CHAPTER 3

Living Through Lyin(g) : Mules And Men

“Niggers lie and lie” – that is the dominant White’s view of the Negro story-telling. Signifying on this view of ‘otherness’ and ‘inferiority’ defined from ‘above’, Hurston affirms the Black folk tradition of ‘lyin(g)’ and the African American people’s right to ‘lie’ or to tell tales. These tales give shape to the actualisation of the Black self and community and create bonds which bring about personal and social transformation and also survival for the Blacks.

Mules and Men is a collection of seventy African American folktales recorded by Hurston on several extended expeditions to the American South under the auspices of the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University and under the conflict-ridden patronage of Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason. In this chapter, I propose to highlight the subversive component in the content and performative style of Hurston’s collected folklore material, including an analytical discussion of about twenty-five folk tales. When Hurston was asked by her mentor Franz Boaz to collect folklore, she decided to go to Florida because it would provide her a good way of re-mooring herself culturally and would also provide an ideal ideological base from which to construct her characters. The book, written on her return to New York between March 1930 and September 1932 and published in 1935, is divided into two parts : “Folk Tales” and “Hoodoo”. The first part gives insight into the orally transmitted folk tales and songs of rural Florida where she goes to different destinations like Eatonville, Polk County lumber camp and Mulberry phosphate mine area. The second part details the occult rituals and folk medicine practices of the conjure artists of Louisiana and New Orleans. The book has an extensive glossary, appendices and preface by the authoritative anthropologist Franz Boas and footnotes which explain exotic words like “chitterlings” and “doodley-squat”, thus abounding in features which make it
In her article titled ‘Folklore and Music’ which was part of her unpublished ‘Works-in-Progress for The Florida Negro’ (1938), Hurston has written that “Thinking of the beginning of things in a general way, it could be said that folklore is the first thing that man makes out of the natural laws that he finds around him...” Also “Folklore is the arts of the people before they find out that there is any such thing as art and they make it out of whatever they find at hand” (875). In the same essay Hurston also calls folklore,

...the boiled-down juice of human living. It does not belong to any special time, place, nor people...

In folklore, as in everything else that the people create, the world is a great, big, old serving-platter, and all the local places are like eating places....each plate has a flavour of its own because the people take the universal stuff and season it to suit themselves on the plate.... So when we speak of Florida folklore, we are talking about that Florida flavor that the story and song-makers have given to the great mass of material that has accumulated in this sort of cultural delta. And Florida is lush in material because the State attracts such a variety of workers to its industries (875).

To Hurston, who had spent her childhood in the cocooned environs of Eatonville, Florida, tale-telling on Joe Clarke’s store porch was an unconscious daily occurrence. She, like any southern child had unconsciously enjoyed listening to the stories of Brer Rabbit and the Squinch Owl. But when she left Florida and came to Barnard and Columbia, she became conscious of the debates with respect to vertical layering of cultures and the hegemony of the white ‘superior’ culture. Hurston’s training under Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, reinforced by the contestational aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance, unfolded to her the full meaning of the tight ‘chemise’ she had been unconsciously sporting all along. (‘Chemise’ is Hurston’s word for the
unconscious knowledge of Black folk narratives which every Black person grows up with, wearing it almost like a skin-tight garment). She now understood the full spiritual/subjective import of Black oral communicative behaviour and the emancipatory-empowering functions of Black vernacular. She comprehended fully that when southern folk speak 'they be signifyin(g) all along'.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. tells us that:

To signify is to be figurative. It presupposes an encoded intention to say one thing while meaning quite another. Signification helps to camouflage meaning strategically in such a way that it is hidden in terms of one audience while unveiled for another. It is an aggressive mode of rhetoric that also has cathartic functions (Gates, The Signifying Monkey 53).

In the Preface to his book The Signifying Monkey, Henry Louis Gates Jr. talks of his complete immersion in Black culture through Black language, which he inherited from observing his own father's fascination with Black language forms:

My father has mastered Black language rituals, certainly; he also has the ability to analyze them, to tell you what he is doing and how. He is a very self-conscious language user. He is not atypical. It is amazing how much Black people in ritual settings such as barber shops and pool halls, street corners and family reunions, talk about talking. Why do they do this? I think they do this to pass these rituals along from one generation to the next. They do it to preserve the traditions of "the race". Very few Black people are not conscious at some level of peculiarly Black texts of being. These are our texts, to be delighted in, enjoyed, contemplated, explicated and willed through repetition to our daughters and sons (xi-xii).

And then Gates goes on to pay his debt of gratitude to Zora Neale Hurston and Sterling Brown, whom he calls two of the truly great minds of "the race"
for practising in the 1930s, a reverence for Black vernacular and its traditions.

Gates refers to examples from Roger D. Abrahams book, Talking Back, who has listed ‘telling lies’, ‘woofing’, ‘sweet-talking’, ‘jiving’ and ‘rapping’ as synonyms of ‘signifyin(g)’ (Signifying 74). Gates suggests that this kind of non-transparent talk enables Blacks to achieve direction through indirection (Signifying 78). In his essay ‘Towards an Ethnography of Black American Speech Behaviour’, Thomas Kochman suggests “With all the above, he (Black) hopes to manipulate and control people and situations to give himself a winning edge” (162). John Lowe has given his own list of customary rituals from Black oral folk behaviour, which, as he suggests promotes intimacy and humor amongst its users. His terms are ‘woofing’, ‘specifying’, ‘toasts’ and ‘the Dozens’. ‘Woofing’, he suggests is a mode in courtship rituals; ‘Specifying’ is another form of signifyin(g) which really “gits down” on the victim; ‘Toasts’ are traditional long poems taken from oral tradition which rely on braggadocio to engage and to get approval from listeners and ‘The Dozens’ are a variant of verbal duelling leading to escalating insults, where the person who “caps” the exchange has won (60). In these insulting remarks, which are generally directed at the rival’s family, that player, who can give bigger insults is the winner.

Hurston’s word for the use of Black figurative language, is ‘lyin(g)’. The ‘lies’ that tale-tellers tell in Mules and Men clearly demonstrate that masses, especially in a multiethnic society, take to arbitrary substitution of ‘signs’ to disrupt the ‘signifier’ by displacing its ‘signified’ in an intentional act of will. The creation of meaning then becomes a communal act based on shared history and experience within the ‘lyin(g)’ community. Western/white ways of reading into meaning become inadequate for reading the African-American vernacular speech acts, thereby disrupting the former’s power and subverting its authority. And yet words alone are not enough. The spiritual, redemptive dimension of the creative process must manifest itself not only through language, but through action. In a way, in the entire ethos of the southern Black communities in which she travelled, Hurston noted the
specially dramatic quality in Black public and community life. She considers Blacks' performative eloquence as a prime example of innovative resilience and creative adaptability. To substantiate his views on Black performative eloquence, Lowe has also quoted the anthropological linguist, Roger Abrahams, who affirms:

The ability of a person to use active and copious verbal performance to achieve recognition within his group is observable throughout Afro-American communities in the New World. It has given rise to an observable social type .... called "the man of words". His performances are typified by his willingness to entertain and instruct anywhere and anytime, to make his own occasion. In all he does, he attempts to dazzle as well as amuse. And in each performance he must incessantly call attention to himself as an unexcelled speaker or singer (Lowe 156).

In an article titled 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', under the sections 'Negro Folklore' and 'Culture Heroes', Hurston writes:

Negro folklore is still not a thing of the past. It is still in the making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the Black man; nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use. God and the Devil are paired .... Ole Massa is sometimes a smart man and often a fool .... The angels and apostles walk and talk like section hands. And through it all walks Jack the greatest culture hero of the South; Jack beats them all – even the Devil, who is often smarter than God.

The Devil is next after Jack as a culture hero. He can outsmart everyone but Jack. God is absolutely no match for him. He is good-natured and full of humor. The sort of person one may count on to help out in any difficulty.

The rabbit, the bear, the lion, the buzzard, the fox are culture heroes from the animal world. In short, the trickster hero
of West Africa has been transplanted to America.

John Henry is a culture hero in song...There are many, many Negroes who have never heard of any of the song heroes, but none who do not know John (Jack) and the rabbit (836-37).

_Mules and Men_ records well over twenty-five categories of such folklore material. There are tall tales, including the 'Texas Mosquito' and the 'Great Hunt'; etiological tales explaining how there came to be Black and white races or why cats have nine lives or why the possum has no hair on its tail; animal tales about Brer rabbit, the 'gator and Brer dog; folktales of Jack and the Devil and some prime examples of John and Ole Massa tales. There are stories explaining the Bible and stories explaining where Hoodoo beliefs and practices came from, legends about the hoodoo priestess, Marie Leveau and formulaic recitations of her hoodoo routines. There are personal narratives of supernatural experiences such as Jim Allen’s account of seeing the wind after squirting sow’s milk in his eyes. There are descriptions of customs and traditional skills, children’s games, folk cookery and hoodoo conjurations. There are traditional rhymes that begin or end long prose narratives, traditional insults or “dozens”, blues lyrics and their music, a text of the ballad of John Henry, street cries, proverbial expressions, esoteric usages and items of folk speech and many examples of the patterned repartee termed as ‘woofing’. In her introduction to _Mules_, Hurston mentions that most of the stories she hopes to hear are only going to be a repetition of the stories she had heard as a child.

In the introduction to _Mules and Men_, Hurston makes her theoretical position clear:

The theory behind our tactics: The White man is always trying to know 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 (10).
Hurston thus, seeks to marginalize members of the dominant culture at the very outset.

Hurston begins her book by adopting the strategy of masking social conflict and critical commentary with humor, so as to bypass the censoring eye of her mentors and unsympathetic white readers. She creates for herself the person of a ‘lovable darky’, one who thanks white folks for ‘allowing’ her to collect folklore and who praises the magnanimity of her patron, Mrs. Mason. She puts herself in a non-threatening role: lovable, entertaining and intellectually mute:

Before I enter the township, I wish to make acknowledgements to Mrs. R. Osgood Mason of New York City. She backed my falling in a hearty way, in a spiritual way, and in addition, financed the whole expedition in the manner of the Great Soul that she is. The World’s most gallant woman (Introduction 12).

