

TRANSFERRING IDENTITY: THE EMERGENCE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN
IDENTITY IN JONAH'S GOURD VINE

By

KEASHA RENEE WORTHEN

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To my mother, Gwendolyn L. Worthen
Your struggles and strengths are the reasons for my successes. You are beautiful.
Also, to Adrian Martin and Heather Williams for their love and support.

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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Because identity formation is a byproduct of cultural formation, it tends to express itself as a constantly changing concept that is reactionary to whatever sociological mores established as precedents of behavior. As the rhetoric of what is socially acceptable changes, so too must the behavior of those individuals housed within a certain social construct. The individuals in the midst of these changes are engaging in a careful negotiation between an identity and social reality that is known versus an identity and social reality that is unknown. Undoubtedly this careful negotiation would involve the assimilation of the unknown, an adaptation of the known to what is unknown, and a transference of what is known into an unknown ideological and physical space. This is the essence of identity formation. And this was the overarching theme behind Zora Neale Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

By telling the story of John Pearson, the novel's main character, Hurston was telling the story of African American identity formation in the late 19th and early 20th century America. Post-slavery blacks were carrying on a tradition of social and ideological change. From the first colonizers in Africa all the way to just after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation in America, blacks have had to redefine their identity against a master narrative. These identity definitions manifested in religion and language as well as the codification of social behavior.

Furthermore, these social realities were, for African Americans during this time, contingent on spatiality as well as relations to other blacks. As mobility brought the change in relations, it also demanded a change in the acceptable social mandates of culture.

Because blacks were charged with locating their own identity in opposition to the identity of a slave that was given, it necessitated an assimilation of the larger American narrative with the African, counter-American, narrative. What *Jonah's Gourd Vine* does is examine all of these cultural identifying formations against a master narrative and explicitly and implicitly states why the negotiation of identity cannot be undertaken without an understanding of transformative social realities.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston's, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, is her first novel, and it is about locating, understanding, transferring, and distributing a middle-ground black identity that is neither African, slave, nor American. A type of folk narrative, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* demonstrates the parameters of identity while simultaneously commenting on the ideas of transferring and projecting identity and what that means in a social context. Hurston is able to accomplish these tasks for two very important reasons: first, mobility and identity are parallel themes that run throughout the novel.

The main character, John Pearson's, movement from a sharecropper with no access to material consumption or education, then to a plantation worker with minimal access to those things, and finally to a black person with power and access beyond the identity narrative of the sharecropper or the plantation worker, all illustrates mobility and transition as well as shifts in identity. This illustration also corresponds with Hurston's depictions of the modes of transportation that the John Pearson uses. His first transition was made on foot, the second on train, and the last and final transition was in a car. With each corresponding shift or progression, a new identity emerged. This leads to the second reason that Hurston was able to comment on the transference of ideas and identity projection.

Hurston creates a fluid character in Pearson. He locates his identity based on his social relations as well as his spatiality or geographical space. (For the purposes of this essay, terms, spatiality and geography will be used interchangeably). Each geographical or relational change results in an obligation to change for John. Therein lays the conflict of the novel. It is the obligation to change and the desire to keep things the same – or hold on to some remembrance of

a past identity – that causes John to ultimately die unreformed and defeated. He was killed by the same tools of progression and transition that increased his mobility and his ability to change.

These tools of progression are not only representational symbols for change in the novel, but they are also representative of the social migration of African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as well as the cultural migration of America as a national identity within that same time period. Thus, the novel speaks to the larger narrative of American identity specifically for the former African and the former slave after the emancipation of slavery. It juxtaposes the specific cultural narrative of blacks with the larger narrative of whites and by extension American identity.

Because Hurston understood that the identity of blacks was inextricably linked with the identity of slaves, Africans, and whites, she was able to highlight the complexities of assimilation and acculturation of identity. She was also able to show that spatial mobility and transference directly impact social or relational identity because a large part of cultural identity formation is based on spatiality. And it becomes problematic to the individual within the culture if they do not adapt their behavior and traditions to the demands of the space that they inhabit. This was the case with the main character in the novel, John Pearson.

Jonah's Gourd Vine is a novel that showcases blacks in a cultural space located post-slavery and before the politically correct identifier of the new Negro or the African American. John Pearson straddles two worlds, both literarily and symbolically. He is a mixed-race sharecropper who becomes a model of an American standard of success. Yet, his rise is problematic because he never manages to move or progress with the cultural climate within the emerging African American culture or the dominating American thought and reason of the time. It is one thing to have cultural traditions and even practice those traditions. It is another thing all

together to try and force two cultural opposites into a tight-fitting ideological space. The identity of the slave was too close to the identity of the African or non- white American. The identity of the American was a white, Protestant narrative. Both were steeped in their own traditions, however, one proved to be more dominating than the other. This dominance was only possible because of the mental and social repercussions behind the slave trade and slavery.

The relationship between the subservient slave and the white master, or even the free African and the white colonizer, created a transference of identity for both cultures. What resulted in this meeting of cultural opposites was an entirely new social relation that substantiated its existence by creating a philosophy and language to accommodate the change of space and relationships. This was the initial transference of identity between whites and blacks. By the time we get to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the time frame of the novel, there is a fixed cultural identity narrative in place.

The novel begins with John as a sharecropper. He lives on the side of the creek where there is no education, no opportunity for upward mobility, and the proximity to slavery is immediate. Because of the conditions and the proximity to slavery, there is a mind-set that is reminiscent of old times while still attempting to negotiate and understand the rhetoric of freedom. Amy Crittenden, John's mother, has high hopes for her children. Yet, with the proximity to slavery so present, it often intrudes on their daily lives. It is almost as if Hurston is suggesting that while the narrative of the slave and his/her history is important, it cannot sustain progress.

Being on this side of the creek not only allows the identity of the slave to remain in stasis and fester, it also pervades the thoughts of the sharecroppers because of the similarities of the existence between the two. In this instance, freedom is a word that contains all the abstract hopes

for the future, but it is resistant to the concrete realities of the present. Everything about the lives of the Crittendens is related to slavery either as a binary to freedom and/or a comparison to the present. Because of this relation to the past especially as a binary to freedom, Hurston makes it clear that a comparative analysis of enslavement to freedom is essential to understanding the transition from the identity narrative of the slave to the identity narrative of the free person.

Amy Crittenden identifies this transition during her exchange with Ned when she states: “You grew up in slavery time. When old Massa wuz drivin’ you in de rain and in de col’—he wasn’t don’ it tuh he’p you ‘long. He wuz lookin out for hisself. Course Ah wuz twelve years old when Lee made de big surrender, and dey didn’t work me hard, but—but dese heah chillun is different from us” (Hurston 5). The fact that Amy notices the different terms of existence between her own experience and the experience of her children suggests that she acknowledges a different identity narrative for her children because of a social or even relational change. In other words, she acknowledges that a transition has taken place and the rules that governed her existence don’t extend to those of her children. They have new rules and new obligations to respond to. They have a new identity they have to create, and this identity has to assimilate itself to all of the social rhetoric of freedom and the nationalist rhetoric of Americanism.

This ability to adapt and assimilate identity as a reaction to circumstance is a legacy of transference that began in Africa. It is through understanding this transference in Africa and how it was negotiated that it is possible to gauge the density of Amy’s assertion that “dese heah chillun is different from us” as well as every assertion concerning difference in the novel as it relates to identity. In order to understand how important Amy’s assertion of difference is in the novel, we must go back to the experience of Africans in Africa and examine the beginnings of their cultural transference from African to slave.

CHAPTER 2 FROM AFRICAN TO AFRICAN AMERICAN

To the African in Africa, there was no concept of race. In his work *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*, Michael A. Gomez notes that there were only ethnic differences that could be interpreted as differences within the community, language and land. He writes that “ethnicity is an identifier that predates race. African groups were named according to their region and language. However, within each group there were subtle differences that differentiated each group.” (Gomez 6) While their interactions with each other certainly precipitated cultural transference, their experience as Africans was a cultured experience based on spatiality within Africa. Regardless of their ethnic affiliations, they were still Africans. Gomez goes on to write that race was a European construct that established and promoted difference between Europeans and everyone else (Gomez 11). The arrival of Europeans and their rhetorical strategies for defining difference would be the cause for the greater transference of identity.

The racial narrative formed by Europeans would be an undercurrent to the overall slave narrative as well as the narrative of the Jim Crow era. It is a narrative of difference that is deeper and more divisive than the narrative of ethnicity. This contact would be, according to Gomez, the place where the African American was conceived. While the idea of African Americans being conceived at the point of contact with Europeans is theoretically plausible, it is not historically accurate. According to Linda Heywood and John Thornton in their work, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660*, the initial contact of Africans and Europeans was from the Portuguese in 1444 (Heywood and Thornton 9). He writes that the Portuguese were the only European power engaged in the slave trade at that time, and they kidnapped Africans for slavery in Europe and not America (Heywood Thornton 9). Thus, how

can an African American identity form when the cultural transference that was taking place was predominantly an African-European transference? It cannot.

