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# Revolutionary Trickster Communities: Re-presenting Folk Heroes in Contemporary African American Novels

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Revolutionary Trickster Communities:  
Re-presenting Folk Heroes in Contemporary  
African American Novels

Susan C. Stinson

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for the degree of Master of Arts in English at Longwood College,  
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Revolutionary Trickster Communities:  
Re-presenting Folk Heroes in Contemporary  
African American Novels

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*"A bag of tricks and a trickster. You want me to believe  
you, your tales and messages. But why need I believe or listen?"*

--The Left Hand of Darkness  
*Ursula K. Le Guin*

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## Introduction

In The Oxford Companion to African-American Literature, Jeanne R. Smith defines the trickster of “the African American tradition” (736) as one whose “power and identity lie in his skillful stories and mastery of verbal technique” (737). Smith states: “The trickster’s . . . transgression of boundaries . . . make[s] him a compelling figure not only for cultural resistance and survival, but also for blasting stereotypes of African Americans” (737). She concludes, “because he continually disrupts the status quo with laughter, outrage, and rebellion, he acts both as a figure of cultural strength and as a sign of diversity” (737). The trickster figure is not only regarded as a folk hero in traditional African American folk tales but also is often used by African American novelists as both a protagonist and a culture hero. By examining the actions, language, and characteristics of the various individuals who comprise the communities in the contemporary novels of Sherley Anne Williams, Ernest Gaines, and Gloria Naylor and by analyzing the narrative structure of the works themselves, the reader may better understand how contemporary trickster literature becomes a powerful catalyst for social change.

Like the Native American novelist, Gerald Vizenor (author of Bearheart), whom Alan R. Velie characterizes as a trickster novelist, Williams, Gaines, and Naylor can also be considered trickster novelists. Velie’s criteria for classifying a novelist as a trickster include the author’s ability to “[create] a narrator who is a professed trickster, telling a story of tricksters, all with the purpose of turning the audience into tricksters”; “fight those whose values he [or she] despises . . . fight[ing] them obliquely with wit”; “[and play] with language” (136). The socially conscious and witty storytellers who serve as

protagonists in Dessa Rose, A Gathering of Old Men, and Mama Day demonstrate that Williams, Gaines, and Naylor fit Velie's definition of the trickster novelist. Each of these novelists shares the ability both to use fiction as a tool to free African Americans from prejudicial stereotypes associated with age, class, and gender and to redefine the traditional African American folk heroes. Thus, these works direct African Americans toward self-definition. Williams, Gaines, and Naylor also incorporate narrative strategies such as multiple narrators, re-naming, parody, and the African American vernacular technique of signifying both to establish a sense of orality in the novels and to give definition and personality to their trickster figures.

All three of the authors write in the past tense and employ multiple narrators. Thereby, the authors signal to their readers that the works they are reading are rooted in historically predetermined communities. In addition, Williams revises the slave narrative genre; Gaines inverts the conventions of the plantation novel; and Naylor rewrites the biblical story of creation. The reader is invited by these contemporary authors to look upon these older writing traditions and the ideas about race, class, and gender that inform them from a contemporary viewpoint--a "tricksterlike" thing to do.

Although Smith refers to the trickster using the masculine pronoun, African American tricksters are frequently women. As Dessa, the title character of Sherley Anne Williams' novel Dessa Rose (1986) illustrates, an enslaved woman who has reached full term in her pregnancy can embody the characteristics and spirit of the trickster. As in the African American trickster tales that, Smith explains, both deal with

animal figures such as “Brer Rabbit” and the human trickster “John” and “emphasize the trickster’s subversive masking and signifying skills” (736), Dessa gets the best of her white captors when, using covert signifying skills, she prepares her escape from slavery: a figurative if not literal example of the trickster’s capacity for shapeshifting. Dessa, however, is not the only character in the novel who functions as a trickster: Nathan, Harker, Ned, Castor, Flora, and their white mistress, Rufel, all cooperate with one another in a scheme to improve their finances by swindling money from easily duped white slave traders; thus united, these characters constitute a community of tricksters: a community of heroes. Nor is Williams alone in portraying a community of tricksters.

In his novel, A Gathering of Old Men (1983), Ernest Gaines unites a seemingly powerless group of old men in a plot to defend Mathu, the one full-blooded African on the Marshall plantation. Mathu has been unjustly accused of murdering the plantation’s Cajun overseer, Beau Boutan. This group of racially mixed old men who carry twelve-gauge shotguns, each man claiming sole responsibility for Beau’s murder, shatters any assumptions a reader might have regarding incapacity of the elderly to act as social reformers. As each man voices his reasons for wanting Beau dead, the reader must confront both the demeaning position that whites have forced on this community of African Americans and stereotypical concepts of the aged and aging. Gaines’ trickster community, like that of Williams, primarily consists of several African Americans and a few white Americans. Gaines’ elderly tricksters parody the younger and more dangerous “badmen” who are, according to John W. Roberts, a combination of the African



American “conception of the conjurer and trickster as folk heroes” and who “[i]n folklore . . . emerged as . . . outlaw folk hero[es]” (215).

In her novel, Mama Day (1988), Gloria Naylor invests many of her Willow Springs characters with the trickster’s ability to conjure--primarily Mama Day and Ruby; however, Abigail, Buzzard, Parris, Cocoa, and the northern outsider, George, also display the trickster’s mastery of signifying and humor. Mama Day, however, emerges as the most significant trickster figure and culture hero within Naylor’s Willow Springs trickster community. Naylor, setting her novel in the all-black community of Willow Springs--an island community located off the coasts of and directly between South Carolina and Georgia, yet not belonging to either state--creates a community of tricksters who, like the members of Zora Neale Hurston’s Eatonville community in Their Eyes Were Watching God, are never faced with the dilemma of constructing their individual identities from within the dominant white culture. More so than either Williams or Gaines, Naylor intentionally blurs the distinctions between the past and the present to suggest to her readers the existence of a trickster continuum that bridges the African American oral and literary traditions.

