recognized and almost universally misunderstood. (22)
Having a new perspective on her culture made Hurston develop a new insight and understanding about her ethnicity. As she explains to her informants in the first folk tale of Mules and Men:

“Nope, Ah come to collect some old stories and tales and Ah know ya’l’ll know a plenty of’em and that’s why Ah headed straight for home.’

‘What you mean Zora, them big old lies we tell when we’re jus’ sittin’ around here on the store porch doin’ nothin’?’ asked B. Mosley…

‘Zora, don’t you come here and tell de biggest lie first thing. Who you reckon want to read all them old-time tales about Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear?’

‘Plenty of people, George. They are a lot more valuable than you might think. We want to seat them down before it’s too late.’

‘Too late for what?’

‘Before everybody forgets all of’em’. (8)

Hurston’s documentation of folk tales is a consequence of her travelling. Her necessity of documenting and preserving devalued folklore moved her to recover cultural history and to re-value it: she empowers oral tradition with values that historically were deprived from it. This strategy illustrates Milan Kundera’s idea about memory in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting: “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (39). Hurston’s struggle is to preserve the richness of African American culture. Emphasizing the importance of orality, as a plural construction of history, defies some Western parameters. Hurston’s positioning as both observer and participant makes her aware of not only what is expected and valued by the dominant social class, but also of what elements constitute a different system of values and tradition. In her book The Sanctified Church (1981) she exposes her knowledge of an African American way of expressing things, mimicking and interpreting reality as different from main-
stream society: it constitutes a different tradition with diverse values. Using her dual status Hurston asserts her double positioning and affirms the unique value of her “tight chemise”.

1.2 Lydia Cabrera’s search for a mythical past.

“Cultural history is rarely straightforward. Its discontinuities, misdirections, and contradictions are all compounded by contacts between cultures.”

Dickran Tshjian, *A Boatload of Madmen*

Clifford explores the influence that surrealism had in ethnography between the two World Wars. During the 1920s and 30s the two spheres developed in close proximity. Surrealism, in Clifford’s words, is “an aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions- that work to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious” (119). The introduction of views that are different from Western ones is central for ethnography: “To see culture and its norms- beauty, truth, reality- as artificial arrangements susceptible to detached analysis and comparison with other dispositions is crucial to an ethnographic attitude” (119). The relativity of cultural values was a step toward the development of surrealism and ethnography: “Modern surrealism and ethnography began with a reality deeply in question. Others appeared now as serious human alternatives; modern cultural relativism became possible” (118).

Clifford’s reflection about the interrelation between surrealism and ethnography points to the figure of Cuban folklorist Lydia Cabrera and identifies some of the motifs behind her fascination with the Afro- Cuban world. In 1920 Cabrera moved to Paris to study painting. While living there she came in contact with the surrealist and Negritude movements which increased her curiosity for Afro- Cuban culture. In the wake of this contact she proceeded to shift her interest from painting to folklore. The aesthetics of the surrealist group persuaded her plural appreciation
of reality. Cabrera’s travels away from her native surroundings and society, first as a student in Paris and secondly during her exile in Miami, gave her a new perspective on Cuba. Cabrera searched for tradition among the Afro-Cuban people: she explored the Afro-Cuban universe and culture in search of a mythical past that would connect this transcultural identity with its present in Cuba. It is within the past that Cabrera finds a meaningful present. In her book, *Itinerarios del insomnio* (1977), the author analyzes, while living in Miami, the necessity of returning to earlier times in order to confront exile and live in it: “Al no ofrecer alegrías el presente ni esperanzas el porvenir, se siente la necesidad de refugiarse en el pasado. Un bello pasado puede consolarnos de todas las fealdades del presente”\(^8\). When talking about the past in relation to making the present bearable, Cabrera, in my opinion, personalizes the needs of Afro-Cuban people, who after being brought from Africa to the New World were disconnected from their historic roots. Granting access to history and tradition, which was part of Cabrera’s agenda, enables a reconnection of the Afro-Cuban people to their ancestry through folklore. As Cabrera points out in relation to her status as exile, the previous times give meaning to the present, making it bearable. The past happiness, the one she found while living in Cuba researching Afro-Cuban folklore, allowed Cabrera to overcome the toughness of living outside her homeland. Similarly, Afro-Cuban people needed to touch their past and history in order to live in the moment: being aware of their cultural tradition provided the base to fully develop their individuality and culture in a different geographical enclave. Amy Nauss Millay in *Voces from the Fuente Viva* (2005) shares this thought: “El Monte reflects the author’s longing for a coherent and authentic source of tradition” (49). Millay analyzes Cabrera’s work in relation to that of other Cuban writers who

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\(^6\) Different speculations, such as her relationship with a powerful Afro-Cuban religious division, surround Cabrera’s exile in Miami, but the one that seems more plausible is her sexual orientation. Cabrera was homosexual.

\(^7\) ‘Transcultural’ is a term used by Fernando Ortiz’s in *Contrapunteo Cubano*.

\(^8\) Because the present does not offer any happy things and the future is not hopeful, one needs to take refuge in the past. A beautiful past can protect us from the present’s ugliness”
found in orality a way of addressing the multiple planes of reality. Millay highlights Cabrera’s focus on “realistic cultural representations. Their texts are authenticated by the portrayal of actual encounters with other voices. In both their narratives and ethnographies, oral language is organized into coherent accounts, and orality takes on an aesthetic function” (24). Such representation of different voices also illustrates “a desire to foster cultural diversity in an age of modernization” (25). Her argument reiterates Clifford’s analysis of surrealism and ethnography.

Dickran Tshjian states, in the introduction to this section, that cultural history is the result of multiple cultural encounters; in other words, history is a product of diversity. Modernity recognizes this multiplicity and as Clifford signals, cultural relativism is a strategy to examine this variety. Zora Neale Hurston states in *Dust Tracks on a Road*: “Nothing that God ever made is the same thing to more than one person. That is natural. There is no single face in nature, because every eye that looks upon it sees it from its own angle. So every man’s spice box seasons his own food” (45). Cabrera’s personal background in relation to the subject of her study echoes this interest in multiplicity. A member of the white upper class in Cuba, she enjoyed the privilege of having Afro-Cuban servants. Through her contact with them, she learned about folklore. It was during her stay in Paris that her interest for it shifted and transformed when she understood its importance in narrating a different existence. As Edna M. Rodriguez–Mangual states in *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction of an Afro-Cuban Cultural Identity* (2004) Cabrera’s writings: “struggled to redefine the identity of the otherwise marginalized Afro-Cubans and to reinsert their history into the broader understanding of Cuban identity. In so doing, she also rewrote the

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9 By orality I refer to storytelling as an aesthetic and anthropological tool of representation. This idea of orality will be explored on chapter 3 of this dissertation: it signals the opposition between Western ways of documenting and preserving history through writing whereas African based identities used storytelling to preserve and create history and tradition.

10 Millay analyzes the work of different Cuban writers who contribute to the aesthetic of orality during the 1920 and 1930s. In this quote she is not only referring to Cabrera.
narration of the nation”(3). Cabrera asserts the importance that folklore has in its oral elaboration of Afro-Cuban history; as a result, she authentically represents and includes it inside Cuba’s national discourse.

1.3 What she heard and saw- Cabrera’s modes of authorship.

“Someone who didn’t know how to ask wouldn’t know how to listen”

Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (10)

Cabrera explains in her introduction to *El Monte* that the stories she collected in the book were published in an accurate way: “El método seguido …lo han impuesto con sus explicaciones y digresiones, inseparables unas de otras, mis informantes, incapaces de ajustarse a ningún plan”11(8). For the composition of her ethnographic books Cabrera interviewed Afro-Cuban people. She fully asserted the value they had because her role as an interviewer left her with less authority over what her informers said, and therefore, over what she would write. Saying prevails over writing in this context because it is the way in which Afro-Cuban tradition constructed and transmitted history. Such privilege reflects Naylor’s idea about the relationship between knowing and listening: according to her a person that wants to know articulates a question and then is prepared to listen. When a person pays close attention to what others say that person leaves his or her personal notions and concentrates on understanding the message.

Rodriguez-Mangual interprets Cabrera’s omission of her authority within the text as a way of, ironically, authorizing the validity of the book: “What authorizes the validity of this book, according to Cabrera, is the loyalty to the voice of the witness (the Afro-Cuban subject) and not the author’s own position as a scientific researcher” (72). By divesting herself of power

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11 “without a trace o scientific pretension. The method I followed (if one can even remotely speak of a method in this book) has been imposed by my informants through their explanations and digressions, one inseparable from the other and incapable of conforming to a single plan (8)”.
Cabrera represents Afro-Cuban collective identity. Millay also emphasizes the plural vision of Cabrera’s portrayal of Afro-Cubans on her analysis:

The introductory disclaimer attests to Cabrera’s tendency to distance herself from the text and to imbue her black informants with authority. She asserts that her book records, objectively and without prejudice, what she heard and saw. Cabrera states that her black informants are the true authors of the book. However, the notion of an idealistic plural authorship is problematic. In the end, the ethnographer is responsible for making editorial decisions and producing the physical text; the gesture of giving voice is an act of authorship. (52)

The idea of giving voice and authority is something consistent with Cabrera’s political agenda. Giving say to marginal identities, she inscribes their voices inside the nation’s multiple discourse. She brings to the center a perspective of reality different from the mainstream one. I agree with Millay’s assertion about how Cabrera asserts her influence by privileging the informants’ agency, but my interpretation is that such vocal collage not only results from an ethnographic maneuver but also from a surrealist painter’s depiction of reality: one in which every fragment, every piece, is a clue to represent a multiple actuality. Clifford also makes a similar point when analyzing ethnographic surrealism. He asserts: “The surrealist moment in ethnography is that moment in which the possibility of comparison exists in unmediated tension with sheer incongruity” (14). Clifford uses Marx Ernst’s surrealist collage technique to talk about ethnographic surrealism. Ernst defines this practice as follows:

I am tempted to see in collage the exploitation of the chance meeting of two distant realities on an unfamiliar plane [this being quoted as a paraphrase and generalization of Lautreamont’s famous phrase: “Beautiful, like the chance meeting of a sewing machine
and an umbrella on a dissecting table"") or, to use a shorter term, the culture of systematic displacement and its effects...A ready-made fixed, once and for all (a canoe), finding itself suddenly in the presence of another and hardly less absurd reality (a vacuum cleaner), in a place where both of them must feel displaced (a forest), will by this very fact, escape to its naive destination and to its identity: it will pass from its false absolute, through a series of relative values, into a new absolute value, true and poetic, canoe and vacuum cleaner will make love. The mechanism of collage, it seems to me, is revealed by this very simple example. The complete transmutation, followed by a pure act, as that of love, will make itself known naturally every time the conditions are rendered favorable by the given facts: the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them .(140)

Clifford asserts that this painting technique and the new anthropology share an interest in the multiplicity of perspectives:

Collage brings to the work (here the ethnographic text) elements that continually proclaim their foreignness to the context of the text...To write ethnographies on the model of collage would be to avoid the portrayal of cultures as organic wholes or as unified, realistic worlds subject to a continuous explanatory discourse. The ethnography as collage would leave manifest the constructivist procedures of ethnographic knowledge; it would be an assemblage containing voices other than the ethnographer’s, as well as examples of ‘found’ evidence, data not fully integrated within the work’s governing interpretation. (149)

Ethnographic surrealism influenced Cabrera’s plural view of Cuban culture and inspired her to integrate those unacknowledged experiences (Afro-Cuban) inside its national discourse. Respect-
ing the different manner in which the informants expressed themselves, the author represents the folkloric multiplicity of dialogue. As Rodriguez-Mangual points out: “The voices of the witnesses do not speak in unison and for this reason cannot be considered a metonymy of a single group with a unified sociopolitical vision. For instance, *El monte* includes at least eight different ways of translating ‘wizard’ (brujo) in the syncretic forms that still exist in Cuba” (72). Cabrera’s documentation of this diversity asserts the complexity of Afro-Cuban culture; she does not homogenize Afro-Cuban speech in a unique expression. Such exercise opposes any mechanism of objectification by making impossible a homogenization of this unique discourse. Cabrera’s documentation of plurality at the same time exemplifies Tshjian’s view of history as a multiple expression. In order to be able to document plurality Cabrera needed to be aware of her informant’s occurrences; she was a listener. A listener, in Gloria Naylor’s quote, is someone who is willing to learn. In her introduction to *El monte* Cabrera emphasizes her listening role, and according to Rodriguez-Mangual, by doing so, she was not only counteracting her role as an author, but also her anthropological role: “Cabrera separates herself from science, the field of knowing, and she claims that she remains silent, since it is the voice of others that she is transcribing. This is her tactic of resistance, which suggests a negation of traditional ethnographic methodology” (71). Traditional ethnography transformed informants into objects for the anthropologist’s account of other identities and cultures. Transcribing the Afro-Cuban tales in their original languages asserts the informants’ power over the tales and reaffirms their role as subjects.

Cabrera’s divestment of authority in her representation of Afro-Cuban identity reflects also her involvement with the French Negritude Movement, a revolutionary ideology that Millay relates to ethnography: “Developments in the arts and ethnographic studies provided the impetus
for a new group of writers who espoused ideas of racial equality and a fervent self-awareness that came to be known as Negritude” (33). This racial consciousness led to the creation of a philosophy and literature faction that “advocated an appreciation of black cultural values and an end to an aesthetic that regarded blacks as exotic subjects” (33). Cabrera’s emphasis on her lack of authority over the text responds to this reclaiming of black identity and subjectivity. According to James Clifford the term “Negritude” coined by Aime Cesaire in the *Notebook of a return to the Native Land* (1939) refers to a “concrete, not abstract, and coming to consciousness” (177). Clifford’s use of the adjectives ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’ in this sentence reflects the highly political and active character of this section. In opposition to the abstract character of surrealism, Negritude enacts a concrete appreciation of black consciousness; such concreteness involves a solid identity awareness and subjectivity. Negritude counteracts any view of black subjects as exotic objects. Cabrera’s reproduction of the exchange with her informants reflects this idea of concreteness in that she interacts with them and represents faithfully the way in which they perceive and interpret actuality; therefore, proclaiming their role as subjects.

Cabrera’s apparent omission of her authority in the text is also a conscious way of avoiding any interpretation of her work as an exotic one: her racial identity, white, and her socio-economic class (wealthy Cuban), could have been used against her work. By apparently divesting herself of any authorial power she emphasizes her position in the participant-observer equation as a powerless one, she is a vehicle. In this regard Millay points out:

The anthropologist, whose credibility rests on ‘being there’, must also step out of the figured ‘inside’ to inscribe it. Cabrera employs rhetorical and discursive tools that enable her to be both ‘there’ and ‘outside’. Authorial exclamations in Lucumi, one of the several African languages that the slaves brought from Africa, reveal how the author straddles
two worlds, linguistic and cultural. They signal that Lydia is enough of an ‘insider’ to express herself (60).

When talking about the process of gathering information Cabrera admits finding some difficulties; she explains in the introduction to *El monte*:

Ganarse la confianza de estos viejos, fuentes vivas inapreciables a punto de agotarse sin que nadie entre nosotros se dé prisa en aprovecharlas para el estudio de nuestro folklore no siempre es tarea fácil. Ponen a prueba la paciencia del investigador, le toman un tiempo considerable. Se tarda comprender sus eufemismos, sus supersticiones del lenguaje, pues hay cosas que no deben decirse jamás por lo claro, y es preciso aprender a entenderlos, esto es, aprender a pensar como ellos. Hay que someterse a sus caprichos y resabios, a sus estados de ánimo, adaptarse a sus horas, deshoras y demoras desesperantes; hacer méritos, emplear la astucia en ciertas ocasiones y esperar sin prisa. No conocen la prisa que mina la vida moderna y enferma del espíritu de los blancos, la presura que es opresión, aprieto y congoja.  

It is interesting to analyze how Cabrera differentiates or displaces her informants, these old people, when expressing the importance that talking to them has for Cuban legends. Cabrera’s use of “these” when referring to her informants, and to “our folklore” when speaking of the compiled material reflects not only Millay’s notion about the anthropologist’s role inside the participant-observation method, but also signals Cabrera relationship to the audience. The use of the adjective “these” signals Cabrera’s separation from them. Cabrera includes ‘these inform-

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12 to gain the confidence of these old people, invaluable living sources about to fade away without whom none of us could rush to take advantage of our folklore, was not always an easy task. They challenge the patience of the investigator; they take a considerable amount of time. If one is slow in understanding their euphemisms, their superstitions about language, since there are things that should never be stated clearly, and it is necessary to learn how to understand them, that is to learn to think as they do. One must submit to their caprices and bad habits, to their moods, adapt to their hours, to their tardiness, and infuriating procrastinating, build up one’s credibility, employ cunning at certain times and wait patiently. They are not familiar with the rush that characterizes the modern and sick spirit of white people’s life which oppresses, depresses and enslaves them.”
ants’ within the larger national parameter through the use of ‘ours’, which illustrates Cabrera’s multicultural conception of Cuba. This displacement also reflects part of her cultural standpoint as a member of the white Cuban class; she describes the informant’s willingness to be interviewed as capricious. The way in which Cabrera’s emphasis on the slowness and capriciousness of her informants can be perceived as racist, but in my opinion, she highlights the particularity of the African based storytelling tradition which differs from the Western one. Her awareness of these differences attests to her positioning as different from Afro-Cuban; that is, while transcribing Afro-Cuban orality she discovers the differences between both cultures and learns about her own. This self-reflexive exercise can be inferred from the last sentence of the paragraph when she emphasizes the sick and oppressive nature of white discourse.

According to Edward Bruner in the introduction to *The Anthropology of Experience* (1986) this difference in narrative modes characterizes anthropological encounters: “Ethnography is embedded in the political process, dominant narratives are units of power as well as of meaning. The ability to tell one’s story has a political component; indeed, one measure of the dominance of a narrative is the space allocated to it in the discourse” (19). Cabrera’s centering of the importance of Afro-Cuban discourse is a way of including this particular speech inside Cuba’s national narrative. When describing the ‘behavior’ of her informants, the author emphasizes the differences in their use of time: “One must submit to their caprices and bad habits, to their moods, adapt to their hours, to their tardiness, and infuriating procrastinating, build up one’s credibility, employ cunning at certain times and wait patiently”(5). According to Bruner perspective is a key element in differentiating between anthropological experience and behavior;

Experience, in our perspective, is not equivalent to the more familiar concept of behavior.

The latter implies an outside observer describing someone else’s actions, as if one were
an audience to an event; it also implies a standardized routine that one simply goes through…We can have an experience but we cannot have a behavior; we describe the behavior of others, but we characterize our own experience. (5)

Cabrera’s description of her interaction with the informers perfectly fits Bruner’s differentiation between these two concepts; for her personal experience influences her interpretation of her informers’ behavior, and the departure from her cultural standpoint which influences her description. Bruner also states that “experience is culturally constructed” (6). Such an observation applies to Cabrera’s understanding of Afro-Cuban culture and the difficulties she encounters with it. Writing about Afro-Cuban culture, Cabrera continuously deconstructs by making comparisons her cultural assumptions to better understand this identity.

In his definition of the anthropology of experience Bruner states that it “sees people as active agents in the historical process who construct their own world” and as he further explains the people being studied are “the authors of ourselves” (12). The advantage of the anthropology of experience is that “beginning the study of culture through its expressions is that the basic units of analysis are established by the people we study rather than by the anthropologist as an alien observer” (14). Cabrera’s description of the method that she followed when compiling the folkloric stories that compose El monte\textsuperscript{13} stresses this approach to her informants; in other words, she allows the people she studies to interpret and tell their own experiences using their particular expressive terms. Her anthropological method, then, is very similar to Bruner’s definition of the anthropology of experience’s methodology. Given her anthropological training with Ortiz, Cabrera’s fieldwork consists in interpreting the expressions used by her confidants for a “home audience of other anthropologists.”\textsuperscript{14}, or in Cabrera’s case, for Cuban people in general. Accord-

\textsuperscript{13} To see the specific quotation I am referring to go to page 23
\textsuperscript{14} Bruner ,\textit{The Anthropology of Experience}. Introduction.
ing to Bruner: “all constructed cultures require belief; that is, the participants must have confidence in their own authenticity, which is one of the reasons why cultures are performed” (25).

Describing the phenomenon of possession, Cabrera similarly highlights the importance that faith in this occurrence has for Afro-Cubans:

Presé de convulsiones la mujerona bufaba y se golpeaba la cabeza que yo me figuraba en pedazos como un fruto, un coco o una calabaza que se hubiese lanzado con furia al suelo. Se incorporó, y aquella mole rugiente movida por una energía extraordinaria, inconcebiblemente ágil, dio varias vueltas de carnero. No podía comprender la ligereza de aquella mujer que cualquiera hubiese creído impedida por su excesiva gordura, y que en estado normal aparecía tan tranquila e indiferente; ni mucho menos, que un momento antes no se hubiese matado, fracturándose lógicamente el cráneo. Pero la lógica felizmente no reza con la fe (38).

Analyzing Cabrera’s description, Rodriguez Mangual stresses that: “Through repetition and experience, what seems implausible becomes real…To see is not enough; it presupposes faith. Faith itself, not the gaze, is what makes the testimonies believable” (79) this emphasis on the importance of faith also supports Bruner’s statement. It is faith and the agreement it presupposes in the reality of a cultural phenomenon that makes it coherent. Coherence not only characterizes Cabrera’s portrayal, on her perception of this occurrence, but on the informants’ unanimous acceptance of the phenomenon’s commonality and authenticity. The communal faith in the value of this experience characterizes Afro-Cuban culture, and Cabrera herself, after witnessing

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15 “In an attack of convulsions, the woman snorted and banged her head which I assumed to be smashed to pieces like a fruit, a coconut, a pumpkin furiously thrown against the floor. She sat up and that huge creature moved by an extraordinary energy, unbelievable agile, gave somersaults. I couldn’t understand the agility of that woman, who anybody would have thought to be crippled by her excessive fatness and that in a normal state she looked calm and relax much less the fact that, despite logic, she had not already cracked her head open. But logic, thank goodness, doesn’t have faith. Translated by Edna Rodriguez-Mangual (38)”
the extraordinary phenomenon proclaims her own faith in it\textsuperscript{16}. Such declaration, at the same time, parallels Bruner’s reflection about the personal and the professional in anthropological writing: “We systematically remove the personal and the experiential in accordance with our anthropological paradigms; then we reintroduce them so as to make our ethnographies more real, more alive”\textsuperscript{(9)}. Cabrera’s lack of formal anthropological academic training influences her ethnographic accounts, because there is no distance between the professional anthropological self and the personal one. Her experiencing of Afro-Cuban culture is often mediated by her informants who guide her through their culture. As Bruner further states: “Field experience is indeed a personal voyage of self-discovery” \textsuperscript{(15)}. This is very obvious in Cabrera’s description of Afro-Cuban culture because it comes hand in hand with observations about her own culture; for example, when she talks about the supernatural in relation to \textit{El monte}, as a place of spiritual connection and communication, she signals: “Todo cosa aparentemente natural, excede de los límites engañosos de la naturaleza: todo es sobrenatural. Verdad que solemos ignorar o que hemos olvidado con la edad, los blancos (14)”\textsuperscript{17}. Cabrera’s observation about the supernatural in everyday reality affirms the validity of belief, and clarifies that white people have lost touch with this important perspective through time. For Cabrera Afro-Cuban tradition is a source of coherent beliefs and her deepening in it responds to her longing for a tradition. It is within the mythical past that Cabrera found the universe that sustained her soul while living in exile. Living in Miami, Cabrera re-visited and re-worked all her folkloric books and she also re-published some of them. What she learned from Afro Cuban people marked her existence in the U.S.

\textsuperscript{16} I consider that Cabrera’s statement about logic and faith is a personal reflection about her positioning when interpreting the phenomenon of possession.

\textsuperscript{17} “Everything that seems natural exceeds the deceitful limits of nature: everything is supernatural. Truth that white people usually ignores or has forgotten with time”.
1.4 Hurston and Cabrera’s methods of authorial representation.

It occurred to me that the ethnic search is a mirror of the bifocality that has always been part of the anthropological rationale: seeing others against a background of ourselves, and ourselves against a background of others. The juxtaposing of exotic customs to familiar ones, or the relativizing of taken-for-granted assumptions, has always been the kind of cultural criticism promised by anthropology. This bifocality, or reciprocity of perspectives, has become increasingly important in a world of growing interdependence between societies: members of cultures described are increasingly critical readers of ethnography. No longer can rhetorical figures of the ‘primitive’ or the ‘exotic’ be used with impunity: audiences have become multiple…Cultures and ethnicities as sets are more like families of resemblances than simple typological trees.

Michael M. J. Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory”

Hurston and Cabrera share this discovery of the personal self in the anthropological research that Fischer analyzes. Applying the spyglass of anthropology Hurston understands her author and subject duplicity. Cabrera, painting the map of her own psyche, discovers the instrument to survive while living outside Cuba. Hurston and Cabrera’s different backgrounds influence their ethnographic accounts; they merged their personal self with the anthropological one and conveyed folkloric descriptions that were permeated by their own vivid experiences. Both writers had to distance themselves to recognize the value of the cultures they studied, influencing in this way what Hoffman Jeep identifies as the “dichotomy of distance and proximity in ethnographic representation” (1). Separating themselves from the researched culture they were able to acquire a new perspective and apply it to their analysis. This distancing from the culture influences their
mediation as authors: the distance between them and their texts results from their conviction about communal authority in African-based identities. They experienced their traditions and this influenced their understanding and ethnographic portrayal.

For Hurston her active participation in African American culture influences her authority portrayal- she is an active member in the tradition she documents. Her use of the pronoun “we” in her ethnographic material and folktales illustrates this understanding. Hurston’s apparent distancing from the folktales is a consequence of her anthropological training: she used the distancing to anthropologically validate her accounts. It is in her fictional works, even though they are highly influenced by her anthropological training, where Hurston omits such distancing.

Cabrera, on the other hand, participates in Afro Cuban culture, but she disguises her authority using other mechanisms: she is a guest who participates in Afro Cuban tradition, and sometimes she stresses this role\(^{18}\) to provide her interpretation and reaction to certain occurrences. Her emphasis on including Afro-Cuban tradition inside Cuban national history and identity is evident in the following statement: “No se comprenderá a nuestro pueblo sin conocer al negro. Esta influencia es hoy más evidente que en los días de la colonia. No nos adentremos mucho en la vida cubana, sin dejar de encontrarnos con esta presencia africana que no se manifiesta exclusivamente en la coloración de la piel” (9)\(^{19}\). According to Cabrera’s statement Africanity penetrates all levels of Cuban culture and is an active cultural influence. Throughout her folkloric tales she recognizes the recurrence of certain Afro-Cuban customs in Cuban life.

\(^{18}\) An example of this ‘guest role’ is her participation and documentation of possession. She acts as a viewer but she also reaffirms her participation in the phenomenon by providing her own opinions and reactions. At the end she acknowledges the validity/authenticity of it.