Furthermore, after several instances of fighting between the Portuguese and the Africans living on the coast of Senegal, the Portuguese –after being defeated by the Senegalese – set up a commercial relationship with Africans based on diplomacy as well as a relationship based on religious conversion. (Heywood and Thornton 9) Also, according to Thornton, in his work, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*, Africans did not emerge in the Atlantic as helpless players in the Euro-political/economical agenda. “...Africans controlled the nature of their interactions with Europe. Europeans did not possess the military power to force Africans to participate in any type of trade in which their leaders did not wish to engage. Therefore, all African trade, including the slave trade, had to be voluntary...” (Thornton, 7-8). Africans rulers negotiated with the Europeans for power over different ethnic groups within their vicinity (Heywood and Thornton 9). This idea of Africans being power players in their own fate directly contradicts Gomez’s idea that African American identity was forged in Africa. What was being forged in Africa was a type of cultural transference that would change the way Africans would be identified as well as how Africans identified themselves. Thematically, Gomez was correct in the assessment of a Euro collective view of Africans at the time. An identity was being forged, but the identity that was being forged was a racial, religious, and economic identity based on difference.

At the heart of the transformation of Africans into a racial identity was the cultural exchange that took place between both whites and Africans. Both saw each other as different, and both made adjustments or demands because of those differences. This was, according to Gomez, how acculturation took place. Gomez writes that the acculturation process occurred in

two ways: Africans and African Americans would be the first way. The second way consists of Africans, African Americans and Europeans (Gomez 8). What resulted from this exchange was a type of hybridity. While the most obvious type of transference would be language, there would also be religious and social transference. These three concepts can be understood to be the markers of culture. When there is a change with either or all of these concepts, there is likely a cultural shift that follows. The reason why African became hyphenated Americans is largely because of the adaptation of a new language, religion, and spatiality. Africans were relocated, received a new language, and a new religion because of European influence as they colonized the Americas. Conversely, Europeans gained a more concrete idea of the abstract concepts of dominance in society and economy. While there would certainly be more visible African and African American influence on whites in the middle to latter parts of the twentieth century, at the time of the novel, what Europeans also gained was an absolute sense of identity based on who they were not: African.

The results of the cultural exchange for African Americans were readily seen in African American culture as well as in John Pearson in Hurston's novel. As stated earlier, when there is a change of spatiality, there is often a change in how we respond to the different space. This change in response directly affects our social actions and our identity, and this is the change that was taking place to the African as his social reality moved from ethnic identity to racial identity.

If the early contact with Europeans involved the conception and impregnation of a new people being formed in the womb, then the middle passage, according to Gomez, was the birth canal "launching a prolonged struggle between slaveholder and enslaved over the rights of definition" (13). Following that logic, the slave trade—the selling, buying, and kidnapping of Africans for the slave trade—were labor pains. Gomez's discussion of the conditions of the

middle passage and the symbolic representation of the entire experience as the processes of pregnancy and labor suggests that the experience of the middle passage for Africans was akin to removing the ethnic and tribal identities of Africans and placing on them a collective identity as slaves. Gomez writes:

Whoever he was prior to boarding the slaver, something inside began to stir, giving him a glimpse of what he was to become. Moved to indignity over mistreatment aboard the slaver, the captive's inexorable movement toward self-reassessment was further propelled by surviving the ordeal. Deep bonds of affection transcended ethnic ties, forming one foundation for the eventual movement to race, a path chosen by rather than for Africans. (14)

What Gomez is suggesting is that the African, as he was in Africa, was no longer equipped to deal with his current conditions aboard the slaver. The self-reassessment that the newly captured slave conducted was a reevaluation of his previous African ethnic identity versus his new subservient racial identity. This shift in the way that a person thinks about himself requires a transference of ideas based on the circumstances. An assimilation of what is known, what is learned, and what is experienced all work to create projection of identity. Based on that, it is not impossible to understand how identity can transform because of what is known and the new things learned as new situations are experienced.

The newly captured slaves would have undergone the same process of change, taking with them the only thing they could from Africa. They took with them the abstract ideas and traditions that would prove to be concrete enough to provide comfort and familiarity and fluid enough to adapt to changing realities. These shifting realities are significant because they were initiated by a shift in spatiality or geographical space. The greatest change in African identity was largely because of their mobility – albeit forced – and this mobility of multiple ethnic groups on one slaver and into one shared condition effectively ended ethnic ties and created a collective

identity. This new collective identity signaled another type of transference of identity. No longer able to sustain ethnic ties, Africans were, to themselves, identified as just Africans.

Hurston demonstrates this in her text because all of the references to Africa discuss a collective African experience. All of the blacks in the novel understood and accepted the facts that the drums were a part of their historical and traditional experience. Voodoo was not relegated to an experience of some blacks, but all the blacks in the novel knew of its existence. The fact that Hurston wrote these circumstances as a collective experience further Gomez's assertion that what the middle passage did was to remove the distinctions of ethnicities and create a collective distinction of race. Even though John Pearson was different than the blacks on the "good side of the creek" and even though slavery – given the setting of the novel – had ended, blacks still were able to share a collective tradition of African and slavery that would not have been available to them had there not been a removal of the ethnic and tribal identities of Africa.

Gomez goes on to write that there was a type of consumption of Africans by the whites. No doubt this consumption, according to Gomez,

requires a preliminary period of seasoning, a period of adjustment to remove the saline qualities from native-born 'salt water' Africans. Learning the rudiments of language was part of the process, but the language was bent and frayed and stretched and refashioned. The tone of the delivery, the lilt of the voice, the cadence of the words, the coordinated body language were employed to communicate the ideas, emotions, and sensibilities of persons of African descent. As such, Africanized English greatly aided collective inter-ethnic efforts of resistance. (14)

Essentially what we see is an adaptive strategy by Africans. Similar to what was done in Africa when the Portuguese first encountered Africa and spread their language and religion, Africans adapted what was unknown to what was known. They transformed. They adapted their language and ways of expression to fit their situation. Their identity was based on their relations to whites.

The identity that was given to them was a slave identity, and operating under those identifying constraints they created a binary culture.

According to Gomez, the slaves in America were grouped together based on a system of stratification that separates people based on ability. There was also a system of stratification, as is commonly known, based on color. Muslims, because of their literacy, were often given less physical jobs or given jobs as overseers. Simultaneously, the lighter-skinned blacks were, in some cases, also given less physical labor (Gomez 82). This system of stratification, as well as the haphazard grouping of different ethnic Africans into common groups, served as a type of Tower of Babel narrative. Similar to the Old Testament story, slaveholders were indeed attuned to the fact that if slaves were able to communicate too effectively their chances of absconding and resistance or rebellion was greater. By interrupting the channels of communication and creating a divide within the slave community, slaveholders could insure a relatively smooth and bountiful socio-economic experience with their slave labor.

This tradition of separating the slaves into the advantaged and disadvantaged would become a part of the slave narrative that would inform African American culture into modernity. It also created a standard of identity that established what was acceptable to whites and thus, to the larger American identity narrative. Slaves were charged with seeking out and projecting acceptable behavior according to the white/European/American standard. Moreover, this tradition of separating slaves into the advantage and disadvantaged would cause conflict within the collective slave community as Hurston notes in her text.

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine* Ned's repeated references to John as having "uh lil white folks color in [his] face..." (Hurston 2) or being "yaller" are rhetorical evidences of the legacy of the divisions amongst blacks because of slavery. This evidence is presented in more detail in the

following comments from Ned: “Das right,” sneered Ned, “John is the house-nigger. Ole Marsa always kep’ de yaller niggers in de house and give ‘em uh job totin’ silver dishes and goblets tuh de table. Us black niggers is de ones s’posed tuh ketch de wind and de weather” (Hurston 4). This legacy of division would then go on to inform the relations within the black community as some slaves would work to accommodate themselves to the master’s identity narrative while others maintained their distance –as much as possible – from that identifying narrative by identifying themselves as Africans and not slaves.