All three of the novelists, as tricksters, manipulate one’s reading process by overlapping the visible with the invisible world: merging faith with empirical reality and cultural boundaries with spiritual boundlessness. Williams’ use of humans who embody characteristics of the animal trickster, Gaines’ use of elderly tricksters who parody the badman, and Naylor’s use of conjuring tricksters suggest to the reader not only that

the trickster's attributes change over time but also that the focus of trickster literature shifts as well. But unlike many of their African American predecessors who use individual trickster protagonists within their works,<sup>1</sup> Williams, Gaines, and Naylor unite individual trickster protagonists within communities that, as a unit, challenge and subvert the dominant Southern white patriarchal power structure.

This thesis will explore the trickster communities established in Williams' Dessa Rose, Gaines' A Gathering of Old Men, and Naylor's Mama Day and will focus on the novelist as trickster; the individual trickster's role within and effect upon the larger community; the trickster's ability to serve as a mediator or bridge between blacks and whites, northern, southern, and western states, and natural and supernatural forces; and the games and tricks, both verbal and physical, that tricksters play to outwit seemingly more powerful oppressors. Sherley Anne Williams' novel, Dessa Rose, Ernest Gaines' novel A Gathering of Old Men, and Gloria Naylor's novel Mama Day are all firmly grounded in the tradition of African American trickster folk tales, yet Williams and Gaines alter the traditional folk stories concerning the animal trickster and badman culture hero to include white Americans who within African American communities serve as trickster figures. Using the conjurer trickster, Naylor also uses and recreates a traditional African American folk hero and, because her 1988 novel is set in the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, Invisible Man's grandfather, Rinehart, and Bledsoe, Tod Clifton act individually as tricksters and do not establish a unified trickster community in Invisible Man.



future--August 1999--she suggests that the conjurer will continue to serve as an African American protagonist folk hero well into the twenty-first century.

## Chapter One: Words of Wisdom Employed by Williams' Tricksters in Dessa Rose

In her novel Dessa Rose, Sherley Anne Williams uses multiple narrative techniques including intertextual revision, naming, parody, the African American verbal art of signifyin(g), and multiple narrative voices to establish a sense of oral storytelling and to develop the personalities of her characters. Additionally, Williams subtly characterizes her tricksters in accordance with the traits of both the antebellum folk and modern literary tricksters: the African American animal and the trickster tales about John and "Massa" as well as the Euro-American confidence men.<sup>2</sup> In addition to multiple voices that narrate and assist in establishing the work's oral quality, Williams also includes a prologue in which her title character, Dessa, lets the reader know that she is narrating the entire story after slavery has ended to a younger female member of her family. This young female African American serves as Dessa's amanuensis, a function often performed by white abolitionists for unlettered authors of antebellum African American slave narratives.<sup>3</sup> Although the prologue implies that Dessa will be the novel's sole narrator, the work utilizes a narrative framing device: allowing Dessa to tell her story while, simultaneously, the third-person omniscient narrator recounts the direct

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<sup>2</sup> In her work Mules and Men (1935), Zora Neale Hurston provides an excellent example of the John and old Massa tales. Briefly, Hurston's John "was Ole Massa's pet nigger. He give John de best of everything and John thought Ole Massa was made outa gold" (113). See Harold Courlander's work, A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore (1976), for further examples of both Brer Rabbit and John tales.

<sup>3</sup> Allowing a young African American female to write her story, Dessa both signifies on and reverses the authors of as-told-to slave narratives dependence on amanuensis.

speech of Adam Nehemiah, Rufel, and Dessa. Therefore, all of these characters are heard and experienced in the first person by the reader. This narrative strategy effectively tricks readers into believing that they are listening to the firsthand accounts of multiple narrators when, in actuality, Dessa is telling the entire story in retrospect.

In her work Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature, Jeanne R. Smith comments on the trickster's creation of community. Regarding Louise Erdrich's contemporary Native American trickster novel, Love Medicine, Smith states,

The creation of community through multiple narrative is an inherently tricksterlike process. . . . [A]ll points of view, including those of the author, the narrators, the characters, and the reader or listener, together create the meaning of the story, and this emphasizes the importance of dialogue and community to the storytelling process. (emphasis mine) (91)

Similar to Smith's understanding of establishing community in Native American trickster novels, Williams, as both an African American and trickster novelist, uses dialogue to move the reader twofold from the present to the past: first, to listen to Dessa as she braids a young family member's hair and tells the story of her experiences during the period of slavery; second, to draw the reader inside of Dessa's own mind so that readers might experience her memories of Adam Nehemiah, Rufel, and herself firsthand and in Nehemiah's, Rufel's, and Dessa's voices.

Another form of dialogue, the intertextual revision--wherein a contemporary novel signifies on the themes, forms, and subjects contained in both literature and folk

stories of the past--that Williams pursues in Dessa Rose has been thoroughly explored by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his work The Signifying Monkey. According to Gates' theory, "postbellum black authors continued to read and revise the central figures they received from the fragments of tradition that somehow survived the later nineteenth century's onslaught of de facto and de jure segregation" (171). Furthermore, Gates calls this literary tradition "black textual grounding through revision" (171), and he adds that revisions of this nature are equivalent to one author's work "Signifyin(g)" (88) on the work of another author.

On signifyin(g) as intertextual revision, Gates theorizes that "[w]riters Signify upon each other's texts by rewriting the received textual tradition . . . to create a space for revising the text. It also alters . . . the way we read the tradition, by defining the relation of the text at hand *to* the tradition" (124). In other words, Gates' term, "Signifyin(g)," is "a metaphor for textual revision" (88). The terms Signifyin(g) and signifyin(g) as Gates uses them and as they will be used within this thesis are words which combine the folk definition (signifyin') and the theoretical connotation (to signify or to have meaning) associated with signifyin(g). Thus, Gates' signifyin(g), with a (g), implies that this term is associated specifically with African American literature. In keeping with Gates' ideas about intertextual revision and its role in the African American literary tradition, Mildred R. Mickle observes in the Oxford Companion to African American Literature that

Williams . . . creates her own rebellion both by deconstructing the roles of female slave and white mistress, by having these two become friends and



work together in a minstrel parody of slave auction to gain economic freedom, and by formally revising the slave narrative genre of the past as well as William Styron's neo-slave narrative on Nat Turner. (211)

The author's production of a novel which, in turn, signifies on and re-envisions other novels also illustrates Velie's description of the trickster novelist's novel, for Williams uses parody and integration of the races to reconsider social reality in the antebellum south.