\(^{19}\) “We will not understand our nation if we do not know black people. Today this influence is more evident than during colonial times, since we will not go further inside Cuban life without finding this African presence that exceeds skin color.”
Despite their different relations to the subjects of their studies, both Hurston and Cabrera are what Kirin Nayan in “How Native is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist” defines as a particular anthropological type:

Instead of the paradigm emphasizing a dichotomy between outsider/insider or observer/observed, I propose that at this historical moment we might more profitably view each anthropologist in terms of shifting identification amid a field of interpreting communities and power relations. The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those we study are multiple and in flux. Factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status. Instead, what we must focus our attention on is the quality of relations with the people we seek to represent in our texts: are they viewed as mere fodder for professionally self-serving statements about a generalized Other, or are they accepted as subjects with voices, dilemmas.(672)

The agency that characterizes Hurston’s and Cabrera’s depictions of their informers justifies the authors’ distance from the texts. Regarding their positioning as anthropologists inside their text, Nayan also provides an interesting definition that fits both authors: “I argue for the enactment of hybridity in our texts; that is, writing that depicts authors as minimally bicultural in terms of belonging simultaneously to the world of engaged scholarship and the world of everyday life” (672). Such involvement appears in the writings of both ethnographers, because they experience and represent the cultures they study in such way.

Both Hurston and Cabrera agree on respecting the ways in which their informants expressed themselves. They saw in the African American and Afro-Cuban vernacular the distinc-
tive voices and representative parameters of unique and cross-cultural identities. Michael M.J. Fischer emphasizes the identity’s ‘particular voice’ as a postmodern element. According to him:

It is a matter of finding a voice or style that does not violate one's several components of identity. In part, such a process of assuming an ethnic identity is an insistence on a pluralist, multidimensional, or multifaceted concept of self: one can be many different things, and this personal sense can be a crucible for a wider social ethos of pluralism.(1)

Hurston and Cabrera exemplify this idea of a specific voice not only in their cultural representations, but also in their own experience: while trying to discover and examine African American and Afro-Cuban identities and voices, they discovered their own. The conflict between the integration of the personal and the anthropological selves made them first define who they were in relationship to what they studied and researched. Hurston in her spyglass quote emphasized her identity first as an African American woman and identifies the anthropological base as the point of departure to integrate this experience in Western anthropological discourse, whereas Cabrera’s lack of formal ethnographic training works at the same time to critique anthropological discourse. Their voices and politics will be analyzed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 2: AN ACT OF BECOMING: THE TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITY.

“I have no separate feelings about being an American citizen and colored. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company! It’s beyond me.”

Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (3)

In *Forging Diaspora* (2010), historian Frank Guridy analyzes how “the idea of belonging to a larger African diaspora led to a transcultural understanding among people of African descent in the U.S. and Cuba” (5). Guridy argues that these relationships existed since slavery: “Since the era of slavery, and particularly after the U.S. intervention into the Cuban War for independence in 1898 Afro-Cubans and African Americans had reached across cultural and linguistic differences to develop cultural exchanges, economic relationships and political solidarities” (16). Guridy examines the institutional relationships between these peoples led by the Tuskegee institute, the artistic exchanges promoted by the Harlem Renaissance and Afrocubanist movement, and lately the relationships between African American and Afro Cuban women. These transatlantic exchanges draw a map of multiple associations between the two nations.

The figures of Hurston, Cabrera, and their mentors Melville Herskovits and Fernando Ortiz, who engaged in an anthropological debate about transculturation during the 1930s, illustrate Guridy’s idea of transatlantic, transcultural (using Fernando Ortiz’s terminology) and intellectual exchanges between U.S. and Cuba. Ortiz and Herskovits discussed the importance of finding an appropriate terminology to describe the process of identity formation in the New World. Using their dispute about the importance of the African cultural past as an essential ap-
proach to understand African-based identities in the new world, I argue that Hurston’s and Cabrera’s portrayals of African American and Afro-Cuban modes of being follow Ortiz’s 1940s new anthropological approach, transculturation. Through transculturation Hurston and Cabrera implemented ethnographic portrayals of African descent people that challenged traditional anthropological modes. Through their representations of African-based cultures, Hurston and Cabrera also express their political ideas regarding race and culture. In their folkloric accounts, Hurston and Cabrera give space to resistance and ultimately picture transculturation from within: they describe how their anthropological subjects define themselves and how they perceive and define reality from their own cultural standpoint.

In 1928 Zora Neale Hurston wrote the anthologized essay, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” Here she expresses her appreciation of her individuality as a black person in the U.S. According to Hurston, the act of being black does not oppose her identity as U.S. citizen; that is, despite the segregation and racial tensions that blacks face in the U.S., Hurston maintained that their national identity is still U.S. citizen. Both selves, the black (African) and the American (U.S. nationality), are perfectly blended in Hurston’s persona. The author celebrates this coexistence and criticizes any dismembering attempt. For Hurston “being colored” is an act of becoming, of realizing that one’s black identity in the U.S. constitutes a different culture. As she explains in this essay, while living in Eatonville she enjoyed a “front porch experience”, one that allowed her to observe and study people. Through her observations she found differences between Southerners and Northerners, white and black. The author welcomed everybody to her city, and throughout her interactions, she inferred different assumptions about the visitors. It is in her analysis of these cultural variations that the anthropologist Hurston talks and establishes parameters of observation and study.
Hurston’s anthropological training under Boas is evident in the observations she conveys in this essay. The author’s recognition of her racial identity reveals her observations about white people’s behavior and vice versa; in other words, by observing the differences in interactions between blacks and whites, she describes a significant aspect of U.S. culture. An example of this is Hurston’s commentary about the different reactions from people when she welcomed them to Eatonville. Those who stayed and engaged with the community were of African descent, whereas those that only travelled through the city without stopping were white:

During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. They liked to hear me “speak pieces” and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop. Only they didn’t know it. The colored people gave no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county—everybody’s Zora. (1)

According to Hurston she “became colored” when she left Eatonville at the age of thirteen. Moving away from her beloved town made Hurston confront the appreciation that other people, U.S. society in general, had of her: “I was now a little colored girl. I found out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown—warranted not to rub nor run” (1). As expressed in Hurston’s words, the external view of Hurston’s character (the mirror) was quickly racially standardized and the author internalized this interpretation, but at the end of the essay she embraces and celebrates her ethnic cultural identity. Hurston’s mirror metaphor illustrates the importance that place and community have for the author’s personality, and also points out the public versus private conflict discussed in chapter one of this study.
Hurston’s acceptance and celebration of her double consciousness is a characteristic of the 1930s assimilationist anthropology. Talking about the anthropological trends of the 1930s in relation to the idea of ethnography as a narrative, as a “genre of storytelling,” anthropologist Edward Bruner observes that “the dominant story constructed around Native American culture change saw the present as disorganization, the past as glorious, and the future as assimilation” (139). He explains further: “Given this 1930s vision of the future and the convention of reconstructing the ‘aboriginal’ past as an integrated culture, the present could only be interpreted as disintegration, framed as it was by both glorious integrity and eventual disappearance” (142). According to Bruner, after the 1930s narrative of assimilation, came the narrative of resistance, one that saw “the past oppression, present resistance, and future resurgence” (143). I find that Bruner’s argument parallels a similar shift that occurred in African American Literature, specifically in the figures of Hurston whose word represents the 1930s trend, and Richard Wright, whose 1940 works are an example of the resistance literature.

In her portrayal of Afro-Cuban identity Lydia Cabrera emphasized the idea of transculturation: a theory of hybrid identity elaborated by her brother-in-law, Fernando Ortiz. Unlike Hurston, Cabrera did not have formal anthropological training, but Ortiz’s academic authority influences her work. Cabrera’s representation of Afro-Cuban folklore and identity differed sharply from that of Ortiz’s due to the influence of her formal training in painting and the ideology of the Negritude movement. Establishing the differences between Cabrera’s and Ortiz’s portrayals of Afro-Cuban culture in relation to the idea of transculturation leads to a better understanding of Cabrera’s enterprise.

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20 Although Bruner uses Native American culture as the subject of his reflection on ethnography as a narrative, I apply his model/ideas to both Hurston and Cabrera’s ethnographies.
21 Edward Bruner, ‘Ethnography as Narrative’ in The Anthropology of Experience
Both Hurston and Cabrera exemplify in their folkloric tales the idea of transculturation. I have not found any evidence of a connection between them; that is, there is no proof of a direct personal or intellectual relationship between them. What I have found is that anthropologists Melville Herskovits (Hurston was his GRA) and Fernando Ortiz knew each other. They maintained a debate during the 1930s about the terminology used to talk about the process of identity creation. Ortiz mentions Hurston’s work in *Contrapunteo cubano* (1941) to talk about African based spirituality, but how his knowledge of her work influenced Cabrera’s or vice versa remains uncertain.

2.1 Exploring the past and its influences in the present.

Herskovits’s and Ortiz’s approaches to the study of African-based identities in the U.S. and Cuba highlight the importance that an African cultural past has for these new world Africans. The cultural patterns that they brought from Africa should be taken into account to explain how they negotiate their identity in the New World and how mainstream/ Western society perceives them. Herskovits’s argument in *Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) focuses on challenging the prevalent myths about people of African descent in the New World: “The Negro is thus a man without a past” (2). The dismissal of African people’s past before coming to the New World results in an oppressive force that negatively affects their present. Herskovits identifies the lack of proper research as the cause of this misleading notion:

Problems in Negro research attacked without assessment of historic depth, and a willingness to regard the historical past of an entire people as the equivalent of its written history, can clearly be seen to have made for confusion and error in interpretation, and misdirected judgment in evaluating practical ends. (xxvii)
Herskovits traveled to Africa and became aware of the cultural differences among African and Western societies. He maintained that one of the most important cultural differences between Africans and Westerners is the primacy of oral versus written history. Because African societies generally use storytelling to construct and maintain historical accounts and memory, Western culture, which privileges written history, does not validate or interpret oral accounts as historical. Herskovits emphasizes that understanding and valuing African cultural past history is essential for its present configuration: “A people that denies its past cannot escape being a prey to doubt of its value today and of its potentialities to the future” (32). In order to dismantle the prejudice about black people in the US it is necessary to counteract this negation. Herskovits asserts that this is the purpose of his ethnographic study:

To give the Negro an appreciation of his past is to endow him with the confidence in his own position in the country and in the world which we must have, and which he can best attain when he has available a foundation of scientific fact concerning the ancestral cultures of Africa and the survival of Africanisms in the New World. (32)

Herskovits’s examination of the African past in the New World challenges negative stereotypes and proves how it influences current U.S. history. Herskovits’s ethnographic studies present slaves in the Americas as historical agents, not passive entities. His anthropological analysis is a constructive one because it states the capacity of action of this population group. Herskovits traces through the past a tradition of influence, voice, and authority often omitted from historical accounts. His documentation of different African cultural traditions serves to examine the base in which African American identity developed in the U.S, and as Sidney W. Mintz explains in the book’s introduction, to “Have direct political consequences for the status of Ameri-
cans” (xvii). Herskovits’s anthropological study has political implications that aim to make the case for equality and justice for black people.

Fernando Ortiz also documented the African legacy in Cuba. In his first book, *Los negros brujos* (1902), an ethnology treaty about crime in Cuba, he traces the origins of Afro-Cuban spirituality. Like Herskovits, he examines the previous derogatory literature written about this topic, but unlike Herskovits Ortiz does not criticize it: he uses it to support his view of African cultural traces (above all the spiritual ones) as the cause of crime in the country. According to Edna Rodríguez-Mangual in *Lydia Cabrera and the Creation of an Afro-Cuban Identity* Ortiz’s approach in this book is an othering one:

Ortiz argued that uneducated blacks and their *religions brujas*, or “religion of witchcraft”, constituted the primitivism and savagery at the root of all violence and immorality in Cuban society. He thus perpetuated the Western paradigm that positions blacks as the Other, the negative shadow of whites and their culture. The construction of an Other is essential in defining Cuban national identity, since it provides the basis for domination and subjugation (30).

In Ortiz’s vision African spirituality is the cause of crime in Cuba. In his analysis about Afro-Cuban identity in relation to Cuba’s national progress he characterizes the first one as spiritually and culturally degenerated and his role, in its relationship with the national enterprise, is an intervening one: he has to cure Afro-Cubans of their degeneration. According to Edmundo Paz-Solán in “Nación (enferma) y narración: El discurso de la degeneración en ‘Pueblo enfermo’ de Alcides Arguedas”, this kind of rhetoric is characteristic of the “degenerative discourse” that permeated the European *fin de siècle*. As he further explains:
Este discurso, basado en las revolucionarias teorías de Darwin y unido al desarrollo de la medicina psicológica, intentó explicar el paradójico hecho de que la retórica del progreso, el mito dominante en la civilización occidental desde los tiempos de la Ilustración, venía crecientemente acompañada por una sensación de profunda alienación espiritual, degradación y pobreza. El discurso de la degeneración, al identificar las causas del "lado oscuro del progreso", el costo humano de la modernización, nació de la crisis del discurso del progreso y se convirtió con rapidez en un mito alternativo a éste, tan o más poderoso que él en los círculos científicos e intelectuales europeos del periodo 1880-1900.

The goal of this “degenerative discourse” was to find the causes of the negative sides of progress: spiritual alienation, poverty and degradation, and to treat them. Paz- Solán’s timing of this dialectic approach, at the close of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, coincides with the publication of Los Negros brujos. Ortiz’s identifies in the Afro- Cuban people the “dark side of progress” and holds them responsible for Cuban progress’s slowing down. For the Cuban anthropologist, this African- based culture corrupts his nation’s progress, as if Cuba was a biological entity attacked by an illness, a virus, that of the Afro- Cuban presence. Ortiz states in the book’s prologue that his goal is to prepare Afro-Cubans to serve the national advancement project:

Tómense, pues, las observaciones de este libro en el sentido real y desapasionado que las inspira, y rectifíquense si son equivocadas, y complétense si deficientes, que todo esfuer-

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22 This discourse based on Darwin’s revolutionary theories and psychiatry tried to explain the paradox behind the rhetoric of progress: the dominant myth of Western society since Enlightenment which often came accompanied by a sensation of deep spiritual alienation, degradation and poverty. The degenerative discourse, when identifying the causes of progress’s ‘dark side’: the human cost of modernization, was born out of this crisis of the progress discourse and rapidly became an alternative myth more or less powerful than that of the scientific and intellectual European circles of the 1880-1900 period.
Ortiz identifies in Afro-Cuban culture, especially in its spiritual practices, the causes of Cuba’s underdevelopment. Written as an essay in criminology, this book illustrates Afro-Cuban civilization as the “ulcer of the country.” Such biological image perfectly matches Paz-Solán’s definition of the organic rhetoric characteristic of progress’s scientific discourse.

Ortiz’s monographic essay about crime in Cuba emphasizes the importance that observation has for the development of his anthropological study. He observes the three ethnicities that compose Cuban population: black, white and yellow, and after identifying their past origins he

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23 "Take the observations contained in this book in the real and objective sensibility that inspired them, rectify them if they are mistaken, complete their deficiencies, for all intellectual contributions to the scientific knowledge of the Afro-Cuban underworld must be a part of a collaborative effort to sanitize their specimens, regenerate their parasites, promote the moral progress of our society, and welcome the advent of those ideals, no less noble for their lack of definition, housed in every honorable and objective mind. We must strive toward the correction of our bereaved humanity, so that selfishness might thrive, so that the natural evolution can run its natural course free of ethnic prejudices and aberrant, artificial factors. May the forces of nature continue to flow in harmony with feelings of love and universal cooperation, which are still not as typically human as our species would like to believe. For the human species remains deluded by the anthropocentric ideas that have cradled it for so many centuries.”

24 Los Negros brujos (4)
25 Discurso del pueblo enfermo.
theorizes about their present situation. Ortiz primarily focuses, as said before, on Afro-Cuban ethnicity and he supports his argument with the work different researchers have previously conducted on African culture. Ortiz, like Herskovits, uses the past to comprehend the present. Despite all his negative commentaries about the black population in Cuba, he is aware of how the past influences this population’s present behavior.

Problematic in Ortiz’s cultural approach is that he examines Afro-Cuban culture against a white paradigm; that is, he is unable to perceive the integrity of this culture and its tradition. Ortiz’s voice in the text is also the only source of authority (in this way he contrasts Cabrera’s representation of Afro Cuban identity). His depiction of African culture as inferior sounds hegemonic and elitist. Another element of Ortiz’s imperialistic approach is his advocacy for science to take over religious beliefs; in other words, he claims for the implementation of a scientific approach to defeat what he considers to be superstitions: African–based religions. This logical approach to reality will “conquer” the space given to spirituality.

Ortiz’s views of Afro-Cuban populations evolve through time and lose their racist implications. In 1941 he publishes Contrapunteo cubano del azúcar y el tabaco where he exposes his theory about transculturation, or the creation of hybrid identities in Cuba. In this book he includes the different ethnic groups that are present on the island and portrays Cuba as a multicultural nation. Ortiz adopts a Cuban musical technique, the Counterpoint, that uses two voices, that of the sugar and tobacco, and creates a discussion about Cuba’s economic history. Throughout the dialogue between the sugar and the tobacco Ortiz elaborates his theory about transculturation, a new anthropological term that will substitute the one in use, acculturation, and fairly describe the formation of hyphenated identities. This difference in terminology led to a debate between him and Melville Herskovits, Hurston’s mentor.

26 Contrapunteo cubano del azúcar y del tabaco. (27)
2.2 Transculturation and Acculturation: A Debate.

In his 1939 introduction to *Contrapunteo cubano*, Malinowski states: “There is probably nothing more misleading in scientific work than the problem of terminology, of the *most juste* for each idea, of finding the expression that fits the facts and thus becomes a useful instrument of thought instead of a barrier to understanding” (xxxv). In this book Ortiz issued the expression “transculturation” to talk about the phenomenon of cultural creation. According to Ortiz this new term will substitute “acculturation,” the term that Herskovits uses in *Myth of the Negro Past*. In the preface to his book, Herskovits defines, acculturation in the following manner:

> It was now evident that if we accepted the proposition that culture-contact produces cultural change, and that cultures of multiple origin do not represent a cultural mosaic, but rather become newly reintegrated, then the next essential step was to ascertain the degree to which these reconciliations had actually been achieved, an where, on this *acculturative* continuum, a given manifestation of the process of reworking these elements might lie.

From this came the concepts of *retention* and *reinterpretation*. In terms of this approach, research was pointed not to the question of what Africanisms were carried over in unaltered form, but how, in the contact of Africans with Europeans and American Indians, cultural integration had been achieved. For the essence of the reinterpretative process lies in differentiating cultural form from cultural sanction. Under contact, a new form can be accorded a value that has a functioning role into which it can be readily fitted; or an old form can be assimilated to a new one, the most obvious example of this being the syncretisms that have been mentioned between African Gods and Catholic saints.²⁷

Herskovits’s emphasis on the study of syncretism to support his definition of acculturation focuses mainly on how spiritual systems that combine elements of two different religious traditions

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²⁷ Pages xxxvi-xxxvii
develop. For Ortiz this definition of *acculturation* is problematic when applied to cultural identities developed from syncretism. As Ortiz further explains:

> With the reader’s permission, especially if he happens to be interested in ethnographic and sociological questions, I am going to take the liberty of employing for the first time the term *transculturation*, fully aware of the fact that it is a neologism. And I venture to suggest that it might be adopted in sociological terminology, to a great extent at least, as a substitute for the term *acculturation*, whose use is now spreading. (97)

Ortiz specifies that “transculturation” surpasses the anthropological discourse and applies to other disciplines. The ethnographic analysis of Cuba developed in *Contrapunteo* examines how the economic enterprises of growing tobacco and sugar parallel socio-cultural developments on the island. The different cultures that integrate Cuba influence these processes. Ortiz pays attention to the past and origin of the different traditions integrated in the offspring, the new born identity:

> The aboriginal human basis of society was destroyed in Cuba, and it was necessary to bring in a complete new population, both masters and servants. This is one of the strange social features of Cuba, that since the sixteenth century all its classes, races and cultures, coming in by will or by force, have all been exogenous and have all been torn from their places of origin, suffering the shock of this first uprooting and a harsh transplanting. With the white men came the culture of Spain…Some of the white men brought with them a feudal economy…while others, white too, were urged on by mercantile and even industrial capitalism, which was already in its early stages of development…And all of them, warriors, friars, merchants, peasants, came in search of adventure, cutting their links with an old society to graft themselves on another, new in climate, in people, in food, customs and hazards…With the whites came the Negroes, first from Spain, at that time full of
slaves from Guinea and the Congo, and then directly from the Dark Continent…The Negroes brought their bodies, their souls, but not their institutions nor their implements. They were of different regions, races, languages, cultures, classes, ages, sexes, thrown promiscuously into the slave ships, and socially equalized by the same system of slavery. No other human element has had to suffer such a profound and repeated change of surroundings, cultures, class and consciousness. (100-101)

It is essential to notice how Ortiz discusses the different historical origins of the inhabitants of the island. Talking about the African descended population, Ortiz emphasizes how the slave past differentiates Afro-Cubans from the rest of the population. He further explains:

They were transferred from their own to another more advanced culture, like that of the Indians; but the Indians suffered their fate in their native land, believing that when they died they passed over to the invisible regions of their own Cuban world. The fate of the Negroes was far more cruel; they crossed the ocean in agony, believing that even after death they would have to recross it to be resurrected in Africa…The Indians and the Spaniards had the support and comfort of their families, their kinfolk, their leaders, and their places of worship in their sufferings; the Negroes found none of this. They were the most uprooted of all. (102)

According to Ortiz, slaves’ inability to bring their own political and religious institutions led them to find alternative ways of worshipping to fit their needs. These beliefs were transformed into the slaves’ ways to resist and negotiate their existence in the New World. Analyzing the different steps involved in the formation of a new cultural identity, Ortiz argues that the word transculturation perfectly encapsulates the different stages:
I am of the opinion that the word *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a decculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation. In the end, as the school of Malinowski’s followers maintains, the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them.” (102-103)

Ortiz’s definition of transculturation echoes Herskovits’s assertion of the validity and influence that the past has in nowadays culture. Transculturation also entails a critique of the (previously discussed) proven wrong myth of black people having no past. Both anthropologists entered a correspondence about the viability of the terms acculturation and transculturation while engaging in a linguistic debate. Enrico Mario Santí in his introduction to the 2002 Spanish edition of *Contrapunteo cubano* analyzes this exchange through the correspondence between the two anthropologists.28 As Herskovits states in his letter to Ortiz:

Certainly, it is necessary for me to enter a very strong demur to the term ‘acculturation’ advanced on pages xvi-xvii by Malinowski. It is significant, I think, that he does not document this passage; certainly, in our use of the term in this country there is no implication of handing down a superior civilization to a ‘savage ‘folk. The term as we use it in our scientific work is indeed entirely colorless and in my book I have stressed the necessity

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28 Pages 785-789 of this edition.
for studies in this field which concern the results of contact between two primitive folk.

“(786)

Herskovits’s argument remarks how the differences in language, culture, and school between him and Ortiz are the causes of their dispute. He continues to mention Malinowski as a source of conflict and he assures that: “If anybody has been guilty of discussing cultural contact in terms of ‘inculcation’—to use Malinowski own word—it has been his own students writing of ‘culture contact’ rather than those of our country who are concerned with the scientific problem of acculturation”(786). Herskovits refers to Malinowski’s words in the introduction to the English edition of Cuban Counterpoint; where Malinowski defends and supports Ortiz’s theory of transculturation and agrees with Ortiz’s demur of the fashionable “acculturation term” which, according to him, has monopolized the field (he specifies that the term is mainly used in North America)29:

The word acculturation contains a number of definite and undesirable etymological implications. It is an ethnocentric word with a moral connotation. The immigrant has to acculturate himself; so do the natives, pagan or heathen, barbarian or savage, who enjoy the benefits of being under the sway of our great Western culture. The word acculturation implies, because of the preposition ad with which it starts, the idea of a terminus ad quem. The ‘uncultured’ is to receive the benefits of ‘our culture’; it is he who must change and convert into ‘one of us’. (x)

The argument among the three academics has also a moral basis because the main dispute originates around the “fairness” of each one of the terms. They resist the idea of seeing those who do not belong to the dominant Western cultural perspective as inferiors; in other words, they debate the necessity of finding an appropriate term that does not have any leveling connotations. They avoid an “othering” view of those cultures that come in contact with the Western world. Ortiz’s

29 Page x of the introduction- Malinowski emphasizes the use that North American authors do of the term.
hypothesis about transculturation supports an argument in which the two cultures involved in the formation of a new one (the offspring of the relationship between the tobacco and the sugar) are agents; that is; his transcultural analysis provides agency to both of them. Malinowski also highlights this essential implication of transculturation:

It requires no effort to understand that by the use of the term *acculturation* we implicitly introduce a series of moral, normative, and evaluative concepts which radically vitiate the real understanding of the phenomenon. The essential nature of the process being described is not the passive adaptation to a clear and determined standard of culture…Every change of culture, or, as I shall say from now on, every transculturation, is a process in which something is always given in return for what one receives, a system of give and take. It is a process in which both parts of the equation are modified, a process from which a new reality emerges.(xi)

Analyzed in a historical context the idea of transculturation celebrates the plural character of Cuban nationality after becoming independent from Spain in 1898 and from the U.S. in 1902. Ortiz’s book and theory are recognition of Cuba’s new identity as an independent nation. Ortiz’s examination of different cultural pasts is essential for the elaboration of his transcultural idea.

Hurston’s and Cabrera’s works intersect Ortiz’s and Herskovits’ approaches in that both acknowledge the great importance that going back to the communal past has for African descendants. These two authors validate in their folkloric enterprises a collective unconscious (in the Jungian sense); therefore they make the case for preserving, as Toni Morrison argues in “Rootedness: the Ancestor as a Foundation,” the future of the community. It is this preservation which gives birth to what Ortiz defined as transculturation: a process of exchange in which the two cultures that give birth to the new, transcultural one, have an active role. The two cultures
influence each other (without imposition of one over the other) resulting in a new culture that combines elements from both. This recognition provides stability to the identity of the newborn child.30

2.3 Hurston’s and Cabrera’s Views of Transculturation.

In his article, “From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation,” Richard A. Rogers examines different critical models for the study of cultural appropriation, phenomena that he defines as “the use of a culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture” (474). This occurrence is the result of the influence that politics, and the control they exercise over cultural productions, have in the relationship between the traditions that come into contact with each other. The theories about cultural appropriation that Rogers compares are exchange, dominance, exploitation and transculturation. Of these four parameters, Rogers favors transculturation from the very first because, according to him, it “posits culture as a relational phenomenon constituted by acts of appropriation, not an entity that merely participates in appropriation” (474). Rogers’s identification of transculturation as a “relational phenomenon” is essential in his definition. He affirms later that “Identity and culture are not discrete entities, but relationships, intersections” (492). Not only does Ortiz articulates this plural view of culture (in general), as a fabric woven through the contact of different cultures, but Hurston’s and Cabrera’s folkloric records illustrate it.