As slaves, however, Africans began to fashion a new identity that would serve them in America. This identity would be a conflation of European, Native American, African, and eventually American cultural existence. The adaptation of language and religion play a role in the adaptation of Africans and slave into the American ethos. The adaptation and assimilation of religion will be discussed later in this essay. However the most important thing to note is that in traditional African culture, there is no separation or duality between the spiritual and the physical. Language is just as much of a cultural marker as religion. It should be understood that when we speak of religious adaptation and assimilation, we are speaking of a total cultural transformation without the emphasis on the separation between the sacred and the profane. African and slave culture was fundamentally transformed because of this forced duality, the social and cultural experience of the New World, and Western thought. In his work, *Slave Religion: “The Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, Albert Raboteau writes:

Shaped and modified by a new environment, elements of African folklore, music, language, and religion were transplanted in the New World by the African diaspora. Influenced by colonial European and indigenous Native America cultures, aspects of African heritage have contributed, in greater or lesser degree, the formation of various Afro-American cultures in the New World. One of the most durable and adaptable constituents of the slave’s culture, linking the African past with the American present, was his religion. (4-5)

This African folk culture that Raboteau writes about has an important distinction from Western religious culture. Raboteau, by noting the similarities within the African ways of worship, was able to illustrate a fundamental difference in African ways of worship with Western Christianity. In the African way of worship, there was no distinction or delineation between the spiritual and the physical worlds. Both worlds revolved around and directly influenced each other. Unlike Western tradition that often separated these experiences into dual experiences often conflicting with the other, African cultural tradition held that both realities had a direct impact on the lives of its worshippers. This too would be a focal point of slave culture because slaves, as did their African predecessors, adapted Western religion and thought to their own African traditions and their experiences as slaves. Yet, the process is two-fold. While they were adapting Western religion to fit their needs, they were themselves adapting to fit the needs of Western religion.

Raboteau confirms this point when he writes:

It is important to realize, however, that in the Americas the religions of Africa have not been merely preserved as static Africanisms or archaic retentions. The fact that they have continued to develop as living traditions putting down roots in new soil, bearing new fruit as unique hybrids of America origin. African styles of worship, forms of ritual, systems of belief, and fundamental perspectives have remained vital on this side of the Atlantic, not because they were preserved in “pure” orthodoxy but because they were transformed. Adaptability, based upon respect for spiritual power wherever it originated, accounted for the openness of African religions to syncretism with other religious traditions and for the continuity of a distinctively African religious consciousness. (5)

Because these African traditions were living traditions, they were able to transform to fulfill the needs of the people who represented these traditions. As Raboteau states, no African culture or religion could have remained functioning and intact throughout the process of enslavement, the middle passage, and transplantation into the New World (8). Therefore, all of the Africans gathered what was common in their individual ethnic traditions and transformed their identity to

create a culture around the similarities of the African traditions of the old world and modified them to fit the New World and their new experiences.

John Pearson's story begins over the creek in an area that is permeated with the legacy of slavery. He represents a dichotomous identity narrative. There is the one side of him, the black side that is over-the-creek nigger and closer to the slave and the old way of being. Then there is the other side of him: the white side that is progressive and problematic to the old-Negro way of being. To be clear, John's existence over the creek is not without its own problems because of his mixed race. However, John can be understood to be an accessible Negro, i.e., his physical identity is quite ambiguous. What makes him a representation of the old has just as much to do with his spatiality as an over-the-creek nigger as it does his blackness. John's family and all of the blacks over the creek, represent the old way of being, living, and existing. The problems that John encountered were because of his origins and because of his inability to transform. It created a conflict within his character because acculturation and assimilation of new traditions dictate that some cultural traditions are left behind so that others may form and establish an identity that agrees with presiding social realities. This is why identity transformation is often necessary and problematic.

John begins a cultural transfer or dismantling when he takes the first plunge into the creek making his way to the other side. Hurston illustrates this transition in the final scene of the first chapter when she writes:

John plunged on down to the Creek, singing a new song and stomping the beats. The Big Creek thundered among its rocks and whirled on down. So John sat on the foot-log and made some words to go with the drums of the Creek. Things walked in the birch woods, creep, creep, creep. The hound dog's lyric crescendo lifted over and above the tree tops. He was on the foot-log half way across the Big Creek where maybe people laughed and maybe people had lots of daughters...Night passed. No more Ned, no hurry. No telling how many girls might be living on the new and shiny side of the Big Creek. He breathed lustily. He stripped and carried

his clothes across, then he recrossed and plunged into the swift water and brested strongly over. (12)

This scene demonstrates two symbolic acts of identity alteration: John's mobility or movement from one spatial location to the next, and his immersion in water. His movement initiates the change and the "baptism" cleanses him for the change. However, as Hurston will illustrate throughout the novel, John does not or cannot convert his old conceptions of cultural identity to the new dominating ideas of cultural identity.

In his essay, "The Music of God, Man, and Beast: Spirituality and Modernity in Jonah's Gourd Vine" Anthony Wilson writes:

At the beginning of the novel, John lives in a community sequestered from modernity and change by an intervening creek. Hurston's depiction of John's early community is too complex for the Edenic imagery she weaves through her narrative to be completely effective: the heavy legacy of slavery and Ned's resentment and abuse mitigate against the easy formulation of John as African American Adam exiled from the Garden. Hurston presents this community in an ambivalent manner that reflects both the residual African proximity to natural divinity and the lingering specter of slavery (Wilson, 66).

Everything about John's life on that side of the creek was representative of the traditions of Africa and slave culture as it had transformed to that point. This culture was distinct in its formation, and it represented the birth of what would be a distinctive African American perception of life, philosophy, and national identity. John's story picks up where the emancipation of slaves ends, signaling a new search for identity. John's narrative is about this transition.

Within this process of transition for John as a character in the novel as well as for blacks in the social construction of modern America, something is lost when he crosses the creek. He would emerge on the other side of the creek with an ignorance of the rules of propriety that govern his new status. Wilson supports this view when he contends: "In his efforts to master the cognitive understanding necessary to assert himself in a world he is initially ill-equipped to

understand, John Pearson sacrifices a kind of prelapsarian intuitive wholeness, an idealized and ultimately unsustainable marriage of nature and self-generated language, of instinct and intellect” (Wilson, 66).

Essentially, John was tasked with the responsibility to change and transform, but he did not know or understand what to transform into. It was not until he met Lucy that he recognized his difference. It is essentially the same narrative that Africans described when they first met Europeans. In his essay Wilson writes, “When John reaches the far side of the creek and encounters Lucy, a crucial and ultimately tragic bifurcation begins in his understanding of his physical and spiritual selves.” (68) This bifurcation of the physical and spiritual selves can be restated to say that it is a bifurcation of his cultural self. It has already been established that in African and slave culture, there was no distinction between spiritual and physical modes of existence. They all manifested as concrete realities to the African and the slave. Yet, when John meets Lucy she would not only play large role in John’s transformation, but she would also let John know that his state of difference or old Negro way of being is ill-equipped to deal with their social reality. Therefore, his cultural ideals are shattered because Lucy represents a more Western interpretation of the physical and the spiritual. These two aspects of culture are, in a Western Christian context, separate. And because of that separation, there is a determined rhetoric on ideological and behavioral propriety.

Lucy immediately points out John’s bare feet, implying that in their new social reality identity involves materiality or at the very least, the projection of materiality. This causes John to feel ashamed whereas he would have never felt so before largely because his understanding of proper materiality was focused on the basic needs for survival, i.e., food and shelter. While things such as shoes were present, they were not predominant. But that way of understanding

materiality was reflective of a different era, spatiality, and social reality. Lucy, by her comments, introduces John to a type of propriety that is acceptable to the new Negro and to the larger American ethos. It was that larger American narrative that needed to be the outcome of John's transformation from one way of being to another. John's failure to accommodate his new surroundings makes him a representation of the old way of being. This point is further detailed when John asks where "Marse Alf Pearson lives" (Hurst 14). Lucy responds in a derisive tone, "Marse Alf! Don't ya'll folkses over de creek know slavery time is over? Tain't no mo' Marse Alf, no Marse Charlie, no Marse Tom neither. Folks whut wuz borned in slavery time go 'round callin' dese white folks Marse byt we been born since freedom. We call 'em Mister. Dey don't own nobody no mo'" (Hurst 14).

This line spoken by Lucy indicates that blacks are aware of their relative relationship to slavery and they are also aware of the relative relationship to freedom. In other words, without slavery as a defining status, they can look towards developing new relations with the people and situations around them. The development of those relations seemingly begins primarily with the identity assigned to whites by blacks. It also indicates that while the identity of blacks as a collective culture was being transformed, the identity of whites as a binary culture to blacks was undergoing a transformation as well. While blacks were no longer slaves, whites could no longer be masters. Because these two cultures were going through simultaneous transitions of identity, it affected how they identified each other.

Furthermore, when Lucy calls attention to John's bare feet she creates in John "his first discomfort with his own body" (Wilson 69). This new space that John inhabits dictates that his body becomes "something to conceal and contain" in the same way that something inappropriate would be concealed and contained (Wilson 69). In his essay, Andrew Wilson writes: "His

[John's] association of this behavior with 'white folks' indicates its separation from the cultural practices John knows and follows—in her disdain Lucy interposes herself between John and his body and between John and his culture.”(69) Because Lucy's approval is something that John seeks, he acquiesces to the cultural change that must take place in order for him to be acceptable to Lucy and to the larger dictates of culture. Lucy, by inserting herself between John and his body, creates a conflict of morality and reality that often results from the process of transition from one set of cultural mores to another.