Additionally, the author's technique of signifyin(g) mirrors the trickster characters within the novel who signify on one another; signifyin(g) skills, as Smith's definition of "Trickster" reminds the reader, are "emphasized" in African American trickster tales. Not only does Williams signify on the slave narrative genre and Styron's work, as Mickle observes, but also, as the author reveals in the preface to Dessa Rose, on two historical events she read about in Angela Davis' article, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," and Herbert Aptheker's work American Negro Slave Revolts. Also, by naming one of her characters Adam Nehemiah and another Ruth (Rufel), Williams signifies on three books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Ruth, and Nehemiah. Symbolic names, therefore, illustrate one way in which African American authors signify upon (and revise) well known literary works.

In the African American literary tradition, naming oneself or reclaiming one's family name is considered a symbolic act of creating a personal identity. In his article "I [Y]am [W]hat I [A]m: [T]he [T]opos of [(Un)]naming in Afro-American [L]iterature," Kimberly W. Benston suggests that for African Americans "[t]he act of naming . . . had

originally been a brand of enslavement, [and, once slave characters rename themselves, the process of naming] becomes a means for arriving at a nexus of private and public intention” (162). In other words, Ruth and Dessa, who were given the names Rufel and Odessa while living within the slave holding society, first discard their socialized names that they received while living within the slavery system and then they reclaim the names by which they are known to their families and friends. In her article “Spies in the Enemy’s House: Folk Characters as Tricksters in Frances E. W. Harper’s Iola Leroy,” Lynda Koolish suggests that by “casting off his slave name, John Andrews, Harper’s character Salters seems an early source for Sherley Anne Williams’s poems about the power of naming” (178). Because Williams writes about the power of names and naming in some of her poetry,<sup>4</sup> the reader may surmise that she would also choose carefully the names of her characters in her novel.

The author who plays with the form of the novel as well as names and naming to the degree that the characters’ names signify on past literary works as well as on the characters within and even authors of those works is one who is well versed in the tricks of the trickster; hence, Williams is a trickster novelist. Turning to the significance of the names Williams chose for her characters, the reader will note that the biblical nature of the characters’ names in Dessa Rose has further significance. According to the book of Genesis, Adam was the first man created by God, and after Adam and Eve ate from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (3), the couple was removed from the garden of

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<sup>4</sup> See William’s collection of poetry entitled The Peacock Poems (1975).

Eden; hence, the concept of the fallen man. Additionally, in the book of Nehemiah, the Hebrew Nehemiah works with other Israelites to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Upon his return to Jerusalem, however, Nehemiah finds that the Israelites have disobeyed God's law which forbids intermarrying with foreigners; therefore, Nehemiah reminds the Israelites that they "transgress against . . . God in marrying strange [foreign] wives" (Neh. 13:23-26).

Although Adam Nehemiah is not the first man in the antebellum south, he is a northern white male visiting the south for the first time. Therefore, by combining the biblical names Adam and Nehemiah to form Adam Nehemiah, Williams parodies the biblical story of the creation of the original man. Whereas God's Adam initially dwelled as an innocent man within the Garden of Eden, Williams' Adam is a xenophobe who, thinking primarily of himself, considers himself part of the chosen race. Therefore, the presence of a rebellious foreign woman, Dessa, presents a potential threat to the purity of the white race. This characterization typifies Williams' Adam Nehemiah: a white man who seeks to promote himself through the success of his upcoming book, The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Population and Some Means of Eradicating Them (16), in which Dessa's story of her involvement in the Alabama uprising on the Wilson slave coffle will play an important role.

Regarding Nehemiah's motivation for writing this book, the third person omniscient narrator of section one of Dessa Rose relates, "However much the plantation south might rely on slave labor, the 'negro tamer,' like the negro trader, had no place in planter society. And Adam Nehemiah wanted just that" (17). Appropriating Dessa's



story for publication and economic gain, Nehemiah plans to make enough money to establish himself as one of the landholders in the southern plantation society. However, when Dessa asks Nehemiah why he is writing a book, his response belies his true intention: "I write what I do in the hope of helping others to be happy in the life that has been sent to them to live" (41). Dessa later retaliates: "'[Y]ou think what I say now going to help peoples be happy in the life they sent? If that be true' she said as he opened his mouth to speak, 'why I not be happy when I live it?'" (47). Dessa's comment is not the ignorant reply of an uneducated slave woman that Adam Nehemiah thinks it is. Wearing the mask of the compliant trickster, Dessa is actually stating in her question to Nehemiah that she knows he is lying about the purpose of his book. Dessa knows that only a literate white slave holding audience will profit from Nehemiah's writing.

Williams makes it clear to the reader that after Dessa escapes from Sheriff Hughes' custody and ruins the narrative Nehemiah had been collecting for his work, Nehemiah's feelings toward Dessa change from idle curiosity into a perception of her as a physical and moral threat. In Dessa's words, "this what Nemi meant; I was something so terrible I wasn't even human. I had lusted with the master, then knifed him; this why I was sold . . . . A danger to womanhood, he called me" (250). Since he looks upon Dessa as a threat to his personal success, lies to her during her pregnancy, and swears that Dessa, "the slut" (72), will not evade her captors, Adam Nehemiah appears to be not one of God's first innocent creations but rather a postmodern madman whose words have no meaning. In fact, Nehemiah never completes the book that he began with his interviews with Dessa. Ironically, the white man's (Nehemiah's) story is aborted whereas the black

woman's (Dessa's) lives on in Dessa's oral history as well as in the written version that her amanuensis records. After Rufel and Dessa trick the Sheriff at the novel's end (escaping Nehemiah's hold one last time), Nehemiah's blank notebook pages reveal the truth to the Sheriff and to both Dessa and Rufel: his desire to write a book that would guarantee his acceptance in the southern planting class has turned to an obsession to locate, capture, and condemn Dessa.