In the opening paragraph of her essay ‘How It feels to be Colored me’, Hurston makes the following remark about her ancestry: “I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenu-

30 Here I am extending my argument by referring again to Ortiz’s definition of transculturation which follows: “en todo abrazo de culturas sucede lo que en la copula general de los individuos: la criatura siempre tiene algo de ambos progenitores, pero también siempre es distinta de cada uno de los dos” (Contrapunteo 260) (“In every cultural encounter it happens what happens when two people copulate: the creature has something of both parents, but at the same time is different from each one of them”)

ating circumstances except the fact that I am the only negro in the United States whose grandfa-
ther on the mother’s side was not an Indian chief”(1). Hurston’s acknowledgement of the pres-
eence of Native American heritage in the African American population reflects Roger’s idea
about culture and transculturation. Affirming that her grandfather was not an Indian chief, Hurston signals that she is in some way an exception to the generalizing stereotype about African Americans who in order to diminish their African heritage claim to have Indian ancestry. Hurston states that she embraces her African-American identity and also points out the transcultural racial dialogue in which African-Americans engage talking about their racial status in the U.S. According to Laura L. Lovett in her article “African and Cherokee by Choice: Race and Re-
sistance under Legalized Segregation” Hurston’s claim about her lack of Native American heri-
tage reflects ongoing debates about racial diversity that took place at the beginning of the twenti-
eeth century. As Lovett further explains:

At a time when governments in the United States were codifying ways to keep the ‘White’ and ‘Colored’ races separate in order to keep them unequal *and* unmixed, articu-
lating African American-Native American interrelations was an important form of re-
sistance for people of mixed and African American ancestry. Claiming Native American identity or Native American costume, were ways of defying a demeaning biracial code that imposed its own system of identity. Articulating African American and Native American interrelations was, thus, not merely a matter of defiance, but a matter of re-
claiming one’s identity…Legalized segregation was oppressive and its influence perva-
sive, but the over-simplicity of its system of racial classification was obvious. Diversity not recognized by law was recognized by people of color and reclaimed in their re-
sistance. (223)
Hurston illustrates the relationship between Native Americans and African-Americans in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when before the hurricane Janie sees a lot of Seminoles leaving Everglades. Some people take this population’s movement as a sign of the hurricane’s approaching whereas others ignored them. Hurston illustrates in the novel the cultural relations that these two groups of people maintained. The contrast between her personal statement about her lack of Native American heritage and the transcultural dialogue she recreates in the novel, I argue, is Hurston’s way of depicting difference: the division between race and culture. How culture, like people of color’s racial identity is the result of an intermixing, of a relationship, that is, of transculturation. She reiterates this idea when in *Dust Tracks on Road* she states:

Light came to me when I realized that I did not have to consider any racial group as a whole. God made them duck by duck and that was the only way I could see them. I learned that skins were no measure of what was inside people. So none of the Race clichés meant anything anymore…Therefore I saw no curse in being black, nor no extra flavor by being white…I am a mixed blood, it is true, but I differ from the party line in that I neither consider it an honor nor a shame…

But it is a well-known fact that no matter where two sets of people come together, there are bounds to be some in-betweens…I maintain that I have been Negro three times—a Negro baby, a Negro girl and a Negro woman. Still, if you have no received no clear cut impression of hat the Negro in America is like, then you are in the same place with me. There is no *The Negro* here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover as all, except My people! My people!” (170-171)

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31 Pages 228-229 of my edition.
Hurston’s accomplishment is her ability to surpass the sometimes “generalized” view about culture and get to the individual.

Cabrera’s work articulates a similar approach to the understanding of transcultural identities. As the sister in law of Ortiz, Cabrera’s anthropological understanding is greatly influenced by his work. Although Ortiz is her point of departure, Cabrera’s work quickly diverges from his model and becomes unique. Cabrera’s awareness of Cuba’s national transcultural identity is evident in her documentation of different spiritual practices and phenomenon shared by the different cultures of the island. She uses different informants to document the same phenomenon to illustrate Afro-Cuban plurality in all levels. In the introduction to *El Monte* she asserts that the presence of blackness, as a racial and cultural element, is something intrinsic to Cuba’s national identity, but she also expands this view to how different cultures perceive and elaborate similar traditions. In her portrayal of the marvelous real (magic) she talks about how the Chinese performance of the marvelous real is one of the most powerful ones. She also talks about this performance among people from the Canary Islands. Cabrera’s analysis of this occurrence from different perspectives echoes Ortiz’s view of Cuban plural character. Cabrera continues to expand this multicultural view and includes an international perspective when in *Yemaya y Ochun* (1971) she documents the Afro-Cuban perception of African American reality in the U.S.:

*Soy negra, pero cubana!...Los negros cubanos, simpáticos, amables y cordiales, le temen a los negros norteamericanos, los consideran extraños, los sienten hostiles, enrevesados.

No los entienden. Afro-Americans sin Africa- ‘ninguno sabe de donde vino’, nos decía

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32 “No se comprenderá a nuestro pueblo sin conocer al negro. Esta influencia es hoy más evidente que en los días de la colonia. No nos adentraremos mucho en la vida cubana, sin dejar de encontrarnos con esta presencia africana que no se manifiesta exclusivamente en la coloración de la piel” (8)

33 The use of the term ‘real marvelous’ instead of magic will be explained and debated in the last chapter of this dissertation

34 Cabrera, Lydia. *El Monte* (23)
otro negro exiliado’ sin nada en común, el recuerdo de un mismo pasado cultural que los acerque, se explica la actitud e incomprensión de unos y otros. El negro cubano está libre de sus rencores profundos y de sus complejos; por eso más que negro se considera cubano. No odia al blanco porque el blanco no le odiaba. En una sociedad abierta a la fusión de razas, como siempre fue la nuestra, no se les humilló ni maltrató. (244)\(^35\)

*Yemaya and Ochun* is a book in which Cabrera documents the traditions and ceremonies involved in the rituals for these two orishas. Written in Miami, during Cabrera’s exile, this book opens space to discuss some of the cultural differences among people of African heritage in the U.S. and in Cuba. Cabrera’s informant (another Cuban exile of African descent) shares with the author the cultural shock he experienced in the U.S. The informant proclaims that he is both black and Cuban, he also emphasizes that there is no distinction between these two spheres; in other words, that one does not exclude the other (similar to Hurston assessment about herself in her essay). Afro-Cuban people also experienced prejudice in Cuba, but they felt strongly about their sense of “Cubanidad”, or the feeling of being Cuban. Cabrera points out how the difference between the two countries’ political systems and institutions influenced the character of the population. Herskovits draws a similar analysis in *Myth of the Negro Past*: he states that one of the problems slaves faced in the New World was that they could not transfer with them their institutions and systems of organization\(^36\). Slavery in the U.S. prohibited the integration of both selves,

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\(^35\) “I am black, but Cuban! Black Cubans, nice, kind and polite, are afraid of African Americans because they see them strange, hostile and twisted. They do not understand them.’ Afro- Americans without Africa- no one knows where he or she came from’- told us another black exiled Cuban. They do not have anything in common: the absence of shared memory of cultural past that ties them together explains the lack of comprehension between them. The black Cuban is free of his deep resentment and complexes; that is why he considers himself more Cuban than black. He does not hate white people, because white people do not hate them. In Cuban society, a society open to the mixing of races, black people were not humiliated and mistreated.

\(^36\) Two weeks ago while at Georgia State University I came across with an African American woman who was involved in the Civil Right Movement during the 70s and while living in New York she attended to Castro’s talk with the United Nations and she told me that what most surprised her about that man, was that he talked to the African
as if blackness did not mean US citizenship. When analyzed from this perspective it can be said that the idea of transculturation lacks an analysis of how political institutions also play an important role in the integration of diversity in a nation where not all its participants are treated equally. What is valuable about transculturation as a theory of identity creation is the recognition of different traditions within one’s culture or as both Hurston and Cabrera point out, their coexistence within an individual personality.

2.4 The Transcultural Space: the Ideology Within.

As discussed before, transculturation allows space for the configuration of plural identities; it is a terrain where plurality designates the whole and the unique. For both Hurston and Cabrera transculturation offers a theoretical framework to explore their views and political ideas. Their compilations of folklore respond first to a nationalistic impulse while at the same time it allows them to redefine national identity according to their parameters. As Deborah Plant explains in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit* Hurston’s folkloric enterprise:

Hurston’s work as an anthropological folklorist had national as well as regional significance. During the years between the World Wars, the interest in folklore became nationalistic. Whereas formerly the official American position was that folk culture represented elements in American society that were best obliterated, the American public and the American government gradually began to embrace folk culture as a valuable part of an authentically American identity…As some American cultures were faced with imminent extinction, others were being assimilated into Anglo-Protestant society and modernity itself was reshaping the cultural patterns of virtually everyone. Genuine folk culture and material culture of early America was disappearing. (70)

American population and made her feel accountable, as an important part of the nation’s identity. I liked this exchange because I can compare it to Cabrera’s passage and better understood what she was referring to.
As Plants signals Hurston challenges this globalized view of identity inscribing the particularity of African American identity. For Hurston, folklore is alive and its permanence reflects the history of her culture. Similarly, Edna Rodriguez-Mangual in *Lydia Cabrera and the Creation of an Afro-Cuban Identity* talking about the politics behind Cabrera’s representation of transculturation, signals Ortiz’s work as the point of departure of her work. Cabrera’s uniqueness lies in the fact that her portrayal of Afro-Cuban identity made more accurate and expanded Ortiz’s. As Rodriguez-Mangual points out:

Despite the obvious changes in his later work, Ortiz’s ethnological texts consistently show a cultural nationalism based on the idea of race and ethnicity. This is not to contradict that he is an indispensable pillar in the proliferation of Afro-Cuban studies. Cuban uniqueness lies in the contact zone between the main cultural groups. Ortiz’s books contain an inner space where the presence of otherness appears far off in the distance. They constitute a metaphorical journey toward the different places that make up the Cuban nation. If Ortiz’s is indeed the ‘third discoverer’ and if within the rhetoric of the Cuban Revolution it is blacks who define the postcolonial identity par excellence, there needs to be a space of resistance that allows Afro-Cubans their own agency and subjectivity. (57)

Cabrera’s documentation of Afro-Cuban folklore creates this space of resistance. In opposition to Ortiz’s illustration of nationality, Cabrera brings ‘otherness’ to the spot light in order to emphasize its agency (and resistance) and its important role inside national history. Both Hurston and Cabrera utilize folkloric representations as spaces where the displaced unities converge in the totality preserving and testifying, in this manner, their uniqueness. Through folklore they constructed their idea of race and cultural identity.
According to Kevin A. Yelington in “The Anthropology of Afro-Latin America and the Caribbean: Diasporic Dimension,” when defining the processes of hybrid identity formation it is crucial for the anthropologist to first inquire about his or her identity (115). This argument is illustrated in Hurston’s definition of who she is in “How it Feels to Be Colored Me” and how her answer reflects her distinctiveness as being of African heritage and U.S. citizenship. Hurston defines who she is as an individual, the tight chemise analyzed in chapter one, and then examines the particularities of the ethnic group she observes. By proclaiming and reaffirming her individual character she states what the point of departure is, that is, what her personal ideology is; therefore, she defines her observer’s lens.37 A nationalist and Republican agenda characterizes Hurston’s political ideologies. Examining Hurston’s portrayal of African-based identities in “Zora Neale Hurston and the Challenge of Black Atlantic Identity,” Shirley Tolan-Dix affirms that in Tell My Horse:

Hurston broadened the scope of her research and focused on the African Caribbean Cultures of Jamaica and Haiti. With these studies, she granted black Atlantic folk cultures a scholarly legitimacy that white supremacist ideology had denied them. In both collections she explored the complex connections between West African and black Atlantic cultures…She was a pioneer in developing awareness of the African diaspora as a ‘transnational and intercultural multiplicity’. (139-140)

According to this author Hurston’s view of African diaspora corresponds to the previously discussed idea of transculturation. Hurston’s personal quest focused, according to Tolan-Dix, on the study of African- based spirituality, not only as the nexus for all the cultures and nationalities in Tell My Horse, but also as a part of her individual self. Despite her inclusion of African diasporic spiritual practices Hurston’s American nationalistic view permeated her docu-

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37 As in the Boasian participant-observation equation.
mentation of Voodoo in Haiti. She criticized the gender politics, the authority figures and “encountered the specific challenge of assuming the insider position of the native anthropologist and discovered she was more of an outsider than she had imagined (142).” Hurston’s U.S. cultural background was in conflict with her personal self and cultural assumptions in Haiti. Hurston did not see in the U.S. occupation of Haiti the cause of its present problems. Instead, she argued that it helped to create a stable political system in line with U.S. democracy and, as Tolan-Dix further explains, “She focused instead on Haitian responsibility for the invasion and on what she thinks their best course of action going forward should be” (147). Hurston’s positioning in this situation is characterized by her subscription to U.S. imperialistic discourse. As an outsider, she was not aware of how the politics of domination permeated her discourse. Her positioning in these circumstances opposes the one she takes when talking about African American identity. In her books about African American culture she emphasizes that slavery; a horrific and unjust past, could not reduce the African American population’s advancement. Hurston consistently advocates an empowering image of African-based identities to avoid the internalization of past exploitation which may lead to decrease their power and agency. Hurston rejects slavery as a valuable model for the present African American identity.

I analyze Hurston’s personal position against the desegregation of the school system in the US Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown vs Board of Education case in the same line. In Richard Rogers analysis of the different models of cultural appropriation, he defines cultural domination as “a condition characterized by the unidirectional imposition of elements of a dominant culture onto a subordinated one …this category focuses on the use of elements of a dominant culture by members of a subordinated culture in contexts in which the dominant culture has been imposed onto the subordinated culture” (479). The Supreme Court’s verdict aimed to integrate schools,
and according to Lynn Moylan in “A Child Cannot Be Taught by Anyone Who Despises Him,” Hurston saw the decision as a diminishing one: “To her mind the Brown decision was an insult to her race and its institutions as well as a dangerous exercise of judicial power” (216). In Hurston’s letter to the Orlando Sentinel she explained her position: “The whole matter revolves around the self-respect of my people. How much satisfaction can I get from a court order for somebody to associate with me who does not wish me near them?” (1). This statement exemplifies Moylan’s understanding of Hurston’s positioning. Hurston’s personal opposition to the Court’s decision reflects her love, faith and self-respect for her people.

In his definitions of cultural exchanges Richard Rogers further explains “One form of cultural dominance is institutional assimilation, the use of educational, religious or other institutions to replace a subordinated culture with a dominant culture” (480). Hurston’s claim echoes Rogers’s statement. As Moylan further discusses in her article, As a cultural anthropologist, folklorist and writer, Hurston devoted the first two decades of her career trying to demonstrate the ideological, esthetic, and social significance of black culture. She held that the survival of African American culture and its traditions was central to the struggle against white dominance and racism. To force black students to attend white educational institutions that excluded and devalued black culture robbed black children of those traditions that contribute to their individual and cultural identities and self-esteem.” (216)

Hurston was concerned about the effects that imposing white cultural traditions in the black population could have. Such apprehension reveals how Hurston’s anthropological training

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38 I had the privilege of reading the article at Emory University’s archives
made her aware of the politics behind cultural appropriation, because as Rogers further expands in his definition:\[39\]:

These strategies of assimilation via cultural dominance involve the *imposition of* the dominant culture onto subordinate cultures, not its appropriation by members of subordinated cultures. The imposition of culture made possible by disproportionate access to resources and modes of power is not in itself cultural appropriation in the sense of a use or a taking— that is, an active process. However, insofar as a dominant culture is imposed upon a subordinated culture, the latter’s members, individually and/or collectively, must adopt one or more tactics for their use of the imposed elements in order to manage the tensions between their native culture and the colonizing one. (480)

Moylan also addresses that in *Brown vs Board of Education* the court’s argument about the disparities in resources between segregated schools did not equate to an inequality in the educational program; that is, it did not mean that black educational institutions prepared poorly their students. Recent studies\[40\] have shown that black students in integrated schools were victims of the hostility and aversion of the white children and educators. This hostile environment resulted in academic losses: white students were placed in advanced, fast tracking classes, whereas black students were located in lower levels. According to these studies and to Moylan, Hurston’s worries were legitimate and have been proven right. Her faith in the value and power of her people earned her some enemies, but she was coherent with her principles. Hurston’s advocacy for the

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\[39\] Rogers uses the cultural dominance model and applies it to Native American culture (subordinate) in its interaction with the impositions of white dominant culture. Native American children were located in Anglo-Saxon boarding schools. Rogers analyzes how the imposition of this educational model was an strategy of cultural dominance, a similar model/idea can be applied for African American culture under integration.


value of African American people inside a dominant Anglo-Saxon culture proves that she was
totally aware of the cultural implications that such phenomenon could have.

Lydia Cabrera’s folkloric accounts are also permeated by her political ideology. Even
though she did not belong to the Afro-Cuban population, she came from a wealthy family and
she had a close relationship with Ortiz, her writings are filled with claims that support the re-
centering of marginal experiences making her view different, in that way, from that of her broth-
er in law. As Rodriguez- Mangual affirms:

Central to Cabrera’s project is a reworking of Ortiz’s notion of transculturation…Ortiz
was aware of the hybrid nature of Cuban culture, yet this awareness never affected his
prose, and he continued to write from a position of authority, gazing at the Afro-Cuban
Other. Cabrera’s transculturation, by contrast, recreates the voice of the Other, thereby
claiming a more radical subjectivity for the Afro-Cuban than Ortiz ever could. Cabrera’s
transculturation affects not just the content but also the form and style of writing. (135)

Cabrera’s involvement with the Negritude and surrealist movement while living in Paris (during
the 1920s) greatly influenced her portrayal of Afro-Cuban identity and her ideas of nationality.
Her views about what constitutes Cuban national identity agreed with the traits of the avant-
garde group in her country which Madeline Camara Betancourt in Cuban Women Writers: Imag-
ing a Matria identifies as three: “their commitment to a critical reformulation of national iden-
tity; the cosmopolitan spirit of the art they created; and their creatively anti-academic approaches
to art”(60). Cabrera’s lack of anthropological training and her ethnographic enterprise respond to
the first and third traits coined by the group. Betancourt further emphasizes: “Although she stud-
ied painting in academic institutes, when she tackled the Afro-Cuban world, she purposely
avoided the academic route that would have legitimized her entrance in this male-dominated area of study in which the positivist, scientific approach prevailed” (61).

A scientific approach to the phenomenon of Afro-Cuban religion would counteract some of its beliefs. For as Cabrera states about possessions: “El lector, advertido de qué Fuente procede el relato queda en libertad, como siempre, de creer lo que mejor le parezca. Por mi parte me inclino a aceptarlo como verídico, pues soy testigo de otros hechos que parecerán tanto o más o igualmente inverosímiles”41 (El monte 66). Cabrera’s witnessing of this phenomenon influences her writing. In “Queer Desires in Lydia Cabrera,” José Quiroga analyzes the influence that Cabrera’s first hand testimony has in her writing: “El monte is a study of Afro-Cuban religions and cultures, but it is also about Cabrera’s understanding of how that form of knowledge assumes its own coherence and its own sense of intelligibility” (89). Cabrera’s experiencing of these spiritual phenomena is the base in which she supports her interpretation of them as coherent and continuous events. What can also be inferred from her statement is its relation to the previously discussed scientific discourse; that is, she used her own experiencing and witnessing of a certain occurrence to sustain her interpretation because such an occurrence was often excluded from a scientifically based anthropological discourse.

Cabrera’s homosexual orientation located her at the margins of society. As Quiroga states in his analysis of Cabrera’s sexual identity in relation to her ethnographic representations,

Indeed, the very personal sensation of evanescence (over and beyond the evanescence implied by ethnography itself- the spectacle of dying cultures) is important not only to her work as an anthropologist but also to her mode of work, her position as a female anthropologist, and the invisible or visible threads of that link with her sexuality…Presence

41 The reader, fully aware of where the tales come from, is at complete liberty, as always, to believe whatever he wants. As for me, I am inclined to accept it as veridical, since I have witnessed other events that would appear equally or more unbelievable
and evanescence are desires that accompany the text, and they define the mode of authorship Cabrera chose for herself- the way she intervened in Cuban letters. This collecting of African tales was all about liminality, about the self that is also an other, or about a sense of otherness within. It is about the relationship between death and homosexuality- in short, this is a work about desire.(85)

Talking about the relationship between death, evanescence and Cabrera’s biography, Quiroga highlights the fact that Cabrera wrote *Cuentos negros de Cuba*, her first compilation about Afro-Cuban tales, in Paris during the 1920-1930s to entertain Teresa de la Parra (her partner) when she was interned at a Swiss sanatorium to treat her tuberculosis. The idea about writing the tales, which Cabrera remembered from her childhood, was both an exercise of entertainment for Teresa, as well as, an exercise of recollection (Cabrera needed to remember the tales in order to transcribe them). In her first book Cabrera’s voice is not included in the text. Her informants are the only speakers. Her perspective is that of an outsider which changes with time as she includes her persona with that of her Afro-Cuban informers. So at the beginning the motivation behind completing these accounts was related not only to entertainment but also to death and disappearance, both of Teresa and the memories that inspired the tales. As Quiroga further explains: “Memory and recollection in *Cuentos negros* are a way of reclaiming the dead, even if it is clear from Cabrera’s words that the dead are something more than memories” (85). For Cabrera, who was at Parra’s side when she died, as well as for Afro-Cuban people, the dead become our ancestors and their influence is present in everyday life. They become the models who inspire present identities when these are displaced, or in the exile.

42 Saying that Cabrera compelled the tales as a way of entertaining Teresa de la Parra can be interpreted as an exotic approach, as discussed on chapter one, Cabrera’s interest in Afro-Cuban folklore was firstly introduced by her training as a painter (ethnographic surrealism) and later evolved through the influence of the Negritude movement and her inclusion of her personal self in the tales.
Memory plays also a very important role in the life of an exile. Cabrera left Cuba on July 24, 1960. As María Zambrano expreses in “Cartas sobre el exilio”:

the exile is ever thus: one who is found or perhaps one who is discovered…so alone and immersed in himself and by the same token a la intemperie\(^{43}\), exposed to wind and weather, like one who is being born; being born and dying at the same time, while life continues. The life that was left to him through no fault of his own; all of life, and all of the world, but no place in it for him…”\(^{44}\)

As Zambrano’s reflection echoes, the exile implies a relocation and reformulation of one’s identity in agreement with the new location which for this Spanish philosopher is a hostile, unprotected environment. When Cabrera left her country in 1960 she was accompanied by Maria Teresa Rojas and both women moved to Miami where they are now buried. Both Quiroga and Betancourt signal that Cabrera continued reworking *El monte* during her exile. Quiroga further analyzes how Cabrera’s living situation influenced how the book was reprinted in 1975 in Miami:

*El Monte* in 1975 seeks to openly intervene in a double setting. The book provided a link with origins (Cuba) for those who have left, and who were at loss as to the names of plants and lacked knowledge of the old rituals. But it was also a political defiance directed at the geographical Cuban space itself. For those who remained in Cuba the reprint of *El monte* was a clandestine border crosser. It has been clear for some time that the book- or at least pages or segments of the book circulated in Cuba in the 1970. (80)

Cabrera’s reworking of her knowledge and memory about Afro-Cuban traditions is, as it can be inferred from the quote, a political act. Memory is for Cabrera charged with the power of

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\(^{43}\) In the open air

\(^{44}\) Translation provided by David Frye in *Cuban Women Writers: Imagining a Matria* (p 57)
knowledge and tradition that cannot be eradicated from Cuban’s identity. What is shocking about the 1975 edition of *El Monte* is, according to Quiroga, the fact that it does not have a new prologue, as the critic signals: “a book that acts out its own enigma by playing off mystery and invisibility. Instead of writing a new prologue Lydia Cabrera wanted readers to face up to silence” (78). Such silent preface is very significant because it echoes at the same time one of Teresa de la Parra’s statements about writing: “The only thing I consider well written…is what isn’t written, what I traced without words, so that the benevolent reader would read it in a low voice.” The silence of Cabrera’s introduction can be interpreted as her displacement from Cuba: she is not there. Her memory and books are the mechanisms through which she traces her identity in the new location. As Cabrera states in *Itinerarios del insomnio*, her reflective essay about her experience in the exile: “With a holy fear of barbiturates- and of psychiatrists- I have resorted, in much the same way that others use Valium pills, to my memories, which alone have the enchanted ability to shorten so many nights of insomnia…I give myself over to evoking the years that I have lived, and those others lived before me” (2). Cabrera not only gave herself over to evoking her past, but she also gave herself to the attempt of voicing the experiences of Afro-Cuban people and on portraying, like Hurston did, a vision of blackness that was not imposed over a white cultural background.

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46 Among the different reasons why Cabrera had to leave Cuba were: her opposition to Castro’s regime, her association with the Abakua sect, and her sexual orientation. Sylvia Molloy and I share the opinion of her sexual orientation being the reason why she had to leave Cuba.
47 Translation by David Frye
2.5 Transculturation from Within

During my study of Hurston’s and Cabrera’s work I have confronted the question of the politics behind anthropological representation and have recently understood that anthropologists themselves share such doubt. Different professionals in this field are trying to integrate and rework a science that “is more accountable for the whole range of social realities that constitute the human cultural variation on which it claims to have expert knowledge” (135). Modern anthropologists, such as Faye V. Harrison, whose research aims to redefine anthropologist’s history and approach, counteract the traditional vision of anthropology as a white, male science and a legacy of colonialism.

Harrison highlights that as a black female anthropologist working in U.S. academia, she has been questioned by others and by herself due to her “marking” as an outsider or “peripheralized scholar” (her gender and race marked her as different from the rest). Her placement on the “periphery” defines a space that needs to be included in anthropological approaches. She explains this tension as she defines periphery: “As I am using them, the concepts of margin and periphery do not signify negation or an absence of merit; instead, they denote spaces in which resilience and resistance may engender the articulation of alternative perspectives” (15). Hurston’s and Cabrera’s ethnographic representations echo Harrison’s definition of a third space or periphery.

I have tried to illustrate, while comparing the modes of anthropological representation of these two ethnographers with their predecessors and mentors, how Hurston and Cabrera elaborate and represent this third space which in itself represents an autonomous alternative to what was seen as universal and dominant. I have entitled the conclusion of this chapter “Transculturation from within” to emphasize my idea of Hurston’s and Cabrera’s recreations of blackness, of

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African-based identities, that are in themselves a total whole, that do not depend on whiteness to be defined or understood. They challenged anthropology to give a space to the alternative.

By affirming her identity as a black (race) woman (gender) anthropologist studying her own culture, Hurston inscribes her analysis in what used to be a white male discipline. By doing so she not only deconstructs that gaze, but also inscribes modes of existence at its periphery. Cabrera, similarly, challenges this traditional exercise of anthropology writing about Afro-Cuban culture without academic training or scientific approach, and inscribing her own culture, white, at the periphery of the Afro-Cuban one. Hurston’s and Cabrera’s anthropological enterprises should be taken into account for what Harrison calls the “reworking of anthropology”:

Our goal was to reterritorialize anthropology in terms that are no longer translatable as a center-periphery dichotomy. We hoped to destabilize that conventional power relation by exposing the shifting patterns of peripheralization and counter peripheralization that have been integral to anthropology’s development, past and present. By bringing together several partial perspectives and being open about their situatedness, we aimed to construct a cooperative model for the coordinated reorganization and reworking of anthropology…The critical reintegration of anthropology requires both intellectual and organizational work as well as an engagement with wider public interest.” (27)

Hurston’s and Cabrera’s 1930s and 1940s anthropological projects function inside Harrison’s idea of reintegration and the tools they use to transcribe these cultural traditions constitute a cooperative effort to redefine anthropology. Their anthropological enterprises were advanced for their times.