By allowing Lucy to dictate the results of his transformation, John identifies Lucy as someone who he should emulate. This is not to say that Lucy is a negative or positive influence on John. It does indicate, however, that John—in the same way that Africans were not passive players in their cultural transformation—played a deciding role in his own cultural transformation. The problems that John encountered were because he never reconciled the two identity formations. Lucy's orthodoxy, supported by the larger American identity narrative, thrust John into the uncomfortable position of having to understand what Lucy's orthodoxy means in relation to his previous life experiences. However, John did not have the capacity to resolve the aspects of his experiences, based on his proximity to slavery, with Lucy's teachings. In other words, he did not understand that Lucy was communicating to him which cultural traditions and identity markers of slavery and Africa to renounce and which to adapt to a greater identity narrative. This concept substantiates Hurston's thematic use of mobility because it necessitates some type of transition to accommodate the things that are left behind and the things that are gained in the new environment.

In the essay, “The (Extended) South of Black Folk: Intra-regional and Transnational Migrant labor in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes were Watching God*,” Martyn Bone states

that the migration or movement that John as well as the novel as a whole, represents is a transformation that blacks, as well as the agrarian South and the economy of all the subjects involved endure. Bone writes, “It helps us to see how John Pearson’s ‘highly mobile’ search for ‘greater opportunities’ encompasses not only the interstate train journey from plantation life in Alabama to ‘de new country’ of Florida but also his intrastate movements even before leaving Alabama.” (761) John’s narrative is a folk narrative that highlights the transition from folk identity to nationalist identity. It also represents the folk culture of the south and the larger narrative of the migration of blacks as they relinquish the old and embrace the new.

So while the plantation life is better than a sharecropper’s life, it is still an old way of being. This old way of being is—in John’s case—under attack by modernity. Many things about the far side of the creek that John escapes to are traumatic attacks on the older identity narrative. Lucy is a representation of one transformative cultural trauma and John’s encounter with the train is another.

John’s first encounter with the train leaves him questioning the symbolic and social meaning behind this mechanical construct. In her essay “Cultural Collision, Africanity, and the Black Baptist Preacher in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and in *My Father’s House*,” Deborah Plant quotes Robert Hemenway’s assertion that the train is “a symbol of the white man’s mechanized world.” (13) However, the problem with this assertion is that it assumes that the black characters in the novel are still passive players in the society that whites have created. As we have seen from the previous experiences of blacks mentioned in this essay as well as by Lucy’s assertion that whites are no longer to be called “Marse” but “Mister,” blacks are increasingly more involved in their own social contextual environment than they are given credit for.

John's first encounter with the train, more than anything, locates him on the progress/transition scale with regards to the other blacks in *Nostalgia*. The train for him at first was a frightening and dangerous thing. The crowd of blacks around him found his reaction humorous because it identified, for them, John's status as an old Negro. His first trip over the creek already saw him represented as a figure of an era gone by. His reaction to the school, his bare feet, and his reaction to the train are all indicative of this fact. John is reacting to progress and even though this progress was constructed in a white world, like all things in the New World, it would be assimilated and acculturated by blacks. Thus, for John these examples of progress spoke to him as well as aided in his transformation.

Hurston makes this clear when she writes of John's reaction to the train. When asked by a fellow black if he likes the train John replies, "Yeah, man, Ah lakted dat. It say something but Ah ain't heered it 'nough tuh tell whut it say yit." (16) Clearly for John the train's language is a language that he may not be able to understand at that time, but he knows that there is a meaning. Furthermore, that meaning will come to represent mobility and change. Similar to the way Africans adapted European languages for their use, the train would likewise be adapted. Not only is there an intrastate and transnational movement, but there is also a cultural movement. The train, therefore, represents a tool or means for the movement to take place. The idea of moving for greater opportunities was the idea of America and certainly the American frontier. And if it is an idea that is a part of the American ethos, than surely blacks would not only assimilate that idea, but also engage in the same movement or change.

This engagement of movement and change is depicted early in the novel on the Pearson plantation. The two spheres of culture that the blacks on the plantation find themselves wrestling with are emblematic of the coming of the African American tradition. John is given the last name

of Pearson and he is quickly urged to attend school for an education. There is an important demarcation of assimilated and/or maintained identity in the different environments that John functions under. In the fields with the other plantation workers, the atmosphere is reminiscent of slavery times. Not in the sense of the slave as a worker but in the sense of a slaves as a human or a person creating an identity based on their environment.

In the fields, the blacks on the plantation sit around and tell stories, play games, and participate in traditions that are distinctly African in their origins and traditional slave identification markers in their performances. Hurston identifies these traditions in their essential form once in the novel. When the Pearsons move to Florida, these traditions will be modified and located in the church as opposed to the fields. However, the tradition that Hurston depicts indicates a cultural identity performance that is deeply ingrained and alters according to the environment.

By including the scene of the hog roasting affair, Hurston makes a connecting line that would run the course of the novel. This line represents the ties to the past and the movement to the future. It seems that during these gatherings, blacks clearly defined themselves as a racial other and accepted this difference as a mark of honor as well as a way of honoring a legacy of folk. In the midst of the cooking, eating, and dancing Hurston writes: “Hey you, dere, us ain’t no white folks! Put down dat fiddle! Us don’t want no fiddles, neither no guitars, neither no banjoes. Less clap!” (29) It is, as Hurston notes, the drums that represent the African tradition in the slave narrative. It is the drums or the pounding of a repeated rhythm that accessed the gods and the ancestors of the African people, recalled its distant existence to the slaves, and symbolized an African existence in an American landscape for the free blacks. Hurston writes:

So they danced. They called for the instruments that they had brought to America in their skins—the drum—and they played upon it. With their hands they played

upon the little dance drums of Africa. The drums of kid-skin. With their feet they stomped it, and the voice of the Kata-Kumba, the great drum, lifted itself within them and they heard it. The great drum that is made by priests and sits in majesty in the juju house. The drum with the mans skin that is dressed in human blood, that is beaten with a human shin-bone and speaks to gods as a man to men as a God. Then they beat upon the drum and it was said, 'He will serve us better if we bring him from Africa naked and thing-less.' So the buckra reasoned. They tore away his clothes that Cuffy might bring nothing away, but Cuffy seized his drum and hid it in his skin under the skull bones. The shin-bones he bore openly, for he thought, 'Who shall rob me of shin-bones when they see no drum?' So he laughed with cunning ans said, 'I, who am borne away to become an orphan, carry my parents with me. For Rhythm is she not my mother and Drama is her man?' So he groaned aloud in the ships and hid his drum and laughed... Furious music of the little drum whose body was still in Africa, but his soul sung around a fire in Alabama. (29-30)

This scene clearly represents what was brought over from Africa. Cuffy is represented as the spirit of Africa, a spirit that connects the old land to the new land: a spirit that is poured out and manifested in a new people that are represented through this strong connection to the past. This connection is then conflated into a cultural connection that is not only present in religious presentations but also in cultural presentations. Yet, as Pearson progresses through the novel, these presentations will be contained within a church building and not out in the open, for the spectacle of public dance such as represented in the hog-roasting is improper in the moral community of Sanford, Florida.

Moreover, it is the observance of Christian religion that, while affecting the greatest cultural identity transformations, also allowed blacks to maintain a large part of their African tradition. In her essay, "Cultural Collision, Africanity, and the Black Baptist Preacher in Jonah's Gourd Vine and In My Father's House," Deborah G. Plant argues that "one of the most significant aspects of Western Anglo American thought is the notion of a natural, all pervasive, God-sanctioned dualism, which fractures all creation into irreconcilable, and therefore, potentially destructive binaries." (13) This was largely the conflict that John would have throughout the novel. With the spread of religion also came a spread of the morality. Anglicism

changed the relationship that Africans had to their gods, but Evangelicalism changed the relationship that slaves and blacks had to their cultural experience. By assimilating Christian ideals into their own traditions, blacks found a way to accommodate their new circumstances with their new beliefs. These new beliefs changed them as a culture and created conflict within individuals in the culture as well.

Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, writes that, in regards to Christianity, it was "fitted by the slave community to its own particular experience" (50). This assertion can be extended to include the entirety of the American experience. While white Europeans were experiencing conquest, wealth, poverty, and monumental change, so to was the African slaves. The exception being that their identity was not tied to a master narrative. Their identity was an identity that was given by the master narrative. Regardless of how slaves saw themselves, they were slaves. Yet, they were able to adapt and assimilate a culture around this given identity, ultimately transforming an African social reality to an African slave social reality; eventually becoming African Americans.