The name Williams chose for Dessa's primary antagonist in Dessa Rose also signifies on the pro-slavery Boston clergyman, Nehemiah Adams, who, in 1854, published A South-Side View of Slavery; or, Three Months At The South In 1854: his findings on the slavery system in the south. Denounced by Harriet Ann Jacobs in her fugitive slave autobiography Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl as an anti-abolitionist who "assures [northern] people that he has been to the south, and seen slavery for himself; that it is a beautiful 'patriarchal institution'; that the slaves don't want their freedom" (403), Adams created one of the antebellum era's most notorious apologies for chattel slavery. An indication of this opposition surfaces when the reader recalls that Adam Nehemiah expresses little concern for Dessa and her unborn child during one of his interrogations of the captive: "Her belly was almost as big as she and Nehemiah thought privately that birthing the kid she carried--a strong lusty one judging by the size of that belly--would probably kill her long before the hangman came for her neck" (16). Historically, Nehemiah Adams became emotionally distressed when he witnessed the sale of an infant slave. Williams, then, has rewritten this historical figure by naming him Adam Nehemiah and characterizing him as Dessa's unsympathetic interrogator. Yet

among his impressions of the southern slave system, Adams compassionately recalls witnessing the sale of an enslaved infant: "It is hardly necessary to say that my heart died within me. Now I had found slavery in its most awful feature--the separation of a child from its mother" (64). The reversal of names--Nehemiah Adams to Adam Nehemiah--clearly indicates that Williams is establishing a dichotomy between the views that the two men hold regarding the relationships between slave mothers and their children.

Williams' name for the white plantation mistress, Ruth, with whom Dessa and her fellow runaways are able to seek refuge, provides a counterbalance to Nehemiah's callousness toward Dessa. In the introduction to the book of Ruth, in The New Oxford Annotated Bible, expanded edition, Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger write,

Since the woman Ruth is a Moabitess, not an Israelite, the effect of the book, if not its purpose, is to create a sympathetic feeling toward foreigners who put themselves under the protection of Israel's God. For this reason many have supposed it . . . [was] intended to counteract the harsh decrees of Ezra and Nehemiah which required Hebrew men to divorce their foreign wives and marry only within the covenant community. (325)

In Dessa Rose Ruth, nicknamed Rufel, serves as a mediator between not only Dessa and Nehemiah but also the white slave holding society and the community of black runaways. In the bible, Ruth was a foreigner living in Judea. Reflective of the story of Ruth, Rufel in Dessa Rose was a Charleston debutante married to a gambling man who, in turn,



moved her away from the city, into the Alabama country, and finally deserted her on their unfinished plantation at Sutton Glen. With the arrival of Dessa at the Glen, Rufel and the runaway slaves whom she harbors become better acquainted, and, as the runaways begin to plot the strategy by which they will deceive white slave buyers in order to improve their own finances, Rufel, already a foreigner from Alabama living in Charleston, symbolically becomes a foreigner in the runaway slave community. Through her interactions with Dessa and her love affair with Nathan (one of the fugitives), Rufel, similar to her biblical counterpart, is able to bridge two “foreign” groups: whites and blacks. Arguments between Dessa and Rufel constitute much of the action in the second and third sections of Dessa Rose; nonetheless, Rufel’s statement to Dessa toward the novel’s end--“I’m talking friends” (239)--voices the stability of their relationship.

Dessa’s name is symbolic as well.<sup>5</sup> The reader will recall that Dessa is referred to by white characters within the novel as Odessa. In Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language the second of two definitions for “Odessa” is “a city in West Texas” (998). The geographic location which is encoded in Dessa’s name is significant to Dessa’s assertions in the novel’s epilogue, for unlike many escaped slaves who historically chose to flee north, Dessa and her fellow escapees choose to settle in the west. In the novel’s epilogue, Dessa recalls, “We come West and Ruth went East, not back to Charleston; she went on to . . . Philly-me-York--some city

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Koolish reveals to her readers that the Odessa of Williams’ poem, “I Sing This Song for Our Mothers,” is “the character who becomes Dessa in Dessa Rose” (182).

didn't allow no slaves" (259). Because her character, Dessa, moves from the south to the west (instead of the north), Williams is both signifyin(g) upon and revising the pattern of black migration during and after the antebellum era that provides narrative structure for many fugitive slave narratives.

Additionally, this is not the only tradition that Williams alters. Reading Dessa Rose, one will note that the novel lacks closure. Although in the epilogue Dessa appears to conclude her storytelling session, the end of her comments is marked not with a period but with ellipsis. Because she does not follow the novel's traditional narrative structure and end with falling action marked by a period, Williams reveals herself to her audience as a postmodern trickster novelist who is unafraid to revise tradition. Just as she re-presents the African American animal and the slave John trickster of the oral tradition, so too does she re-present the traditional form of literature within her own literary constructs: as Williams' contemporary rendition of the African American trickster's antics suggest, orality naturally allows for constant revision.

Kimberly W. Benston points out the somewhat elusive connection between tricksters, multiple names, and naming. Referring to Rinehart, of Ellison's Invisible Man, Benston states that the trickster "embodies what Ellison elsewhere calls the liberating 'joke' of the trickster which exposes the world's duplicity, its lack of correspondence to a simple referent, its ability to name two things at once which amounts to an inability to name any one thing conclusively" (161). Benston's comment on naming is another way of articulating the trickster's shape-shifting and ever-fluctuating character. Because Rinehart is known for wearing multiple masks--Benston describes

him as “a provider and pimp, dream-merchant and hipster, schemer and improviser” (161)--and is known by several names, Benston links Rinehart to the African American trickster. Likewise, Ruth is known as “Rufel,” “Miz Lady,” and “Miz Ruint”; Dessa as “Odessa”, “The Darky,” “The Wench,” and “The Negress”; and Adam Nehemiah as “Nemi.” The duplicity inherent in the meanings of the characters’ names further suggests to the reader that there may be multiple meanings in the statements of Williams’ characters as well as double-voicedness in their speech and dividedness in their thinking. The reader’s attention, therefore, must shift away from the tricksterlike element of signifyin(g) as it occurs between Dessa Rose and works written in the past toward instances of signifyin(g) between the characters within the novel itself. Thus is Williams’ trickster community revealed.