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49 Hurston’s anthropological work was written during the 1920s-1940s and Harrison’s idea of ‘third space’ belongs to a later tradition: Harrison is writing during the late 20th century beginning of 21st.
The second part of this dissertation focuses on analyzing how Hurston and Cabrera use orality, other ways of knowing (Voodoo and Santeria), and feminist approaches to represent these transcultural identities from within, that is, how transculturation and Africanity are defined from the informants’ perspectives. These two pioneers recreate cultural parameters that encapsulate an empowering image of the periphery.
CHAPTER THREE: THE FRONT PORCH AND LA FUENTE VIVA50: ORALITY AS A TRANSCULTURAL DISCOURSE.

The people all saw her [Janie] come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the boss man were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment. (9-10)

In the opening lines of Their Eyes Were Watching God this lyrical paragraph signals the importance that the practice of storytelling has for the African American community. The timing of this passage, sundown, introduces not only a very specific hour for the people, the end of their work day, but also serves to later introduce Janie, the protagonist. Hurston describes sundown as an empowering moment, a mythic time in which the role of these people is transformed: from mules and brutes this group becomes powerful through the exercise of judgment and orality: “they became lords of sounds and lesser things.” The act of “passing nations through their mouths” signifies orality, the art of storytelling that Hurston represents as an act of authority. At the same time it brings Janie to center stage perhaps prompting the reader to ask, “Who is this woman? Why is she being judged?”- The recreation of the oral is in Hurston’s novel not only a plot device, in that it brings the protagonist forth, but also an aesthetic that characterizes all her

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50 I borrowed the term ‘la Fuente viva’ (the living source) from Amy Nauss Millay’s study of the effect of orality in Twentieth- Century Spanish American Narrative in Voices from the Fuente Viva (2005)
works and representations of African American folkloric tradition. Amy Nauss Millay in *Voices from the Fuente Viva* uses the term orality to refer to: “the fictionalization of the oral discourse that provided the most authentic manifestation of the written voice” (12). Defining orality, in its political implications, in written discourse is according to Millay a paradox: “How can an intellectual claim and inscribe orality without causing the demise of the very tradition one seeks to represent and preserve?” (19). What Millay proposes is to understand the use of orality as: “the innovation of a discursive form that aims to subvert ideologies upheld by writing culture, and not a faithful expression of the essence of oral culture” (19). Furthermore, to subvert such an ideology, oral texts “create an illusion of presentness, authenticity, and communal experience by incorporating the voices of the disenfranchised and the powerless” (16). Hurston’s use of orality, as I will argue in this chapter, subverts the dominant writing ideology. It favors the communal by incorporating multiple narrators in the narration of a single tale. Her representation of oral discourse is also characterized by circularity and repetition. The incorporation of songs and performances are part of this oral technique.

Lydia Cabrera also uses these artistic tools in her representation of Afro-Cuban culture. In her tales the Cuban author faithfully reproduces Afro-Cuban vernacular, the language her informants use, and the dynamics of storytelling as something very particular to this community. As explained in the introduction to *El monte* Cabrera emphasizes her informants’ authority over what she wrote. The value that telling history over writing it has for this African descent population illustrates difference; in other words, it points out differences in cultural traditions and expressions. It also illustrates, according to Nauss Millay, Cabrera’s “longing for a past that preceded the process of modernization symbolized by writing. She attempted to redefine national

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51 I employ Amy Nauss Millay’s study of orality in twentieth –century Spanish American narrative to analyze not only Cabrera’s use of orality, which she analyzes, but also Hurston’s.
52 See chapter 1 of this dissertation
identity by incorporating oral culture in all its variants” (13). Both Hurston’s and Cabrera’s writings show how ethnography is very close to orality, as Nauss Millay further explains: “Both ethnography and literature are embedded with multiple discourses and a plurality of voices” (20). In their works Hurston and Cabrera integrate their ethnographic approach with the literary/artistic recreation of their informants’ narrations.

3.1 Anthropology and writing the oral.

“(S) he called and the hearing heard” (208)

- Toni Morrison, Beloved

The recreation of the spoken is a device related to anthropology. In order to obtain the information needed for their folkloric accounts Cabrera and Hurston conducted interviews. They used a verbal methodology, that of question- and- answer, to gather information and develop their oral aesthetic. Analyzing the role of this discipline in relationship to the reproduction of the oral, Nauss Millay emphasizes that this process of “mediating between writing and speech is manifest in both literary and anthropological discourse” (12). Anthropology evokes the oral tradition of the analyzed cultures. In order to represent a tradition different from his or her own, the anthropologist requires an aesthetic similar to that of the researched cultures.

African descent cultures are communal and oral. The community is the social structure around which the individuals construct their identities. This social structure brings a notion of commonness to the individual members, providing in this way, the roots and feeling of continuity to hold them together. Orality is a key instrument for creating, building up and sharing knowledge. Through the spoken word news about the community and its members are spread; telling is perceived by members of the community as the main source of knowledge and infor-
Hurston’s description of the telling dynamics in the folk tale “Uncle Monday” exemplifies how the community articulates knowledge through speaking when at the beginning of the story Hurston introduces the conjure doctor: “People talk a whole lot about Uncle Monday, but they take good pains not to let him hear none of it” (30). Hurston also highlights the importance of the verbalized word in relation to knowledge: “Another thing that struck everybody unpleasantly was the fact that he [Uncle Monday] never asked a name nor a direction. Just seemed to know who everybody was, and called each and everyone by their right name” (31). Orality, in its relation to knowledge, thus entails in a community a sense of power: a person that knows something may have influence. The fact that Uncle Monday knows everybody’s name and people in the community do not want him to know that he is the protagonist of the discussion shows how people respect him. Uncle Monday is a conjure doctor and his knowledge of healing and spiritual rituals provides a reason for the community’s precautions: a man with these powers can change people’s fate.

Regarding anthropology’s role in representing the Afro communal in Cuba, Nauss Millay further asserts that the science is “a principal mediating element that has enabled Spanish American writers to translate and inscribe cultural traditions. It is also a self-reflexive discipline through which Western thinkers articulate their own identities vis-a-vis other cultures” (12). Cabrera’s anthropological enterprise illustrates how she engaged in communal verbal exchange to gain knowledge for the tales she compiled. Cabrera’s statement about how hearing tales during her childhood influenced her interest in Afro-Cubanism as well how she became aware of orality as the mechanism to obtain knowledge:

Pongamos por caso las leyendas, todas las religiones en el fondo se parecen. De niña había oído muchos cuentos de los negros de casa, el de ‘espíritu de árbol,’ por ejemplo. Todo
At an early age Cabrera became familiar with the Afro-Cuban communal elaboration of histories and transmission of knowledge. She reproduces in her tales an aesthetic that aims to recreate it. Describing the encounters with her informers, Cabrera emphasizes that she heard different folk tales told by the black workers in her home. In her recollection of her childhood Cabrera describes how the African people employed at her house habitually shared stories. This collective practice institutes what Sandra A. Zagarell in “Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre” defines as “narrative community”, a people that “take as their subject the life of a community (life in its ‘everyday aspects’) and portray the minute and quite ordinary processes through which the community maintains itself as an entity. The self exists here as a part of the interdependent network of the community rather than as an individualistic unit” (499). Hurston’s novels *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* also exemplify this tradition. The communities in these texts are essential for the protagonists’ (John Buddy Pearson and Janie) development of personal identity: the individual self develops and grows through a relationship with the communal. In Hurston’s fiction and Cabrera’s Afro-Cuban compilations the two anthropologists make use of the community as a source of knowledge, and the narrative of the community also entails a specific epistemology.

Hurston also utilizes this storyline for her folkloric tales. In *Mules and Men* we see her as another character or inside the story:

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53 Let’s suppose that with regard to legends, all religions are essentially similar. As a young girl, I heard many stories from the black people of the house, the one about ‘the spirit of the tree’, for example. I would rediscover all of this in Japanese folklore. So many similar legends, and some almost identical to the stories I heard in my childhood. Thus began my interest in the Afro-Cuban.

(Hiriart, Rosario, Lydia Cabrera : vida hecha arte. New York: Eliseo Torres & Sons, 1978, 72.)
During the hilarious uproar of the game, Charlie Jones and Bubber Mims came up and sat on the porch with me.

‘Good Lawd, Zora! How kin you stand all dat racket? Why don’t you run dem chaps’ way from here?’ Seeing his nieces, Laura and Melinda and his nephew, Judson, he started to chase them off home but I made him see that it was a happy accident that they had chosen the lane as playground. That I was enjoying it more than the chaps.

That settled, Charlie asked, ‘Well, Zora, did we lie enough for you las’ night?’

‘You lied good but not enough’, I answered. (54-55)

Hurston’s use of the expression “to lie” which in this instance refers to the act of narrating folk tales illustrates her deep knowledge of African American vernacular. According to Trinna S. Frever in “Mah Story Ends’, or Does It?: Orality in Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘The Eatonville Anthology’” the use of vernacular language is one of the fundamental characteristics of oral-print text, which she defines as: “a text that interweaves the forms and aesthetics of oral storytelling and print fiction”(3). As Frever further elaborates:

Among these characteristics are the use of inset narration, whereby a story is passed off from teller to teller within a storyline circle; a use of regional and/or colloquial language distinctive for both its sound and rhythm; the use of different speaking styles or idioms for individual characters; a use of onomatopoeia and sound words to rupture the linearity of the print form and the arbitrariness of the signifier/ signified relationship; an invocation of ‘mythic time’ associated with fairy tales and folk tales, rather than the strict linear-historical time associated with print; a use of circular or episodic plot structure, again to disrupt the linear-historical print time; and a recreation of the relationship between au-
tor, text and audience, realigning the normally individual act of reading with the shared act of listening, and of participating in narrative construction. (3)\textsuperscript{54}

These elements emerge in Hurston’s works. As an anthropologist she wrote about the specificities of African American culture: the ways in which people talk and the rhetorical devices they use. She explains and analyzes these elements in *The Sanctified Church* where she identifies and provides examples of what she calls “characteristics of Negro Expression.” Among the constituents the author analyzes in this compilation are drama which she explains as follows: “The Negro’s universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama. His very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the metaphor and simile” (49). This description of drama points out two important concepts: that Black people speak through their bodies and that their linguistic inference differs from mainstream English in a particular way. Hurston then correlates this difference in language interpretation to assert “the Negro’s greatest contribution to language: (1) metaphor and simile, (2) the use of the double descriptive, (3) the use of verbal nouns” (51). Addressing the specificity of African American vernacular language, the folklorist proclaims the particularity of this cultural discourse.

In her compilations Lydia Cabrera also reproduces the languages of her informants. As introduced in chapter one\textsuperscript{55}, Cabrera’s way of addressing the nature of her informers’ dialogue should be addressed. The author employs the adjective “caprichoso” (capricious) to describe the way in which her informants time discourse: “One must submit to their caprices and bad habits, to their moods, adapt to their hours, to their tardiness, and infuriating procrastinating , build up

\textsuperscript{54} Frever, Trinna S. “‘Mah Story Ends’, or Does It?: Orality in Zora Neale Hurston’s “The Eatonville Anthology””. Journal of the Short Story in English. Autumn 2006

\textsuperscript{55} To see this discussion go to page 31 of chapter 1 of this dissertation
one’s credibility, employ cunning at certain times and wait patiently” (8). The use of this word can be seen as denigrating Afro-Cuban discourse, but later Cabrera opposes this particularity to whiteness’s obsession with rush. She is aware of this cultural difference in discourse: “They are not familiar with the rush that characterizes the modern and sick spirit of white people’s life which oppresses, depresses and enslaves them” (8). Cabrera navigates between two different traditions her white cultural background, the standpoint from where her research departs, and Afro-Cuban culture, the object of her study. This duplicity is evident in some instances, such as the use the word ‘capricious’ to describe the particularity of Afro-Cuban discourse. What permeates in her argument is an adjective that reflects a negative connotation probably used by the white population in general to describe Afro-Cuban use of time. Using a negative adjective to describe difference is not only an attempt to homogenize this African based culture by adjusting it to the dominant culture parameters, those of the white population which Cabrera identifies with rush, but also an example of an othering mechanism.

Despite the fact that Cabrera’s own personal cultural background permeates her representation of Afro-Cuban culture in this instance, her labor with the representation of Afro-Cuban language and plurality is a remarkable one. In all her works she respects and sympathetically represents the language and ways of her informers: she illustrates the different linguistic groups that operate inside the Afro-Cuban population. She counteracts any view of Afro-Cuban population as homogeneous; therefore, she does not locate her compilations inside an exotic or othering paradigm. Her folkloric enterprise does not fit inside anthropology’s traditional white, male and colonizing analysis. In Otán Iyebiyé (1970), the book she wrote in exile, she documents the power that certain stones and minerals have due to their relationship with the orishas. Cabrera reproduces her conversation with Bamboché, one of her informants, and in this particular exchange
Cabrera not only illustrates the way in which he talks, but she also reproduces the singularity of his discourse; that is, she respects his individuality:

Bamboché: ¿Cómo le llamaban los lucumís a las estrellas?

Irawó, y a la estrella gorda que mi madre saludaba como era su costumbre, cuando saludaba a la Luna, que se dice en Lucumí Ochupá u Ochú y no se confunda con Ochún, Ochú como estornudo, ella le llamaba Awalá.

Bamboché… Mis lectores lo conocen. ¡Nunca podré dejar de citarlo! Cada vez que registro mis primeras fichas me sale al encuentro, como en esta que acabo de copiar, respondiendo a una pregunta, haciéndome un cuento o explicándome con su gracia inimitable algún punto de sus creencias que era oscuro para mí. (1)

In this exchange Cabrera records the particularities of Bamboche’s discourse when he explains what his mother called a star. An element that should be highlighted in this conversation is Cabrera’s direct address to the reader: “Bamboché… Mis lectores lo conocen” (Bamboche… My readers know him). When Cabrera talks about Bamboche she not only refers to her personal acquaintance of this informant, but also to that of the readers. In this way she displays one of the elements that Frever identifies as characteristic of the oral-print text: “a recreation of the relationship between author, text and audience, realigning the normally individual act of reading with the shared act of listening, and of participating in narrative construction” (3). This particular exchange often appears in different Cabrera texts. The folklorist also enquires about the ways in which the stars were called in Lucumi, the language spoken by Yoruba people. In this manner

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56 Bamboché, How were stars called in Lucumi?/ Irawó, to the big star who my mother used to salute when she saluted the moon, which in Lucumi is called Ochupa or Ochu, do not confuse that noun with Ochun, it’s Ochu like a sneeze, which she called Awala/ Bamboche …My readers know him. I will never be able to forget him! Every time I check my first notes he encounters me, like the one above which I just copy, where while answering one of my questions he used a tale or graciously explained me something about his religious beliefs which I was unable to understand.
she identifies the specificity of a linguistic group inside Cuba’s national discourse\textsuperscript{57}. This is a very important feature in the analysis of Cabrera’s reproduction of orality and Africanness, because as she explains in the introduction to \textit{El monte}:

Ignorando las lenguas yoruba y bantú que tantos se precian de hablar y efectivamente se hablan en este país: el arará y el carabalí-ewe, bibío, effí-y deliberadamente sin diccionarios ni obras de consulta al alcance de la mano, he anotado las voces que corrientemente emplean en sus relatos y charlas, según la pronunciación y las variantes de cada informante. No me ha sido posible determinar, porque ellos mismos lo ignoran generalmente, las palabras que corresponden, tanto en el grupo lucumí como en el congo, a los distintos dialectos que aquí se hablaron y aun se hablan en los templos y entre lo que llamaremos, si nos permite, la casta sacerdotal y sus secuaces, en Pinar del Río, la Habana, Matanzas, Santa Clara. Por ejemplo: algunos “lucumís” llaman al árbol iki, otros iggi; a las divinidades, orisha, orissá; a la yerba, ewe, eggüe, égbe, igbé, koriko; al arco iris, osúmaremi, ochumaré, malé…Análogas diferencias que revelan los distintos dialectos bantú hablados en Cuba, hallamos entre los “congos”: viejo, ángu, moana, kuku, aguardiente, malafo, guandénde…”\textsuperscript{(9-10)}\textsuperscript{58}

Cabrera’s awareness of the multiplicity of languages and dialects in Cuba registers the diversity that characterizes Africa; that is, she counteracts any universalist view about the African continent that ignores its plurality. In this way she parallels the discourse of some African diaspora

\textsuperscript{57} The majority of the African population in Cuba belong to Yoruba, Congo and Dahomey traditions.
\textsuperscript{58} Discounting the Yoruba and bantu languages that a lot of people are proud of speaking and in fact are spoken in Cuba: the arara and the carabalí-ewe, bibío, effí- deliberately, without any dictionary or checkbooks nearby, I have taken notes of the names that usually my informants employ on their tales and talks, according to their pronunciation and varieties employed by each one of them. Because of my informants lack of knowledge about the languages they speak, I have been unable to determine to what language groups, Lucumi or Congo or the dialects spoken by the religious groups in Pinar del Rio, La Habana, Matanzas, the words belong to. For example: some lucumis called the tree iki, others, iggi; the divinities: orisha, orissá; the grass, ewe, eggüe, égbe, igbé, koriko; and the rainbow, osúmaremi, ochumaré, male…Similar differences found among the bantu dialects, and among the Congo are found viejo, ángu, moana, kuku, aguardiente, malafo, guandénde.
scholars in Latin America, including current scholars Patrick Manning and Paul Lovejoy. This particular debate focuses on reconstructing the idea of the African continent’s culture as diverse, dispelling any representation of its culture as singular. Documenting the different linguistic groups that operate in Cuba’s African descent populations, Cabrera deconstructs any homogenizing view about this cultures. She also points to the idea of transculturation within the Cuban population. Cabrera reveals the different cultural exchanges that take place inside this population in Cuba: slavery blended different African traditions within the African cultures of Cuba leading to another transcultural process. At the same time the author combats any assumption about the disappearance of the Afro-Cuban cultural past; that is, she supports Herskovits’ arguments against US myth of the Negro past, that which claims that the slaves’s cultural past disappeared when they were brought to the New World.

Rhythm is another important element of the oral-print text present in the writings of these two folklorists. Hurston and Cabrera represent and document musicality: they transcribe songs used by African peoples in the New World. Melody is a dominant plot element in their folkloric tales. As Hurston affirms in her authoethnography, Dust Tracks on a Road, the production of songs and the creation of stories are very similar:

> It was the same in songs. The one thing to be guarded against, in the interest of truth, was over-enthusiasm. For instance, if a song was going good, and the material ran out, the singer was apt to interpolate pieces of other songs into it. The only way you can know when it happens, is to know your material so well that you can sense the violation. Even if you do not know the song that is being used for paddling, you can tell the change in rhythm and tempo. The words do not count. The

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59 I consider Hurston’s Dust Tracks on a Road an autoethnography which is defined by Garance Marechal as: “a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing” (43).
subject matter in Negro folk songs can be anything and go from love to work, to travel, to food, to weather, to fight, to demanding the return of a wig by a woman who has turned unfaithful. *The tune is the unity of the thing*. And you have to know what you are doing when you begin to pass on that, because Negroes can fit in more words and leave out more and still keep the tune better than anyone I can think of. (143-144)

Hurston emphasizes rhythm as an important communicative element inside the story. It extends beyond plain speech and adds meaning to the oral account. This rhythmic nature of African American discourse makes difficult to confer it into written language because orality provides this extra communicative tool. Hurston’s representation of melody in printed text is evident in the following passage from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

…Somebody tried to say that is was a mouth organ harp that John was playing, but the rest of them would not hear that. Don’t care how good anybody could play a harp, God would rather to hear a guitar. That brought them back to Tea Cake. How come he couldn’t hit that box a lick or two? Well, all right now, make us know it.

When it got good to everybody, Muck-Boy woke up and began to chant with the rhythm and everybody bore down on the last word of the line:

Yo’ mama don’t wear no Draws
Ah seen her when she took ‘em Off
She soaked ‘em in alcohol
She sold ‘em tuh de Santy Claus
He told her ‘twas aginst de Law
To wear dem dirty Draws

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60 Emphasis added by me in cursive.
Then Muck-Boy went crazy through the feet and danced himself and everybody else crazy. (192-193)

In this passage a song accompanies the storytelling act. This improvised tune requires the participants to share musical and cultural knowledge in order to express and engage a particular message. Noteworthy in the above passage is how Hurston highlights the “mouth organ harp in this musical piece. This instrument resembles the metaphor of “passing nations through their mouths” that she employs at the beginning of the novel to refer to the power of storytelling. Both images emphasize the mouth as a central element to signify orality. The author utilizes this rhetorical device in order to emphasize orality as the medium of cultural or communal interaction.

Cabrera, similarly, represents the use that Afro-Cubans make of musicality in their storytelling exchanges. Since rhythm is a part of the plot, Cabrera also includes songs within the stories. An example of the combination of songs within a text appears in the tale “Suandende” where the folklorist narrates an affair between a man and married woman who accidentally meet near a river:

El tenía vergüenza. Ella, no.

El hombre dijo:

Ayáyabómbo, Ayáyabón!

Yo vá a pasá

¿ Se pué pasá?

La mujer contestó:

“Sí, señó

Ayáyabómbo, Ayáyabón!

Uté pué pasar…”
El hombre adelantó un paso.

Ayáyabómbo, Ayáyabón!

¿Se puede mirar?...

Y el dijo:

Ayáyabómbo, Ayáyabón!

¿Se puede tocar?... (133)^61

The musical dialogue continues until both sexually consummate their encounter. The rhythmic exchange that leads this narrative plot culminates in the fulfillment of physical passion. As Rodríguez-Mangual points out about the tune in this particular tale:

In this reproduction of the couple’s conversation, the rhythm is particularly striking, as it creates a choirlike repetition of the phrase “Ayáyabómbo, Ayáyabón,” which subtly changes in relation to the gradual arousal of the characters. It is also onomatopoeia of the sound of a drum. Note that the transcription imitates orality of the spoken enunciation in a written form. This passage thus gives priority to the aesthetic value at the root of African rhythms. (122)

Cabrera emphasizes in her written transcriptions the accents and tones that illustrate that the tales are verbally transmitted. The presences of drums and of expressions highlight the African traditions they circumscribe. According to Naus Millay, Cabrera’s reproduction of black oral tradition combines elements that correspond to two different linguistic realms: the Spanish based one, found in the use of accents that simulate Spanish pronunciation, and the African one evident in the use of certain words. Combining the two linguistic areas originates a musical aesthetic that is explained by Naus Millay:

^61He was embarrassed. She was not/ The man said: Ayáyabómbo, Ayáyabón! I’m going to come in. Can I come in? / The woman answers: “yes, sir, Ayáyabómbo, Ayáyabón! You can come in…/ Ayáyabómbo, Ayáyabón! Can I watch?/ Ayáyabómbo, Ayáyabón! Can I touch? - he asked/ she answered: Ayáyabómbo, Ayáyabón! Yes you can
In *Cuentos*, the incorporation of rhythmic choruses in African languages has a stylistic and musical effect, and also preserves the songs themselves. The intended reader of the anecdotes would most likely be unfamiliar with the African lexicon and thus be unable to distinguish between one African language and another. Rhythmic and sonorous verses become linguistic instruments that re-create the moment of performance in which a tale might be heard. Lydia’s experiences as an observer of storytelling jousts taught her the importance of the role played by songs that are intertwined with the action in African tales. She reinvents these beats and repetitive syllables to heighten the African rhythms of the narrative. (44)

Cabrera’s representation of orality thus symbolizes the idea of transculturation on multiple levels: it echoes the multiplicity of African traditions that coexist in Cuba while at the same time shows how they are integrated in Hispanic culture. Both Hurston and Cabrera in their tales emphasize the specificity of African-based popular discourse. In their descriptions both set the stage for the storytelling to happen, emphasizing, as Nauss Millay points out, their role as participative listeners. They became ears to listen to what the mouths were ready to tell, to what every tongue had to confess.

### 3.2 Transculturative Discourse.

A continuous alteration characterizes the verbal discourse documented by these two authors. The different story-tellers that take part in the narration modify their account to fit the message they hear. The reproduction of the oral is not only the assertion of the specificity of their spoken discourse, but also attests to the ways in which the history and myths surrounding these particular traditions were created. As John Burrison states in *Roots of a Region: Southern Folk Culture* (2007) folklore is “A community-shared resource of accumulated knowledge, folklore
is learned informally, preserved, in memory and practice, and passed on through speech and body action to others in any group whose members have a common bond” (19). In their folkloric recollections Hurston and Cabrera portray and emphasize the communal involvement that folklore and storytelling require. The prominence given to the community engagement and its oral quality counteracts Western discourse in the written form when it legitimizes a single authority (that of the book’s author); in other words, by giving prominence to multiple narrators (Hurston and Cabrera’s informants) these authors destabilize notions of authorship that provide authority to an individual narrator. At the same time they represent the impossibility of conforming folkloric narration to a single plan or unique perspective: Cabrera and Hurston capture the different perspectives conveyed in folkloric narrations, as each participant adds to the tale. The multiplicity of angles inside folkloric tales is often identified, from a Western perspective, with modernism, but such narrative construction has always been a characteristic of African culture because of its representation of multiplicity. Collectivity and circularity characterize not only folklore, but also the narrative discourse of the African-based identities that Hurston and Cabrera portray. Transcribing the tales in the way in which they were told, using the original languages in which they were transmitted, these authors convey the voices of the community in their plural and transcultural dimension.

Engaging in a conversation requires the speaker’s willingness to speak and to be heard. In the folkloric plural account each participant wants to share. The narrators react to the story that has been told and then express what they want to say; therefore, the involved participants are both observers (listeners) and partakers (speakers) in the same story. This dual role makes each one of the community members a participant and depository of collective memory. Hurston and Cabrera clearly illustrate this exchange as a ceremony for the development of cultural memory.
and for the preservation of traditions that find in orality a tool to record and preserve it. According to John Mbiti in *African Religions and Philosophy* (1970) African societies use storytelling as a way of maintaining and keeping memory alive; therefore, each community member acts like a book does in Western societies. Hurston’s and Cabrera’s preservations of this plural discourse in their written transcriptions are, in my opinion, not only the legitimization of different ways of knowing and making history, but also ways to preserve this tradition alive for future generations. Creating a written testimony of storytelling they acknowledged African American and Afro-Cuban folkloric traditions and inscribed them in the Western anthropological and literary canon. For the creation of a transcultural identity, such as African American and Afro-Cuban, it was also necessary to connect these identities to their African cultural origin and history.