In a 1911 pamphlet titled ‘The Social Evolution of the Black South’, when DuBois had said that from the ranks of the sensitive Negroes would arise someone who would fight for what is right, he may have to stoop, if necessary, but he will stoop only to conquer (104), his statement was prophetic. In her dealings with her white patron, Mrs. R. Mason (Godmother as she liked to be called), Hurston wore the mask of an obsequious slave, as her servile and flattering letters to Mrs. Mason reveal. Hurston realised how such a pose could pay off in the workplace for her and for others, though she has been severely criticized for this by her own people. Alice Walker understands Hurston fully well when she says in her 1979 essay ‘Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View’ that:

...we have Zora sincerely offering gratitude and kind words to people one knows she could not have respected. But this unctuousness, so out of character for Zora, is also a result of dependency, a sign of her powerlessness, her inability to pay back her debts with anything but words. They must have been bitter ones for her.... We have taken help where it was offered

82
because we are committed to what we do and to the survival of our work. Zora was committed to the survival of her people’s cultural heritage as well (In Search 91).

The fact that despite great great odds,1 Hurston managed to see into print an account of the patterns of language used by “the Negro farthest down”, in his folk narrative, shows that she had mastered the art of playing the trickster, asserting her triumph. Beginning with the book’s dedication, preface and introduction, Hurston tricked on the very whites who made the book’s existence possible: Mrs. Annie Nathan Meyer, Dr. Boas and Mrs. R. Osgood Mason. Hurston is definitely admitting but also mocking the power that these three whites and many others held over her, critiquing the systems of social inequality that kept her and people of African descent “in their place” in this and many Western societies, even to the extent that they had to seek the sanction of the mainstream to represent themselves. Hurston has made it clear in the ‘Introduction’ to Mules that her resistance will be encoded in the forms of discourse that is associated with a marginalized community.2 Limited by their own racism, the white men/women can never grant a black wo(man) any intelligence, wit or agency. Robert Hemenway is right when he says “To believe that the Black (man or woman) is intelligent enough to trick him would destroy his presumption of superiority” (Biography 169).

As Hurston drove along in her Chevrolet on her tale-gathering expedition to Florida, she began to recall the folktales of her childhood in her all Black community and regaled over the fact that “even the Bible was made over to suit our vivid imagination”, such that God got outsmarted by the Devil and the latter got outsmarted by the trickster, Jack or John. As her thoughts hover in the supernatural sphere, she remembers the folktale about the creation of souls for humans. God, she explains, had created the “soul-piece” but having ascertained that humans were not yet ready for souls, He covered it with his “loose raiment” i.e. He decided to postpone giving out souls to humans, and covered it with a big cloth. People passing by noticed it and Hurston suggests that this is how various races and ethnic groups responded...
as they passed by the “soul-piece”:

De White man passed by it way off and he looked but he would not go close to touch. De Indian and de Negro, they tipped by cautious too...De Jew come past and heard de song from de soul-piece then he kept on passin’ and all of a sudden he grabbed up de soul-piece and hid it under his clothes...It burnt him.... Way after while they [the rest] come out of holes and corners picked up little chips and pieces that fell back on de ground. So God mixed it up wid feelings and give it out to ‘em. ‘Way after while when he katch dat Jew, He’s goin’ to ‘vide things up more ekal” (11-12).

While this humorous tale offers an example of the kind of folktales that follow and functions as a sort of “creation myth”, it also serves another function in this chapter, which is devoted to the origins of Mules. It implies inequality among various groups: We need to read the tale within the context of Hurston’s introduction, her life and the African American tradition of verbal art, which then reveal that Hurston was once again signifying on Mrs. Meyer and Dr. Boas, critiquing by indirection, the unequal power that they had and the patronizing behaviour she had endured at their hands. Placing her acknowledgements to “the Great Soul/the world’s most gallant woman”, (12) Mrs. Mason soon after referring to this tale of the origins of inequality and the creation of the “soul-piece”, is strategic. Hurston, the trickster is at work, making her critique of the unequal distribution of power through her use of a figurative folktale.

Driving along the Maitland-Eatonville township line, Hurston is delighted to see a group on the store-porch – George Thomas, Calvin Daniels, Jack and Charlie Jones, Gene Brazzle, B. Moseley and “Seaboard”. What is more, she finds nothing had changed since the days of her childhood. They are found playing a game of Florida-flip. As soon as Zora drives in, they all recognize her and crowd around her. When Zora tells them that “Ah come to collect some old stories and tales...” the crowd blames her for telling “de
biggest lie”. George Thomas says “Who you reckon want to read all them old-time tales about Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear?” But, Zora is able to convince them that “They are a lot more valuable than you might think” and that she wants to write them down “Before everybody forgets al of ’em” (13-14). Then begins the almost non-stop flow of lyin(g) contests, verbal duels, jokes, riddles, woofing, jiving and one-upmanship which almost emits a distinct southern scent. The Eatonville crowd who “never run outer lies” do “lie up a nation” for her but tell her that if she is interested in some really good old lies then she must visit Polk county because “Dat’s where they really lies up a mess and dats where they makes up all de songs and things lak dat” (58).

Tales of how the ‘Smart Nigger’, John always outsmarted ‘Ole Massa’ are an all-time favourite among African Americans in southern settings and places. In the glossary of the book, Hurston again explains that Jack or John is

The great human culture hero in Negro folklore. He is...the wish-fulfilment hero of the race. The one who, nevertheless, or inspite of laughter, usually defeats Ole Massa, God and the Devil. Even when Massa seems to have him in a hopeless dilemma, he wins out by a trick. Brer Rabbit, Jack (or John) and the Devil are continuations of the same thing (229).

The first tale that Zora gets to hear soon after she reaches Eatonville is an Ole Massa-John tale. Calvin Daniels narrates the story that once Massa was thirsty and wanted John to get him a cool drink of water from the spring. John was too lazy to exert himself. Nevertheless, he went to the spring and came back running, extremely frightened and without any water. He told Massa that there was a “big ole booger” at the spring and that he was too scared of the booger to go near the spring and draw water. Massa tried to pacify the agitated John, telling him that there’s no such thing as a booger and asked him to explain what it looked like. John who had actually seen a frog then says “Massa, he had two great big eyes lak balls of fire, and when he was standing up he was sittin’ down and when he moved, he moved by jerks, and he had most no tail” (16). Seeing John so scared and ignorant, Massa just let
him be. In a way John’s ignorant fear helped Massa to feel racially superior. Thus, John, who was basically too lazy to work, used his stupidity as a subversive gesture. His use of signifying language, too, assists him in gaining ascendancy in an otherwise losing situation. Massa’s racism, however, could never permit him to dream that John could be upto some kind of deception.

‘Ah’ll Beatcher Makin’ Money’ is another signifyin’ tale in this cycle of Ole Massa–John stories. Interestingly, this long story is narrated by a child Julius Henry, on the Eatonville store-porch. In a fit of anger Massa kills John’s horse. John is unperturbed. He puts the horsehide on his shoulder and goes about saying he has a ‘fortune teller’ with him. He earns a lot of money. Massa, too, tries to imitate John in making money by fortune-telling. He kills his own horse, but having no gift for fortune-telling, he ends up making a fool of himself. At another time, Massa kills John’s grandma. Again the cycle of John becoming richer and Massa killing his own grandma (out of greed) is repeated. Now Massa’s anger knows no bounds and he throws John into the river. Johns saves himself through his cunning. Massa in his relentless greed, hoping to make money even after getting thrown into the river, ends up losing his life. “And dat wuz de las’ of Ole Massa”, we are told (43-47).

On the surface, the above story appears to be a story of John outwitting Ole Massa, even causing his death with his guile and intelligence, but it is also a story about the power of intuition against sheer reason, about alternative modes of perceiving reality, as also about alternative economic modes for Blacks. Massa’s ruthless money-making instincts even in exchange for life, recreate the plantation dynamics of the American South, but John’s victory helps tale-tellers relive a psychic victory whenever his tales are narrated.

In the story ‘How Jack beat the Devil’, the Devil who is a trickster like Jack/John and an alternative representation of the Black man is not completely inscribed within the socio-economic restraints common to the Black population, because he is an otherworldly figure. The story opens with an inheritance distributed equally between two brothers. The first brother uses
his share to buy “a big farm” and “a pair of mules” and settles down. After this we do not hear of this brother. The remaining story is all about the second brother, Jack who “took his money and went on down the road skinnin’ and winnin’”. Although the first brother’s part is very short, yet his function is very crucial in the story. He represents the larger economy, the system of stability based on property ownership within which Jack’s “skinnin’ and winnin’”, an inventive and alternative economics, is inscribed.

The first of these alternative modes of exchange is gambling in which Jack is pitted against an unbeatable opponent, who having won all of Jack’s money, suggests they keep the game going by staking Jack’s life against “all de money on de table”. The attachment of exchange value to human beings reminds one of slavery, capitalism’s first mode of labour control. Jack agrees to the wager, loses, and suddenly finds himself facing a “twelve-foot tall” opponent, who looks down on him and says, “De Devil is mah name and Ah live across de deep blue Sea”. The Devil could kill Jack on the spot but in keeping with the economics of slavery, Jack is more valuable alive than dead. So the Devil perpetuates the game, though he changes its form. He lifts Jack out of the economics of slavery and reconstitutes his relationship to him in terms of the system of debt peonage, which is reminiscent of the sharecropping system of the post-civil War South.

Jack must now journey across the ocean to where the Devil lives. He accomplishes the journey on the back of a bald eagle who gets so hungry in mid-flight that when he is left with nothing to feed her, he tears off his own arm and then his leg to satisfy her hunger. On reaching the Devil’s house, the latter quickly remedies the situation by giving him an arm and a leg because he wants an able-bodied worker, not a cripple. The incident clearly articulates the fluctuations in fortune an individual with alternative economic modes like gambling or sharecropping might experience. Now in the Devil’s debt for his arms, legs and life, Jack is required to perform a number of tasks. First, Jack must clear a hundred acres for the Devil; then he must retrieve a lost ring from the bottom of a well; and finally, he must pluck two geese in a raging gale
without losing a single feather. Jack, who could never have performed the tasks in the amount of time allotted by the Devil, is luckily aided by the Devil's daughter, who magically completes each of the tasks. Beatrice Devil is no subservient peasant woman, but one who exercises free will, guile and intelligence. Jack, having fulfilled his obligations to the Devil, marries his daughter and it seems he is liberated from bondage. But the domineering master that the Devil is, he cannot accept the situation and comes looking for Jack one night in order to kill him. As a free man, Jack is now worth more dead than alive. Hurriedly, Jack and his wife escape in a buckboard, pulled by two of the Devil's horses with the Devil in pursuit on his jumping bull.