In her essay, "Ideology and Race in American History," Barbara Fields writes that the notions about color derive their definition from context. Ideological context dictate which details to notice, which to ignore, and which to ignore when translating the world around them into ideas about the world. The idea that one people has of another, even when the difference between is embodied in the most striking physical characteristics, is always mediated by the social context within which the two come into contact. (Fields 146)

Thus, if ideological context dictate what details to notice and which to ignore, the ideological context of the African, slave, and newly freed black would dictate which details to carry over and which to leave behind. The racial relations that the slaves had with whites, and

vice versa, were mediated by the situation that the two racial groups encountered. This relation permeated every context of their lives with each other. In the same way that the whites had to cope with and acculturate to the slave community, the slaves had to do the same. Clearly the acculturation scales were unbalanced towards the blacks; yet, it was what the slaves were able to do with the acculturation process that allowed the emergence of a different culture. This is demonstrated through the assimilation of Christianity and Western morality.

One of the most important ideals to come out of the religious movements in early America was the evangelical movement. Headed by Anglican preacher, George Whitefield, the movement changed the way preaching and teaching the bible was conducted. The rhetoric used by these evangelical preachers was instrumental in converting many people, especially slaves. In his book, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, Mark Noll writes that in the beginnings of the evangelical movement, African Americans were a people with “no social standing, no strong tradition of Christian faith, no stake in church establishment, and no heritage of European civilization” (Noll 172). This is what makes the evangelical conversion of blacks who predominantly rejected Anglican conversions, so remarkable. By preaching in a way that was less theologically based and more practical and in some respects revolutionary, slaves were able to accept the evangelization process and change to acclimate to evangelical dictates. Furthermore, because the evangelical movement moved control away from a governing body, religion was separated from state control and placed in the hands of the audience. As a result of this shift, Anglicans became a dissenting body and evangelicalism, through Methodism and Baptism, was able to become the dominating force behind religious conversion.

Black slaves, responding to this new message of freedom and antislavery, converted to the two dominating evangelical denominations, Methodism and Baptism, in large numbers. This,

according to Noll, had an exponential impact on early American religion and the spread of Christianity in America. African Americans, by understanding the “message of reconciliation as if it were a message that was meant directly for them” (Noll 177) were able to renegotiate the terms by which they would accept religious ideology while simultaneously defining their identity as an emerging culture within America. It also proved problematic to African tradition because the focus on the duality of good versus evil was contradictory to traditional African spirituality. Western Christianity largely suppressed African expression of their spirituality.

With the rise of denominational evangelism, blacks were able to add to their collective identity narrative that would transition them from an African observation of spiritual, and by extension cultural, presentations of identity to a more institutionalized version. According to Michael Gomez, the transition from African to African American began in Africa. As I have noted, that assessment is problematic. However, it is fair to say that a general transformation was occurring during first contact. As the relations between blacks and Africans/slaves progressed, so did those transformations. Where other Christian devices and European associations failed, Methodist and Baptist doctrines would succeed with regard to the emergence of an African and an American cultural identity. These denominations would lend themselves to an adaptive Christian doctrine similar to what Hurston illustrates in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

In his book titled *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity*, John Wigger states that the reason why blacks gravitated to Methodism was because the “Christianity of Methodists was fresh, easily understood, and immediately experienced” (128). Also, without the influx of Africans, African tradition declined. With Methodism, African American slaves were able to assimilate some of their African tradition into Christianity. Because Methodists were willing to accept impressions, dreams, and visions, (129)

slaves were able to create a Methodist faith that was innately their own and similar to African spiritual practices.

Furthermore, according to Wigger, Methodism allowed black slaves to participate in the inner workings of the church, not only as members but as preachers. This was an important development in the spread of Christianity to black slaves and the transition from African to African Americans. Black preachers made the church the pillar of the community and the Methodists were able to continue to grow and maintain their audience. According to Wigger, under Methodism, evangelicalism became more individualistic and “early American Methodism appealed most broadly, not to the defeated and hopeless, but to those who had a realistic expectation of improvement” (11).

The Baptist denomination offered many of the same allowances to blacks as far as their use of African tradition in a Western Christian setting. Janet Lindman, in her book *Bodies of Belief*, contends that slaves’ initial attraction to Baptism was because of their “corporeal manifestations of salvation (154). The evangelical message of the Baptist was conversion, ritual, and discipline. Blacks were drawn to a religion that “emphasized spiritual rebirth, water rituals, visions, ecstatic dances, trances, and singing” (148). These traditions in the Baptist church were similar to African traditions that Hurston describes in her novel both in and outside of the church: especially in John’s final sermon at Zion Hope. The mixture of the biblical with the African folk underscores the slaves and future African American’s tenacity to define their own cultural experience and set the terms on just how much of the master narrative, religious or otherwise, deserves a place within their cultural experience. This is what the Methodist and Baptist denominations allowed them to do. And it also made the transformation process easier on blacks as they negotiated their cultural identity within their new social reality.

Another important component of the conversion of blacks in to Methodist and Baptist faiths was, as Mark Noll notes, the two denominations promoted literacy in their slaves during the early days of their respective denominations. They believed that literacy meant power, which could eventually lead to emancipation. Also, because of literacy, black preachers would emerge and begin to minister to other blacks and teach other slaves to read. This helped with the spread of Christianity among black slaves and allowed African American converts to not only learn how to read scripture, but also develop a lingua franca that would become a vernacular English, helping them to communicate and express their experiences in religious terms. It also helped with the spread of a new cultural identity because the messages were distributed in a vernacular or rhetoric that they could readily identify. An example of how this vernacular and the rhetoric of tradition operate within the black church is illustrated during John Pearson's final sermon at Zion Hope.

Realizing that he is being pushed out of the church because of his prior transgressions, John delivers a rousing sermon that rhetorically is Christian and biblical in nature, but symbolically and culturally weaves back forth between two cultural traditions. Reading from the book of Isaiah, the 53rd chapter, John manages to remove some of the Western myths surrounding the Christian God and enshroud him with a distinctly African emphasis on singularity and practicality of the spirit and the flesh. John says,

From the stroke of the master's axe
One angel took the flinches of God's eternal power
And bled the veins of the earth
One angel that stood at the gate with a flaming sword
Was so well pleased with is power
Until he pierced the moon with his sword

And she ran down in the blood
And de sun
Batted her fiery eyes and put on her judgment rob
And laid down de cradle of eternity
And rocked herself into sleep and slumber... (Hurston 180)

What this excerpt largely demonstrates is the very old African tradition of the gods and the spirits of the world working in a very visible and tangible reality and not an abstract idea of an unseen god working on behalf of people. This is one of the definitive African traditions that did not change even with the transference of cultural identity. The Methodist and Baptist denominations allowed for the unity and the demonstration of the corporeal with the spiritual expressions of faith. This way of speaking in the vernacular spoke to blacks in a way and with a language that whites could not readily comprehend.

The accessibility of the vernacular language not only transformed the religious experience but also the educational and even social experiences of blacks. And as each successive generation of blacks emerged, an emphasis on the type or proper vernacular was used as a distinguishing factor not only for whites with regards to blacks, but also for blacks with regard to each other. This is evident in Hurston's depiction of John's first encounter with the school house on the other side of the creek.

The school, a universal symbol of progress, is the primary bridge that connects where John, as a representation of the old and new Negro, has come from and where he is going. While there are still limitations placed on what blacks can expect to receive at this time, there is still an opportunity for progress directly linked to that school and what that school symbolizes. Hurston confirms this change that would eventually become a commonality among blacks when John exclaims, "Negro children going to learn how to read and write like white folks. See! All this

going on over there and the younguns over the creek chopping cotton. All this must be very nice, but maybe it wasn't for the over-the-creek niggas" (13). This indicates that there is a direct correlation between what is acceptable and expected in a white nation and social construct versus what is going on the opposite side of the creek. This chance at an education appeals to both whites and blacks as a symbol of progress.

Another way that the spread of religion through the adaptation of the vernacular has transformed and even come to define African America culture is through the acceptance of the morality and even the Western thought process behind the vernacular. While this is clearly present through the emphasis on education, it is also present through the behavior of John Pearson in the novel.

In her essay, "Cultural Collision, Africanity, and the Black Baptist Preacher in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *In My Father's House*," Deborah G. Plant, as mentioned previously in this essay, argues that what western culture did was create a "destructive binary" because of its focus on dualism(13). This was largely the conflict that John would have throughout the novel. With the spread of religion through the vernacular also came a spread of the morality. Furthermore, even though Plant states that a dualism was created, an argument can be presented for the just the opposite. African American identity in general is an amalgamation of the total American experience and that includes the experience of slavery and the experience of the relations to whites. Thus, where Plant sees a type of conflicting duality, there can also be seen, through John, a process of assimilation, accommodation and change. These three things prove difficult for John as he remarks, "Don't it look funny, dat all mah ole pleasures done got to be new sins?" (Hurstons 169) Based on this quote, Plant writes,

The either or mentality of the Western mind, imposed upon an African belief system that tends toward either inclusion and tolerance than exclusion and

alienation, creates a certain drama in the lives of African Americans as they attempt to achieve a sufficient balance between contending ideals and cultural traditions.
(Plant 10)

Plant is saying that the traditional African values and mores collided with European Christian values and mores so that a European morality was assigned to an African experience, thus creating an African American experience that was negative because the collision required a dismantling of African culture.