### 3.3 Verbalizing and Constructing Memory.

It is the telling of our story that enables political self-recovery

bell hooks, *Black Looks*

Constructing history in your own particular discursive way is an act of agency and empowerment because it allows you to organize and present the world in relation to your persona. Elaborating creation myths folklore not only represents the often ignored subjectivity of marginalized people, but also acts as a way of political self-recovery. In Hurston’s and Cabrera’s folkloric narrations about the creation of the world, black people describe this process in an empowering way; they become subjects of their non-written history. They also talk back to the dominant cultural narrations: they inscribe stories of creation that diverge from dominant mythologies. This act is political in its articulation of what bell hooks in *Black Looks* (1992) identifies as “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination”: 
Although there has never been any official body of black people in the United States who have gathered as anthropologists and/or ethnographers to study whiteness, black folks have, from slavery on, shared in conversations with one another ‘special’ knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people. Deemed special because it was not a way of knowing that has been recorded fully in written material, its purpose was to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society. For years, black domestic servants, working in white homes, acting as informants, brought knowledge back to segregated communities—details facts, observations, and psychoanalytic readings of the white Other. (165)

Hurston documents in *Mules and Men* black people’s folktale regarding God’s creation of races. This account reflects bell hook’s point about othering whiteness in the black imagination:

Well, He give out eyes one day. All the nations come up and got they eyes. Then He give out teeth and so on. Then He set a day to give out color. So seven o’clock dat mornin’ everybody was due to git they color except niggers. So God give everybody they color and they went off. Then He set there for three hours and one-half and no niggers. It was getting’ hot and God wanted to git His work done and go set in the cool. So He sent de Angels. Rayfield and Gab’ ull to git’ em so He could ‘tend some mo’ business.

They hunted all over Heben till they found de colored folks. All stretched out sleep on de grass under de tree of life. So Rayfield woke ‘em up and tole ‘em God wanted ‘em…

So God hollered ‘Git back! Git back!’ And they misunderstood him and thought He said ‘Git Black’ and they been black ever since. (29-30)
This folkloric tale mirrors and talks back to the Christian biblical creation narrative of races. It shows how black people are familiar with this Western mythology and how they utilize this knowledge to inscribe their particular account. The multiple narrators of Hurston’s tale deconstruct the view that white people have of them because they articulate very specifically their agency in this event. This account also illustrates the power of words to create the universe according to the idea they express: when people misunderstood “git back” for “git black” what they understood originated what they became. Interpreting words in a certain way was the origin of black people’s race. This importance given to the influence that words have on creation also characterizes early Christian beliefs, as it is stated in the Bible: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God” (John 1:1). Christianity and African-based spiritual systems share this principle. The creative power of words (or of nommo) is another important element that I analyze later in this chapter.

The Afro-Cuban narration of how the races were created is intrinsically related to the creation of the world from an African-based spiritual perspective, a relation that I will explore in chapter 4. In ‘Taita Hicotea y Taita Tigre’ Cabrera reproduces the Afro Cuban myth of creation in which ethnic differentiation is linked to the sun and the moon, which influence how white and black racial personalities behave. It also reflects how Afro-Cuban narrators, Cabrera’s informants, rework the creation myth by including their view of whiteness as something cold and sad:

Un hombre subió al cielo por una cuerda de luz. El sol le advirtió: “No te aproximes demasiado, que quemo.”- Este hombre no hizo caso: se acercó, se tostó, se volvió negro de pies a cabeza…Fue el primer negro, el padre de todos los negros.

(la alegría es de los negros)
Otro hombre se fue a la Luna montado en un Caballo- Pájaro- Caimán- Nube- Chica…La luna es fría. El frío es blanco. El hombre que fue a la luna emblanqueció. Fue el primer hombre blanco, Padre de todos los blancos. Son tristes…Todo se explica. (41-43) 

The difference in characters is explainable inside Afro-Cuban epistemological parameters that other whiteness and elaborate difference according to their view.

These two folk tales illustrate how each one of these communities explained and related to their origins. Folklore, orally perpetuated and created, is the testimony that maintains and keeps oral history alive. Folkloric accounts contain cultural and historical memory. They help generations connect with their cultural histories and ancestral wisdom. Toni Morrison’s discussion of the great importance that the figure of the ancestors has for African American identity in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as a Foundation”, explains how storytelling has an important influence in the relationship with the ancestor’s figure. According to Morrison it is within the connection between the past and the present where a community finds its future; in other words, it is necessary for a community to know the past in order to understand the present and walk toward the future. Acknowledging the past involves an active participation of memory in its historical and spiritual dimensions. Memory from a chronological point of view for African societies was transmitted orally and served to spiritually venerate the past, its customs and ancestors. Hurston and Cabrera also pointed out this connection in their works. In Moses Man of the Mountains Hurston states: “the present was an egg laid by the past that had the future inside its shelf” (112). Cabrera, similarly, acknowledges this connection in El Monte when she affirms: “No se hace

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62 One man went up the sky with a robe made of light. The sun advised him: - “Do not get very close. I burn”- This man did not pay attention: he got closer, he turned completely black. He was the first black man, the father of black people. Happiness belongs to black people. Another man went to the moon riding his horse-bird- caiman- small cloud…The moon is cold. Coldness is white. The man that went to the moon turned white. He was the first white man, the father of white people. They are sad…Everything explains itself.
nada que no esté fundamentado en el conocimiento de lo que se hizo en un principio” (117). Using memory to reflect how Afro-Cubans told and constructed history reinforces their agency and subjectivity both inside the cultural tradition to which they belong and in the cultural history of the nations where they currently live. It allows them to reach traditional models, those of ancestral origins, and imaginatively live present existence according to them. This is the act of political self-recovery bell hooks points to in her analysis.

Creativity is also an important part of the process of verbal recollection. When talking about the creative process of her novels Morrison affirms that:

I depended heavily on the ruse of memory (and in a way it does function as a creative writer’s ruse) for two reasons. One, because it ignites some process of invention, and two, because I cannot trust the literature and the sociology of other people to help me know the truth of my own cultural sources. It also prevents my preoccupation from descending into sociology. Since the discussion of Black literature in critical terms is unfailingly sociology and almost never art criticism, it is important for me to shed those considerations from my work at the outset. (386)

Morrison’s reflection about the importance of memory for the creative process reflects on the importance that models have for art and imagination. Talking about storytelling as a way to transmit folklore and history, we refer to a kind of art that does not totally fit inside “the sociology of other people” parameters; in other words, the oral traditions of these African-based identities did not adequate their art form in the written form. Hurston and Cabrera transcribed these kinds of artistic expressions and created a testimony of how the cultural sources that Morrison talks about are enacted, created and preserved in folklore. In order to elaborate mythic tales de-

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63 Nothing is done that is not rooted on a previous (past) knowledge
scribing the creation of the world, a cultural tradition cannot borrow and appropriate other culture’s folkloric tales. In the same way, for art to be original, it cannot be based on foreign or external traditional values.

### 3.4 The power of nommo.

Hear more often things than beings,

The voice of the fire listening,

Hear the voice of water.

Hear in the wind

The bushes sobbing,

It is the sigh of our forebears.

Those who are dead are never gone…

They are in the tree that rustles…

They are in the water that sleeps…

The dead are not dead.

Those who are dead are never gone,

They are in the breast of the woman,

They are in the child who is wailing

And in the firebrand that flames.

-Birago Diop

This poem written by the Senegambian poet Birago Diop appears in *Muntu*, a study on neo-African culture published in English in 1961. It illustrates the West African belief in the power
of nommo. This belief is intrinsic to African spiritual identity, a fact that is acknowledged in the repeated verse: “Those who are dead are never gone” and in the symbol of the “breast of the women.” As illustrated by this poem and by some of the folkloric tales analyzed before, specifically the one in which Hurston narrates how the world was created, words in African traditions carry a transformative energy, the power of nommo. According to this belief, words carry a special influence that changes/ modifies reality to fit what they express. Adisa A. Alkebulan locates this belief among the Dogon people of Mali, but other critics such as William R. Handley generalize it as a West African principle. Alkebulan defines it as more deliberate and definitive:

In West Africa, the Dogon people of Mali believe that the African concept of Nommo, the power of the spoken word\textsuperscript{65}, carries a life force that produces all life and influences everything. By human utterance or through the spoken word, human beings can involve in a kind of spiritual power. Nommo is a force that gives life to everything. It is present everywhere and it causes everything... For the Dogon, all magic is ultimately word magic whether the word is manifested in incantations, blessings, or curses. In fact, if the word did not exist, all forces would be suspended, there would be no procreation, and therefore no life. (279)\textsuperscript{66}

According to this definition, this nommo force is circumscribed by the spoken word. Alkebulan relates this belief to the particular way in which people of African descent perceive existence; as she further explains:

The African’s preference for the spoken word over the written word speaks to the [spoken]word being viewed as a life force. The written word does not have the transformative powers of the spoken word. Only the word that is spoken can engage the human being...

\textsuperscript{65} Emphasis added.
and put him or her on the path to harmony. Furthermore, Nommo creates a relationship between the speaker and listener. The written word cannot facilitate human interaction and is therefore lifeless. The spoken word permits us to experience life in the most significant ways. (280)

Storytelling as a creative enterprise and exercise of memory reflects this power. In her tale about “How black people became black”, Hurston demonstrates the power of spoken words to bring things into life. Black people’s misunderstanding of God’s words results in the coloration of their skin. Hurston’s folklore articulates an African principle that operates inside this tradition.

Lydia Cabrera’s compiled tales also illustrate the power of nommo among people of African descent in Cuba. In “¿Quién es Yemaya?” Cabrera explains who Yemaya is, and how she created the ocean using this creative force of words:

Yemayá es la reina universal porque es el agua, la salada y la dulce, la Mar, la Madre de todo lo creado. Ella a todos alimenta, pues siendo el Mundo tierra y mar, la tierra y cuanto vive en la tierra, gracias a Ella se sustenta. Sin agua, los animales, los hombres y las plantas morirían.

¡Oyo so ko ni awadó! No llueve…¡Maíz no crece!

Sin agua no hay vida. De Yemayá nació la vida. Y del mar nació el Santo, el Caracol, el Ocha verdadero. El Santo que primero habló y le dijo a las criaturas lo que debían hacer.

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68 Yemayá is the universal queen because she is both the salty and the sweet water, the Sea, the mother of everything alive. She feeds everybody because the planet Earth is composed by earth and water (oceans), everything that inhabits the Earth needs the water. Without water animals, humankind and vegetation would die. -¡Oyo so ko ni awadó! If it does not rain the corn will be dead-. Without water there is not life. Yemayá give birth to life. From the ocean the orishas, the cowry shells , the authentic Ocha were born. The first orisha that first talked and told all the creatures what they should do.
This tale narrates how Yemayá, the mother of creation, originated life on Earth. Through water, beings were created and the Ocha’s spoken commands elaborated their specific features and behavior. Nommo effects conception, as exemplified by the first orisha (Santo) who “told” the creatures what to do. Cabrera’s informant’s use of the verb ‘to tell’ illustrates, in a similar manner, what happens in Hurston’s tale; in other words, in Cabrera’s tale the first orisha tells the creatures what to do and Hurston’s God told colored people to ‘git back’ and because they understood ‘get black’ they turned black. Both of these tales illustrate how the use of words can give birth to and transform reality.

Another important spiritual feature associated with the nommo lies in naming. As William R. Handley reflects on “The House a Ghost Built: Nommo, Allegory, and the Ethics of Reading in Toni Morrison’s Beloved”, through the power of nommo things are called into existence: “The sacred act of naming is integral to becoming muntu, such that babies who die before they have been given a name are not even mourned, because they are kintu, that category of things that only the power of nommo can mourned, because they are kintu, that category of things that only the power of nommo can restore and animate, make actual and real” (677). The category of muntu according to him refers to the act of giving a personality, and kintu is a animated limbic type brought back to existence through nommo. Without nommo, there is no life no energy and kintu refers to a body without life, personality.

The importance of naming and nommo in West African tradition reflects the value that languages, expressions and names have for the cultures that these two authors researched. By reproducing the original words, expressions and languages in their tales Hurston and Cabrera worked within African American and Afro-Cuban cultural belief systems: in providing a name something is brought to existence and reality can be altered. This transformative energy is known
as the life force. It resembles Morrison’s discussion about the importance of finding the correct models for creation and imagination: Hurston’s and Cabrera’s faithful representations of dialects and languages feed on the life force. The energy of the spoken brings history to life by perpetually feeding it. Central to the concept of life force, of giving birth to elements, are women. Storytelling portrays female agency, reaffirming it against Western writing parameters. Hurston and Cabrera portray in their folk tales the centrality that women have in the oral tradition.

3.5 Orality and the feminine.

“Those who are dead are never gone; they are in the breast of the woman”

In this verse from Biop’s poem, women play a special role in the transmission of tradition: feeding their kids represents how they influence the creation and communication of oral history. Ancestors are embodied in women’s breasts, symbolizing that their knowledge is transmitted by the milk to their kids. Children are then fed not only with milk, but also with history and its protagonists. The symbol of the breasts as the ancestor’s site also points out to orality: children use their mouths for breast feeding. In this way knowledge in its transmission emphasizes verbal acquisition. Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein in her “Envy and Gratitude” essay counters Freud’s phallic theory about identity creation and centers people’s capacity to speak and be knowledgeable with the relationship that they maintained while breastfeeding with their mothers. Melanie Klein thus locates in breasts individual identity’s point of departure.

In her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston identifies the importance of women’s memory at the center of storytelling when she affirms that: “women forget those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget”(5). Janie is the central character of the account because she tells her story, which is the story of her life, com-
community and tradition. Hurston reinforces this notion when she affirms: “So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead” (9). The burying of the dead represents the idea of ancestry as illustrated by Biop’s poem. The dead that Janie has buried is Tea Cake, the husband that she most loved and who personifies her idea of love. Janie killed him in self-defence and such sacrifice symbolizes her personal fulfilment and voice acquisition. Janie narrates to Phoeby her quest for love and horizon and starts by telling Pheoby what her grandmother taught her at the time of her sexual awakening: “De black woman is de mule uh de world, as fah Ah can see” (29). This teaching represents part of the milk that Janie, the baby, drank from her forebears. It is the tradition that gave birth to her: Janie’s mother was also fed with it and in her absence is the grandmother the one that takes care of Janie. As she grows up this teaching totally contradicts her aspirations. Nanny herself tells her granddaughter that she also felt that her dreams were different from those imposed by society: “Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me” (29). Janie internalizes Nanny’s vision about the role of African American women and agrees to marry Mr. Killicks, a marriage that nanny sees as the best thing Janie could accomplish. DoVeanna S. Fulton interprets in Speaking Power (2006) Janie’s reaction to this oral account in the following manner:

The protagonist of Their Eyes, Janie Crawford, confronts the history imparted orally by her grandmother, Nanny. Janie then develops a past that is both satisfying to her and usable for others. Although the oral history is passed down from Nanny who had been caught within the circle of slavery, Janie is outside the circle, therefore, must locate her (post-Emancipation) subjective experience from this point of dislocation. Janie must contend with the culturally inscribed representations of women from African American culture that are influ-
enced by the dominant white culture. She then rejects these representations, discovers a self in opposition to the cultural prescriptions, and proceeds on a quest of self-fulfilment. (83)

Janie narrates to Phoeby the story of that fulfilment which is parallel to the acquisition of a voice that allows her to participate inside her community and its storytelling practice. The ability to tell her life story is a testimony of Janie’s say, which adds to the history she has been told by her grandmother, re-elaborating and arranging it according to her own subjectivity. In her refusal to reproduce Nanny’s life experience Janie “testifies” her experience and her resistance to a story imposed on her by society’s expectation. Geneva Smitherman\(^69\) explains that “testifying” refers to: “The truth through story...The content of testifying, then, is not plain and simple commentary but a dramatic narration and communal reenactment of one’s feelings and experiences. Thus one’s humanity is reaffirmed by the group and his or her sense of isolation is diminished” (151).

Both Nanny and Janie tell the truth about their stories. Janie’s starting point is Nanny’s story because she recalls what she learned from her: the past and its tradition, but then she adds her own truth and transforms the account into a narration of self-fulfilment, of overcoming that legacy and creating a space for her voice to express what happened to her and how she defeated all those expectations. According to Fulton Janie’s story is also a “method of resistance to objectification” (xi) as well as, in my opinion, of speaking subjectivity.

Lydia Cabrera similarly signals the importance of Afro-Cuban women and their speech power in folkloric tales. In the tale “Bregantino Bregantin”, included in *Cuentos Negros de Cuba*, Cabrera reproduces the story of enslavement and liberation of the Cocozumba kingdom. At the beginning of the story the princess Dingadinga decides that she wants to get married. Her father wants her to marry the strongest man: “Un hombre sano, robusto. Yo digo que Dingadinga

debe casarse con un hombre fuerte que pegue duro” ¹⁰⁹( 12), but her mother after consulting the babalawos ⁷¹ decides that her daughter should marry a man that is the best musician: “con la mejor tonada la obligase a bailar” ¹²(12), so they decide to marry Dingadinga to the best musician: the earthworm. After three years of marriage the Earthworm decides to return to the depths of the Earth because he does not feel happy living outside. He then names the Bull, his loyal server, his successor: “Yo no podré ser feliz sino enterrado. En la oscuridad glutinosa de la que depende mi salud y alegría… Te dejo en mi premio a tus servicios, mi mujer, mis bienes, mi tambor; todo te lo dejo sin condiciones. Sé tú el rey de Cocozumba cuando te llegue la hora o te plazca adelantarla” ¹³³ (16).

After killing the King (Dingadinga’s father) and eating the princess, The Bull takes over the crown. He establishes a tyrannical government in which all the women belong to him. The bull eats all the men, makes the women his slaves and declares that all the offspring of the Cocozumba women must be female. Every time a woman has a son in Cocozumba the Bull kills him. The Bull’s enslaving government lasts for a long time:

El Toro rey degollaba anualmente varios miles de infantes, y era costumbre suya, al romper la mañana, subir con el sol a una colina que dominaba los valles y engallándose en la altura, lanzar a los espacios este grito de gloria:

-¡Yo, yo, yo, yo, yo! No hay hombre en el mundo más que yo. ¡Yo, yo, yo!

Sólo las mujeres, su abnegado pueblo de mujeres, le contestaba de rodillas afirmativamente.

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⁷⁰ A strong man. I say that Dingadinga should marry a strong man that hits hard.
⁷¹ Yoruba (Santeria )priests
⁷² With the best tune, that obliges her to dance
⁷³ I can only be happy underground… As a reward for your services, I leave you my wife, my belongings, my drum; may you be the king of Cocozumba when the appropriate time comes.
El Toro bajaba luego triunfante a reanudar su vida cotidiana. Muy seguro de que nadie, ¡jamás! vendría a desmentirle. Hombre él, el Único, el Dueño incontestable...(18)

It is a brave woman, Sanune, who by going to El Monte and making a pact with the orishas makes it come to an end. After seeing her seven children murdered, Sanune decides to protect the life she carries and makes a pact with Ogún, Ochosi, Yemaya and Shango:

Era que Sanune no era sumisa, pero tenía miedo; odiaba al Toro y no podía contener su odio; que debido a su estado tenía antojo, necesidad de gritarlo donde no fuese oída de amenazarlo, sin correr ningún riesgo; de sentirse sola, ferozmente sola y rebelde. Y no fue a la cañada; fue más allá del río cruzando el viejo puente abandonado, y más allá de la otra orilla. Con una rapidez de la que no tenía conciencia, llegó a los lindes de la selva temida, conducida por el espíritu de su madre en vida había adorado a los santos de hierro, sus protectores…Ogún y Ochosi. (19)

She offers the orishas some clothes of their favorite colors and sacred stones. Faithful to her promise, Sanune keeps on doing her offerings till she gives birth. Her seventh son is also killed by the Bull, but Ochosi brings him back to life. The orishas take care of Sanune’s son who at the end of the story liberates Cocozumba from the Bull’s tyranny and reestablishes the natural order of things.

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74 The Bull king slit the throat of thousands of infants, and he made a habit of following the sun at daybreak up a hill that looked over the valleys, and in a display of arrogance way up high, screaming out into the air this cry of glory: ‘Me, me, me, me, me, me! There is no other man in the world except me, me, me! ’Only women, his resigned people, answered him on their knees. The Bull triumphally walks down the hill every day very sure that no one will ever take over his kingdom. The only man, the king, the owner of everything

75 Sanune was not a submissive woman, but she was afraid: she hated the Bull and could not control her hate. She felt compelled to shout and express her hate where no one could listen to her. She did not go to the sugar cane fields, she went beyond the river, crossed the abandoned bridge, and went beyond the other shore. Quickly she entered the limits of the feared jungle, guided by her mother’s spirit, who during her life prayed to Ogún and Ochosi.
This tale highlights the agency that women have inside the Afro-Cuban tradition. The princess Dingadinga is the one that tells her parents that she wants to get married: she is not forced into marriage by them. It is the queen’s wish of marrying Dingadinga with the candidate that best represents Africanness, the Earthworm, to be her daughter’s husband. Finally it is a woman that ends the Bull’s regime, a system that Rodriguez-Mangual defines as “an autocratic system of sexist exploitation that alludes to the treatment suffered by Africans during slavery” (129). Rodriguez-Mangual further explains: “The story emphasizes that only with the protection of the orishas is it possible to restore harmony. But the ideology that underlies the story is the agency of the black woman, who manages to liberate other women from the cruel power of men. The death of the king reestablishes the natural order, and once again boys can be raised in Cocozumba” (132). Sanune’s connection to her mother’s spirit reminds her of spirituality and the power it has to bring back the natural order of things. The Bull’s regime imposed new priorities to the population. Sanune’s memory of the previous system, symbolized by the ancestor figure of her mother, resembles Bisop’s image of the mother breast feeding her kid and transmitting the memory of the spiritual beings that give protection and strength.

3.6 Orality.

Hurston’s and Cabrera’s use of orality points out not only the commonality of orality to represent these identities, but also how it is a distinctive feature of transcultural discourse. The way in which these people speak echoes the way in which they negotiate their culture inside the dominant one. Language helps to organize and portray the world in a way that is familiar; therefore, by representing dialects and language variants Hurston and Cabrera depict how Africana people interpret and see the world. Recognizing the different ways in which cultures speak and create their reality and existence is a way of counteracting an absolutist view of being. Preserv-
ing these oral exchanges challenges any homogenizing views of different traditions and gives them space inside the modernist cultural collage. In my opinion Hurston and Cabrera were aware of the importance that preserving these oral cultures has to grant African American and Afro Cuban cultures a future inside a society that privileges written forms of knowledge. This future is based on ancestral modes of existence that secure the stability of the community. Accessing the verbal exchange that helps to construct culture is a way of access to the past stories that contributed to construct the present as we know it.
Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites, is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion. It has its thousands of secret adherents. It adapts itself like Christianity to its locale, reclaiming some of its borrowed characteristics to itself, such as fire worship as signified in the Christian church by the altar and the candles and the belief in the power of water to sanctify as in baptism.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (183)

The area in which Zora Neale Hurston’s and Lydia Cabrera’s works most resemble each other is the study of other ways of knowing. Hurston’s and Cabrera’s anthropological approaches to the African-based spiritual beliefs of Voodoo, Hoodoo and Santeria in *Tell My Horse* and *El Monte* emphasize the great importance that these religious systems have for African American and Afro Cuban identities. In their religious portrayals the authors highlight the value that the sense of the supernatural, the idea of an unperceived reality that coexists with the sensorial one (one which all humans perceive), has for these spiritualities. According to both writers African-based beliefs add a paranormal dimension to the perception of the world in which we are immersed. This extra dimension is fully integrated into everyday life; therefore it adds a marvelous duality to perception. Throughout the supernatural the divine (deities) are able to establish a dialogue and communicate with human beings. This chapter analyzes how Hurston and Cabrera portray African-based spiritualities as transcultural systems that provide agency to people of African descent in the Americas.
According to these folklorists spiritual beliefs also constitute a way of reconnecting with past traditions and ancestry while providing an important space for women to construct their identities and voices. Women through their life forces and their storytelling ability have a central role in Voodoo and Santeria. Using female centrality in African-based spirituality, Hurston and Cabrera articulate a womanist discourse in their researches.

From an anthropological point of view Voodoo and Santeria clearly articulate Ortiz’s notion of transculturation with their emphasis on a reciprocal exchange between elements of African spirituality and Catholicism. Ortiz acknowledges Hurston’s anthropological work in *Contrapunteo* to talk about her research about cultures that share similar traditions. Hurston’s study of the importance of smoke in certain spiritual rituals in Native American and African rituals exemplifies, according to Ortiz, the notion of transculturation. Similarly, Herskovits’s address on African based spirituality brings Hurston’s name to the spotlight. Both academics identify in the spiritual traditions the blend between African and Western elements and also relate this understanding to Hurston’s enterprise. Hurston refers to this combination in her scholarly article “Hoodoo in America”:

Shreds of hoodoo beliefs and practices are found wherever any number of Negroes are found in America, but conjure has had its highest development along the Gulf Coast, particularly in the city of New Orleans and in the surrounding country. It was these regions that were settled by the Haytian emigrees at the time of the overthrow of French rule in Hayti by L’Overture. Thousands of mulattoes and blacks were driven out, and the nearest French refuge was the province of Louisiana. They brought with them hoodoo rituals, modified of course by contact with white civilization and the Catholic Church, but predominantly African. (3)
Hurston affirms the Western influence over hoodoo, which she explains as follows: “Veadau is the European term for African magic practices and beliefs, but it is unknown to the American Negro. His own name for his practices is hoodoo, both terms being related to the West African term *juju*. “Conjure” is also freely used by the American Negro for these practices” (2). Despite the difference in terminology, all of these practices have a common African origin and are related to the supernatural dimension of reality that they incorporate. Hurston traces names and places where spiritual practices engage with reality’s multiple dimensions. She also highlights how these practices were influenced by political institutions and events. When talking about the differences among islands of Haiti, and continental performances Hurston specifies that:

These island Negroes had retained far more West African background than the continental blacks. Many things had united to bring this about…They continued to carry on their tribal customs in their new home without even the difficulty of struggling with a new language…Moreover the French masters were tolerant of the customs of others, even slaves, and the Negroes were encouraged to make themselves as much at home as possible in their bondage…

On the North American continent the situation was different. Slaves were traded like live stock or any other commodity. They were brought for speculation and shipped here and there. No thought was given even to family ties; to say nothing of tribal affiliation…In consequence the tribal customs and the African tongues were soon lost. (3)

Hurston identifies in the differences between the slavery systems the reasons why, in some areas, the African influences were more evident. In her view the institution of slavery aimed to attack African culture. According to her, New Orleans is the city in the US where this
tradition is richer: “For these reasons the Negroes fleeing Hayti and Santo Domingo brought to New Orleans and Louisiana, African rituals long since lost to their continental brothers”(3). Hurston traces the origin of the hoodoo practice in New Orleans: the Haytian and Dominican Republic immigrant population, but then she signals another transcultural element, Catholicism:

This transplanted hoodoo worship was not uninfluenced by its surroundings. It took characteristics of the prevailing religious practices of its immediate vicinity. In New Orleans in addition to herbs, reptiles, insects, it makes use of the altar, the candles, the incense, the holy water, and blessed oil of the Catholic church- that being the dominant religion of the city and state. (3)

Hurston’s affirmation of hoodoo’s incorporation of Catholic elements inside its practice clearly illustrates Ortiz’s theory about transculturation. Hurston continues to describe spiritual practices in the US that are hoodoo based, but which add the particularities of their surroundings, such as the one in Florida where “no use is made of such paraphernalia. Herbs, reptiles, insects, and fragments of the human body are their stock in trade”(3). She also mentions the presence of West African beliefs wherever spiritualism or “communication with the dead” is practiced.

Hurston’s research about the different ways in which hoodoo is practiced across the US, the Bahamas and Jamaica reflects Ortiz’s idea of transculturation. It emphasizes how a common belief is practiced differently in each cultural site. Lydia Cabrera similarly speaks about the great African influence that exists in Cuba and demonstrates evidences of how transculturation has affected different spiritual practices in the island. In the introduction to El monte, when talking about her informants, she identifies the African origin of some Cuban spiritual practices: “La huella profunda y viva que dejaron en esta isla los conceptos mágicos y religiosos, las creencias
y prácticas de los negros importados de Africa durante varios siglos de trata ininterrumpida.”