The double-voicedness of and multiple meanings within the language Williams’ tricksters use is clearly illustrated by the vernacular technique of signifyin(g) that the tricksters employ to elude both physical and spiritual entrapment at the hands of white slave holders. Although Nehemiah has two names he is not a trickster. But he may be considered a participant in the trickster tradition because he is one of the people who gets tricked. Nehemiah’s inability to trick others stems from his unwillingness to acknowledge the power that words have to convey multiple meanings. The one instance in which Nehemiah tries carefully to construe his words so that he might mask the meaning of his statement is the time that he explains to Dessa that he is writing his book “in the hope of helping others to be happy in the life that has been sent to them to live” (41). As shown previously, Dessa’s reply, “why I not be happy when I live it?” (47),



reveals that Dessa sees through Nehemiah's poor attempt at signifyin(g). Not only is his lie exposed but also Dessa is able to turn the tables and regain control of the conversation.

Dessa and Rufel both know how to signify. Through signifyin(g), Dessa and Rufel illustrate that they can put on the mask of the trickster and, equally as important, they show that they are able to remove it. When Dessa calls Rufel "Mis'ess" near the end of the novel, Rufel is the first to remove the trickster's mask; Dessa soon follows Ruth's example:

"My name Ruth," she say, "Ruth. I ain't your mistress." Like I'd been the one putting that on her.

"Well, if it come to that," I told her, "my name Dessa, Dessa Rose. Ain't no O to it." (255-56)

In this conversation the two women claim their true identities, reaffirm the names by which loved ones and family members call them, and re-direct the "jealous mistress versus female slave" stereotype that is commonplace in fugitive slave narratives and antebellum African American novels.<sup>6</sup> This act is significant because the trickster is a representative of transformation; therefore, removing the mask of the trickster seems to indicate a period of stability for the characters.

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<sup>6</sup> For examples of this tension between white mistresses and their female slaves, see William Wells Brown's work, Clotel (1853) and Harriet Ann Jacobs' narrative, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861).



Nehemiah, however, is associated with slave holding whites--those who are able to grasp only the surface meaning of words--and therefore does not see the necessity of reaffirming his identity. Because he is willing only to see himself in terms of what he hopes to become--a member of the southern planter class--he, in effect, negates any personality he might be capable of asserting outside of the slave holding community. As the book concludes, Dessa and Rufel refuse to say Nehemiah's name; thereby, the women remove any trace of him from their society: "'Ruth,' 'Dessa,' we said together; and 'Who was that white man--?' 'That was the white man--' and stopped" (256).

Another medium through which Dessa signifies is the African American spiritual. Section one of Dessa Rose, "The Darky," is narrated by both an omniscient third person narrator and, as the prologue indicates, Dessa. In his June 29, 1847, journal entry Nehemiah writes, "As today is Sunday I held no formal sessions with Odessa. But, in order to further cultivate the rapport thus far achieved, I read and interpreted for her selected Bible verses" (47). Nehemiah quickly becomes tired of reading and, overhearing Dessa as she hums, asks Dessa to sing the words to the song. Dessa sings the words to a spiritual. Her words covertly label Nehemiah as the "[s]inner":

Gonna march away in the gold band

In the army by 'n by.

Gonna march away in the gold band

In the army by 'n by.

Sinner, what you going to do that day?

Sinner what you going do that day?

When the fire arolling behind you

In the army by 'n by? (48-49)

Commenting on the song, Nehemiah writes that "It is, of course, only a quaint piece of doggerel which the darkies cunningly adapt from the scraps of Scripture they are taught" (49). His comments indicate his inability to recognize that he is being signified upon.

In his work, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom, Lawrence W. Levine suggests that slaves used their songs to communicate secretly with one another. Levine's comment illuminates the call and response singing through which Dessa, at the end of section one, is informed that she will soon be rescued from her captivity in Sheriff Hughes' cellar. Once again Dessa signifies through song and once more Nehemiah is unable to perceive what is being said. As the slaves go out into the fields to work, Dessa, from the cellar, calls out, "Tell me, sister; tell me, brother / How long will it be?" (63). Through the mask of a spiritual, Dessa asks aloud how long she will be held captive. After a few minutes the song is picked up by the workers and before long Dessa hears a response: "Oh, it wont be long. / Say it wont be long, sister / Poor sinner got to suffer, suffer here" (64). The reply given indicates that a rescue party is on the way and that Dessa will not be imprisoned much longer. Disbelieving that she has heard correctly, Dessa calls again and a second response is sent: "Soul's going to heaven / Soul's going to ride that heavenly train / Cause the Lawd have called you home" (64).

Again, Nehemiah, in his June 30, 1847, journal entry, records his impressions of Dessa's singing of this song: "This is the liveliest tune I have heard Odessa sing . . . .

Odessa was a bit fractious, probably no more than a sign of her returning spirits” (67-68). Like Vaughan, the owner whom she previously has killed, and Wilson, the slave trader from whose coffle she has escaped, Sheriff Hughes and Adam Nehemiah underestimate Dessa’s desire not just to survive her imprisonment but to live as a free person. These white men have also underestimated the creativity of the individuals who comprise the slave community. Levine writes, “slave music, regardless of its origins, was a distinctive cultural form, and . . . it was created or constantly re-created through communal process” (30). In addition, Levine suggests that “[spirituals] were not sung solely or even primarily in churches or praise houses but were used as rowing songs, field songs, work songs, and social songs” (30). The ability of the individual slave to create a song on the spot, to encode a message within the song, and for the community then to pick up the song and relay the messages illustrates the adaptability of the trickster and trickster communities and reveals the connections between African American folk culture and contemporary African American trickster novels.