The horses that Jack has stolen are named "Hallowed-be-thy-name" and "Thy-kingdom-come" and are trained in such a manner that everytime the Devil calls their names, they fall to their knees. But luckily for Jack, his wife knows the charm to reverse the Devil's spell each time the Devil calls out. When the Devil still manages to catch up with Jack who has hidden in a hollow log, Jack cries out "O Lawd, have mercy". This speech act frightens the Devil so much that he wants to flee. In his haste he orders the bull to turn around with such ferocity that the jumping bull, obeying his orders turns so fast as to break his own neck and to throw the Devil and kill him. The story ends, "So dat's why day say Jack beat de Devil".3

This last part of the story clearly shows that the Devil is mastered by himself and especially by Jack in his use of language, which, like the specific feature of Black language, reverses the systems of domination. Overall, the story functions in reassuring the Blacks that they have the mettle to prevail even in the most adverse circumstances.

All southern folks love to hear these success stories of the Jack/John figure. As Eugene Oliver of the Polk County saw mill camp says, "Ah love to hear tales about Ole Massa and John. John sho was one smart nigger" (72) and Black Baby says in another place "John was too smart for Ole Massa. He never got no beatin'!" (80). There is the story of John praying to God every night to come and take him away because "Ah have such a hard time. Ole
Massa works me so hard, and don’t gimme no time to rest” (72). One day Massa hears John’s prayer and comes to his door, dressed like God and knocks and calls out to him to “heben”. John is very frightened now and while feigning concern for the Lord’s interests, he proffers one excuse after another. He begins with a short appeal to decorum: “O, Lawd, Ah can’t go to Heben wid you in yo’ fiery chariot in dese old dirty britches; gimme time to put on my Sunday pants”. When this strategy is exhausted because “John didn’t had nothin’ else to change”, he lays the groundwork for his escape by appealing to the ‘fact’ of God’s superiority and the Black man’s inferiority. He says:

O, Lawd, heben is so high and wese so low; youse so great Ah’m so weak and yo’ strength is too much for us poor sufferin’ sinners. So once mo’ and agin yo’ humber servant is knee-bent and body-bowed askin’ you one mo’ favor befo’ Ah step into yo’ fiery chariot to go to Heben wid you and wash in yo’ glory – be so pleased in yo’ tender mercy as to stand back jus’ a li’il bit further (74)

As God steps away, taken in by the slavish appeal of John, the latter bolts through the door and runs across the fields with the Master following him, but John remains way ahead. Told in the context of the Blacks’ own feelings of impotence at the hands of cruel bosses at the saw-mill camp, this tale of Will Richardson evokes a “Kah, Kah, Kah” laughter with everybody’s mouths wide open, suggesting their delight in the Black man’s wiliness and the white’s gullible vanity. To hear and tell even a temporary/imaginative reversal of the roles of white and Black men is subversively amusing for these otherwise ‘mulish’ folks.

The story in which Massa takes John deer-hunting, once again shows the quick-witted John getting the better of Massa. Massa gives John his best gun and tells him to shoot the deer that he will scare down from the hill. Massa scares down a deer, it passes John, but John remains unmoved. When Massa comes down and questions John why he did not shoot the deer, he
coolly replies: “Well Ah sho’ ain’t seen none. All Ah seen was a white man come along here wid a pack of chairs on his head and Ah tipped my hat to him and waited for de deer” (78). Later in Willie Robert’s version of the same story, Massa sends John with his best gun and other niggers for deer-hunting. When the niggers come down and ask John why he did not shoot the deer they had scared down, John’s nonchalant reply is “Y’all crazy! You think Ah’m gointer sprain Massa’s brand new gun shootin’ up hill wid it?” (113). Deer-stories of this type extol the subversive virtue of laziness through the appearance of stupidity. For the white man to think of the Black man as anything but stupid would destroy his own presumption of superiority, so the Black man’s masking is effective.

In a debate with Ralph Ellison on the perpetuation of folkloristic elements in life and literature both, literary critic Stanley Hyman suggests that “Assuming this role, a smart man playing dumb, is a characteristic behaviour pattern of Negroes in the South (even often in the North)” (47). Also in a world of harsh economic realities, where “ought’s a ought, figger’s a figger/all for de white man, none for de nigger” (77), the Black man who works diligently, is instrumental only in serving the white man’s interests rather than his own.

Anthromorphic tales of Brer Rabbit type are also very popular among the African Americans. “Among the animals, the rabbit is the trickster hero”, Hurston explains in the glossary of *Mules*. “Lacking in size, strength and natural weapons such as teeth and claws, he continues to overcome by cunning” (231). Brer Rabbit, as I have already mentioned, is also a continuation of the figure of the clever John. There is the story of Brer Rabbit who becomes jealous in love and by treachery cuts Brer Dawg’s melodious tongue. The clever rabbit who is invited by the Dog to dinner refuses to stay on as he becomes “suscautious” of the dogs’ motives and tells his host “De rabbits didn’t go to school much and he didn’t learn but three letters and that’s trust no mistake” (111). Despite Brer Dog’s best efforts to take his revenge, Brer Rabbit, the trickster always outsmarts him. It is the sharp ole rabbit
rascal, that took advantage of the alligator also and made him Black, as we come to know in a later story.

Another important category of stories are the Blacks’ own stories of the creation of the universe, that form the basis of their beliefs and practices. These folk stories of the origin and creation of various species on earth are absolutely valid for the Blacks, irrespective of their factual authentication vis-a-vis the written word of the Bible. To the Blacks, who have received the stories through oral transmission from the previous generations, their own unquestioning beliefs in these stories grants a subversive subjectivity on account of the knowledge they confer. Many of these stories are narrated to Hurston after she leaves Eatonville and goes further on her tale-gathering expedition to Polk County and Mulberry.

At the Polk County saw mill camp, Jim Presley, the guitar-player narrates the story on how snakes got poison, and Larkins White of this camp can narrate a factual ‘lie’ to justify where the “possum” lost the hair off his tail. Lonnie Barnes of Polk County story-telling gang has his own story of how the mean woodpecker was hit by the Old Noah with a sledge hammer on his head and that’s why the pecker has a red head. Stories of how butterflies, gophers and squinch owls came into being, hold the audience in rapt attention. Cliffert Ulmer another member of the saw mill camp has a story on the origin of gophers. Ulmer suggests that gophers are the devil’s creation in response to God’s creation of the turtle. [The devil as Hurston tells in her article “Culture Heroes”, is a continuation of the trickster John]. Though God is unhappy with the Devil’s water-hating version of the turtle, the Devil insists on its authentic identity and names it ‘gopher’. He also narrates a story of how much good sense gopher has. Floyd Thomas caps this story with his story of how butterflies came into being. They were created by God to give company to the lonesome flowers. God cut little pieces off the sky, the trees, the flowers, the earth, the animals and all these little clippings flew off. Folks started calling them ‘flutter-bys’. But the brother in Black got it all mixed up and called them butter-fly and that’s how they got their name.
At the community centre in Mulberry Phosphate County, which is Hurston’s third halt in her tale-collecting expedition, again she meets a group of enthusiastic tellers of ‘true lies’. Mack C. Ford, “the mighty storyteller” (153) in the phosphate country around Mulberry gives his explanation of the mystery of the crosswise tail of the ‘porpoise’. One of them, A.D. tells the tale on how we got squinch owls. An old maid sister of Ole Massa who had never been married, wished to be courted and married. Once a devilish young man told her that if she would spend the night on the roof of her house, he would marry her in the morning. It was a bitter cold night and the girl kept on shivering and shaking and by the morning she froze to death. But, the next day, she was back there in the shape of an owl, shivering and shaking, and that’s how we have squinch (shivering) owls. The Blacks have a series of personal superstitious beliefs attached to the squinch owl. When A.D. finishes his story, many members of the group gathered there, want to talk of these superstitions. Christopher Jenkins vouches that it is a sign of bad luck and of sure death, everytime one hears an owl hollering round the house. Then each member of the group has his own belief of what is the most harmless way of killing a squinch owl, which ranges from turning a piece of clothing inside out to throwing some salt on the lamp. With respect to the Black cat too, they believe that killing a Black cat brings extremely bad luck. These stories of “how everything started” demonstrate a different kind of cultural creativity that flourishes outside the range of white control. This subjectivity has strategic survival import as well as self-affirming virtue. By narrating such creation stories and having independent belief systems of their own, Black people feel they have their own power not only to understand the cosmos and to assign ‘reason’ for its existence, but with their unique superstitious beliefs, they can also exercise ways to control it.

The knowledge of the Black communities of the American South that Hurston studies is further wide-ranging. They have their own stories of reasoning for various phenomena: ‘Why the Christian Churches don’t stick together’ and ‘Why we’s Black’. Charlie Jones, a member of the gregarious group of Eatonville who collect on the store-porch everyday, wants to impress
Hurston. So he narrates a story that once Christ went for a walk with his disciples and asked everyone to pick up a rock. Except the lazy Peter, everyone else obliged him. Then, Jesus advised everyone to catch fish. God then turned everybody’s rock into bread and they all had a hearty meal except Peter. Next time when they went for a walk Peter picked half a mountain and dragged it. When Christ saw this, he wanted to build his church on it but Peter wanted it to be converted into bread. So Christ had to build his church by piecing up the eleven rocks of the other disciples and that’s how the Christian church is split up into so many different sects.

Gold, a Black woman porch-sitter of Eatonville, too, wants to contribute her own bit to the story-session in progress. She narrates a tale of laziness of Blacks to justify why Niggers are Black. On the day when God was giving out color to the people he asked everyone to come at seven o’clock in the morning and get their color. All the people went at the appointed hour, took their color and went away, except the niggers. God kept waiting for them. Later some angels found them all stretched out asleep on the grass under the ‘tree of life’. The angels woke them up and asked them to hurry. The Blacks became so scared that they pushed and shoved and messed around God’s throne. God became furious and shouted on them to “Git back! Git back!” and they misunderstood him as saying “Git black!” and they have been black ever since.