While this assessment has some validity, it also tends to assume that Africans, slaves, and African Americans were passive players in their acculturation of the Western belief system. African Americans were busily adjusting to their cultural space and negotiating that which is acceptable and that which was not throughout the entire process of the development of an African American culture. That is why there is a conflation of identities within the African American identity narrative. There are parts of Africa, Europe, Indian, and American within the African American community.

Furthermore, it can be argued that African culture did not completely dismantle because of the collision with the West, but it was transformed. The transformation is a necessary component of the survival of cultural as the social circumstances change. John's problems may be influenced by cultural collision but it is more likely that the problems that he faced were the problems of change and transition—the space between being an African and then a slave versus being a new Negro with a new morality. Not only were blacks changed by the relations with whites, but they also were in the process of negotiating their own change and setting limits and parameters on African American culture in this transitory period.

Another way to look at this fusion of cultures into one identity is to trace the cultural migrations of African Americans. In other words, it can be argued that blacks looked to the things about Western culture that they could accommodate, and they altered themselves to the

ethos of the West in such a way that could make their cultural experience more cohesive. This alteration, again, is best viewed through the adaptation of religion.

In his book, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, Albert Rabetaou states that the "individualistic emphasis on revivalism, with its concentration on inward inversion, fostered an inclusiveness that bordered on egalitarianism" (32). Raboteau's book is the definitive book from which most other studies of African American slave religion base their research from. He was able to explain the development of slave religion from its origins in Africa throughout the slave trade to its African traditions in Christianity. Furthermore, he was able to make his research accessible enough that it could not only aide in the understanding of the development of African American Christianity but also African American culture. Because of the conversion efforts of evangelists and, as Raboteaou states, the personal nature of the conversion, blacks were able to interpret a Christianity that was different from paternalistic Christianity. Individual autonomy was an important aspect in the development of a collective folk culture. As Rabetau writes, "Christianity was fitted by the by the slave community to its own particular experience. At the same time, the symbols, myths, and values of Judeo-Christian tradition helped formulate the slave communities' view of itself (213).

Because African and Christian religions were at one time isolated, exclusive and were forced together because of slavery, it forced people to cope with whatever diverse elements were available to them. Thus, the Christianity that African American slaves observed was physical as well as spiritual because of the African tradition of combining spiritual and physical worlds. The integration of these worlds helped them to take ownership over their spirituality and by extension their culture. Raboteau writes:

Regular Sunday worship in a church was parallel by illicit...prayer meetings, on weeknights, in the slave cabins. Preachers licensed by the church and hired by the

master were hired supplemented by slave preachers licensed only by the spirit. Texts from the Bible...were explicated by versus from the spirituals. Slave forbidden by masters to attend church, or in some cases, even to pray risked floggings to attend secret gatherings to worship God...Into that all night singing and praying the slaves poured the sufferings and needs of their days. (213)

Among the many things that Raboteau is doing with this book, one of the most significant is that he takes us inside those secret meetings and describes the type of Christianity that the slaves observe. There, spirituals are song, prayers, are made, and dances are danced. It was in these meetings that a perfect merger of Christianity and African traditions can be seen the most clearly and by extension a merger of African and Western cultures. A perfect example of that is the Negro Spiritual.

Spirituals are a combination of Bible stories, Protestant hymns, sermons, and African styles of singing and dancing. These songs are “hybrids born of mutual influence and reciprocal borrowing of traditions” (Raboteau 243). These spirituals and the ambiguous ability to become songs that spoke for every person in any given occasion. They also proved to be a form of conversation and communication with other slaves, spirits, and God. They focused on the conscious of the worshipping community (Raboteau 265). Another way the conscious of the community was represented was through prayers. This explains how John Pearson was able to straddle both religious and cultural divides during his sermons and, some might say, his life.

Another way this relationship is represented in the novel is through the relation between the congregation and the pastor, i.e., John Pearson and the members of Zion Hope. In his work, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, Raboteau writes that

The style of the folk sermon, shared by black...evangelicals, was built on a formulaic structure based on phrases, verses, and whole passages the preacher knew by heart. Characterized by repetition, parallelisms, dramatic use of voice and gesture, and a whole range of oratorical devices, the sermon began with normal conversational prose, then built to a rhythmic cadence, regularly marked by exclamations of the congregation, and climaxed in a tonal chant accompanied by shouting, singing, and ecstatic behavior. The preacher, who needed considerable

skill to master this art, acknowledged not his own craft but, rather, the power of the spirit that struck him and “set him on fire.” The dynamic pattern of call and response between preacher and people was vital to the progression of the sermon, and unless the spirit roused the congregation to move and shout, the sermon was essentially unsuccessful. (236)

All of these assertions made by Raboteau can be located in various places within Hurston’s novel. John’s assertion that it is “de voice of God speakin’ thru me” is very illustrative of the nature of the spiritual and culturally defined identity of the emerging African American.

According to Raboteau, whites have long acknowledged the rhetorically and culturally dense experience within the African American church when he quotes a white minister as saying in 1863 that,

the colored brethren are so much preferred as preachers. When in the pulpit, there is a wonderful sympathy between the speaker and his audience... This sympathetic influence seems the result of a peculiar experience. None but a negro can preach as fully to arouse, excite, and transport the negro. (235)

This experience, according to Raboteau is steeped in the African tradition that would then become a slave tradition and from there it would continually transform to inform the black experience.

In his book *Old Ship of Zion*, Walter Pitts Jr. writes that the church tradition of African Americans is an extension of the slave tradition and their secret meetings. These secret meetings of the slaves not only gave slaves an outlet but they also provided a type of emotional and communal support. Furthermore, according to Pitts, these meetings became “the principle means of transferring esoteric to the North American colonies” and this esoteric knowledge contained in them “sacred wisdom” that was taught to the youth in the form of songs that acted as a means to physically preserve tradition (36). If anything, this is the collision that John finds himself confronting: that esoteric knowledge and modernity. Slaves had already negotiated cultural and social right and wrong with regards to their relations with whites. Lewis Baldwin makes note of

this negotiation in his essay, “A Home in Dat Rock’: Afro American Folk Sources and Slave Visions of Heaven and Hell”.

Baldwin takes Raboteau’s work a bit further to explain the folk consciousness or way of thinking of slaves at the time and it is not a stretch to see how John developed as a character based on this perception of morality. Baldwin writes:

the slaves critically redefined and reshaped Christian dogma concerning heaven and hell in accordance with their own experiences, values, and traditions...they fashioned an autonomous body of thought on this subject, thereby demonstrating that under the dynamics of the human spirit, no system is airtight. (Baldwin 38-39)

Baldwin suggests that slaves notion of Heaven and Hell is quite different from the master class’ version. The master classes’ required slaves to be good in a way that would keep them obedient to their masters. However, slaves had a different notion. What was considered a sinful offense to the master was not necessarily a sinful offense to a slave. This idea or argument would have strengthened Deborah Plants own argument concerning the problems that John Pearson had in his life and his work. For example, stealing from the master is a serious offense to the master as well as to God. Slaves did not see it that way. This is evident in the slave secular song that Baldwin quotes:

Our Father, who is in heaven,
White man owe me eleven and pay me seven
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,
And if I hadn’t took that
I wouldn’t had none.” (Qtd by Baldwin 40)

Baldwin goes on to suggest that what slaves learned from their masters, above all else, is how to use Christianity to fit their own needs. Again this does not sound like a black person who is a victim of cultural collision, but a black person who reinterprets what is presented to fit the needs

of whatever prevailing social situation that exists and makes the adapted concept or ideology a part of their social reality. And in the same way that the slaves were able to fit Christianity for their own needs, John was able to fit his behavior in the face of a type of morality to fit his own needs. This is a type of transference of identity.

As we have just seen, the religious experience of the emerging African American community was extensive. Furthermore, we can see that that experience was present in the everyday life of African Americans and it, by extension, shaped the culture. Thus, if we view African American Christianity as the bedrock of African American culture, we can also understand how the culture was formed around that experience. With the assimilation of two cultures and a reworking of the master narrative, slaves were ready and able to transition from slave to African Americans especially after their freedom. Once they were no longer slaves, blacks were free to create a cultural identity within the parameters of the master American narrative.