Because the action in Dessa Rose, excluding the epilogue, is set in the antebellum period while the novel itself is the product of a contemporary author, Williams invests in her characters the humorous antics of both the antebellum animal trickster of folk tales and the contemporary trickster of literature. Shifting the reader’s attention from slave spirituals to the slave trickster tales, Levine proposes that

[a]ll the forms of slave folk culture [including spirituals] afforded their creators psychic relief and a sense of mastery. Tales [including tricksters]



differed from the other forms in that they were more directly didactic in intent and therefore . . . realistically reflective of the irrational and amoral side of the slave's universe. (115)

Levine further suggests, both "[t]he slaves' animal and human trickster tales . . . took the same delight in seeing the weak outwit and humiliate the strong . . . and . . . included the expression of repressed feelings and the inculcation of the tactics of survival" (131).

Likewise, in her work Writing Tricksters, Smith asserts that the trickster of contemporary literature "operates less by subterfuge than by inspiring open celebration and laughter. . . . The trickster now freely examines the deceptions inherent in the mask" (153). Laughing both at oneself and others is at the heart of trickster's philosophy. Parodying the oppressor's behavior and laughing behind Br'er Bear, "Massa's," or mistress's back is the main way that animal and Slave John tricksters of the oral tales get the best of their captors.

As Williams signifies on the traits of both tricksters of the past and those of the present she again identifies herself as a trickster novelist. She allows her protagonists to signify on one another as well as on their antagonists, and she uses humor to mediate between the hardships of slavery and the enslaved individuals' need to believe in themselves and their community. In the second section of Dessa Rose, "The Wench," Dessa and Rufel get into an signifyin(g) session regarding the identity of "mammy": Rufel asserts that "Mammy" (124) was her family's slave who took care of her as a child, and Dessa asserts that "Mammy" is her own mother. Rufel's comments provoke Dessa to become defensive of her biological "Mammy," her mother, Rose. Before the

argument heats up, however, the narrator informs the reader that Dessa “knew . . . what the white woman meant. ‘Mammy’ was a servant, a slave (Dorcas?) who had nursed the white woman” (124). Nonetheless, knowledge of whom the white woman refers to does not satisfy Dessa: “Dessa thought contemptuously [of Rufel], just like a fish out of water. Anybody could make this white woman’s wits go gathering” (125).

Dessa derives satisfaction from the white woman’s ravings about her mammy. Teasing and provoking Rufel, Dessa inquires, “What was mammy’s name? What--” (125). Not long after, however, Dessa’s sense of humor turns into rage. Rufel, silenced by her inability to remember her mammy’s name, leaves the room, and Dessa “wept” (127). Although at the end of the argument Rufel leaves Dessa and Dessa ends up in tears, the reader sees the situation from a distance, and assuming that these two women will eventually turn to one another for support, sees only the grouchiness of a runaway slave woman who just gave birth and the jealousy of a stranded white woman who must take care of the former’s child. The signifyin(g) session does manifest underlying racial tensions that must be addressed, yet for modern readers to whom the entire situation seems at best unusual and at worst absurd, the session has elements of humor.

As to the deeper implications of such verbal warfare, Lewis Hyde, in his work Trickster Makes This World, writes, “A game of the dozens [signifyin(g)] is built on insults to family, and to mothers especially. The Signifying Monkey story must come, then, from a world in which . . . a child is admonished to ‘defend your family,’ to ‘respect your Mamma’” (273). Hyde cites the African American animal trickster tale in which “this Signifying Monkey works the Lion into a blind rage at the Elephant by reporting



with relish things the Elephant supposedly said about the Lion's family" (272). The Monkey in this tale attempts, as Hyde states, to "trope a dope [the Lion]" (273). During the mammy argument between Dessa and Rufel, Dessa takes on the role of the Signifying Monkey when she manages to frustrate Rufel to the point of silence, yet Dessa allows herself to become emotionally involved with the deeper racial implications of the mammy argument and, in her rage, lowers herself to the level of the Lion. Hyde suggests, "The loser is overcome with gravity; he gets serious, attached, defensive of his mamma in fact; his sense of humor evaporates, while the light-bodied winner stays perched in his tree, his humor intact" (274). Neither Dessa nor Rufel emerges from this signifyin(g) session as the winner nor will either woman emerge truly victorious until, in the novel's third section "The Negress," both learn to combine their talents with those of other individuals to develop a community of tricksters to fight and dupe a common enemy.

The trickster community in Dessa Rose evolves first to disguise and protect runaways who, in their flight from slavery, have committed murder and second to provide those runaways and Rufel, abandoned by her gambling husband, with the means of securing money for the future. Because of the violent nature of the slaves' escape from Wilson's coffle it becomes essential for the reader both to identify the types of tricksters who make up Williams' trickster community and to explore the situation that moved the tricksters to commit murder. In her Oxford Companion to African American Literature entry "Bad Woman," Trudier Harris suggests that "it is seldom for inherent

reasons of evil that women are thought to be bad; however, sexuality and morality figure prominently” (43). Harris implies that Dessa is a bad woman who “forgets morality” because “she kills white men in the fight for freedom from slavery” (43). Dessa’s confession to Adam Nehemiah would also appear to be in keeping with this bad woman characterization, for when asked about the killings, Dessa boldly asserts, “I kill white mens cause the same reason Masa kill Kaine. Cause I can” (13). Confirming Sheriff Wilson’s assessment of Dessa, Nehemiah also assists in characterizing Dessa as bad. Nehemiah states, “This was the ‘fiend,’ the ‘devil woman’ who had attacked white men and roused other niggers to rebellion” (13).

After her initial escape from the coffle, however, Dessa never again resorts to killing whites; nonetheless, she has the opportunity. When stopping at the plantation home of Mr. Oscar--on their route to Wilkerson where the runaways Harker, Castor, Ned and Flora plan to sell themselves into slavery only to turn around, escape, and repeat the money making scheme numerous times--Rufel is attacked in the night by Mr. Oscar and she calls Dessa to assist her. Dessa recalls, “Well, I got up and started looking around for something to hit him with. Nearest thing that came to hand was a pillow” (219). This example illustrates that Dessa is not the cold-blooded killer she claims to be during her interviews with Adam Nehemiah. When Mr. Oscar is finally forced from the women’s room, Dessa and Rufel experience their first real moment of companionship, and laughter is the force that brings them together. Dessa addresses the reader, “I started laughing, trying to keep it quiet, you know; and she was laughing now, herself. The more we tried to be quiet, the more we laughed” (219). Because the trickster, as Smith states

in “Trickster,” “disrupts the status quo with laughter” (737), Dessa, as she shares her laughter with Rufel, is able to begin to acknowledge Rufel as a woman, not simply as a white person: “The white woman was subject to the same ravishment as me; this the thought that kept me awake. I hadn’t knowd white mens could use a white woman like that . . . same as they could with us” (220).