This kind of Negro self-laughter is a common theme in the folktales. Once when a Negro sends up a prayer to God on behalf of the white man, asking for rain, he starts by saying:

Pay some attention to me. I don’t worry and bother you all the time like these niggers – asking you for a whole heap of things that they don’t know what to do with after they git ’em... we’d like a little rain. But I don’t mean for you to come in a hell of a storm like you did last year – picking up racket like niggers at a barbecue... another thing.... Don’t let these niggers be as sassy as they have been in the past. Keep ’em in their places... (90)
Lonnie Barnes of Polk County tells a tale on how a nigger who found a gold watch on the road didn’t know what it was and asked a white man about it. The latter duped him of it and told him to pick up anything he finds on the road that’s kicking and to sell it. The colored man next finds a turtle and hangs it by a string out of his pocket and tries to read the time in it. Jim Presley has a tale on how Negroes brought hard work on themselves out of their own greed. God left two bundles on the road. The white man and the nigger raced to see who would get there first. The nigger was so scared that the white man would get the bigger bundle, that he raced on fast and got hold of the bigger one first. The white man contented himself with the left over one. When the nigger opened his bundle, it had a pick and a shovel and plow and a chop-axe and the white man’s bundle carried a pen and ink. That’s how niggers have been always working out in the hot sun, while the white man works on the figures, where he keeps all for himself and leaves none for the niggers. Jim Allen has a parallel tale to suggest why the sister in Black works harder than anybody else in the world. According to him, the white woman asked Ole Massa to go pick up the bundle God had placed in the middle of the road. Seeing that the bundle is too heavy, Massa ordered the Black man to ‘tote’ it, who in turn told his wife to bring it. The nigger woman being greedy, ran and grabbed it, but on opening it, found it full of hard work.

Alice Walker suggests that Hurston enjoyed the idea that Blacks could on occasion be peculiar and comic (In Search 84). John Lowe has complimented Hurston for successfully demonstrating the glories of African American humor at a time when its false images in the form of minstrelsy and vaudeville had taken America by storm (29). Hurston had observed in her abovementioned 1938 (then unpublished) essay, under the subtitle ‘Folklore and Music’ that the Negro humor is something native to American soil:

One fact stands out as one examines the Negro folk tales which have come to Florida from various sources.... Each tale brims over with humor. The Negro is determined to laugh even if he has to laugh at his own expense. By the same token he spares
nobody else. His world is dissolved in laughter. His “bossman”,
his woman, his preacher, his jailor, his God, and himself all must
be baptized in the stream of laughter (892).

To Hurston, a subtle triumph is hidden in the “Kah, Kah” laughter of
the store-porch tale-tellers. It suggests their being inured from the devastating
effects of spiritual enslavement. The laughter thus become one of their modes
of inscribing resistance. In an essay, “Humor as a Technique in Race
Conflict”, Whiney and Simkins have suggested that :

In conflict, the involved parties make use of a variety of
techniques to gain ascendancy or temporary advantage. Since
subtle barbs often strike more telling blows than gratuitous insult
or rational argument, not infrequently these techniques include
humor, satire, irony and wit.

Humor lends itself particularly well to use as a conflict
device because...its nature is such that it often contains more or
less well concealed malice...(622).

The discussions of wit in the writings of Freud and Reik also suggest similar
explanations. John Lowe has quoted Sigmund Freud who says, “Humor has in
it a liberating element...it is not resigned; it is rebellious” (25). Harry Oster, a
white folklorist, who wrote a piece titled ‘Negro Humor : John and Old
Master’, in a 1968 issue of the Journal of American Folklore Institute, has
suggested that the insights Reik expresses in his book Jewish Wit are
essentially applicable to the mechanisms of much of the humor of more
despised and/or persecuted minority groups. He writes :

[The] emotional process in the listener to an aggressive or
obscene joke [operates] in the region “between fright and
laughter”. The first reaction to hearing such a joke is
unconscious alarm. This emotion is aroused by an unexpected
attack on highly esteemed persons or institutions, for instance
religion, marriage, etc.... There must be in all of us an
unconscious wish to attack those respected persons or highly
regarded institutions. The latent anxiety connected with this temptation is for a moment increased when we hear a cynical or obscene witicism assailing them...but then the intensified fear reaction is recognized as...superfluous and the...effect is laughter (Oster 558).

In her own lifetime, Zora Hurston was blamed for her ignoring the harsh economic realities of Blacks' lives or for romanticizing Black response to white oppression by always showing them happy and laughing. This, however, is a gross misunderstanding of Hurston’s politics. In the discussion between Hyman and Ellison mentioned above, on the value of folklore for the Negro writer in America, Hyman refers to the “grief-gayety”/”melancholy-comic” ambivalence of the blues and among other examples, he quotes what a character in a similar situation in Redding’s Stranger and Alone, says “As for the laughter, unless one had experienced it, he cannot imagine how it rips and tears you with pain” (48). Hurston authenticates this when she says in Mules:

The brother in Black puts a laugh in every vacant place in his mind. His laugh has a hundred meanings. It may mean amusement, anger, grief, bewilderment, chagrin, curiosity, simple pleasure or any other of the known or undefined emotions (64-65).

She also quotes an instance of a Black woman whom she met at the Pine Mill:

Clardia Thornton of Magazine Point, Albama, was telling me about another woman taking her husband away from her. When the show-down came and he told Clardia in the presence of the other woman that he didn’t want her – could never use her again, she tole me “Den, Zora, Ah wuz so outdone, Ah just opened mah mouf and laffed (65).

The laughter/self-laughter of the Blacks, definitely has an undercurrent of pathos. This pathos may be the result of the penuriousness of the work-stressed slaves or other compelling situations prevalent in their lives. Hurston, however, knew the powerlessness of the Blacks in fighting this situation with
open defiance and understood the merits of indirect action viz. subversive tale-telling or full-throated laughter. I would like to quote at least one of the tales in *Mules* that show Hurston’s awareness of the grim reality of the Black men’s lives. Eugene Oliver narrates this tale of a colored man who was too lazy to work and as soon as his master turned his back, he would go off to sleep. When he heard somebody coming, he would hit the log with the flat of the axe and say “klunk, klunk, you think Ah’m workin’, but Ah ain’t”. But on Saturday night, when he went to the white man to get his pay, the latter stacked up his big old silver dollars and shook them in his hand and said, “Clink, clink, you think, I’m gointer pay you, but I ain’t” (93-94). Tales such as these are a stark reminder of the oppression of slavery and reveal Hurston’s awareness of this grim reality.

Hurston has purposely created the Polk County saw-mill work scene to emphasize the white domination, and the control of Black men’s lives and the latter’s handling of the situation in such a way so as to make a transition to the state of being ‘men’ from the ‘mules’ they are made out to be. On a day when the workers arrive at work to find the straw boss missing, they think they will be given a day off but are disappointed when the foreman orders them on the mill to see if they are needed there. Telling tales, all the way, they walk the long distance to the mill, only to be summarily dismissed by the mill boss. Like mules, the men are moved from one location to the next, never informed of the white boss’s plans. Frustrated by this dehumanising situation, the men use traditional tales to critique white power figures and to reassert their own humanity. After general speculation that the boss is absent due to illness, one man sneers, “Man he’s too ugly. If a spell of sickness ever tried to slip up on him, he’d skeer it into a three weeks’ spasm” (70). This comment leads into a series of exaggeration stories in which the workers try to top one another’s stories about men who are “ugly”.

As the later stories of exaggeration about the hottest weather, the biggest mosquito, the richest and poorest land etc. show, this traditional genre is often a fun-filled verbal play engaged in for its own sake. In a work context,
however, these are used to lampoon white power figures. When the foreman announces that they must report at the mill, one man says, “Ain’t dat a mean man? No work in the swamp and still he won’t let us knock off” (71). The tales that follow detail one straw boss “so mean dat when the boiler burst and blew some of the men up in the air, he docked ’em for de time they was off de job” and a road boss so mean “till he laid off de hands of his watch” (71). These exaggeration stories can also be ascribed to the Black folk oral ritual called ‘Dozens’, which, I have already explained, is a verbal duel of mutually exacerbating insults.

It is besides the point whether a tale carries meaning or not, whether it is true or false. As long as the Blacks have been granted their right to voice, all of them who felt like mules being shoved around by inconsiderate bosses, have managed to destabilize the mules-men relationship by indirection, by name calling and lampooning the boss for his looks, his conduct and his mean mentality – all with their potent linguistic power.

Harry Oster, has also suggested that the slave knows that there is no escape from the bitter reality. He must work in order to live. Running from one plantation means going to another, within the same repressive system. So the slave decides to stay there. “Thus the old-time Negro who feels he has to work within the system uses tales of this sort as a defense psychological mechanism”, opines Oster. Also:

While such tales have been important as entertainment, they have also functioned significantly as a mechanism for emotional survival. If one can treat bitter reality as a joke, even grim laughter produces a release which blunts tensions and brings about a catharsis of the emotions (Oster 560).

In an essay titled ‘Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit’, Bernard Wolf has assigned similar reason for the existence of Brer Rabbit, one of the finest creations of the folk imagination. Wolf says:

...the function of such folk symbols as Brer Rabbit is precisely to prevent inner explosions by siphoning off these hatreds before
they can completely possess consciousness. Folk tales, like so much of folk culture, are part of an elaborate psychic drainage system (535).

Wolf opines that through his anthromorphic Brer Rabbit stories, the Negro slave seems to be hinting that even the frailest and most humble of ‘animals’ can be a combatant in the most blood-thirsty aggressions (531). Only his weapons are those of trickery and malevolence.

Mythical heroes like Jack or John enhance self-respect, pride and a sense of legitimacy and continuity of an age-old tradition, albeit unrecorded and unwritten. The prototype for the ‘darky clown’ (John) can be traced to the West African trickster of so many cycles: Spider on the Gold Coast, Legba the Creator God’s son in Dahomey, Rabbit or Tortoise elsewhere. In this sense he becomes a vital dynamic part of the American Negro folk heritage. Listing various types of folktales of the Negro American in her essay ‘Folklore and Music’, Hurston mentions the following also:

Also in Florida are the Cuban-African and the Bahaman-African folk tales. It is interesting to note that the same Brer Rabbit tales of the American Negro are told by these islanders. One also finds the identical tales in Haiti and the British West Indies....the wide distribution denotes a common origin in West Africa (891-92).

A sense of tradition spread out both in length and breadth, is definitely uplifting for these otherwise dehistoricized folks.