(7) She also pays particular attention to the African and Catholic fusion that characterize Cuban spirituality:

Siempre los Santos Católicos han convivido en Cuba con la mejor armonía e intimidad, hoy francamente, con los “Santos” africanos; del mismo modo que antes los “patentes” de los científicos, y actualmente la penicilina y las vitaminas, alternan con las yerbas consagradas de los curanderos-hechiceros. Al fin y al cabo, como decía la difunta Calixta Morales, que sabía su catecismo de memoria y fue una Iyalochas mas honorables de la Habana: “Los Santos son los mismos aquí y en Africa. Los mismos con distintos nombres. La única diferencia está en que los nuestros comen mucho y tienen que bailar, y los de ustedes se conforman con incienso y aceite y no bailan”. En cuanto a las medicinas… “es botanica disfrazada”- palo y yerba- “y en el monte están todas vivitas”.

Cabrera’s informant, Calixta Morales, an iyachola (conjurer woman), articulates a transcultural explanation about the spiritual practices in Cuba when she explains that the only difference between African and Catholic Saints is their behavior. The African Saints embody human actions, eating and dancing, whereas Catholic deities seem to be more reserved. She also extends her spiritual comparison to medicine and healing practices. The comparison that Morales establishes shows the spiritual transcultural dialogue that exists in the island. In Calixta Morales’s view Western medicine resembles “disguised” botany. In order to obtain the herbs needed to cre-

76 The deep and lively influence left in this island by the magical and religious traditions brought by the African slaves during uninterrupted centuries.

77 The Catholic Saints have always coexisted harmoniously and intimately with the African Saints in Cuba. In the same way that before the scientific patents, and today’s penicillin and vitamins alternate with conjured roots and herbs. To sum up, it is like what the deceased Calixta Morales, despite of being one of the most memorable Iyacholas knew her catechism by heart, used to say: “The Saints are the same here and in Africa, the same but with different names. The only difference is that ours eat a lot, dance and that yours resign themselves with incense and oil, but they do not know how to dance. Regarding medicines…They are disguised botany- stick and herbs- and in the hill they are all alive.
ate healing remedies a person needs to go to el monte (the hill) and request the ingredients. A healing ritual requires spiritual intervention and El Monte is the sacred space where it can be obtained. African–based healing practices involve divine intervention, through the support of the Orishas. Deities have an active participation in a person’s life. Cabrera addresses their active role in spiritualism: “En religión todo es cosa de los muertos. Los ikus se volvieron santos. Santos y espíritus son visitas diarias en las casas del pueblo cubano- El espiritismo…Bah! En Africa lo mismo se hablaba con los muertos. Eso no es nuevo”78(30). The presence of spirits and orishas in everyday life also signals the African practice of talking to the deceased. The active company of spirits and ancestors reveals not only its African base, but also the continuum of a tradition that constitutes what Houston Baker Jr. defines as culture: “a whole way of life grounded in the past” (vi)79. Venerating past traditions and people in a present location adds an extra value to spirituality. Spirituality acts as a cultural connection with ancestry and tradition for African descendant people in the Americas.

4.1 Sacred Spaces.

Persiste en el negro cubano, con tenacidad asombrosa, la creencia en la espiritualidad del monte. En los montes y malezas de Cuba habitan, como en las selvas de Africa, las mismas divinidades ancestrales, los espíritus poderosos que todavía hoy, igual que en los días de la trata, mas teme y venera, y de cuya hostilidad o benevolencia siguen dependiendo sus éxitos o sus fracasos.80

Lydia Cabrera, El Monte (13)

78 In religion everything is about the deceased. The ikus became saints. Saints and spirits are daily acquaintances in Cuban houses. Spiritualism…Bah! In Africa people talked to the dead. This is not new.
79 Quoted by Fred Hord in Reconstructing Memory: Black Literary Criticism. Chicago: Third World P. 1991 (vi)
80 The belief on the Hill’s (monte) spirituality is strongly held by Afro- Cubans. The Cuban hills and forests, like African jungles, are inhabited by the same ancestral deities, whose strong spirits influence today, like they did during slavery time, their successes or failures.
In this note from *El Monte* Cabrera talks about how ancestral deities have a similar place in Cuban and African nature. In order to speak and relate to them, Afro-Cuban people go to the natural enclaves of el monte (the hill) and the forest to venerate the ancestors. The influence that deities have on people’s successes and failures is intrinsically related to the praise they received from them. Cabrera further explains this relationship:

El negro que se adentra en la manigua, que penetra de lleno en “un corazón de monte”, no duda del contacto directo que establece con fuerzas sobrenaturales que allí, en sus propios dominios, le rodean: cualquier espacio de monte, por la presencia invisible o a veces visible de dioses y espíritus, se considera sagrado. “El Monte es sagrado” porque en el residen, “viven”, las divinidades. “Los Santos están más en el Monte que en el cielo” 81(13).

Once in nature a person feels surrounded by the presence of the divine entities. The emphasis that the “Saints are more in the hill than in Heaven” highlights not only the omnipresence of the orishas in daily life, but also the intrinsic spirituality behind everyday existence. The fact that Afro-Cuban spirituality does not need buildings, such as a church or temple, to establish communal worship distinguishes it from the Catholic and Protestant churches. As Cabrera’s informants point out: “Nosotros los negros vamos al Monte como si fuésemos a una iglesia, porque está llena de Santos y de difuntos a pedirles, lo que nos hace falta para nuestra salud y nuestros negocios” 82 (15). The hill is not only seen as the place to dialogue with the orishas, but also as the site where life originated:

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81 The Afro Cuban won(man) that enters in the tropical jungle, that penetrates a Hill’s heart, does not doubt his/ her direct contact he/ she establishes with the surrounding supernatural forces. Every part of the Hill is considered sacred. The hill is sacred because the deities live there. The Saints are more in the hill than on Heaven.
82 We, Afro-Cubans, go to the hill as if we were going to church, because is full of Saints and ancestors, to ask for what we need for our health and business.
Engendrador de la vida, “somos hijos del Monte porque la vida empezó allí; los Santos nacen del Monte y nuestra religión también nace del Monte”, me dice mi viejo yerbero Sandoval, descendiente de eggwddos, “Todo se encuentra en el Monte”- los fundamentos del cosmos- “y todo hay que pedírselo al Monte, que nos lo da todo”. (En estas explicaciones y otras semejantes,- “la vida salió del Monte”, etc.- para ellos, Monte equivale a Tierra en el concepto de Madre universal, fuente de vida. “Tierra y Monte es lo mismo”) (13)

Cabrera paraphrases old Sandoval’s words about the importance of the Hill for Afro-Cubans. In the parenthetical phrase she adds to his explanation that this belief about the Hill is also shared and expanded by other Afro-Cubans. Nature is intrinsically related to life and spirituality in African cosmology. El Monte (the Hill), a physical enclave, as Cabrera explains refers to its greater signification:

Mas no piense el lector que con esta palabra Monte o manigua- nunca aquí se dice bosque- se designa exclusivamente a una extensión de tierra inculta y poblada de arboles. En la Habana, se considera “un monte”- o sabana- cualquier terreno baldío cubierto de matojos...Todo espacio en que la yerba crece y se espesa, es un lugar a propósito para depositar una “rogación”, un ebbo, la ofrenda común que en la Regla de Ocha se se destina a un Santo “que no sea de agua”. (68) 84

Cabrera’s highlights that the word “Monte” (hill) denotes a plural and diverse site that can be transferred and implemented in the Western world. According to her, any space where grass and

83 Engendering life, “we are the Hill’s offspring because life began there. The Saints and our religion were born there”, told me old herbalist Sandoval, an eggwddos descendant, “Everything exists in the Hill”- the cosmic foundations- “and everything should be requested from the hill, because it grants us everything” (These explanations and similar others, “life was born from the Hill”, “we are the Hill’s offspring” etc- for them, the Hill equals the Earth as the universal mother, the source of life. “The Earth and the Hill are the same”

84 The reader must not think that the words monte (hill) or manigua (forest) are only use to refer to a waste land populated by trees. In Habana, any waste land covered by weeds is considered a hill. Every space in which grass grows is an appropriate place to perform offering rituals to Earth Saints.
weeds grow, where Earth gives birth to nature, is appropriate to perform spiritual rituals and talk with the Saints. Elizabeth West in *African Spirituality in Black Women’s Fiction* (2011) makes a similar connection between nature and beliefs in the mysticism of early African American female texts. Tracing the influence of Africanity in Sojourner Truth’s texts West reflects about the close relationship between God and nature as something characteristic of African spirituality. Truth’s dialogue with the divine in the woods points echoes the Afro-Cuban notion of the hill:

*Truth recalls the importance of God in her life from early childhood…It was “under the sparkling vault of heaven that Truth’s mother would gather them and “point out the stars, and say… ‘Those are the same stars, and that is the same moon, that look down upon your brothers and sisters, and which they see as they look up to them, though they are ever so far away from us, and each other”’(4). This deference to god through nature would remain with Truth, as she continued into adulthood the practice of praying in the woods where she believed God could more readily converse with her. (68)*

I also find similarities between the acts of praying in the woods and the gardening practice that African American writer Alice Walker describes in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (1983). A garden, a space where life is planted and organized according to the cultivator’s wish, is a place that engages a person’s life force and creativity promoting, in this way, a spiritual connection. Talking about her mother’s garden Walker recalls:

*Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties…And I remember people coming to my mother’s yard to be given cuttings from her mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point*
of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty. (241)

The way Walker equates her mother’s gardening to the divine is interesting. The act of arranging flowers according to her individual perception of beauty puts Walker’s mother in a spiritual level outside the ordinary realm. Spirituality is closely related to creativity. By becoming the creator a person is closer to the divine in its performance of the life force or spiritual energy. In my analysis I link gardening to the Afro-Cuban hill due to this enactment of spiritual creation and birth. As Deborah G Plant notes in Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit (2007), Hurston: “loved to cook, she kept a flower and vegetable garden” (2). This statement about Hurston’s habits adds another perspective to Hurston’s use and performance of the divine in its relation to nature. A scholar of African spirituality, Hurston was probably aware of the Afro-Cuban spiritual space of the Hill. Plant’s interview with Jack Conolly, a member of the committee for ZoraFest in Fort Pierce, Florida, reveals that Hurston gave tremendous importance to cultivating things. In Hurston’s own words the garden connects her to the place she belongs to, to her home:

I wouldn’t want to walk in her garden because that was one thing she loved. Whether it was a window box in the city of New York or a garden outside her modest home or wherever, that’s one thing she had. In fact in a letter she wrote to someone, she said, and I am paraphrasing here: “I know I am home because I just planted a garden today. Can you picture me without a garden?” And it is true. As modest as it may have been, she would not be without her little garden growth. From seeds to full bloom, it was Zora. (186

Hurston’s gardening and the hill that Cabrera discusses in her books work in a similar manner: they are sites of venerating the ancestors and the deities. It is a space where African spiritual

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practices are reenacted and practiced. In this area the past is no longer a past, but a present. The present, in its connection to the past, extends these previous traditions holding, as Toni Morrison explains in her study of the ancestor, the key to the future. It seems that existence in this space is simultaneous. Speaking about time in La Casa de los espíritus (1987), Chilean writer Isabel Allende gives a definition of time that equates the hill’s circular notion of existence. According to her: “Creemos en la ficción del tiempo, en el presente, pasado y futuro, pero puede ser también que todo ocurre simultáneamente” (350). This spherical notion simultaneously parallels the circularity of African-based discourse. It reflects Umberto Eco’s statements in “La línea y el laberinto” about language and the world it creates, in particular: “What is the relationship between language and the universe it speaks about? The universe exists, with its laws, and language reflects its order, or the linguistic processes and language’s law determine our way of seeing the universe” (10). Language, according to Eco, reflects our perception of the universe. Similarly the notion of the hill, as a sacred space, blends and fully inserts spirituality in everyday life, and existence is arranged according to this notion. African-based spirituality does not conceive of a ‘heaven’ in the Christian sense, because eternity is arranged around the concept of reincarnation. Existence is a spiral that integrates and normalizes what in the Western world is seen as supernatural.

4.2 The Supernatural and the Marvelous Real.

Now he understood that a man never knows for whom he suffers and hopes. He suffers and hopes and toils for people he will never know, and who, in turn, will suffer and hope and toil for others who will not be happy either, for man always seeks a happiness far beyond that which is meted out to him. But man's greatness consists in the very

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86 We believe in time’s fiction; in the past, present and future, but maybe everything happens simultaneously.
fact of wanting to be better than he is. In laying duties upon himself. In the Kingdom of Heaven there is no grandeur to be won, inasmuch as there all is an established hierarchy, the unknown is revealed, existence is infinite, there is no possibility of sacrifice, all is rest and joy. For this reason, bowed down by suffering and duties, beautiful in the midst of his misery, capable of loving in the face of afflictions and trials, man finds his greatness, his fullest measure, only in the Kingdom of this World.

Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World* (184-185)

Alejo Carpentier’s novel *El Reino de este mundo* (1957) narrates Haiti’s history before, after and during the revolution. At the end of the novel the protagonist, Ti Noel, realizes that a person’s heaven is on Earth, that a human is incapable of having a perspective or idea of what “heaven” must be, because human conception of the divine is in itself limited. I link Carpentier’s quote to the African notion of the hill, because as Cabrera’s informants state: “Saints are more in the hill than in Heaven” (13). In this way the belief in the hill’s spirituality presupposes an inversion of the Christian dimension of the celestial kingdom bringing it to Earth itself. As Ti Noel’s realizes: “In the Kingdom of Heaven there is no grandeur to be won, inasmuch as there all is an established hierarchy, the unknown is revealed, existence is infinite, there is no possibility of sacrifice, all is rest and joy” (185). Eco’s reflection on the parallels between language and the universe it creates also points to this infinite notion. In Christian Western thought existence in its unlimited dimension happens after a person dies; in other words, there is a starting point in the never-ending: one’s physical death. African based beliefs integrate the infinite in the circularity and simultaneity that characterizes reincarnation. The endless starts in today: “For this reason, bowed
down by suffering and duties, beautiful in the midst of his misery, capable of loving in the face of afflictions and trials, man finds his greatness, his fullest measure, only in the Kingdom of this World” (185).

Since the sacred integrates itself in everyday’s life, reality can be altered through the intervention of the deities, phenomenon that Hurston and Cabrera refer using the noun magic. In Mules and Men, Zora Neale Hurston states that “Belief in magic is older than writing. So nobody knows how it started.” (183). In El Monte, Lydia Cabrera emphasizes the great importance that magic has for the Afro Cuban population. She affirms that “magic is the great preoccupation of Afro Cubans; to have control of the hidden and powerful forces”(16). Hurston and Cabrera also address the importance that magic has for Voodoo and Santeria. For them magic refer to the transformative energy that surpasses the supernatural dimension and changes material reality. Through the invocation of divine spiritual interaction magic alters factual reality by adjusting it to the subject’s volitional energy. Such alteration needs sacred performances that can only be executed by people trained to do so. Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski affirms in Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays (1948) that: “Magic never ‘originated’, it never has been made or invented. All magic was from the beginning an essential adjunct to all such things and processes as they vitally interest man and yet elude his normal rational efforts. The spell, the rite, and the thing which they govern are coeval” (173). Cabrera also highlights the spell and the rite as intrinsic to Afro-Cuban practice: “El rito, la palabra, la conminacion magica, determinan luego su efecto. Y para todo hay dos caminos: el bueno y el malo. “Se toma el que se quiere”87(18). Malinowski’s and Cabrera’s statements indicate the systematic procedures that performing magic

87 The rite, the word, the magic invocation, determines its effects. And for everything there are two ways: the good one or the bad one. “One chooses the one that he/ she wants”
requires. Taken together, Hurston, Cabrera, as well as Malinowski’s understanding of magic is as an essential component of human life and spirituality.

Magic, however, is not always perceived as positive. Cabrera points out the negative connotations that the word “magic “evokes. She differentiates between conjurers and magicians in *El Monte*, noting that Afro-Cuban religion has: “sus sacerdotes y magos (aunque en realidad, nuestros mayomberos- hechiceros no merecen este nombre”\(^{88}\) (22) and require a redefinition of the term. Often associated with a magician’s imaginative tricks, the word ‘magic’, when misused, deprives this African practice its spiritual meaning and depth. As Hurston points out in *Mules and Men*:

Nobody knows for sure how many thousands in America are warmed by the fire of hoodoo, because the worship is bound in secrecy. It is not the accepted theology of the Nation and so believers conceal their face…Nobody can say where it begins or ends. Mouths don’t empty themselves unless the ears are sympathetic and knowing…That is why these voodoo ritualistic orgies of Broadway and popular fiction are so laughable. The profound silence of the initiates remains what it is. (185)

According to Hurston the silence among Hoodoo practitioners testifies the value and importance of this phenomenon, whereas its exposure in popular art is not realistic. In order to reappropriate and properly address this transformative practice, I employ Alejo Carpentier’s notion of the “marvelous real” to speak about magic. Carpentier explains the marvelous real as follows:

It is that so many people forget, because it costs them so little to dress up as magicians, that the marvelous begins to be marvelous in an unequivocal way when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality, from an unusual insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality, or from an amplification of the scale and categories of re-

\(^{88}\) Their priests and magicians, but in reality our mayomberos (Santería’s priests) do not deserve that name.
ality, perceived with particular intensity by means of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of ‘limit-state’(10).

Carpentier relates his discovery and experience of the marvelous real during his trip to Haiti, but as he explains, this phenomenon is characteristic of the American continent:

I found the marvelous real with every step. But I also realized that the presence and vitality of the marvelous real was not a privilege unique to Haiti but the patrimony of all the Americas, where we have not yet established an inventory of our cosmogonies. The marvelous real is found at each step in the lives of the men who inscribed dates on the history of the Continent and who left behind names still borne by the living: from the seekers after the Fountain of Youth or the Golden City of Manoa to certain early rebels or modern heroes of our wars of independence, those of such mythological stature as Colonel Juana Azurduy… Looking at the matter in another way, we see that while in western Europe folk-dancing has lost all its magical evocative power, it is rare that a collective dance in the Americas does not embody a profound ritual meaning that creates around it an entire initiatory process: such are the santeria dances in Cuba or the prodigious African version of the Corpus feast, which may still be seen in the town of San Francisco de Yare in Venezuela. (12-13)

Carpentier’s observation about the difference between Western European and American understanding of folk dances highlights that whereas in Europe they have lost their sacred meaning, in the Americas they act as a door, a bridge, to another space, to the marvelous real. Besides body language there is another kind of communication initiated. The marvelous real transformed into a spectacle, as in a magician’s performance, loses its sacredness. The ritualistic nature of the marvelous real requires something that, according to Carpentier, can only be conferred through-
out a spiritual approach, faith: “In the first place, the phenomenon of the marvelous requires faith. Those who do not believe in saints cannot be cured by the miracle of the saints, in the same way that those who are not Quixotes cannot enter, in body and soul, into the world of Amadis de Gaul or Tirant lo Blanc” (10). Carpentier’s parallel between Christian faith in the miracle and the belief in the marvelous acts as a way of legitimatizing and contextualizing the second one. Miracles inside Christian religion are not seen as spectacles, but as divine influences. The Santeria dances and the African version of the corpus feast as initiatory processes should not be deprived of their spiritual value by those who do not share the faith. From a literary point of view the reference to Cervantes’s Quixote contextualizes what faith, not madness, implies: entering in a world created by a person’s life force.

Transforming African-based performances of the marvelous real into spectacles equates to what Audre Lorde’s denounces in “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as a Power”:

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. (53)

Depriving the marvelous real of its power and transforming it into a spectacle, as Lorde states, is a parody of its real value. In its communal involvement and ritual engagement accessing the marvelous real enacts a source of power that threatens the oppressor. Carpentier portrays Haiti’s revolution as the triumph of the marvelous real, the weapon that challenged the oppressor’s control over a country’s reality. Depriving African descended people in the Americas of access to the marvelous real reflects the oppressors’ fear about a force uncontrollable by them.
Fear, in this way, reflects the validity and transformative power of this ritual performance. Documenting and reappropriating African-based spirituality, Hurston and Cabrera recovered and enacted a source of agency and healing. Similarly James Sweet explains in *Domingos Alvarez, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (2011) in its relation between the supernatural and African healing in the New World context was: “The glue that ultimately held together these ‘new’ communities of exiles and refugees was the belief that healing was the most viable means of addressing the misuse of power” (26). Hurston’s and Cabrera’s folkloric enterprises and their work on spirituality not only address this misuse of power, but also provide African descended people tools to repair it. Sweets further points out, “That this belief had wide-ranging political implications was one possible outcome of successful healing, but it was not necessarily the primary focus. Rather, the ultimate goals were balance, reciprocity, and community stability” (26). Accessing this spiritual power through transformative ritual and healing ensures a reconnection with ancestry and produces the community’s stability.

### 4.3 Crossing the Bridge: Accessing the Marvelous Real.

“It ain’t about right or wrong, truth or lies, it’s about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge” (3)

*Gloria Naylor, Mama Day*

“In Dahomean thought, the god of the sea, Agbe, communicates with the creators ‘at the point where sea and sky meet, that is, the HORIZON. Hence it is said that Agbe and his children are both in the sea and in the sky because their home is where the two meet” (109).

*James Sweet, Domingos Alvarez*

Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* narrates the story of a family of women who are descendants of Sapphira Wade, a conjurer woman that lived in the island of Willow Springs. The image of
crossing a bridge represents the access that Sapphira has to the marvelous real dimension. In Willow Springs, an island only connected to the mainland by a bridge, the marvelous dimension is integrated in everyday life and reality because as Naylor states in her quote in Willow Springs words have a different meaning, a transformative one. Thus, crossing a bridge is a common image that symbolizes how a person how has the ritual knowledge accesses and masters the real marvelous.

James Sweet’s reference to the horizon similarly introduces the way in which the action of crossing the bridge takes place in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In the novel Janie is continuously searching the horizon: “It was all according to the way you see things. Some people could look at the mud-puddle and see an ocean with ships. But Nanny belonged to that other kind that loved to deal in scraps. Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon, for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you” (138). After Joe Starks’s death Janie reflects about the permanence of her horizon dream and how it involves a communion with the community: “She had found a jewel down inside her and she wanted to walk where people could see her and glean it around”(138). I interpret Janie’s search for the horizon as a spiritual one. The fact that “no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still far beyond you” can be transferred to African people’s displacement to the New World, and in this way, Hurston’s statement points out to the transmission of this belief to the Americas and to Janie’s character. Spirituality is something individual that becomes collective when people gather to share and celebrate the same beliefs. Janie’s appreciation of “the jewel down inside her” signals an spiritual embracement and celebration of her African American identity. Soon after this passage, Janie meets Tea Cake, marries him and both move to South Florida, to the Everglades. While living in the Everglades enjoying her life with Tea Cake and
the community, Janie finds happiness until a hurricane changes her life. During the storm Janie and Tea Cake flee to protect themselves and arrive at a bridge where they wanted to rest. They were not able to because: “It was crowded. White people had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room. They could climb up one of its one of its high sides and down the other that was all. Miles further on, still no rest. They passed a dead man in a sitting position on a hummock, entirely surrounded by wild animals and snakes” (243). The image of the dead man accompanied by wild animals is a powerful one. The presence of the snakes, sacred animals in African cosmology, can be understood as a divine one; I interpret this figure as Papa Legba, the vodon that mediates between the spirits and the people. James Sweet defines vodon, African spiritual deities, as: “forces or powers. These powers made themselves known by means of supernatural revelations” (17). Recalling again that African spirituality includes the supernatural in everyday reality, we are reminded that in this cosmology every element in nature is meaningful and divinely chosen. That after this episode a dog bites Tea Cake reinforces this interpretation because dogs are this orisha’s sacred animals.

Other critics, such as Derek Collins, also interpret Hurston’s novel using an African spiritual approach. In his article “The Myth and Ritual of Ezili Freda,” Collins analyzes how West African spiritual beliefs permeate Hurston’s fiction: “In terms of anthropology, Hurston views southern American blacks as simply the end-link in a chain that stretches in time back through the West Indies to West Africa. But on the literary level they can be composites of this whole heritage, as Hurston sees it, and therefore demand to be interpreted as the culturally complex figures they are” (139). According to Collins, Janie embodies Ezili Freda, the vodon that represents femininity, erotic love, and sexuality:

89 I reproduce Sweet’s vocabulary addressing African spirituality. Vodon is the name given to deities.
At the most general level, Janie’s characterization embodies the springtime spirit represented by Ezili. Small wonder that springtime and flowers constitute the dominant metaphors Hurston uses throughout Their Eyes to express Janie’s thoughts about love and marriage. Indeed, each of Janie’s relationships (with Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Vergible Tea Cake Woods) is described at critical moments in terms of the flower metaphor. In any case, the pervasive usage of such metaphors initially suggests the flowery love goddess, Ezili Freda, as a ‘mythic model for Janie. (141)

Collins’s source to analyze Jamie’s character is Hurston’s *Tell My Horse*, in which the anthropologist describes Erzulie Freda as:

Nobody in Haiti ever really told me who Erzulie Freda was, but they told me what she is like and what she did. From all of that it is plain that she is the pagan goddess of love. In Greece and Rome the goddesses of love had husbands and bore children. Erzulie has no children and her husband is all the men in Haiti. That is, anyone of them that she chooses for herself. But so far, no one in Haiti has formulated her. As the perfect female she must be loved and obeyed. She whose love is so strong and binding that it cannot tolerate a rival. (121)

The fact that Janie has no children and different love partners makes her identifiable as the Erzulie character. I concur with Collins’s interpretation, but I suggest that there are other elements that can be analyzed using a West African perspective. Adding to Collins’s analysis, I argue that the novel’s title, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, re-centers the divine theme, because the readers themselves seem not to be watching God, but staring at Janie’s horizon. The horizon is, according to Sweet’s sources, where: “the god of the sea, Agbe, communicates with the creators ‘at the point where sea and sky meet’”(109) and Janie, Ezili (the mermaid), is a goddess
who inhabits a body of water, the river. Staring at the horizon this divine creature attempts to go home, the place where the sea and the sky meet. This joining site, which echoes the notion of the hill because of its heaven and earth intersection, is a spiritual space for communication with African saints.

The bridge is also a key element in Cabrera’s tale *Bregantino Bregantin*\(^90\). In order to save Cocozumba kingdom and her son from the bull’s murdering Sanune crosses a bridge and goes beyond the river to communicate with the orishas:

Fingiendo un día dolor de muelas, con acento que hubiera movido a compasión una piedra, sin valerse de intermediarios, le pidió permiso al Toro para ir a la cañada. Allí los lirios, floreando después del plenilunio, daban al agua una virtud curativa… Y no fue a la cañada; fue más allá del río cruzando el viejo puente abandonado, y más allá de la otra orilla. Con una rapidez de la que no tenía conciencia, llegó a los lindes de la selva temida, conducida por el espíritu de su madre que en vida había adorado a los santos de hierro, sus protectores (flecha, arco clavo, cadena, herradura) Ogun y Ochosi (San Pedro y San Norberto)\(^91\). (19)

Trespassing the space to which she has access, Sanune leaves the gulley where water lilies greet her. Lilies, according to Cabrera in *El Monte*, are flowers associated with the orisha Obatala. This orisha created the world by using a grain of sand. It is the African saint associated with healing, the restoration of balance in the community. Cabrera’s use of this specific plant parallels Hurston’s employment of flowers to signal Janie’s embodiment of Ezili. Blossoms, as

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\(^90\) On chapter 3 I explore the connections between this tale and orality.