As John progressed through the novel, not only rhetorically but spatially as well, he also progressed socially. Leaving the other side of the creek meant leaving behind the sharecropper's life and that proximity to slavery. Leaving Nostalgia, Alabama for Sanford and Eatonville, Florida was another cultural progression. There was seemingly constant movement that was moving towards something that could not be sustained by his previous proximity to slave ideology or conceptions of life. The things that John tried to take with him as he transitioned were quickly cast in a negative light or as something that needed to be hidden because they did not fit the American ideological ethos. John was not the only person in the novel being represented as an older ideal working against a type of modernity. Neither John nor the African

practice of conjure could fit into the scope of the transitory narrative of the emerging African American.

In her essay, “Voodoo as a Symbol in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*,” Barbara Speisman contends that *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, in general, is representative of a voodoo culture and ideology and by extension, and African culture. While her overall argument is problematic she does make some valid points concerning the use of Voodoo in the novel as well as the presence of Voodoo in African American culture. Albert Raboteau writes that conjure (hoodoo and voodoo) was and is “a belief, a way of perceiving the world which placed people in the context of another world no less ‘real’ than the ordinary one” (275). In other words, it was a way of being and perceiving. It is also a part of a counterculture of belief because of its presumed African ties. However, conjure as Raboteau notes, is a mixture of African and European magical lore. (Raboteau 284) Here again we see a type of adaptation of beliefs behaviors or ideas that take on a form that is completely represented in the African American ethos. It would seem that Hurston is suggesting that the two words, African and American; voodoo and Christianity; black and white, should be kept in separate spheres. These seemingly opposing spherical ideologies may simply be the conflicts that Hurston was having with these ideas of identity and how they should be located in the narrative of blacks. These elements then could be described as cultural migratory symbols of change, adaptation, and acceptance.

The first migratory cultural symbol was witnessed at Lucy’s death. On her death bed, Lucy begs her eldest daughter Isie – assumed to be Hurston’s fictional self – not to let the people “take de pillow from under mah head, and be covering up de clock and de lookin’ glass...” (Hurston 130). This method of honoring the dead is an old Voodoo practice in the African tradition (Speisman 87). The fact that Lucy opposed those types of primitive displays suggests

that Lucy represented the new Negro or the Negro completely ascribed and dialed-in to the Christian mythos and the standard of what would become African American. She is John's conscious: a symbol of modern African American achievements. Her emphasis is on Christian doctrine and education. She is the first to note John's difference as being an "over-the-creek-nigger." And she is the first to demand reform and change. The old way, the over the creek way, was not compatible with the future. Seemingly the black *folk* had to be left behind in order for the African American to emerge. In this case, John was the student and Lucy was the teacher or advisor. Another way to view their relationship would be Lucy as the mother and John as the child.

A different use of the African tradition of Voodoo was John's second wife, Hattie's use of voodoo to marry and manipulate John. Interestingly, the community of Eatonville is aware of the conjure priestess, Dangie Dewoe, and they acknowledge her power. Yet, there is a clear delineation between the church going folk and the people who use conjure. That is not to say that these two spheres do not interact and co-exist, but John's reaction to finding out that he has been conjured or had roots placed on him, is to lash out at Hattie. He beats her, feeling none of the remorse and transformation of character that he felt the first time and only he struck Lucy. It can then be stated that John's anger is not directed so much at the fact that he had a conjure curse put on him, but that the curse became the thing that separated him from Lucy. Based on the analysis of what Lucy represents, it appears that John is reacting against his own tradition and he is lashing out at his inability to change through Hattie.

By the time that his divorce from Hattie has become finalized, John makes a significant statement. He lost the court proceedings because he refused to tell the judge about Hattie's use of conjure. When asked why, John responds: "Ah didn't want de white folks tuh hear 'bout nothing

lak dat. Dey knows too much ‘bout us as it is, but dey some things dey ain’t tuh know. Dey’s some strings on our harp fuh us tuh play on and sing all tuh ourselves” (Hurston 169). John’s is as an admission of duality within the emerging African American culture. There is the side that America sees, and this America is the creator of a master narrative that accepts a specific African American identity narrative. It also is deeply defined by a Christian morality that determines what is culturally acceptable and what is not.

The other side of the coin reflects the reality for African Americans within the culture that is just as real and conducive to African American culture formation. These two identity narratives both run parallel to each other. According to Raboteau, this dualism has existed since the time of slavery because “for slaves, conjure answered purposes that Christianity did not and Christianity answered purposes that conjure did not” (Raboteau 288). Here again is an example of the adaptive nature of the African American culture.

Barbara Speisman takes a different reading from the presence of voodoo in the novel. She contends that “we can gain a clearer understanding of the underlying structure of the novel if we interpret John’s character as that of a minister who has renounced the tenets of Christianity and embraced the concepts and basic symbols of voodoo”(Speisman 88). She goes on to say that “John may be conceived of as a voodoo doctor who turns away from God and uses voodoo to gain his power over his family and his congregation” (88). Basing this argument on the fact that John has some measure of success, she implies that his status in the community and the overall theme of the novel is a voodoo narrative because of John’s innate character flaws and his continued flaunting of the Christian morality would seemingly lend him to more failures than successes.

The problem with this argument is that she is not taking into account the entire narrative and transformative properties of the experience of colonization, slavery, freedom, and national identity. In doing this, she rejects the influence of the evangelical movements of the Great Awakenings, and she rejects the slaves' ability to assimilate to a new culture. Furthermore, she assumes that the culture of voodoo was so influential and dominant that the presence of Christianity in the novel is superfluous compared to the part that Voodoo plays as well as its supposed practitioners control over the outcome of certain circumstances in the novel. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is not a novel about voodoo or Christianity. It is, however, a novel about culture: cultural creation, cultural sustaining, cultural maintenance, and culture identity. Both sides are equally important to the African American narrative.

Therefore John does not represent a voodoo priest but a black man who is too light to be African and too dark to be American. This assessment can then be extended to the overall narrative of American identity as being an American superstructure of identity with many smaller structures and discourses working and playing out within that superstructure. African American identity is one narrative and there are many others and each have their own evolutionary story to tell. The significant thing is that by the nature of an immigrant culture, it seems that what becomes American is somewhere in the middle of two or more cultural extremes. In the case of African Americans, and largely in the case of the national narrative of identity in America, that process is still being defined. And largely what defines an American experience are those things modeled and stipulated by the master narrative. This narrative is what blacks worked towards during the Jim Crow era while simultaneously maintaining a distinct African and American cultural paradigm. Also this narrative guided the transformation

from slaves to Americans that identify themselves as distinct from the master ideology by inserting a cultural designation of African before the American.

The main model of modernity as it is represented in the novel is demonstrated by Lucy. Her family's status, her language and her Christian orthodox morality all symbolize a shift away from the old morality and behavior that blacks were accustomed to. It was this narrative of responsibility and behavior that John found problematic. Yet, Hurston carefully detailed—through her representations of Lucy and the train—that this march to modernity was necessary. It was necessary because the shift in culture deemed that it was necessary. The behavior of free blacks modeled, to the best of their ability, the behavior of whites.

That is not to say that blacks experience was focused on the assimilation of a white experience but that the two cultures lived a parallel existence. And what was normal and acceptable in the white cultural sphere became normal and acceptable in the black cultural sphere. Nowhere is the demonstrated more clearly than Hurston's depiction of the schoolhouse and its designation as a standard as opposed to what it would be considered on the side of the creek that John came from: a privilege.

The schoolhouse plays a pivotal role in the novel, but it also demonstrates an interesting developmental relation that blacks would have with each other. Blacks are placed in a new environment and urged to modify in order to accommodate a new type of blackness. These forced modifications are ruled under a similar structure as the master slave scenario. Only this time, the master is the black heading the class, acting as delineator of a new way of being. He serves as the figure of authority and he exercises his authority in a way that is similar to the old master slave scenario that can be seen in history as well as in caricature.

Lucy's uncle, the head of the classroom, is tasked with making this transformative process form a slave to a free American tangible. He is described as a "stodgy middle-aged man who prided himself on his frowns." He ruled his classroom with a modified tool of the slave driver: switches instead of whips, and he "had little ambition to impart knowledge. He reigned" (Hurston 25). This is a clear illustration of the type of assimilation that the former slaves used in order to make the conversion from slave to New Negro. By all accounts, it appears that once the blacks were free of slavery the black leaders in the communities moved to fill the same roles that whites used to fill, and they fulfilled them in a similar way fit for the conditions in which they found themselves, similar to what was done with the assimilation of religion. We also have a clearer example of the manifestations of racial ideology that would begin to define the era of free blacks in the Jim Crow era.

In her essay, "Ideology and Race in American History", Barbara Fields writes "If ideology is a vocabulary for interpreting social experience, and this both shapes and is shaped by that experience, then it follows that even the same ideology must convey different meanings to people having different social experiences" (155). This is essentially how the rhetoric of a black identity would then transform into the culture of an African American identity. As noted with the school master, there was an assimilation of the known behaviors of white, the traditions of Africans and slaves, and the projection of an identity in America. All of these things would converge in the schoolhouse. Furthermore, they would manifest in the morality of the newly emerging African American culture. Once John gets to the schoolhouse, Two-Eyed John becomes John Pearson, the adaptor of an identity that brings him closer, through the acquirement of his last name, to an American identity.