Blacks’ survival within and outside the white perimeters is not the only concern of Hurston in Mules and Men. Though the title of the book seems to privilege the male; yet, as Cheryl A. Wall suggests in her 1989 article on ‘Mules and Men and Women’ that “one subtext of Mules is female empowerment” (661). Hurston represents the means by which women are relegated to subordinate roles in the culture she otherwise celebrates, but over and above that she reveals how women gain power in that very culture, by their access to creative expression. “Even the women folks would stop and
break a breath at times...” (70), Hurston tells us among the reasons for her choosing to go to Eatonville to collect material. In his article, “Negotiating Respect: Patterns of Presentation among Black Women”, Roger Abrahams suggests that women negotiate for respect in their interpersonal exchanges of everyday interaction. They have the ability to talk smart or cold with anyone who might threaten their self-image (61).

The early scenes of the book, starting with the Woodbridge toe-party have sexist undertones. At this party, Hurston observes that women are valued/sold for their ‘li’l pink toes”. The man ‘treats’ the woman in proportion to her beauty. Some girls are conscious that their “old rusty toes” will not sell at all. The group that gathers on the store-porch at Hurston’s invitation the following morning is made up of women and men. Interspersed among the tales are highly charged exchanges between men and women, the subject of which is male-female relationships. Through these between-story conversations and through the content of many of the tales, one understands that Hurston critiques the fact that respect to women is never a permanent given, but by giving voice to them, she has also revealed how they assert and empower themselves.

After one tale on the store-porch, a tale which uses “rounders and brick-bats” as terms of address for women, Gold, a female character comments that the teller has told a “lie” and goes on to attack the male-teller, “Dat’s all you men is good for – settin round and lyin’” (28). Gene Brazzle, one of the regulars at the store porch, counterattacks by blaming women for being good for nothing and always demanding things from men as soon as they draw their pay. Gold, Armetta, Shug and Mathilda, the Eatonville women present on the porch, each pits in her bit to defend the female image. Crudely sexist remarks like “Her tongue is all de weapon a woman got” and “she got plenty hips, plenty mouf and no brains” (34) are not taken by women lying down.

When the conversation gets a bit too peppered with derogatory comments about women and males bragging about their superiority, Mathilda
counters these comments with her story "Why women Always Take Advantage of Men". Women are not “naturally” inferior to men, she points out, because originally “de woman was just as strong as de man and both of ’em did de same things. They useeter get to fussin’ bout who gointer do this and that and sometime thy’d fight, but they was even balanced and neither one could whip de other one”. But in the female version of the creation myth, this Eden is destroyed by male perfidy when the man asks God for more strength so he can “whip” the woman and “make her mind”. God grants his request. Then the man swaggers home to announce, “Ah’m yo’ boss” (36). “Long as you obey me,” he warns, “Ah’ll be good to yuh, but every time yuh rear up Ah’m gointer put plenty wood on yo’ back and plenty water in yo’ eyes”. Determined to regain her strength, the woman goes to God, who refuses to comply with her request. She then goes to the Devil. It is the Devil, “a powerful trickster” who helps women in the battles with Black men, (just as he often helps Black men in their struggles with whites). Teaching her to be a cunning trickster herself, advising her to ask God for his keys, he promises that in an indirect fashion she can “come out mo’ than conqueror”. After securing the keys to the kitchen, the bedroom and the cradle, she returns to the devil, who instructs her not to “unlock nothin’ until [her husband] use his strength for yo’ benefit and yo’ desires”. Unable to rear up in open defiance of the male, the woman like High John nevertheless wins without “outside show of force”.

The female trickster, despite apparent inequality, exercises considerable control in her relationship with men. So do the women in Mules and Men. Moseley’s smart talking or “sass” ultimately becomes a form of resistance: it helps make women like her subjects in their own discourse rather than the objects they generally are in the discourse of Black men and white men and women.

Two major areas of power struggle between men and women, as delineated in the folktales are: work and love. The tale that most starkly delineates the male perspective on work is "Why the Sister in Black Works
Hardest” told by Jim Allen in Polk County. According to Allen’s rendition of the tale, “De white man tells the nigger to work and he takes and tells his wife” (76-77). Told in the context of the worker’s racial oppression in Polk County, the tale ironically reveals another way in which Black men assert their own humanity i.e. by transferring the mule status to their women, they can see themselves as men. Told by Jim Allen, the most psychologically oppressed Black man in the group, the tale in context exposes racial inequality and insecurity as the foundation for the Black male’s oppression of Black women. In her depiction of the men’s return to the quarters after having been sent home by the straw boss, Hurston reveals how this male point of view is played out in the social life of the community -- As soon as Mrs. Bertha Allen sees the men coming up she said, “Ah’m mighty proud y’all got a day off. Maybe Ah kin git dis yard all clean today”. But Jim throws down his jumper and dinner bucket and at once retorts, “Now, Ah’m goin’ fishin’ too. When Bertha starts her jawin’ Ah can’t stay on de place. Her tongue is hung in de middle and works both ways” (94-95).

The laziness of Black men that functioned as a subversive strategy against white power at the mill actually furthers female oppression at home. Jim takes off fishing. Bertha might seem to pay the price for his psychological freedom, but the fact that she can use her own strategies for assertion and victory over her oppressors can be seen in her subtle response: instead of foolishly confronting her husband physically, she uses one of her ‘keys’. When the men return from fishing, “The fishermen began scraping fish and hot grease began to pop in happy houses. All but the Allen’s. Mrs. Allen wouldn’t have a thing to do with our fish because Mr. Allen and Cliffert had made her mad about the yard” (135-36).

Love, too, is a major struggle between men and women in *Mules and Men*. In the several courting conversations she narrates, Hurston demonstrates how male and female perspectives differ: in men’s comments and tales, love is often a game with women as the sexual prize. One such story told by a man bespeaks this attitude. It is a courtship story, in which a man woos a woman
by pointing to a farm, cattle, sheep and hogs and telling her, “All of these are mine”. When she goes home with him, only to find it a “dirty I’ll shack” and berates him for his lies, he responds, “Everytime I showed you those things I said ‘all of these were mine’ and Ah wuz talkin’ about my whiskers” (164-65). Such insincerity may be a source of humor for men, but women by being able to recognize such “woofing” for the “aimless talking” that it is, are in a position to safeguard their own interests. In another story-poem, titled ‘Song Poem’ Jack Oscar Jones reinforces the male perspective with his “speech about love”, which is actually a poem about a man having concurrent love affairs with three women. Refusing to allow this version of the male-female relationships to go unchallenged, Shug, the assertive female porch-sitter, responds to Jack’s paean to philandering with her assertion, “Well, de way Ah know de story, there was three men after de same girl” (41). She then goes on to narrate the story of the heroic feats three men perform to win the hand of a girl in marriage. In the male-female ‘woofing’ that is going on, the story demonstrates how Black women good-humoredly safeguard their status by counteracting each “woofing” with a parallel tale.

Eventually, however, Hurston’s objective is not to depict a contestational stance between Black men and women. It is basically an unfolding of the fun, the laughter and the bantering that goes on in their ‘personal space’, the store-porch. This is made clear especially when Gene says “We ain’t mad wid one ’nother...We jus’ jokin’” (29). It reflects Hurston’s emphasis on the cultural riches these diverse negotiations both reflect and produce and how their creative use becomes, an enabling feature in women’s survival and self-realization, too.

The story of Big Sixteen who is so “big and strong” that he can carry a mule under each arm and is feared even by the devil, shows a mythic admiration for male strength and power. But a “big and strong” woman is often a source of scorn. The men hate not only her size but the equality with men that she might assert in her overalls, “bull woofing” and “loud talk[ing]” (157). The female character who comes closest to Hurston’s ideal of male-
female equality is Big Sweet, who also proves to be one of the most assertive characters of the book. Her name is suggestive of her persona – a combination of physical power and sexual attractiveness, of strength and tenderness. The space associated with her is the jook which in Hurston’s definition is a combination of dance hall, gaming parlor and pleasure house. In the essay ‘Mules and Men and Women: Zora Neale Hurston’s Strategies of Empowerment’, Wall suggests that “Free of the constraints of ladyhood, the bonds of traditional marriage and the authority of the church, women improvise new identities for themselves” on the jook (668).

Big Sweet is a woman who “didn’t mind fightin’; didn’t mind killing and didn’t too much mind dyin’” to protect herself and those she loves. The value Big Sweet places on generous support for another is indicated in her selfless support of Hurston. She uses “Little-Bit” as a term of endearment for Hurston. By telling her, “You come here tuh see and lissen and Ah means fuh yuh tuh do it,” (171), she promises her support. Also through the tale of selfless devotion of the mocking birds she narrates, we come to know of the value she places on this virtue. Ironically the men on the jook are ignorant of this emotional tale of birds’ Herculean labor which is a mark of their devotion to a man – ‘Why the Mocking Bird is Away on Friday’. There is only one more tale ‘How the ‘Gator got Black’ that Big Sweet narrates. Before she gets a chance to begin her story, Big Sweet is interrupted and reclaims her place immediately by asserting “When Ah’m shellin’ my corn, you keep out yo’ nubbins” (107). Therefore, though the formidable character Big Sweet narrates only two folktales in the book, it is more through the specific situations in which stories are told, and through Hurston’s general narrative of her own experiences in Polk County, that we get to know more about how Big Sweet asserts and maintains her identity.

The scene which begins with one of the battles between Big Sweet and Joe Willard over his infidelity also reveals Big Sweet’s assertive identity through her verbal dexterity. Introducing his contribution to a series of stories about dogs, Gene Oliver comments, “Talkin’ ’bout dogs,...They got plenty
sense. Nobody can’t fool dogs much”. Recognizing Gene’s “by-word” reference to men, Big Sweet changes the direction of the conversation with her own “signify[ing]” comment: “And speakin’ "bout hams...if Joe Willard don’t stay out of dat bunk he was in last night, Ah’m gointer sprinkle some salt down his back and sugar-cure his hams”. A leader of the group and himself a man of words, Willard tries initially to shrug off Big Sweet’s challenge: “Aw, woman, quit tryin’ to signify’”. But she is undeterred and announces she will signify as much as she pleases. Making an appeal to male solidarity, Willard tries to draw the other men to his side, but they know they can’t beat Big Sweet’s signifying. She declares her independence in no unclear terms: “Lemme tell you something, any time Ah shack up wid any man Ah gives myself de privilege to go wherever he might be, night or day. Ah got de law in my mouth” (123-124). These words symbolise her power, for they signal her ownership of self and her power of self-assertion.

The men gathered on the porch understand that Big Sweet is “specifyin” on them and Willard says bitterly “You fool wid Aunt Hagar’s chillun and they’ll sho distriminate you and put yo’ name in de streets”. He has thus at once related Big Sweet’s verbal jibes to a unique African tradition. When Jim Allen still does not stop and comments, “…a man can cackerlate his life till he git mixed up wid a woman or git straddle of a cow”, she again gets down on him viciously: “Who you callin’, a cow, fool? Ah know you ain’t namin’ my mama’s daughter no cow” (123-124).