Thus, Harris’ classification of Dessa as a bad woman is questionable for several reasons. First, she only commits murder to escape from slavery. Secondly, the trickster figures mentioned with the most frequency within the novel are animals. As the novel opens, Dessa, remembering Kaine’s death, states, “I say all the names I know bout, thought bout, Lawd, Legba [an African trickster god], Jesus, Conqueroo--anybody, Jes so’s Kaine could speak” (emphasis mine) (12). Likewise, the argument over the identity of mammy, as Hyde’s theory stipulates, is a game of dozens and a retelling of a Signifying Monkey tale. Also, Dessa’s signifyin(g) skills, which she frequently employs, link her closely to African American trickster tales.

Harris claims that bad women are “Unguided by morality or an obligation to community . . . [and] set themselves beyond any traditional forms of safety and become accountable only to themselves” (43). But Dessa is one trickster within a community filled with such personalities. The community uses storytelling, games of signifyin(g), and trickery to transform the system that enslaves and oppresses them into a source of communal strength and economic gain. Each member of this community realizes the importance of working as a team, for the security of their slave trading scheme rests upon



the trust which each person must have in the other. In Writing Tricksters, Smith observes that Toni Morrison's trickster figure Sula unites a community by playing the role of an individual trickster who threatens to destroy the community from her alienated position: "[Sula] exists outside of a dichotomized good and evil. She is not immoral but amoral, and the trickster's amorality sharpens the community's sense of a moral code. By constantly violating societal norms, Sula paradoxically helps to define the social fabric" (117). In Dessa Rose, however, there are no individualistic tricksters; there is only the community of individuals who both work together and wear the mask of the trickster as a team: the oppressed unite against the oppressors. Thus, the community of runaway slaves on Rufel's plantation, together with Rufel and her house servants, swindles money from the oppressive slave holding class. Thereby, the trickster community temporarily becomes the dominant community to which the more powerful white society unwittingly submits.

In From Trickster to Badman, John W. Roberts discusses the African American animal trickster tales and provides further ways in which the reader may liken Williams' tricksters to those of the oral tales told during slavery: "[L]ike their ancestors on the African continent, enslaved Africans embodied their conception of the trickster in tales of animals, primarily Br'er Rabbit and other animals who, in the wild, would have been considered prey for those animals most often acting as dupes" (35). Tellingly, Dessa implies that the tales Nathan tells are concerned with animal and human tricksters in slave tales: "animals that talked, trees that had spirits, people who refused to die, and tales he swore were 'true to life'" (157). While on the coffer, Cully--the mulatto who



stays behind passing for the “white person” (212) on Rufel’s plantation when the others set off for Wilkerson--points out a constellation named after an animal trickster:

“a cluster he called Jack the Rabbit, put there, so he said, because of a low trick Rabbit had played on Brother Bear” (58). As Daryl C. Dance points out in her work Shuckin’ and Jivin’: Folklore From Contemporary Black Americans, “Brer Rabbit and Slave John are with us today in varied guises” (181). Williams’ references to these rabbits operate as an intertext wherein the animal trickster each character evokes reflects the personality of these individual folk characters. Using tricksterlike terms, Dessa, discussing Ned, characterizes the community of slaves on Rufel’s plantation: “He was always playing tricks on peoples--you know, tie your pants leg in knots, rig a bucket to dump water on you as you go into the barn . . . . [T]his the way they all act, like I was the only one could play the maid” (emphasis mine) (197).

While Williams attributes the traits of the African American animal and Slave John tricksters to her runaway slaves, she also acknowledges Ruth’s potential as a trickster. As a confidence woman (a re-vision of the confidence man), Rufel might be expected to leave out significant truths from the stories that she claims are truthful, but she would not be expected to signify. That she can signify, therefore, evidences that she is able to adopt the more subtle approach to lying from her African American trickster allies. In section two of Dessa Rose, “The Wench,” signifyin(g) is the primary tool by which Dessa and Rufel communicate. Dessa’s emotional explosion compels her to signify on Rufel when, seeing Nathan and Rufel in bed together, she calls Rufel by her derogatory nickname, screaming “Miz Ruin!” (172). It is clear that everyone on the

plantation refers to Rufel this way: “[E]veryone, Nathan included, called her Miz Ruint, too--amongst ourselves; this was the name Annabelle give her” (176). Once she becomes part of the trickster community, however, even Rufel appears adept at signifyin(g). Recalling Rufel’s abilities to signify, Dessa laments, “‘Somebody,’ Miz Lady say, looking all out the windows, ‘somebody better start paying tention, else they going ruin the whole thing.’ It made me hot that she could signify like that” (216).

Rufel, however, is not the only white person who embodies the spirit of the confidence man. Revealing the origin of Harker’s idea temporarily to sell himself and his companions into slavery in order to profit from the slave holding society, Nathan tells Dessa, “Member I told you his [Harker’s] old master was a flimflam man, a confidence man? ” (emphasis mine) (162). By introducing the confidence man into the novel, Williams establishes a link for Rufel, as a white or Euro-American trickster, to work within the African American trickster tradition.

Recalling Gary Lindberg’s definition of the confidence man, Hyde suggests that “a confidence man is someone who is in the business of creating belief. That is to say, the confidence man is not necessarily a crook, which is why he is so problematic” (296). As a participant in the runaway community, as an individual who tells lies, steals, and helps runaway slaves escape from slavery, Rufel might be considered a criminal, but this classification rests upon the white antebellum concept of a criminal. When one looks at these crimes through the perspective of an antebellum slave, it is the white slave holders who are committing the crime and the runaways whose actions are heroic. Therefore, Rufel is categorized by Williams as a culture hero within the African American literary

trickster tradition and as a confidence woman in the Euro-American canon. Thus, Rufel, a trickster within two traditions, bridges not only whites and blacks but their literary traditions as well.