Consequently, what we see from the beginning of the novel to the end is a transformation process that is codifying acceptable behavior while simultaneously partitioning the most exotic of binaries that could possibly mark blacks as too African to be among the American mainstream. Even though there is a certain ethos of culture that mark African Americans as a distinct cultural group within America, the process of weeding out what is acceptable was a major transformative process for blacks. While mainstream America was dealing with what to do with a population of freed and migrating blacks, blacks were dealing with how to be something other than a subjugated culture of difference. Ultimately, dealing with this difference was where John Pearson failed.

After John's final remarriage and reemergence as a pastor, he finds himself being led, once again, by a woman who is a black person of a higher morality and economic status. Similar to his relations with Lucy, Sally was tasked with guiding John to an acceptable morality and behavior. But just like with Lucy, John failed to overpower the "beast within." After his encounter with the young woman in a hotel in Oviedo, John is angry with the Ora, the latest woman of consequence, and he is angry with himself.

John's latest and final dalliance signaled John as a member of the old way of being. All of Lucy's morality, her death, and even the loss of his position as mayor of Sanford and pastor of Zion Hope represent a shift or focus to modernity that John could not quite grasp. His inability to grasp ideals of modernity is related to his inherent inability to acknowledge that things have changed in his social sphere. John doesn't blame himself for his behavior but he does blame what he calls the "beast" inside of him for his transgressions. These transgressions are problematized for him because John was never able to grasp an understanding of the rhetoric that Lucy, the train, and even the towns of Eatonville and Sanford represented. Seeing himself as a

vessel for the spirit of both God (as a preacher) and the beast (as an adulterer) could not be inserted into the discourse of the national identity.

Similar to the oft represented image of duality, the devil sitting on one shoulder and the angel sitting on another, both sides of the same man are attempting to guide and direct his actions or choices. This duality was never present in Africans, slaves, and even the blacks on the side of the creek that John emerged from. The further he moved from the proximity of slavery and subjugation to progress and American identity, the more conflicted he became. It all culminated into John's final encounter and subsequent loss to modernity and progress. Husrton writes:

The ground-mist lifted on a Florida sunrise as John fled homeward. The car droned, "ho-o-me" and tortured the man. False pretender! Outside show to the world! Soon he would be in the shelter of Sally's presence. Faith and no questions asked. He prayed for Lucy's return and God had answered with Sally. He drove on but half-seeing the railroad from looking inward. The engine struck the car squarely and hurled it about like a toy. John was thrown out and lay perfectly still. Only his foot twitched a little. (200)

John Pearson was killed by a symbol of modernity. At this point in his life, it seemed that John had accepted the duality between the spirit and the flesh. His angst while driving represented an acceptance of the morally and socially sanctioned codification of behavior. John could not progress. In order to fully understand this point, it is imperative to understand what the train represents.

The train is a symbol for the new industrial America. The ability to relocate, modernize, and distribute information, resources, and materials is all tied to this mechanized symbol of modernity. That was the language that John could not understand. When the train whistled and tooted, it spoke the language of movement, change and progress. It transformed the way Americans saw America and it changed the way Americans viewed their own spatiality. Quite simply, if a person found that he could not be who or what he wanted to be where he was presently located all he had to do was change his spatiality. The train made this change easier

and accessible. While John was able to physically enjoy the modern language of the train, he was not able to access the implied rhetorical meanings behind the whistle and toot of the train. His spiritual, mental, and emotional battles with what Lucy, the train, and the church all represent battles with modernity. And it was a battle that John lost when the train rammed into the side of his car and removed any reminiscence of the old way of being. John Pearson was not able to transform as his newer, modern social reality dictated.

CHAPTER 3 CONCLUSION

Jonah's Gourd Vine is a literary exemplar of how African Americans managed the transformation of identity post slavery. Through her use of the parallel thematic constructs of identity and mobility, Zora Neale Hurston was able to continue the transference narrative that began with the capture and the enslavement of Africans and carried them to the point of the emancipation of slaves. Blacks were tasked with the responsibility of finding an American identity while still maintaining an African tradition. It was a delicate negotiation, and free blacks were able to succeed because of the historical lessons of cultural adaptation and assimilation learned through colonization and slavery. That is not to say that the lessons learned were lessons that needed to be learned. It does however speak to the tenacity of a culture to survive.

In Hurston's novel, John Pearson struggles with this legacy. Because of his proximity to slavery as a sharecropper, John is completely cognizant of the cultural transference that Africans and slaves engaged in. However, with the end of slavery and the need for a new identity that is not forced, John is tasked with the burden of finding his African American self. And he failed. John represented an identity that was completely conflicted because of his inability to locate and come to terms with his own identity narrative. Each step that he took on the transformative road to African American served as miniature cultural implosions within his conscious. He was too African to be American and too steeply rooted in the cultural ties of an old mentality. Because John failed to navigate this period of transition by adapting to the social and cultural context provided by Lucy, Eatonville, Zion Hope, his multiple relocations and the train, he was symbolically overrun by modernity and left behind. His failure to transition from a past consciousness denoted an inability to deal and accept the future.

John's inability to deal with the changing social reality was the overall point of the novel. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* was a novel about transition. The focus of the novel should be on the journey or the experience of attempting to adjust social realities. Hurston gives us just enough of the cultural narrative of slavery in the beginning of the novel and the coming of modernity towards the end of the novel to let readers know that a transition was taking place within the African American culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Hurston was also able to demonstrate the importance of the necessity for constant change by placing her novel between two defining eras: slavery and African American modernity. By restricting her novel within these fixed social realities, she was able to intensify the quest for identity as well as the consequences for those African Americans who are unable to resolve the two sides of their cultural and social existence. That is not to say that one cultural ideology must dominate within the social conscious of an individual, but it does suggest that when there is a transference of ideologies, an individual must adapt each cultural ideal to a given set of circumstances. In other words, the individual must take what they can use and disregard what can potentially become problematic.

Once the individual has established a set of ideas that are, at the very least, relational and non-antagonistic to the prevailing cultural ideas that individual can find some measure of social acceptance and success. John Pearson was unable to comprehend this. Thus, while Hurston's novel depicted an ethnic people within the process of transition, it also illustrated the consequences of failing to transform and adapt as social reality dictates.

That social reality is what Amy Crittenden implied when she asserted that her children were different from the generation that she, and even her husband, came from. Each successive generation since colonization has had to deal with a new social reality that defined their lives. As

they negotiated those social realities, they also had to negotiate their own identities. As has been proven throughout this essay, African Americans have experienced a myriad of relatively swift and dramatic changing social realities. And it was through the adaptation of their own social spheres to the identifying parameters of space and relations that blacks were able to create a defining African Americans culture.

Furthermore, the larger cultural narrative after the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves was a changing narrative as well. America as a nation was attempting to find its own identity. Thus, it was imperative that free blacks adapted to the rhetoric and ideology of nationalism in the same way that all of America moved to one nationalist idea. This is not to say that African Americans were included in the rhetoric of nationalism, but it is important to note that the discourse of Americanism was assimilated into the discourse of being black and free in America.

This is largely where John Pearson failed. He was either unwilling or unable to understand the inherent dialogue within his changing mobility, relations, and spatiality. The internal cultural implosions overcame him. And because Hurston chose to place the setting of her *Jonah's Gourd Vine* in a time period that is ambiguous with regards to black identity, she was implying that identity is a concept that is carefully constructed and renewed as society changes. In other words, each phase of transition from African to African American required a reassessment of the authenticity of identity based on the given circumstances.

Based on the inherent mobility, seen and implied, within the novel, Hurston was stating that identity is not a fixed idea but a fluid concept that is constantly being refitted and adapted to whatever social realities are present. John's gourd vine, then, was the legacy of Africans' and slaves' cultural tenacity with regard to adapting, transforming, and surviving their ordeal. It was

also being born in a different social sphere than his parents, meeting and marrying Lucy, and becoming a minister and leader of the community in Eatonville, Florida. All of these things sheltered John and guided him as he negotiated the change from slave identity to the larger American identity narrative. The vine withered because he could not reconcile the multiple identity narratives inherent in the African American experience with the larger narrative of an African who is also an American. This was the larger commentary inherent in Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Keasha Renee Worthen was born in Lakeland, Florida. Raised in the Atlanta area, she attended Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia and earned a Bachelor of Arts in English literature in 2008 before enrolling in the Master of Arts program at the University of Florida in 2009. She received a master's degree from the English Department at the University of Florida where she continues to study issues of reception between American literature and culture and Swedish literature and culture for her Doctor of Philosophy.