Lowe says that of all the comic possibilities, signifying dominates humorous conventions in Black culture. Quoting Geneva Smitherman’s definition of signifying, Lowe calls it a customary ritual of folk expression in the oral tradition, where the signifier humorously talks about someone with verbal indirection, and if the recipient cannot come back with any signification of his own, he just laughs with the group (59). In his book *Figures in Black*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has quoted Kernan and Hurston to suggest that ‘signifying’ is a sexless rhetorical game and that Hurston in *Mules* and Mitchell Kernan in ‘Signifying, Loud-Talking and Marking’ are
the first scholars to record and explicate female signifying rituals. Hurston, in fact, is the first author to represent ‘signifying’ as a vehicle of liberation for the oppressed women, as suggested by Gates (241).

The incident of Big Sweet’s encounter with another female character, Ella Wall at the jook is also crucial. The two women exchange verbal insults, then physical threats, until the conflict is halted by the arrival of the white quarters boss. In this conflict also, while Ella Wall is disarmed and thrown off the job, Big Sweet emerges victorious. The entire conduct and demeanour of Big Sweet is legitimate and does not sound stereotypical because Hurston has successfully identified its source within the culture itself in the story of Big Sixteen, which finds mention earlier. After the successful fight in the jook, men rally to her, “you wuz noble... You wuz uh whole woman and half uh man” (148). In the ‘muscular’ Big Sweet’s protective attitude towards Hurston herself, the latter is underlining the importance of Black female solidarity as a means to Black female empowerment and survival. But for Big Sweet as bodyguard, Hurston’s work of collecting lies and of being a participant-observer at jooks and lumber camps would have been rendered impossible and in a way she would have failed in her ‘mission’ of preserving the Black ethos. Big Sweet tells her reassuringly, when there is danger to Hurston’s life from Lucy, “You come here tuh see and lissen and Ah means fuh yuh tuh do it”. She also gives her few tips for protecting herself, “Don’t let nobody bring yuh nothin’ tuh eat and drink... They liable tuh put uh spider in yo’ dumplin’. Don’t let nobody git yuh intuh no fuss... And don’t git biggity wid nobody and let yuh head start more than yo’ rump kin stand” (171). All this maternal advice reminds one of the kind of advice Hurston in her real life had received from her dying mother or that which Isis gets from her dying mother in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Female bonding and protectiveness is an African American tradition that has deep African roots and enabled women’s survival in racist America.

By portraying women characters as varied as the rural women Armetta and Gold as active story-tellers, the house-proud Bertha Allen, the seemingly
tough Big Sweet, the jealous lover woman Ella Wall, and herself, the anthropological participant-observer-narrator, Hurston has subverted the thesis of the monolithic Black female. There is an overlapping between the roles enacted by Hurston herself and these women characters and all of them are complex characters with multiple roles. They wield their power of language (Hurston in the written form and her characters in the oral form) which is a sign that they enjoy equal status with their menfolk in society.

Hurston has also given religious and metaphysical sanction to Big Sweet’s conduct by interpolating a sermon ‘Behold de Rib’ with the message of female equality, just before the fight scene:

So God put Adam into a deep sleep
And took out a bone, ah hah!
And it is said that it was a rib.
Behold de rib!
A bone out of a man’s side.
He put de man to sleep and made wo-man,

... if God
Had taken dat bone out of man’s head
He would have meant for woman to rule, hah.
If he had taken a bone out of his foot,
He would have meant for us to dominize and rule.
He could have made her out of back-bone
And then she would have been behind us.
But, no, God Almighty, he took de bone out of his side
So dat places the woman beside us;
Hah! God knowed his own mind.
Behold de rib! (138-39)

What is more, by placing this spiritual affirmation of men and women as equal partners within the most heterodox form of Christianity practiced in the Black community, Hurston has further reinforced the need for celebrating
one's own culture to arrive at a semblance of the ideal man-woman relationship.

In the final section of *Mules and Men*, where Hurston travels to the Crescent City, New Orleans, she becomes the central participant in the pre-Christian, Afro-centric belief system of hoodoo. "Just want to learn how to do things myself", she tells Mrs. White. She calls hoodoo rites those "deeds that keep alive the powers of Africa" or conjuring that ritual where one can "hit a straight lick with a crooked stick". New Orleans is "the hoodoo capital of America" where she finds it burning with all the intensity of "a suppressed religion" (176-178).

The fundamental premise of hoodoo, as Lawrence Levine tells, was, that life is not random or accidental. Events were meaningful, and human beings could divine and understand their causes by reading the phenomena surrounding and affecting them because they too were part of the Natural Order. Personal misfortunes were not accidental or due to bad luck; once people understood the root cause of their trouble, they could end or reverse it (Levine 58–59). It was in this sense that hoodoo was one of the creative means by which African Americans could exert control over their interior lives. Cheryl Wall says, "Psychologically, hoodoo empowered all of its adherents; it allowed them to perceive themselves as actors in the world, not the passive reactors the dominant society held them to be" ("Mules” 673).

The real ‘political’ power that hoodoo gave to the Blacks vis-à-vis the power of the white slaveowners and their heirs, lay in the fact that hoodoo subverted the thesis that whites were either omnipotent or omniscient. Because there were many things that the whites did not know and many forces they could not control, areas in which slaves had more knowledge and authority than their masters, so, the powers of the whites, even if not entirely thwarted, could at least be muted. Whatever the master’s power, he was a puny man as compared to the supernatural. ‘Hoodoo’ is actually used in *Mules and Men* to exact justice from the master as well as to take revenge against fellow slaves. I would like to mention here at least one of the conjure
stories included by Hurston in the 'Hoodoo' section of the book to illustrate the attitude of Negroes towards it and the power it confers on them.

There was once a wealthy Georgia planter who was very arrogant towards his Negro servants. He boasted of being “unreconstructed” and said that he didn’t allow any niggers to ‘sass’ him. One day it so happened that at dinner he spoke very sharply to the Negro girl who served him and she sassed right back. He hit her so hard that she dropped dead right there. The parents took away their daughter’s body weeping, but the father soaked his handkerchief in her blood. With the power gained from his dabbling in hoodoo, he took his revenge on his white master. Within four days, the master’s wife became intolerably insane and life became so miserable for them that they had to leave the plantation and go elsewhere. In the next few days, his twenty-year old son became “criminally insane”, and then his charming daughter became “deranged”. The once wealthy and proud planter became so scared of his “Black enemies” that he would keep himself locked behind doors (217–19).

Most pertinently, in hoodoo, power was not gender-specific, but decentered. Within hoodoo, women were the spiritual equals of men. The plantation conjurer, unlike the slave preacher could as easily be a woman as a man. The authority to speak and act that hoodoo gave to women allowed free rein to their creativity, and was one of the principal reasons for Hurston’s immersion in these practices. Both, the first and last hoodoo practioners introduced in *Mules and Men* are women, while the greatest teacher of all is the dead New Orleans priestess, Marie Leveau. Under the providential guidance of her spirit, Hurston is completely transformed. From being christened “Rain Bringer” by one hoodoo doctor, to being named “Boss of Candles” by another, Hurston ultimately gets the power to “work with the spirits anywhere on earth”. Hurston has specified that though this “belief system is operative in the early decades of the twentieth century but “Hoodoo is private” (183). In so doing she has distinguished it from the Voodoo ritualistic orgies of Broadway and popular fiction. To Hurston, as, “The

109
subversion of traditional religious beliefs becomes as necessary for survival as
the creative impulse and is in fact, yet another manifestation of the Black
creative response to life” (Wilson 63).

Soon after detailing Kitty Brown as “a well-known hoodoo doctor of New Orleans” with whom Hurston had apprenticed, she concludes her book by recounting an animal tale:

Once Sis Cat got hungry and caught herself a rat and set herself down to eat ’im. Rat tried and tried to git loose but Sis Cat was too fast and strong. So just as de cat started to eat ’im he says, “Hol’ on dere, Sis Cat! Ain’t you got no manners at all? You going set up to de table and eat’thout washing yo’ face and hands?”

Sis cat was mighty hungry but she hate for de rat to think she ain’t got no manners so she went to de water and washed her face and hands and when she got back de rat was gone.

So de cat caught herself a rat again and set down to eat. So de Rat said, “where’s yo’ manners at, Sis Cat? You going to eat ’thout washing yo’ face and hands?”

“Oh, Ah got plenty manners”, de cat told ’im, “But Ah eats mah dinner and washes mah face and uses mah manners afterwards. So she et right on ’im and washed her face and hands. And cat’s been washin’ after eatin’ ever since.

I’m sittin here like Sis Cat, washing my face and usin’ my manners (228).

Even as Sis Cat got her mouse, Hurston had collected her folklore, written her book, found a publisher, managed to get a Preface from Boas, and got the work published. Like the figure of Sis Cat, she finds immense satisfaction through this exercise. For Hurston, the satisfaction came, at least partly, in the form of publishing a response to generations of folklorists who, according to her, had misrepresented African Americans, their language, their folklore and
their culture. Another part of her satisfaction, undoubtedly, lay in the fact that she could achieve her goal by “usin’ [her] manners” – the power and tropes of the tradition of African American verbal art which included not only the tales themselves, but their performative art, their use of dialect, their use of repetitiveness as a device in folkloric process, and the empowerment that comes from the total involvement in the communal ethos.

Why Hurston chooses Eatonville as a possible destination to collect folklore is because she feels that this is a community where she will be offered material without hurt, harm or danger. In her essay, ‘Characteristics of Negro Expression,’ she had said “…we are an outdoor people accustomed to communal life…. The community is given the benefit of a good fight as well as a good wedding” (839). The sense of security that a familiar community breeds is evident in the way Armetta provides her a comfortable place to stay in as soon as she reaches there and cooks her a hearty meal. Her tale-collecting expedition becomes everybody’s business, whether she is at the Eatonville store porch, the Polk county sawmill or the Mulberry phosphate mines. All that Zora has to guard against is looking too “uppity” in her Chevrolet or in her upmarket dress. At Polk County especially, where she gives up her expensive dress and convinces the workers that she is a fugitive from the law like some of them, she is taken into the “inner circle”. Strangers like Big Sweet “back her falling” only because she is a member of their community. The Polk County swamp gang are extra-protective about saving her from the threat of alligators and panthers.