\(^91\) Feigning at toothache, with a painful tone of voice asking for compassion, without intermediaries, Sanune asked the Bull for permission to go to the gulley. There the arum lilies, flourishing after the full moon, gave the water a healing aspect…She did not go to the gulley; she went beyond the river, passed the opposite shore. With an unconscious rush, she reached the jungle limits guided by her deceased mother’s spirit, her mother during her life was a devotee of the iron Saints, her protectors (arrow, chain, arch, horseshoe) Ogún and Ochosi (Saint Peter and Saint Norberto)
Collins indicates when talking about Janie are divine metaphors: “At the most general level, Janie’s characterization embodies the springtime spirit represented by Ezili. Small wonder and springtime and flowers constitute the dominant metaphors Hurston uses through Their Eyes to express thoughts about love and marriage”(141). There is a consistency in the work of these two authors to use flowers to represent the divine and to show how it inhabits nature. Sanune crosses the bridge and accesses, guided by her mother, the forest where she is welcomed by Ogun and Ochosi. These divinities will protect Sanune’s son from being murdered by the bull, leading ultimately to the end of his kingdom. In order to be granted protection Sanune has to make several offerings to the orishas. As she keeps doing her libations and returning the divine help, the spirit world takes care of her. In this way accessing mysticism works as a reconnection with ancestry and religious traditions that ultimately lead to healing, to restoring the natural order of things. As recreating a new world, Sanune assisted by Obatala, contributes to the reordering of elements in Cocozumba.

Accessing the marvelous real dimension can be done, as Malinowski noted, by performing spells and rites. In this way the conjurer contacts the spiritual forces that change material reality. Hurston and Cabrera document in *Tell My Horse* and *El Monte* the different spells and rituals used to ask for this transformation of material reality. Hoodoo as explained by Hurston in “Hoodoo in America” refers to conjure, the performance of the marvelous real. In her article and books Hurston describes the spell and rituals that this practice involves. Different persons go to a conjure man/woman to solve their physical and emotional problems and achieve balance. As Sweet states in his definition of African healers, healing is a spiritual and natural performance that aims to restore balance and stability in a community by means of reciprocity. When dealing
with physical ailments people often go to the ‘root doctors’ that Hurston describes in *Mules and Men* as:

Folk medicine is practiced by a great number of persons. On the ‘jobs’, that is, in the sawmill camps, the turpentine stills, mining camps and among the lowly generally, doctors are not generally called to prescribe for illnesses, certainly, nor for the social diseases. Nearly all the conjure doctors practice ‘roots’, but some of the root doctors are not hoodoo doctors. One of these latter at Bogaloosa, Louisiana, and one at Bartow, Florida, enjoy a huge patronage. They make medicine only, and white and colored swarm about them claiming cures. (281)

Hurston differentiates between conjurer men that only practice medicine and those who perform medicine and hoodoo. Only those who perform hoodoo are capable of solving social problems. Among the social diseases that Hurston documents there are cases of women who lack female friends or people who want to attract love in their lives. It is in these performances that conjure doctors articulate the marvelous real as they communicate with the spirits. This divine conversation is one that can only be initiated by those who have been chosen. As she narrates in “Hoodoo in America”, Hurston herself wanted to work as an apprentice for Samuel Thompson, a Catholic hoodoo doctor of New Orleans:

Samuel seated me and stood behind me with ceremonial hat upon his head and the crown of power in his hand. “Spirit! I want you to take her. Do you hear me, Spirit? Will you take her? Spirit, I want you to take her, she is worthy!” He held the crown poised above my head for a full minute. A profound silence held the room. The he lifted the veil from my face and let it fall behind my head and crowned me with power. (360)
Lifting the veil and letting it fall behind Hurston’s head is an empowering metaphor that represents the acquisition of a new sight, a second one.

Hoodoo involves spiritual and such intercession must be reciprocated by an offering to the spirits. These presents are determined by the conjurer and the orisha. For example, Hurston states that in order to pay for the spirits one must use whiskey: “Spirits will do anything for whiskey. Pay them also with sugar” (367). Cabrera echoes this statement in *El monte*: “Las pasiones son las mismas en este [hombre] que en la divinidad cuya protección implora: tienen, pues, la divinidad y el hombre las mismas apetencias y necesidades. Lo que al negro complace, produce igual satisfacción material a un dios o a un espíritu: un chorro de aguardiente de cana.” (113) Cabrera also highlights the relationship between the conjurer and the orisha, in this way she also refers to the veil Hurston talks about.

Retribution or paying back the orisha for his or her interaction is a way in which a person restores the energy balance that healing requires. Cabrera specifies in this regard: “‘Sin cortesía’, me asegura Baro, ‘el Monte no da una hojita ni nada que tenga virtud’. No olvidemos que nuestros negros todo lo humanizan. ‘Si al Monte no se le saluda, si no cobra, se pone bravo” (15). Cabrera’s comment on Baro’s clarification about how to treat the hill points out the personal character of both the space and of Afro-Cubans in their relation with this site. It signals the marvelous real in its manifestation in everyday reality, and it also points out to the reciprocal nature of African based spirituality. If you are given something, you must also return it. The two headed doctors, or conjurers, in their dialogue with the orishas determine what the payment must be.

92 Men’s passions and those of the divinity he asks for help are the same because deities and men have the same needs. What makes the Afro-Cuban man happy, produces in a god or spirit the same material satisfaction: some sugar cane liquor.
93 “Without courtesy”- assures me Baro- The hill does not give you a leaf with power”. Do not forget that Afro-Cubans humanize everything: “The hill will get angry if you do not salute or pay him back”.
In their works Hurston and Cabrera highlight the importance of the conjurer figure for the African-based communities. These authors present the Judeo-Christian figures of Moses and Jesus respectively as those of two-headed doctors. One of Cabrera’s informants, C, draws a parallel with the biblical figure of Jesus: “¿Jesus no nace en el monte sobre un monton de yerba”- dice C.- “y para irse al cielo a ser Dios no muere en un monte, el monte Calvario? Siempre andaba metido por los montes. Era yerbero!” (17)

This informant parallels Christ’s figure with that of a conjurer man, in this way, this person elaborates a transcultural dialogue about this figure. Hurston similarly elaborates on the figure of Moses in Moses Men of the Mountains (1939) according to an African-based paradigm:

Moses was an old man with a beard…He died on Mount Nebo and the angels buried him there. That is the common concept of Moses in the Christian world. But there are other concepts of Moses abroad in the world. Asia and all Near East are sown with legends of his character. They are so numerous and so varied that some students have come to doubt if the Moses of the Christian concept is real. Then Africa has her mouth on Moses. All across the continent there are the legends of the greatness of Moses, but not because of his beard nor because he brought the laws down from Sinai. No, he is revered because he had the power to go up the mountain and to bring them down. Many men could climb mountains. Anyone could bring down laws that have been handed to them. But who can talk with God face to face? (xxiii)

Hurston signals how the Christian figure of Moses generates numerous questions about its veracity among students and in this way she destabilizes this figure and introduces her elaboration. In her introduction, Hurston draws attention to the fact that Moses: “is revered because he had the

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94 Wasn’t Jesus born in a mount over some grass?- asks C- and didn’t he die on a mount, to go to heaven to be God, Mount Calvary? He was always around mounts. He was a conjurer!
power to go up the mountain and to bring them down”, as well as he, “can talk with God face to face (xxiii). The prominence that Hurston provides to the physical enclave of the mountain, in its relation to communication with God, echoes the Afro-Cuban concept of el monte. The Spanish word ‘monte’, also signals a mount, a place where land is elevated. In response to Hurston’s question about who can go to the mountain and talk with God face to face, I contend that a conjurer, two-headed doctor, or a vodon can do that. My interpretation is afterwards corroborated by the author when she affirms that: “this worship of Moses as the greatest one of magic” (xxiv) and later when Jethro affirms in the book: “Yes, my son Moses is the finest hoodoo man in the world” (114). Connections between Hurston’s representations of Moses with the Afro-Cuban concept of El Monte are found throughout the text. An example of this is when later Jethro asserts: “You are the one being waited for on this mountain. You have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. You are the son of the mountain. The Mountain has waited for the man…There are lots of plants and things that you ought to study so you can know their habits” (105-106). In his analysis of Hurston’s portrayal of Moses Kevin Hayes highlights that:

In terms of its basic plot, Moses: Man of the Mountains differs little from the biblical story. What does differ between the two are the individual details concerning how Moses accomplished what he did. The Bible says little about his youth, but Hurston treats Moses’s boyhood activities in great deal. In the novel, young Moses urges the pharaoh’s magicians to teach him their magic tricks…Moses’s quest for magical knowledge culminates in his search for the book of Thoth.\(^95\) (15)

According to Hayes, employing a book is related to Hoodoo practices. He further expounds:

The process of dissolving a written message and then ingesting the solution was a common hoodoo practice... Thomas Smith, a Georgia Negro born into slavery, told an interviewer during the 1930s that the same magic power that Moses had used when he turned his rod into a snake before the pharaoh still existed among the Negroes. “Dat happen in Africa duh Bible say,” he explained. “Ain’t dat show dat Africa wuz a lan uh magic powuh since duh beginnin uh histry? Well den, duh descendants ub Africans had duh same gif tuh do unnatchul ting. (16)

Hurston, like Thomas Smith, continues to draw parallels among Moses and Damballah, the Haitian vodon, and their African origin in Dahomey: “In Haiti, the highest god in the Haitian pantheon is Damballah Ouedo Ouedo Tocan Freda Dahomey and he is identified as Moses, the serpent god. But this deity did not originate in Haiti. His home is in Dahomey and is worshipped there extensively” (xxiv). Hurston traces the multiple origins of this mythical figure signaling, in this way, its transcultural character. Other critics also make the same claim. Theophus Smith in Conjuring Culture (1995) similarly signals: “Indeed the exaltation of Moses is a transatlantic phenomenon, linking Africa to the Americas by way of biblical figuralism” (34).

A hoodoo man is also required to know how to speak the language of the people, and of the real marvelous. As Hurston specifies in Mules and Men, Moses was: “the first man who ever learned God’s power compelling words” (185). In order to perform the real marvelous and speak with deities, a conjurer needs to use a specific language. Lydia Cabrera addresses the importance of speaking a particular language to perform the marvelous real rites:

Esta fidelidad al ancestro, esta preocupación por conservar puras sus creencias y tradiciones. Los ritos no admiten otro idioma que el Lucumi (yoruba), no podía menos de conmoverme, a mí, que a lo largo de mis encuestas admire siempre el amor respetuoso que
sentían por su tierra de origen los descendientes de africanos en Cuba, y me indigna, más bien me entristece, la indiferencia, el despego que ya muestran tantos compatriotas nuestros por sus raíces.96

In this paragraph Cabrera not only deals with the importance of speaking Lucumi for Afro-Cuban spiritual practices, but also connects it with ancestry and tradition. Cabrera denounces that the concept of ‘botanica’ (botany) has been modified when brought to the States. It is important to notice how the author parallels the Afro-Cuban Lucumi, ancestry and traditions with Cuban practices outside the island. Cabrera criticizes the lack of continuum with the tradition and its transformation into a spectacle by those in the Cuban exile communities in the U.S.

Conjuring, Cabrera points out is closely related to the use of a particular language. The reproduction of Lucumi that Cabrera documents in her books acts as a bridge with tradition and the marvelous real. In this way, orality as I explored in chapter 3, permeates a spiritual dimension that can transform material reality. The use of words, spells, rites is a reminder of the cultural origin of this population group. Speaking about the African origins of the conjurer figure, when talking about Domingos Alvarez James Sweet highlights the following:

As a healer, Domingos performed crucial social and political roles in society. His primary function was that of an intellectual, “a function that [was] directive, organizational or educational.” Thus, it was not so much the individual “quality and content” of Domingos’ behaviors that rendered him powerful. Rather, it was his position “within the ensemble of social relations”, his ability to extract broader political meanings from “illness”, impart-

96 Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami. Lydia Cabrera’s archives (box 16, folder 16). This fidelity to the ancestor, this preoccupation with the purity of beliefs and practices, the rites do not admit other language than Lucumi. It move me to tears, because throughout the years I came to admire the respectful love that African descendants in Cuba felt for their mother land. The indifference that other Cubans in the exile felt for Cuba frustrates me and makes me sad.
ing these meanings to his clients and building new communities around ideas of collective redemption and well-being (6).

Key to understanding the importance of the conjurer/healer figure is the relationship with the community. Responsible for restoring the balance in a group of people, a healer crosses the bridge and communicates with deities in order to understand the source of discomfort in a person and society. To accomplish his/her social role inside the community, it is necessary for the healer to be rooted, like Cabrera highlights in her commentary, in tradition.

In the *Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison portrays how the inadequacy of the healer figure, Soaphead Church, can affect a community’s structure (represented by Pecola’s character):

As in the case of many misanthropes, his disdain for people led him into a profession designed to serve them…Having dallied with the priesthood in the Anglican Church, he abandoned it to become a caseworker. He became a “Reader, Adviser and Interpreter of Dreams.”

…Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger…A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power. For the first time he honestly wished he could work miracles. Never before had he really wanted the true and holy power—only the power to make others believe he had it. (138)

Soaphead makes Pecola perform a sacrifice, killing a dog, in order to obtain the spirit’s assistance: “We must make, ah, some offering, that is, some contact with nature. Perhaps some simple creature might be the vehicle through which He will speak. Let us see” (139). Soaphead’s actions replicated African-based spirituality, particularly sacrifices that are performed as recipro-
cation for the orishas intervention. Soaphead not only contributes to Pecola’s madness, but also
to the community’s fragmentation. A healer who does not trust his power and has no faith in
people or divinity affects the relationship between the society members, because as Sweet ex-
plains, the practice of healing in the New World communities acts as a way of keeping them to-
gether. The disruption of a community’s unity leads to its destruction. Healers act not only as
bridges communicating past and present through healing tradition, but they also have access to
the marvelous real and are able to talk with deities, spirits and ancestors. The healer’s double vi-
sion enables him to access this marvelous dimension, as Hurston previously noticed, a veil that
when lifted allows the conjurer to perceive in the present multiple dimensions.

4.4 Communicating with the Marvelous real.

Conjurers and healers also communicate with the spirit world through the use of divina-
tion. Divination mediates between Earth and Heaven and its methods include Ifa, the supreme
oracle and its board, coconut and cowry shells. Divination establishes a dialogue between the
enquirer, the person that wants to know, the divinities that express themselves through these
foretelling instruments, and the conjurer or expert who interprets the spirit’s signs. In The Spirit
and the Word (2008) Georgene Bess Montgomery defines Ifa:

Ifa is an ancient spiritual system of cosmology, worldview, and philosophy. Although
dramatically simple, Ifa is “a complex combination of theology and ritual” (Mason 1). As
such it is a microcosm of African life, thought, and cosmology, based upon a profound
spirituality that emphasizes the intimate and inherent connection between all living and
non living things. Central to Ifa is the belief that ase (known to others as chi), the pulsat-
ing rhythmic force of life, is the true nature of things. All things have this dynamic and
malleable energy. (8-9)
The centrality of the life force and the interconnections it creates is essential to understand how communication between multiple spheres happens. Lydia Cabrera defines the Afro-Cuban (Lucumi) coconut divination method as the: “conocimiento primario utilísimo, indispensable en opinión de todo el sacerdocio lucumi, porque así se puede interrogar con ellos a los orishas por cuenta propia, obtener sus respuestas y saber de inmediato lo que hacer” (37). The interconnections created between the world in which we live and the marvelous dimension allow the conjurers to answer and solve everyday problems. In her book Montgomery proposes an interpretation of literature that follows an Ifa paradigm. This author analyses elements in fiction according to this divination model:

By offering Ifa as a vehicle for the shaping of a literary critique, this book, much like the aforementioned texts [Their Eyes among them], provides the opportunity for provocative discussions on spirituality, Africanisms, and the encoded meaning in Caribbean and African American literature…The application of the Ifa paradigm helps to unearth yet another level of meaning, offering a whole new world of literary criticism and understanding (19-20).

Montgomery highlights the importance of numbers, colors, and rituals to apply the Ifa paradigm in its spiritual approach (21). I suggest that flowers, as previously discussed, are also important elements for this paradigm. Blossoms are symbolic of a deity’s presence; therefore, they should be included inside this model. Montgomery proposes a systematic and spiritual interpretation of literature that is applicable to both Hurston and Cabrera. Ifa is a way of interpreting present reality in order to foretell future actions. Divination, in this way, enacts cultural parameters that are coherent within African-based traditions. Proposing a theory of literary inter-

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97 Cuban Heritage Collection- Lydia Cabrera archives, box 16 folder 16- “Primary source of knowledge, indispensable to all the Lucumi priests, because they can consult the orishas and obtain answers to immediately solve the problem.
pretation that signals the centrality of African spirituality is an approach that signals a cultural
tradition that engages the spirit in every element. In this way it promotes continuity in spiritual
and cultural traditions.

Another element that reveals the spiritual dimension in everyday life or reality is possession. Hurston and Cabrera define possessions in their books: as a phenomenon in which spirits and deities express themselves using the human body. Spiritual possessions are common; the spirit chooses the individual he wants to ride and then mounts that person. The possessed one becomes a vehicle for the spirit’s expressions. Hurston explores possessions in *Tell My Horse*:

Guedé is never visible. He manifests himself by “mounting” a subject as a rider horse, and then he speaks and acts through his mouth. The person mounted does nothing of his own accord. He is the horse of the loa until the spirit departs. Under the whip and guidance of the spirit-rider, the ‘horse’ does and says many things that he or she would never have uttered un-ridden. (220-221)

Using the human body to make their presence evident to the audience, deities reveal things unknown: “But the peasants believe that the things that ‘mounts’ claim to see in the past and the future are absolutely accurate. There are thousands of claims of great revelations. They are identical for the most part, however with the claims that the believers in fortune-tellers make in the United States (222)”. Faith is essential to interpret these spiritual manifestations as divine. Hurston equates this belief and communication to that of the faith in fortune-tellers, who are able to interpret past, present and future. Faith is intrinsic an essential in spirituality. It provides coherence and consistence not only to the phenomenon, but also to the communal traditions that perpetuate them.
Cabrera argues, in a similar manner, that spirit possession is a normal phenomenon in Cuba. She uses the Spanish expression, “estar montado” (28), equivalent to Hurston’s “tell my horse” and explains that it is:

Pero antes de continuar, un paréntesis para que sepa el lector que desconozca a Cuba, que “subirle el santo” a uno o “bajarle el santo” o estar montado por el santo, “caber con santo”, venir el santo a cabeza, se llama aquí a este fenómeno viejo como la humanidad, conocido en todos los tiempos y por todos los pueblos, que ocurre incesantemente en el nuestro, y que consiste en que un espíritu o una divinidad tome posesión del cuerpo de un sujeto y actúe y se comporte como si fuese su dueño verdadero, al tiempo que dura su permanencia en el. (28)  

Cabrera uses a strategy similar to Hurston’s: she speaks about the commonality and preeminence of this phenomenon and highlights its universality. Possessions are not only relevant to Cuban population, but as Cabrera signals, they have existed since ancient times in different nations and traditions. The prevalence in the belief of the divine’s access to everyday reality perpetuates the African-based belief in the spirituality of existence and the prevalence of the life force. Hurston’s and Cabrera’s ethnographic works on spirituality help African descend people in the New World to reconnect with spiritual agency and to trace back their roots and traditions back to their past.

98 Before I continue, a parenthesis to explain the unfamiliar reader about Cuba, that the expressions “saint gets up on you” or that “gets down” or to be ridden by the Saint, the saint goes to your head, refer to the old phenomenon that often happens in Cuba when a spirit or divinity takes possessions of a person’s body, acting and behaving as if it were theirs.
4.5 Safe Spaces: Women Speaking Their Life Forces.

Vodou deities are characters defined by contradiction. The Vodou spirits represent the powers at work in and on human life, their ability to contain conflicting emotions and to model opposing ways of being in the world gives Vodou its integrity as a religion.  

Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*

In their portrayals of the marvelous real women are depicted as active agents. African-based through their validation of the supernatural, the transformative energy of the marvelous real, and their promotion of the storytelling tradition create for women what Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) defines as safe space: “a social space where Black women speak freely (135)”. Karen McCarthy Brown’s definition of vodon emphasizes the opposite sides that these energetic spiritual forces emphasize. Accepting different behaviors and interpretations transforms Voodoo, according to Brown, into an integral spiritual system. Reality in this religion does not conform to a unique vision, it accepts multiple possibilities. When talking about African deities in *Yemaya y Ochún* Cabrera explores a similar duality. Yemaya, represented by the Virgin of Regla, is not only considered the embodiment of motherhood, but also the mother of all things. She is the ocean; the mother of existence. Yemaya’s sister, Ochun, represented by Our Lady of Charity, is also related to a body of water, the river. Ochun, the goddess of the river gives and protects love. Due to her sensual quality Ochun is represented as a lascivious coquette and is often imagined as a prostitute. Ochun’s embodiment of sensuous pleasures gives her and “earth-like quality”. Although she is a deity she proposes the enjoyment of life through our bodies. Yemaya and Ochun represent femininity in a dual complex way. They link it not only to motherhood, but also to the enjoyment of life. They integrate two sides of femaleness that are

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99 I copy McCarthy Brown’s spelling of the word Voodoo. It is a word with different spellings that transmit its multicultural origin and different political implications. I generally use the spelling *Voodoo*
often seen as contradictory, and by relating them they provide a more complete picture of what womanliness is. Exposing these two different sides, Cabrera counteracts a traditional understanding of womanhood. Hurston, in a similar way, addresses Voodoo’s interpretation of femininity when she talks about Erzuli “she is not the passive queen of heaven and mother of anybody…The Virgin Mary and all female saints of the Church have been elevated, and celebrated for their abstinence”(121). Proclaiming the two different views of female sacredness, Hurston highlights how the Church’s single interpretation of womanhood rejects another feminine side. Recognizing duplicity, in my opinion, leads to integration. Hurston and Cabrera’s focus on sacred femaleness is an impulse to integrate female identity selves that traditionally have been separated and displaced. They also represent how divinity and spiritual completion include a bodily experience. They echo what Calixta Morales, Cabrera’s informant, pointed out at the beginning of this chapter: that African Saints embody Earthly qualities and activities. The inclusion of the marvelous real in everyday life is thus perpetuated in these behaviors. African deities’ embodiment of human behaviors articulates the notion of spirituality in everyday activities. Activating this knowledge by performing habitual acts is a source of empowerment through the involvement of individual life force. Sanctifying femininity in all its African-based spiritual expressions freed women’s character from some restrictions imposed by society when it censors certain behaviors that are not seen as proper.

In religious traditions, like African spirituality, based on orality, due to the absence of sacred scriptures, ritual knowledge is orally transmitted. Women’s participation in storytelling is a key element for the survival of these sacred rites. In Voodoo and Santeria women can carry the priestess role; therefore they are charged with a leading religious position. These systems promote access to female life force: women empowered with their existential strength and intuitions
are able to access the marvelous real and transform reality. As previously signaled by Cabrera and Malinowski to perform the marvelous real a person needs to know the spell and rites that articulate the transformation of reality. Accessing this transformative energy, results in a reevaluation of the value of words. Understanding the real importance of language, at the same time, reinforces the appreciation of what we communicate orally. Women motivated to use their storytelling capacity are given the power to make use of the force and meaning carried in their words.

When talking about her conjurer woman character, Sapphire Wade, Gloria Naylor states in *Mama Day* that she is: “a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge”(3). Naylor’s emphasis on the need to cross the bridge to be able to access the marvelous real and its multiple dimensions, as previously discussed, provides to orality an important role inside African based spirituality. The power of nommo is essential for the spell’s effect to take place. It provides, as Naylor signals, a new (or forgotten) meaning to words. Accessing this transformative energy, results in a reevaluation of the value of words

In *Women Who Run with the Wolves* ethnographer and psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola-Estés analyzes the function of the wild woman archetype, model that relates orality to female agency. According to Pinkola- Estés, she discovered this feminine prototype while studying wolves:

The title of this book…came from my study of wildlife biology, wolves in particular. The studies of the wolves *Canis lupus* and *Canis rufus* are like the history of women, regarding both their spiritedness and their travails. Healthy wolves and healthy women share certain psychic characteristics: keen sensing, playful spirit, and a heightened capacity for
devotion. Wolves and women are relational by nature, inquiring, possessed of great endurance and strength. (4)

This archetype of the wild woman is explained further by Estes: “She is the female soul. Yet she is more; she is the source of the feminine. She is all that is of instinct, of the worlds both seen and hidden- she is the basis. We each receive from her a glowing cell which contains all the instincts and knowings needed for our lives” (17). The ability of telling stories and by so transmitting knowledge is, according to Pinkola-Estés, deeply rooted in female consciousness. Her analysis of this archetype in relation to female psychology highlights the great importance that the access to intuitive consciousness has for women’s psychological integrity. Like Audre Lorde’s denouncements in her essay about the uses and misuses of the erotic power, Estes also argues that historically women have been denied access to this archetype; and as a result the feminine psyche has been damaged, altered and alienated:

Yet both [Estes refers to both women and wolves] have been hounded, harassed, and falsely imputed to be devouring and devious, overly aggressive, of less value than those who are their detractors. They have been the targets of those who would clean up the wilds as well as the wildish environs of the psyche, extinguing the instinctual, and leaving no trace of it behind. The predation of wolves and women by those who misunderstand them is strikingly similar. (4)

The suppression of this psychic power damages female agency and transformative power. Pinkola-Estés also links the wild women archetype to life force, as she explains “She is the Life/Death/Life force, she is the incubator…She is from the future and from the beginning of the time” (5). The timeless existence of the wild woman makes her eternal. Like with the Life force, this archetype is also empowered with the death force; therefore existence is associated with
death. If the existence and death equation is connected to the oral quality of the wild woman we can argue that by telling a story women’s life force is bringing the story to life, and by silencing it, the story is condemned to death. The knowledge transmitted through storytelling will be lost if a story is not told. Women’s storytelling capacity is then essential for the transmission of knowledge related to Voodoo and Santeria. In promoting women’s narration these two traditions let women access their intuitive psyche, use their voices, as well as, to relate to their life forces. Women become agents who can not only speak about their reality, but also change it.

In ‘La Loba’, one of the folkloric tales that Pinkola-Estes analyzes, the wild woman archetype, is characterized as the guardian of ancient knowledge. The story of la Loba is that of an ancient woman whose “sole work…is the collecting of bones. She is known to collect and preserve especially that which is in danger of being lost”(35). La Loba collects the bones of deceased creatures, especially those of wolves, and once she has all of the skeleton parts she unites them and brings the creature back to life by singing and using her soul-voice, her life force. Bones for Pinkola- Estés represent not only the pieces of a complete story, but also what Naylor calls “the meaning of words beyond the bridge”, or the power of nommo to transform the reality around us.