If being surrounded by one’s own people makes Hurston feel secure, the celebratory Black ethos of the surroundings rejuvenates her spirits. Box-playing, Florida flip and eleven-card game, dancing, polk-county songs, chicken perleau, pig-feet, chitterlings and coon-dick, spirituals, gregarious fun-and-laughter, children’s games and even fighting are vital components of this all-Black world. A day off from work is as good a time for feasting and celebrating as log-rolling time, which, Hurston elaborates, was the time when people used to take out the logs to build a house and call all the neighbours
for help. The ‘jooks’, especially, as Hurston elaborates, are Negro pleasure houses. They could also mean bawdy houses where Negroes ‘Spread out their jenk’ i.e. have a good time. It is to these ‘jooks’ that Hurston later credited the true Negro style of singing and dancing. In her essay, ‘Characteristics of Negro Expression’, Hurston has also said that fighting in the open is an accepted part of Negro community life and the fighters do a sort of community service by giving the audience an exhilarating opportunity to watch well-matched opponents go into action (840). In the Polk County ‘jooks’, Hurston gets to see some spirited infighting among Blacks born of ‘loud-talking’ or from jealousy in love-relations. On one afternoon when she is sitting alone on the store-porch, she happens to see children playing in the streets. “I had played in the same lane years ago”, she tells herself and recalls her childhood games being repeated in ‘Goin’ round de mountain two by two’, ‘Little Sally Walker’, ‘Drain a bucket of water’, ‘Sissy in de barn’ and then what she calls the “most raucous, popular and most African of games ‘Chick mah Chick, mah Craney crow’” (57-58). Later, while sitting on Mrs. Allen’s front porch in Polk County, she is once again thrilled with the familiar ambience of children’s games like ‘Shoo-round’ and ‘Chick-mah-Chick’ and a mother’s lullaby ‘Mister Frog’. Hurston has quoted many lines from songs sung in different settings. The first one is a children’s game song:

Going around de mountain two by two
Going around de mountain two by two
Tell me who love sugar and candy (57).

Then there is the Gaming Song in ‘jooks’:

Let de deal go down boys.
Let de deal go down.
When yo’ card gits lucky, oh padner;
You ought to be in a rollin’ game (143)

Each line in this song is punctuated by “hah !” and a falling card, which shows that the Negro loves to perform even while gambling.

This brings me to yet another vital feature of Negro communicative
behavior, that is his love of drama. "Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatised", Hurston says, "There is an impromptu ceremony always ready for every hour of life" (830). There is high drama in the style of eating fish or in warming oneself in the right way. One can observe the Negro love for mimicry as Jim teaches the community youngsters how to subtly eye the best trout in the dish while at the same time choosing the best pone bread. Then he acts out elaborately the best manners to eat a fish tail backwards. Dad Boykin, the eighty-one year old village Dad, indulges in some top class acting as he dramatises the art of warming oneself in cold weather: First one pulls a rocking chair close to the fire, but does not flop down in it like a cow in a pasture. Then he demonstrates while sitting there, one can’t be “spraddle-legged” but the feet must be close together so that both the big toes are side by side and then one shoves them up close to the fire to get them good and hot. While these actions give the ‘dramatic’ Negro an opportunity to perform, they also depict the importance of passing on behavioural traits from community elders to youngsters.

Religion, too, is acted out in drama. Hurston is witness to a little drama of religion at Loughman Lumber camp quarters, when, at night fall, a travelling preacher came there with two women and sang the ‘Behold de Rib’ sermon. Hurston says that while singing the spiritual, it is as if the colored preacher ascends to a fiery cloud. When he warms up and goes natural, he uses “hah”, a breathing device rhythmically to punctuate the lines. The congregation loves to hear the preacher breathing or “straining”. John Lowe says it also helps to convey the sense of the moment (7).

With respect to the oral narrative also, Lowe suggests that multivocality was a prized possession of the griot in Africa, who was above all, a performer rather than a mere oral historian (as in Eurocentric culture). Oral narrative was usually meant first for entertainment and only secondarily for edification. The African griot would act different roles while telling a story (7). And this skill can be observed in the African American tale-tellers, too, with whom Hurston interacts. Even the little child Julius Henry of the
Eatonville store-porch performs a ritualistic act of spitting out into the yard, trying to make out he was “skeeting” tobacco juice like a man. Then he sings a couplet:

\[
\text{De rooster chew t’backer, de hen dip snuff} \\
\text{De biddy can’t do it, but he struts his stuff (45).}
\]

All this reveals that he has been brought up on this performative art as an unconscious daily diet. John French, another member of the crowd of Eatonville lie-tellers gets his “wind on” to tell a tale by first acting out a piece of literary:

\[
\text{Well Ah went up on dat meat-skin} \\
\text{And Ah come down on dat bone} \\
\text{And Ah grabbed dat piece of corn-bread} \\
\text{And Ah made dat biscuit moan (50).}
\]

By framing his story with a couplet, French wants to make it appear that he was taking part in a special kind of discourse that necessitates a special set of conventions. This ritualistic behaviour is to be met with among story-tellers at all the places that Hurston visits. Even at the Polk County lumber camp storytelling session, when Jim Allen has finished narrating his tale of how snakes got their poison and rattle from God, the sense of satisfaction that Allen feels is conveyed through this couplet:

\[
\text{Biddy, biddy bend my story is end.} \\
\text{Turn loose de rooster and hold de hen (99).}
\]

Tale-telling is made out into a ceremony all along the South, as observed by Hurston in the various lying contests/sessions in which she participates. One famous refrain that the story-tellers repeatedly use is:

\[
\text{Stepped on a pin, de pin bent} \\
\text{And dat’s de way de story went.}
\]

The performative joy on the face of the story-teller is to be read/seen to be understood.

Interestingly, as Hurston has observed in her essay, ‘Characteristics of
Negro Expression”, the Negro will of action has been extended to his vocabulary also. In words like “sitting-chair” “cook-pot” and “chop-axe”, “...the speaker has in his mind the picture of the object in use. Action. Everything illustrated. So we can say the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics” (830-31). This “will to adorn” his language which Hurston has found to be an important characteristic of the Negro expression is noticeable in the story-teller’s language. This idea of ornament further perpetuates and satiates the Black creativity. The same phenomenon is further exemplified in the excessive use of metaphors and similes, the use of double descriptives, verbal nouns, double-negatives, frequent use of the objective case of pronouns, softening down of words from “aren’t” to “ain’t”, “let us” to “le’s” and “them” to “’em”, etc., jumbled tenses, and a very personal vocabulary of dialect words, phrases, spellings and ‘by-words’. It would be relevant to list out some of these unique language features that I have deciphered in Mules. Each Black usage is followed by its meaning in brackets:

**Metaphors and Similes**

a) She’s plenty propaganda (She makes a lot of noise).
b) Gamblin’ wid yo’ stuff out de window (Risking nothing. Ready to run).
c) He’s got a cub (He has arranged the cards).
d) Big Moose done come down from de mountain (Important things are about to happen).

**Double-descriptives**

a) What you done done (What you have done).
b) Little-tee-ninchy (tiny).
c) Come go (Come along).
d) Shame-face-ted (Shy).

**Verbal Nouns**

a) Uglied away (became uglier).
b) Take a listen (to listen).

c) Jook it (play the piano jook-style).

**Double-Negatives**

a) Nobody can't (Nobody can).

b) Can't tell him nothing about no flood (can't tell him anything about any flood).

**Object-Case pronouns in subject position**

a) Them rain barrels (those rain barrels).

b) That's us business (That's our business).

**Jumbled tenses**

a) Teached (taught).

b) He wined (He won).

c) Had went out (Had gone out).

d) Laketed (Liked).

**Dialect Words/spellings**

a) Gointer (going to).

b) Bimeby (By and by).

c) Abstifically (Absolutely).

d) Figger (figure).

e) Gennywine (genuine).

f) Blue-John (Skimmed milk).

g) Old Hannah (The Sun).

h) Buckra (While people).

i) Ker ploognum (Sound of falling in water).

**Mythical words**

a) Joe Moore (A piece of gambler's lucky hoodoo).
b) Ginny Gall and Bee-luther-hatchee (names of mythical places).

A very personal part of the linguistic apparatus of the Southern Blacks is the “by-words” used by them, the meaning of which is limited to its community of users. Larkins tells that “There’s a whole heap of them kinda by-words” and he has “done heard my gran’ paw say dem very words many and many a time”. He goes on to give examples “‘Ole coon for cunnin’, young coon for runnin’, and ‘Ah can’t dance, but Ah know good moves’. They all got a hidden meanin’, jus’ like de Bible. Everybody can’t understand what they mean. Most people is thin-brained. They’s born wid they feet under de moon. Some folks is born wid they feet on de sun and they kin seek out de inside meanin’ of words” (124). The privacy of language, of meaning and of the continuity of the language tradition confers proud subjectivity on the community.

In an essay “Americanisms That May Once Have Been Africanisms”, David Dalby is of the opinion that “...attempts were made to prevent newly arrived slaves from speaking African languages, in the fear that they might be used for secret communication... the slaves had a legitimate interest in deceiving their white captors...” It is then Dalby suggests that a “partial code” may have been established among slaves by concealing African words with their original meanings, behind similar sounding words already existing in English. He has also quoted examples of words like ‘dig’ for ‘understand’, ‘sock’ for ‘strike’, ‘uh-huh’ for ‘yes’ and ‘uh-uh’ for ‘no’. Dalby concludes by saying that the in-group lingo, perhaps more than any other single folkloric element helps to create a sense of group identity (139).

Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his book Figures in Black has called dialect “a verbal mask” where he says the word “mask” is from “mesh” or “net”, so the meaning in a dialect word is “enmeshed” (167-69). In the same book, Gates also refers to George Henderson who has used the term “MASCON” for dialect words i.e. words with a massive concentration of matter beneath the surface, because these words carry “an inordinate charge of emotional and psychological weight”, according to Henderson (34). The entire Black
linguistic apparatus contains a secret, coded and hermetic world, a world which can be understood only by one who is well initiated into the same. In yet another piece titled, ‘Dis and Dat: Dialect and the Descent’, Gates says “...if to communicate is an essential and social function of all language, so is to conceal, to leave unspoken, to mask.” This, he says, leads to the element of privacy in language. Inevitably each person draws on two sources of linguistic supply: the current usage that corresponds to his particular level of literacy, as well as, a private thesaurus. The latter becomes, quite inextricably a part of his subconscious and of his memories, so far as they may be verbalized. This element of privacy in language makes it possible to use language to mask meaning and intention. This leads to “unvoiced intent” – which only an intimate (community) hearer understands. Gates also gives this phenomenon the name of ethnic privacy in language (“Dis” 92-93).

Eric Sundquist suggests that African American dialect was “a reservoir of semantic resistance and cultural freedom” (90). In response to Newbell Puckett who had called dialect “a labyrinth of jaw-breaking words full of sound and fury but signifying nothing”, Sundquist asserts: “African-American dialect,...was in a constant condition of signifying on the linguistic power of the masters, appropriating and depleting that power...by subverting its authority and thus reducing it to ‘nothing’ ” (58).

Their “egg bag won’t rest easy” as Clifford Ulmer woofs at Lonnie Barnes in Mules, unless each one of them has “handled some grammar” on folk characters or “plough[ed] up some literary” and “lay-by some alphabets” (88). This is true of most Southern Blacks. Even little children like Julius Henry are “little but loud” and when Henry is complimented by George Thomas for narrating the long story of the “fortune-telling horse”, he proudly says “Ah knows a heap uh tales” (49). Not older men and women alone, but young Black children, too, become functioning members of their community by being active tradition-bearers of the folktale tradition. Most stories have been getting transmitted from generation to generation. Eugene Oliver says of the truthfulness of his Ole Massa-John story, “...my grandma told it to my...
mama and she told it to me" (75), Replicability also helps give the folktale its form. The community acts as a self-correcting force, which safeguards that the text of a story will not be altered in any significant way. Repeated recalling and reconstructing thus helps in the folkloric process.

Karla Holloway, who has worked on the character of the Black word in an elaborate fashion, makes use of extended examples of black in-group lingo. She says that usages like “done took/done been took” act as intensifiers. The speaker indicates that no matter what accoutrements of the ‘standard’ s/he uses, one’s own dialect’s “cultural markers” must be included for the semantic sense one wants to convey. The user communicates more than grammatical sense; s/he communicates cultural sense, too, as per the opinion of Holloway (96). In that sense, Hurston’s is definitely an effort to create through the word, the experiences of her culture, the core of her community’s values. In the Black cultural tradition, a positive identity comes from a command of words, as I have been suggesting from the Introduction of my thesis. Hurston has given ample proof that for black women, too, talking (tale telling in Mules) is a means of affirming themselves. All female characters of Hurston gathered on the store porch are speaking Black women. It would be pertinent to quote Bell Hooks here, “For us [Black women] true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges the [gender] politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless” (Talking Back 9).

On the whole, it would not be an overstatement to affirm that Hurston has succeeded in laying down a mode of self-definition for Black men and women by drawing on the rich oral legacy of African American culture to create the text of Mules and Men. Re-mooring herself in her folk tradition becomes Hurston’s life-line, which at the same time, helps her in awakening the Southern folks to a healthy realisation of self-love and self-knowledge in co-relation with their cultural heritage. This historical consciousness of values, beliefs, strategies and rules of their own culture “…fulfils the function of law – it regulates behaviour” (Faulkner 339). Hurston has succeeded in
defying the notion that Black lives were diminished, deprived or depraved or
that they were living in what Du Bois called a 'half-way house'. She has
clearly demonstrated that the ‘community space’ in which Blacks sang,
talked, woofed and joked was a transformative space that helped recover
wholeness. Blacks were not shiftless and lazy but natural humans who
enjoyed work, pleasure and leisure. Susan Willis has also said: “...folktales
fill the interstices of her [Hurston’s] informants’ workdays and whose
taletelling takes place in those areas, like the jooks and the front porches, that
are not included in either the system of industrial production or domestic
labor” (37).

In her recovery of temporal and spatial zones outside of property
relationships, Hurston has thus contested the essentially dehumanizing nature
of capitalist society. Participating in and performing the art of story-telling
helps them to transcend their mulish existence. The shift in self-perception
and status that all Southern Blacks feel in tale-telling is best encoded in the
title of Hurston’s book *Mules and Men*: From ‘mules’ at work in a white
capitalist world, they become ‘men’ in their own space, among their own
people.

Alice Walker had once said that the role of the Black revolutionary
artist is that “He must be a walking filing cabinet of poems and songs and
stories, of people of places, of deeds and misdeeds” (In Search 136). *Mules
and Men*, above all Hurston’s works, acts as a kind of “filing cabinet” or a
repertoire of the entire range of her folk knowledge and wisdom. Hurston is
thus a cultural revolutionary simply by being her “cullud” self. Walker has
authenticated the characters and situations of *Mules and Men* by talking of her
own relatives’ responses to the book:

> Very regular people from the South, rapidly forgetting their
> Southern cultural inheritance in the suburbs and ghettos of
> Boston and New York, they sat around reading the book
> themselves. ... in the end they could not hold back the smiles, the
> laughter, the joy over who she was showing them to be:
descendants of an inventive, joyous, courageous, and outrageous people; loving drama, appreciating wit, and most of all relishing the pleasure of each other's loquacious and bodacious company (In Search 84-85).

Walker then winds up by saying that "the life we save is our own" (85).

Hurston has developed a literary mode of discourse out of an oral tradition, whose basic component is name-calling. In Mules, there is a story where a Black man does his 'cussing' at Ole Massa at the big gate (far from Massa's hearing), but Hurston's method of 'cussing' is more successful, though oblique. She has done her 'specifying' in the form of a book that Massa can hold in his hands and read on his very own porch, while Hurston revels in giggling with a smug demeanor in the privacy of her community. It is not only in consideration of what Hurston has written, but how she has written it, that Hurston has offered what one can call a critique oblique. She has fictionalised in Mules what was supposed to be an anthropological enterprise.

The framing technique or what Meisenhelder calls the book's "novelistic frame" (270) and Sandra Dolby-Stahl calls the "novelist's format," (57) includes her sojourns into various destinations in the heart of the South, the between-story conversations, the contexts of work and place and everyday life patterns on porches and jooks.

This framing technique is very important to Hurston's avowed intention of capturing a total Black ethos. To her (as it may be to a scientist), folklore is not an entity or a formulated idea to be presented in abstraction. It is a process – a communication process, to be exact. It is a contextual behaviour that includes all aspects of the communication viz., a network of relationships between tale, teller and audience that need to be observed and understood holistically. The framing technique also helps to authenticate Hurston's use of the folklore material. Boxwell has given yet another positive reason for the author's presence in ethnography. He suggests that Mules and Men is Hurston's own re-interpretation of ethnography. He arrives at a
succinct perception with his belief that Hurston's presence in the work as a kind of recreated omniscient consciousness who assumes centrality, predicates in unifying the action it depicts and in giving a strong sense of cohesion to the disparate parts and multitudinous story-telling voices. Boxwell also relates it to the women writers' affinity to the desire for the expression of selfhood which marks much African American women's writing, as it is a means of empowerment for them (605). The same element also adds to the versatility of the book and makes interesting reading; but, most important of all, her technique privileges the power of Black creativity and imagination and saves it from the narrow generic categorization within the white/male academic and literary norms.

This book, then, becomes a singular instance of what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls "Critical signification" (Figures 48). By privileging Black oral narrative and narrative technique as rhetorical strategies, Hurston has meaningfully repudiated the discourse generated by all the whites, who she was alleged to be pandering to. Hurston’s so-called friends, however, failed to comprehend her unique mode of inscribing resistance. She had to pay a heavy price in terms of her rejection by these friends who blamed her for 'literary climbing' or for an ‘exploitative academic colonisation'. Mules and Men, published in 1935, was vociferously criticized for its “mulish” depictions of Blacks (Preece’s term), for its idyllic ambience and “socially unconscious” characters (Sterling Brown); its language was called the language of the illiterates and the book as a whole was condemned for belonging neither to the category of pure science (anthropology), nor to fiction. For Hurston’s commitment to portray Black lives honestly, and with a vision that is whole and undiminished in Mules and Men, despite the odds she faced, one need to pay credence to her talent as a creative writer who bridges the gap between art and life. I conclude my reading of Mules with Keith Walter’s words:

What is victory with respect to certain pieces of oppositional discourse? their existence? their being misread? their being rich enough to sustain multiple readings and misreadings across time
and space? their power to lead some readers to question their own vanity and to examine their own behavior more analytically? (365)
Notes

1 Hurston's details in her autobiography, “Dust Tracks on a Road” of the kind of control Mrs. Mason exercised on her and on her fieldnotes, was definitely a big obstacle in the author’s publication of her anthropological book.

2 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has used the term ‘Monkey’ and ‘Lion’ for the marginalised and the dominant community respectively. In his book, The Signifying Monkey, he says that “… the Monkey dethrones the Lion only because the Lion cannot read the nature of his discourse…the Monkey speaks figuratively, while the lion reads his discourse literally” (85).

3 The ‘Jack beat the Devil’ folktale which is critiqued in the preceding paragraphs, appears in “Mules and Men” on pages 50-56.

4 Till about 1970s, American history books in education make no mention of Negro history which accounts for Black children’s lack of knowledge of their own historical past. Yet each Negro has some personal knowledge of his/her folklore (songs, dance, superstitions, legends, myths, customs, games, riddles, proverbs, etc.).

5 All quotations from the text included in this paragraph are from “Mules”, 28-37.

6 Gates has explained that Henderson borrows the acronym “mascon” from National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), where it is employed to describe a massive concentration of matter beneath the lunar surface.

7 Gates explains that he has located a metaphor for literary history arising exclusively from within the Black idiom, that is not dependent upon Black-white power or racial relations, and that is essentially rhetorical. He says that he has taken his term “critical signification” from the indigenous Black rhetorical strategy called “Signifyin(g)”, which derives from the “Signifying Monkey” tales. The figure of the “Signifying Monkey” in turn, is the profane counterpart of Esu-Elegbara, the Yoruba sacred trickster who is truly Pan–African. Hermes is his closest Western counterpart. Gates continues that he uses Esu as the metaphor for the critical activity of interpretation and signifyin(g) as his metaphor for literary continuity because these are idiatically Black. Esu is for Gates the figure of indeterminacy and interpretation. “Signifyin(g)” is a unique Black textual/ linguistic/ rhetorical concept by which a second statement or figure repeats or tropes or reverses the first statement. The statement with its continuity becomes a figure of intertextuality, too, in this sense.