Hurston and Cabrera’s ethnographic enterprises illustrate how Voodoo and Santeria preserve a mythical knowledge and cultural traditions that can be traced back to Africa, how they respond to Ortiz’s idea of transculturation and how women who employ their soul voices preserve them. These two African-based religions are sacred spaces for people of African descend to recover their spiritual agency and for women to articulate their voices, and to reconnect with their instinctual selves. Documenting these spiritual sources of power, Hurston and Cabrera, like Sapphire Wades, crossed the bridge, articulated their wild voices and became healers: women
who retell and document these folkloric stories are also healers. They reveal how the balance of African American and Afro Cuban communities is restored by rooting them in a marvelous real tradition.
CONCLUSION: THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL . . . AND FEMALE TOO

“So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead.”

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

“La verdadera dueña del Poder era una mujer que mataron los hombres para apoderarse de su secreto.”

Lydia Cabrera, *Anaforuana*

In the opening lines of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston marks the beginning of the novel, of the story, with Janie, but also as discussed in chapter four, she mythologizes the protagonist as an African vodon in search of the horizon, of the cosmic enclave where life originated. Similarly Lydia Cabrera in *Anaforuana* (1975), her study of the secretive and only male Abakua society, reports the different reasons women are excluded from this organization: that a woman, Sikan, the owner of the marvelous real’s secret (quote) was robbed from her power, or that women were found guilty of treason after revealing the society’s secret leading to their exclusion. In any case what Cabrera articulates in her explanation is how female agency is the reason that women are excluded from the organization. Hurston and Cabrera were female anthropologists in a discipline that was traditionally male. Their roles as female ethnographers departed from the academic norm not only because of their gender, but also because they employ different strategies of ethnographic representation that dislocate the anthropologist’s authorial voice and place it at the periphery of the informants’ subjectivity. In their folkloric compilations

100 Using the adjective *female* I signal Hurston’s and Cabrera’s female gender. I do not subscribe myself to the traditional anthropologist dialogue, introduced in chapter 1, that interprets the anthropologist’s inclusion of his or her personal self in the research as a feminine (inferior) one. My goal is to highlight the value of these anthropologists who fought against a predominantly male discipline and challenged its parameters of representation.  

101 The real owner of the Power was a woman murdered by men who wanted to own her Secret.  

102 The Abakua is the most repressed Afro-Cuban male fraternity. This society has its origin in Nigeria.
Hurston and Cabrera add their academic and personal voices to those of their informants in an attempt to accurately represent the traditions they examined. In this way they avoided imposing homogenization and exoticism onto their ethnographic subjects. Hurston and Cabrera became part of the African-based cultures they studied.

Zora Neale Hurston and Lydia Cabrera were pioneers in their anthropological works. They not only advanced the representation of what Faye Harrison defines as the representation of spaces of resistance\textsuperscript{103}, but also promoted a female centered standpoint that illustrates the importance that women have in African-based traditions. Hurston’s and Cabrera’s folkloric enterprises reveal sites of reference for African American and Afro-Cuban identities in the New World. They elaborate on memory through folklore, which transforms their enterprises and folklore into what Maurice Halbwachs defines as a collective framework of memory:

But what we call the collective framework of memory would then be only the result, or sum, or combination of individual recollections of many members of the same society. This framework might then serve to better classify them after the fact, to situate the recollections of some in relation to others…Collective frameworks are the instruments used by collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society (\textit{On Collective Memory} 40).

As Hurston and Cabrera represent in their ethnographic narrations for African American and Afro-Cuban identities, the community is the social framework that sustains the apparatus of memory. Both anthropologists capture the elaboration of social frameworks of memory in the collective narration of a single folkloric tale.

\textsuperscript{103} See chapter 2 of this dissertation page 33.
Hurston and Cabrera locate at the center of their narrations women, who like Janie, embark on a recollection of how she integrated her voice into that of the community. In this concluding chapter I reflect on how Hurston’s and Cabrera’s anthropological enterprises have multiple values: they advance a feminist and postmodern anthropological discourse that opens up space for identities at the periphery. Including their personal voices inside the anthropological dialogue they make a political statement while speaking together with their informants about how it feels to be from African descend in the New World.

5.1 Losing the Self in the Group: The Personal is Political… and Female Too.

“The impulse is not to isolate oneself, but to lose the self in the art and wisdom of the group.”

Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (166)

Hurston and Cabrera include themselves inside the social framework of African-based identities, disguising their authorial voices as that of reporters who participate in the practice of storytelling to elaborate present identity through past recollections. They interweave multiple narrations to develop an accurate representation of the cultures they studied. As female anthropologists, their cultural representations emphasize female gender identity. Hurston and Cabrera include female discourse as an essential element in their folkloric elaborations. They insert in their anthropological narrations the often gendered other, women, especially women of color.

In their representations of women, Hurston and Cabrera highlight the essential role of women within the oral tradition and religious practices. Hurston illustrates the growth into womanhood of Janie, the protagonist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through her search for cultural identity. Janie has to choose between the culture of her people (African American storytelling art) and that imposed by society. Janie’s struggle to acquire her own voice signals how orality, as
discussed in chapter three, constitutes a mechanism of transcultural representation: Janie’s quest consists not only in fighting to define her role and discourse as a woman, but also in accessing and participating in communal discourse. This interpretation threatens notions of female silence: by linking a particular oral discourse to the creation and transmission of stories, Hurston points directly to female cultural discursive agency. Hurston also reclaims the centrality of female discourse in *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), her novel about Arvay Henson, a white woman, and her search for love. Hurston’s portrayal of womanhood in this novel differs from the one she constructs in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Each woman is a product of her culture and their roles are quite mediated by their relationship with men. Searching for love is Hurston’s way of depicting her protagonists’ search for individual and spiritual identity. Janie’s goal is to find the romantic relationship that fulfils her spiritual wishes. Whereas, Arvay’s personal struggle is to accept that she is worthy of love, since she is convinced that no one will ever love her. Hurston’s novels depict how race, class and discourse influence each protagonist’s evolution, and how their fate is the result of personal development within these conditions.

Cabrera’s work, like Hurston’s, articulates a feminist agenda: she brings women to the center of the tales. In “Bregantino Bregantin,” Cabrera narrates the story of the enslavement and liberation of the Cocozumba kingdom. She highlights the role of a woman, Sanune, who through her communication with the orishas and her offerings to them is able to stop the tyrannical order imposed in the kingdom and restores the natural order of things. As Cabrera points out in *Yemaya y Ochún*, woman’s agency in Afro-Cuban spirituality is a very active one: “Igual que los hombres, las mujeres que nacen con ache se revelaran muy temprano como buenas santeras y tendrán numerosa prole espiritual”104 (235). In the different Afro-Cuban religious denominations women can carry the role of priestesses; therefore, they have an active role in the religious prac-

104 “Like men women who are born with “ache” will turn to be good santeras and will have numerous followers.”
Sânune’s liberation of the Cocozumba’s kingdom is linked to her relationship with the spiritual sphere, her ancestors and the orishas, who protect the son she gives birth to, the one that finally liberates the kingdom. Sanune’s compromise with spiritual tradition signals a continuum in order. This order will replace the unnatural one imposed by the bull. Cabrera conveys a story that reveals how women in this society reclaim their active participation in religious practices, and by affirming, like in “Bregantino Bregantin” the liberating strength within their life forces.

In her article, “Looking Back from Zora, or Talking out Both Sides of My Mouth for Those Who Have Two Ears”, P. Gabrielle Foreman considers matters of women’s visibility in anthropological texts: “The lack of a discernible tradition has been a silencing agent in the history of Blacks, of women, of Black women, of indeed marginalized groupings. Without a “tradition” into which to fit us, we have been misunderstood, misinterpreted, and finally, often quickly dismissed” (17). As I discussed on chapter one, the traditional model of anthropology promoted this silencing by ignoring or objectifying a cultural tradition that did not fit inside the discipline’s Western parameters. Foreman highlights how black women, particularly, were invisible in the traditional anthropological model. Hurston and Cabrera disrupted this academic system by reproducing the dialogue characteristic of African-based traditions and by making women’s presence visible in their ethnographic portrayals. I argue that Hurston’s and Cabrera’s works intersect those of black feminist anthropologists like Foreman, by centering the often invisible female subjects. In “Forging a Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics of Black Feminist Anthropology” Irma McClaurin defines this discipline as follows:

Black feminist anthropological theory asserts that by making the complex intersection of gender, race and class as the foundational component of its scholarship, followers gain a different and, we are convinced, fuller understanding of how Black women’s lives (in-
cluding our own) are constituted by structural forces. The multiplicity of coping strategies and forms of resistance that Black women adopt globally to contend with the structural and psychocultural dimensions of racism, sexism, and the other myriad forms that social inequality can assume in people’s lives are an essential component of a Black feminist anthropological theorization. (15)

Hurston’s and Cabrera’s representation of layers of power and inequality are consistent with the Black feminist anthropological parameter that Mcclarin proposes; however, I find that their feminist approach follows what Kamala Visweswaran in “Histories of Feminist Ethnography” identifies as the articulation of a women’s standpoint: “‘women’s point of view’ not as a subject of identification that activates woman as universal category, but as the filter through which cultural and racial difference is both apprehended and abstracted from unequal relations of power” (606). Inserting multiple narrators in a single tale, Hurston and Cabrera not only destabilize Western notions of single authority, but they also include gender as a way to denounced unequal notions of power. As Lynda Hoffman-Jeep explains in “Creating Ethnography: Zora Neale Hurston and Lydia Cabrera,” this signals Hurston’s and Cabrera’s representation of the anthropological subjects as the critical element that sustains a feminist interpretation:

To a degree what Hurston and Cabrera undertook with their first collections of folktales was a kind of feminist experimental ethnography. As defined by Kamala Visweswaran, the goals of the experimental ethnographer include creating and nurturing a sincere, caring, positive relationship with the subject (29)…Furthermore, Hurston illustrates Visweswaran’s contention that “the potential of a feminist ethnography…locates the self in the experience of oppression in order to liberate it” (29). Whereas Hurston quite demonstrably enters into her collection of narratives, many of which both portray and cor-
roborate the experience of oppression, Cabrera, in contrast, staged her own invisibility by not giving herself a personally marked voice in her tales. (346)

In this quote Hoffman- Jeep refers to Hurston’s and Cabrera’s first collection of tales: *Mules and Men*, and *Cuentos Negros*. In her first work Cabrera’s voice does not appear in the text. She reproduces the voice of her informers as the sole source of authority. Cabrera modifies this technique in *El monte*, where she includes her voice with that of her informants. It is in this work that Hurston’s and Cabrera’s styles most resemble each other. Reproducing the voices of the community in a text where the author’s voice is almost invisible or another participating narrator is, according to Edna Rodriguez- Mangual’s in *Lydia Cabrera and the Creation of an Afro-Cuban Identity*, a characteristic of postmodernity:

Cabrera’s text is a re-creation of an *evoked* orality that dismantles the scientific scrutiny of date and evidence at the same time as it reinvents a cultural space through a revision of conventional social codes. Moreover, Cabrera’s interpretation of Afro-Cuban culture is conceived as a process. *El monte* is an enigmatic and paradoxical text that represents its ethnographic ‘truth’ as a partial incomplete, thereby inscribing itself in the very impossibility of achieving solvency in the debate over Cuban identity…Besides its hybridity, a distinctive sign of postmodernity, the genre reaffirms alterity and heterogeneity: “Testimonial discourse is fragmentary, local, defiant of hierarchies and homogeneous forms”.

(95)

I agree with Rodriguez-Mangual’s postmodern interpretation, but it is necessary to add that this interpretation departs from a Western perspective. Trying to place Hurston’s and Cabrera’s enterprise in relation to anthropology’s canon, in relation to the work of other anthropologists, the plurality of their accounts not only points out the complexity and pioneering post-modern per-
pective of their researches, but also to how this quality signals the polyphony of African-based culture. Claiming a feminist and postmodern interpretation of Hurston’s and Cabrera’s works speaks to the multiple layers of their enterprises and their innovative representations. In the plurality of their ethnographies they speak about the politics of power, using a language (that of their informants), outside the dominant discursive systems.

In her research Cabrera also includes an analysis of homosexuality from an Afro-Cuban standpoint. In *Yemaya and Ochun* she retells the origin of the vodon Inle and interprets him as the patron of lesbians:

> Yemaya amo locamente a un androgino, el bellísimo Inle. Para satisfacer la pasión que el joven dios le inspiraba, lo rapto, lo llevo al fondo del mar y allí lo tuvo hasta que, saciado del todo apetito, se aburrió de su amante y deseo regresar al mundo, a la compañía de los demás Orichas y de los hombres.

> Inle había visto lo que ninguna criatura divina o humana. El misterio insondable del mar, lo que oculta en lo más profundo. Y Yemaya, para que Inle a nadie lo contara, antes de emprender el retorno a la tierra, le corto la lengua. Adviértase que es Yemaya quien habla con Inle en el Dilogun. (45)

According to Cabrera’s perspective, the fact that Yemaya is in love with an androgyny signals that sexuality in Yemaya’s relationship with Inle could be seen in two ways: heterosexual, if we consider Inle male, or homosexual, when we see Inle as a woman. Having to hide her

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105 Cabrera signals that Inle is the patron of lesbians, but her interpretation may not be the same as that of vodun worshippers. Inle’s delicate features endear him to homosexuals who adopt him as their patron. Inle is also known as the orisha of medicine.

106 Yemaya was madly in love with an androgyny, the beautiful Inle. In order to satisfy her passion for the young god, she kidnapped him, carried him to the bottom of the sea, and there she had him until, having satiated her appetite, she grew bored of her lover and desired to return to the world, back to the company of the other orishas and men. Inle had seen what no other divine or human creature had. The indescribable mystery of the sea, what lies in its depths. And Yemaya, so that Inle could not tell anyone what had transpired, before setting off on her return trip cut off his tongue. Note that it is Yemaya who talks with Inle in the Dilogun. (trans. by Edna Rodriguez-Manguel in *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction of an Afro-Cuban Identity* (91).
relationship with Inle and going to the depths of the ocean, in order to satisfy her passion for
him, points out that Yemaya wants to maintain this relationship in secret. Consequently the se-
cond interpretation that of a homosexual relationship between the two, is the most plausible one.
Yemaya’s cutting off Inle’s tongue prohibits him from revealing not only the secrets of the sea,
but also the secret of their affair. As Rodriguez-Mangual discusses regarding this topic:

The subject of gays and lesbians in Santeria is controversial and ambig-
ous…Both gays and lesbians are referred to as ‘reversed’, and the text [El monte] offers
the words used to designate them in other dialects: “Addoddis, Obini-Toyo, Obini- Nana
or Eron Kiba, Wassicundi or Diakune, as the Abakas or Nanigos call them, and alacuttas
and oremi”(59-60). It also includes the voices of witnesses who tell of homosexual prac-
tices and state that many of Yemaya and Ochun’s sons are effeminate: “There is a mys-
tery in this part of the Addodis…because Yemaya had to do with one of them…She fell
in love and lived with one of them. It was in Lado country, where all the inhabitants
were like that- sissies”. (58)

Including the voices of the witnesses and the ways in which homosexuality is named in
different African languages is consistent with Cabrera’s multilayered and plural account. Re-
claiming that Inle is the patron of lesbians Cabrera makes visible sexual identities that are often
excluded from a traditional discourse; in this way she adds another layer to her post-modern rep-
resentation of Afro-Cuban reality. Being a lesbian herself, who never spoke openly about her
sexual orientation, Cabrera was aware of how homosexuals were placed at the margins of socie-
ty. Inle is known as the orisha of medicine and Cabrera’s personal interpretation influences her
compilation of this tale. Including the topic of homosexuality is Cabrera’s way of recentering, representing and talking about different realities within the Afro-Cuban community.

Through the multilayered and plural accounts Hurston and Cabrera achieve, together with their informants, what Audre Lorde commands in *Sister Outsider* (1984): “It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others- for their use and to our detriment” (45). Defining who we are, according to Lorde, is an exercise of power. Representing African-based communities as polyphonic systems that denounce inequality while providing an accurate image of their identity and original languages is what makes Hurston’s and Cabrera’s enterprises valuable anthropological portrayals. They picture African American and Afro-Cuban identities from within (in their anthropological works they join their informants and their cultural standpoint) and also provide a picture of how these two traditions define the outside from their standpoint or gaze. This detailed gaze in Hurston’s and Cabrera’s portrayals is the way in which these two ethnographers picture transculturation from within. Hurston and Cabrera represent the voices of those under study, giving over to their languages to define their transcultural realities. Hurston’s and Cabrera’s reproductions of African-based dialects in their ethnographies not only offer more accurate representations, but also signal the African spirituality discussed on chapter four. As Deborah Plant explains in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit*,

The spoken word in traditional African society had a procreative force to name, to define, and to order the world. And the dynamics of African oral tradition fostered harmonious interrelations and community because co-creativity is the very nature of antiphonal communication. Africana people found themselves uprooted from their African homelands and deposited in strange and inimical environments. The cultural traditions that gave birth to the humanity of African peoples would serve to empower Africans in the diaspo-
ra to survive, maintain, and recreate themselves as they resisted the attempts of Europeans and Euro-Americans to objectify and dehumanize them. The genius of oral tradition is its flexibility and adaptability. Thus, oral tradition equipped Africana people with the wherewithal to make their bid for freedom and peace. (100)

Orality, the way in which Africana people recreate history, and its characteristic adaptability, is the key to survival and recreation for them in the New World. It serves to recreate the past in the present, while giving space and voice for the future.

5.2 Foot Tracks on the Ocean.

“I believe that the truth about any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together and all their different meanings make a new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer’s story.” (49)

Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*

Narrating a folktale and transcribing it, an ethnographer is aware of how each narrator focuses in the process of providing a rounded story. This commitment to providing the complete picture of a tale is evident on Hurston’s and Cabrera’s ethnographic enterprises, particularly when they illustrate how in the storytelling practice each narrator adds to the other narrator’s version. This folkloric narrative pattern echoes an African sense of creativity that Plant maintains is “not dependant on education or rationality for its being; in the same way that spirituality happens outside or beyond the accustomed order of reality” (105). As discussed on chapter four, African-based spirituality and culture integrates a marvelous, beyond the accustomed order or dimension of reality. Creativity is linked to energy, to life force, to the sum of all parts that integrate a whole, an act of creation. Folklore as a communal exercise brings together the spiritual
forces of each one of the narrators. In *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* talking about her research to rediscover Hurston’s work Alice Walker states, “We are people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone” (92). The image of collecting an artist’s bones brings chapter four’s Clarissa Pinkola Estes’s “La loba” folktale to the conversation. The act of blending the bones together and using the life force to bring them back to life, which is what la loba does, not only points out to the artists’ figures, Hurston and Cabrera, and to their enterprise of singing the bones back to life through folklore, but also to their informants’ creative agency. Including the different artists’ (informants) in their ethnographic tales, Hurston and Cabrera folklorically recollected the bones of the story, put them together and sang, together with their informants, the whole story back to life.

The area in which Hurston’s and Cabrera’s works most resemble each other is African-based spirituality. After studying their spiritual works I found that both authors share a similar, personal and anthropological, understanding of spirituality. To be able to disguise their voices and selves inside the narration of a folktale, Hurston and Cabrera have to have a strong cultural and personal consciousness. In their anthropological observations the two folklorists often navigate between different cultures: Hurston uses her religious research in *Tell My Horse* to compare Voodoo practices with Catholic ones and legitimates the marvelous real as a coherent and valuable practice. Cabrera departs from her cultural standpoint and witnesses spiritual phenomenon, possessions, and testifies their validity. Talking about Hurston’s understanding of spirituality in relationship to folklore Plant explains that

Ultimately, with African American folklore, as with the lore of the folk, the forms gave expression to creativity, to cultural genius, to humanity, and to divinity. Hurston de-
scribed her research as “formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking, that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they dwell therein”…This doorstep, the folklore, is the local. It is the finite point through which the seeker moves toward the finite, the transcendent, into an exploration of “cosmic secrets.” (88)

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Janie stares at the horizon from a local point, the place where she is, and the horizon represents her wish to embrace the secrets of the cosmos. Standing in the local shows how important cultural, social and physical frameworks are for a person’s awareness. In Janie’s case the finite point, the framework, is the community. She is able to relate her search of the infinite, the horizon, to her friend Pheoby, one who shares the same cultural references. To retell her story and provide the complete picture Janie needs Pheoby. Memory needs a starting point (Pheoby’s willingness to listen to her friend) to be elaborated following the dynamics of storytelling. Once those frameworks are missing, a person struggles to define his or her identity. Cabrera herself wrote *Cuentos Negros* while living in Paris for Teresa de la Parra, who took Pheoby’s role as the starting point for her Afro-Cuban recollections. Cabrera also re-worked *El Monte* during her exile in an attempt to find in the past a reference for her present, and that of the Afro-Cubans.

Reinaldo Arenas, like Lydia Cabrera, who he met in Miami while both were living in exile, provides in his autobiography, *Before Midnight Falls* (1993), a very visual picture of how living without physical frameworks feels:

New York has no tradition, no history; there can be no history where there are no memories to hold on to. The city is a constant flux, constant construction, constant tearing down and building up again; a supermarket yesterday is a produce store today, a movie house
tomorrow, and a bank the day after. The city is a huge, soulless factory with no place for
the pedestrian to rest, no place where one can simply be without dishing out dollars for a
breath of air or a chair on which to sit down and relax. (310)

According to Arenas’s, a city that does not keep sites of reference threatens historical and per-
sonal identity, because it relies too much on change for its definition. For Arenas, New York
City’s reality is quite different from that of his childhood in Cuba. Talking about the destruction
of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in Beyond Katrina (2010), Natasha Tretheway discusses
the effects that the modification of physical landscapes have on cultural memory:

It is commonplace that the landscape is inscribed with the traces of things long gone.
Everywhere the names of towns, rivers, shopping malls, and subdivisions bear witness to
vanished Native American tribes, communities of former slaves, long ago industrial dis-
tricts and transit routes. We speak these names often unaware of their history, forgetting
how they came to be. Each generation is further from the events and the people to which
the names refer- these relics becoming more and more abstract. No longer talismans of
memory, the words are monuments nonetheless. As Robert Haas has written, “A word is
elegy to the thing it signifies.” (33)

When the physical enclaves that remind us of our history are altered, cultural memory
loses part of its frames of reference. Thinking about the slaves that were brought from Africa to a
foreign continent, the exiles that have to rebuild their identity in a new enclave, their access to
these physical monuments of memory is limited. As Tretheway further explains not only man
made testimonials are elements of cultural landscapes. Nature is an important element of
memory and history. Talking about the oaks that stood after Katrina Tretheway points out the
following:
Such natural monuments remind us of the presence of the past, our connection to it. Their ongoing presence suggests continuity, a vision into a future still anchored by a would-be neutral object of the past. Man-made monuments tell a different story. Never neutral, they tend to represent the narratives and memories of those citizens with the political power and money to construct them. Everywhere such monuments inscribe a particular narrative on the landscape while- often- at the same time subjugating or erasing others, telling only part of the story. (55)

Nature is also important memory framework for Arenas recollection of his childhood, specifically he reflects on the great importance that his grandmother and the natural enclaves she encapsulates, the hill and the night, have for his literary development during his childhood, growth that he also identifies with his grandmother’s relationship with the marvelous, the marvelous in itself is intrinsically related to nature:

But regarding the magical, the mysterious, which is so essential for the development of creativity, my childhood was the most literary time of my life…And this I owe, in large measure to that mythical figure my grandmother, who would interrupt her housework or throw down her bundle in the woods and start talking with God. Night also came under my grandmother’s domain; at night she ruled…My grandmother would tell me stories of apparitions, of men who walked with their heads under their arms, of treasures guarded by the dead tirelessly pacing their place of hiding…She knew that the hills were sacred places full of mysterious creatures and animals, not only those used for work or food. There was something above and beyond the realm of our senses; every plant, every tree could exhale a mystery that she would know about. When she walked around she would question the trees and, in fits of anger, sometimes slap them. (23-24)
On his childhood recollection Arenas links the beginning of his creativity with nature’s mystery and the marvelous real. For Arenas his first contact with “literacy” is his grandmother’s storytelling, an account that is intrinsically related to natural frameworks. Arenas’s conceptualization of his grandmother is especially linked to her spiritual agency. His grandmother daily “crosses the bridge” and accesses the marvelous real by retelling stories of apparitions, and creating healing remedies with herbs and plants. Arenas’s grandmother has a special relationship with nature, concretely with the wood and the hill. She, like Sojourner Truth as discussed in chapter four, speaks with God in nature. The importance of the hill, in its Afro-Cuban spiritual notion, is an essential natural landscape element for Arenas’s memory of his grandmother. The hill becomes a physical and spiritual framework for Arenas’s creative identity development, as he continuously emphasizes throughout the novel.

Envisioning the hill as the starting point of Arenas’s creative development transforms this space into a memory framework. Cabrera’s work in the exile mostly consisted, as discussed in chapter two, in reworking *El monte*. Through this enterprise Cabrera brought to the exile a spiritual and identity framework that will serve as a reference for those who like her and Arenas had to move to a new country, a new city in which there were no markers to enclave memory. The past without a framework can only be reenacted through storytelling as Tretheway signals. Thus, recentering the importance of this enclave is Cabrera’s way of protecting its continuity as a cultural framework for future generations. Tretheway also notices when looking at the surviving oaks around the coastline: “In the years after the storm, as the leaves have begun to return, the trees seem a monument to the very idea of recovery” (55).

Stepping on foot tracks on the ocean Zora Neale Hurston’s and Lydia Cabrera’s enterprises elaborate on African-based identities in the New World. In their ethnographic depictions
both authors testify the importance that the act of storytelling has for the stability of African American and Afro-Cuban identities. While documenting folklore they stepped on multiple voices, multiple tracks that signal a common origin in Africa. This origin cannot be eradicated or lost by the change in tides because it is permanent as long as these peoples get together and narrate their histories. Summing up all the steps Zora’s and Lydia’s enterprises speak about the faith in nommo, in creating a present that feeds up from the past and which ultimately leads to the future.
AFTERTHOUGHT.

So, in the beginning of this dissertation were two women, Zora and Lydia, whose search of cultural authenticity resembles that of Janie Crawford’s: the search of the infinite, the past, present and future, from a local point that of African descended communities. Hurston and Cabrera document and re-trace the foot tracks that became the references for African- based identities in the New World. Adding to Machado’s poem in the introduction, Hurston’s and Cabrera’s anthropological works articulate the importance of knowing the past in order to understand people’s present identity. Hurston’s and Cabrera’s enterprises, the similarities between their strategies of representation of African- based identities, are examples of what I call a “transcultural consciousness.” They navigate two different spheres in their works, the anthropological and the white one represented by anthropology’s gaze, while writing about transculturation from within African American and Afro-Cuban cultural standpoints. Through my analysis I aimed to show that the way in which these identities construct their present culture is deeply rooted in their spiritual past. What needs to be added is to find the folkloric elements that African American and Afro-Cuban identities have in common. My study aims to add to the understanding and cultural conception of transatlantic identities whose cultural integration departs from their displacement from Africa and whose survival strategies are based on perpetuating the essence of their oral tradition.
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