In section three of Dessa Rose, “The Negress,” Rufel puts on the mask of the trickster to convince the Sheriff of Acropolis that she is the innocent southern belle who owns Odessa, and this action certainly portrays her as “someone in the business of creating belief” in keeping with Hyde’s definition. Again, in section two of the novel, when Dessa and Rufel stay in the house of Mr. Oscar, Rufel and Dessa work as a team to play a mistress and the maid routine. A funny but potentially dangerous situation arises when Rufel drops her handkerchief in Mr. Oscar’s living room and Dessa does not stoop down to pick it up. Dessa offers her recollection of this event:

“Dessa!” Miz Lady hiss at me, yanking on the tail of my dress. “Nigger!”  
he [Oscar] say real sharp, and even I knowed he meant every nigger in  
hearing this time, but the other girl reached and got the hanky before I  
could move. He seemed satisfied with that. “Get them bags,” he say over  
his shoulder. Miz Lady ain’t have to yank my dress that time . . . . (216)

Were Dessa Rufel’s slave this scene would be bereft of humorous value. But Dessa is no longer a slave and Rufel is by no means a heavy-handed southern belle.

For Dessa, who narrates the novel’s epilogue, the escape to the west and the community that both assisted her and, in turn, that she assisted, have become part of her family’s oral history: “I told that West part so often, these childrens about know it by heart. Mony [her son] tell it to his babies like the memory was his, stead of things he



heard when he was coming up” (259). Significantly, Dessa not only narrates this story to her family but also has the story written down: “[M]y mind wanders. This is why I have it wrote down, why I has the child say it back. I never will forget Nemi trying to read me, knowing I had put myself in his hands” (260). In a powerful affirmation of identity, Dessa has shifted from being Nehemiah’s literary subject to becoming the author of her own story. Like the men in Sterling Brown’s poem “Strong Men,” who throughout history have laughed at whites who attempt to oppress them, Dessa and Ruth discover that “The town could . . . bar us from laughing; but . . . we didn’t hide our grins” (256).

In his work From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals In the Black American Novel, H. Nigel Thomas suggests that in

[t]urning to the folklore surrounding the Euro-American trickster (confidence man), the African trickster, and the Amer-Indian trickster, in relationship to the complex character of the Afro-American trickster, one begins to see a merging of all these influences on him [trickster], especially in fiction. (82)

In Dessa Rose Williams portrays tricksters who embody both folk and contemporary versions of the trickster. African-American and Euro-American tricksters meet in a community setting and learn from one another what was heretofore not experienced by either group: when working toward a common goal and acknowledging the humor that can arise even out of hardship, a community consisting of blacks and whites who work



together has the potential to transcend an otherwise bleak reality. In his novel A Gathering of Old Men, Ernest Gaines also explores the culturally transformative potential for an interracial community that is united towards achieving a common goal.

## Chapter Two: Trickster's Persuasive Parody in Gaines' A Gathering of Old Men

Similar to the narrative techniques employed by Sherley Anne Williams in Dessa Rose, Ernest J. Gaines, in his novel A Gathering of Old Men uses his multiple narrators to provide the reader with characteristics of the various types of people who lived in Louisiana during the 1970's. Also, Gaines' narrative strategy is similar to that of Williams, for he uses multiple names and renaming, multiple and multiethnic narrators, intertextual revision, and signifyin(g) to characterize his group of old men and their allies as tricksters. By choosing to use intertextual revision (African American cross-narrative signifyin(g)) as a narrative technique, Gaines reveals himself to be as much a trickster as are his characters who, signifyin(g) on both one another and white authority figures, use verbal wit to overcome vigilante oppression with communal action. Gaines creates a creolized community both to parody the African American badman trickster and to re-present the trickster of folklore in the African American literary tradition: the men he uses as the novel's trickster protagonists are both old and racially mixed (being of Indian and black or black and white ancestry).

That the African American trickster is influenced, as H. Nigel Thomas suggests, by the "folklore surrounding the Euro-American trickster (confidence man), the African trickster, and the Amer-Indian trickster" (82) is nowhere more apparent than within the personal and interpersonal dynamics of Ernest Gaines' trickster community in A Gathering of Old Men. Of all of the old men who gather to defend Mathu, the full-blooded African on the Marshall plantation, there are no other full-blooded Africans: the old men are all of mixed parentage. Clatoo, one of the novel's fifteen narrators,

explains that “Mathu was one of them blue-black Singaleese niggers. Always bragged about not having no white man’s blood in his veins” (51). Clatoo further states, “I was brown-skinned--my grandpa white, my grandma Indian and black, both my parents black; so he [Mathu] didn’t look down on me quite as much as he did some others, like Jacob, or Cherry, or the Lejeune brothers” (51). Mat, another of the work’s narrators, describes the ethnic background of the men in Clatoo’s truck who are en route to Mathu’s house on the Marshall plantation: “Billy was from Silo, Jacob from the old Mulatto Place. Jacob and his kind [mulatto] didn’t have too much to do with darker people, but he was here today. . . . Cherry was between red [Indian] and yellow [mulatto], with a lot of brown curly hair” (39). The group of racially mixed old men together with the young African American narrator, Snookum, and Gaines’ two white female protagonists--Candy (Jack Marshall’s niece) and Miss Merle--constitute the multiethnic trickster community in A Gathering of Old Men.

In accordance with Jeanne R. Smith’s definition of the African American “Trickster” whose “transgression of boundaries . . . make[s] him a compelling figure not only for cultural resistance and survival, but also for blasting stereotypes of African Americans” (737), Gaines’ characterization of racially mixed old men who carry twelve-gauge shotguns, each man claiming sole responsibility for Beau’s murder, shatters any assumptions a reader might have regarding incapacity of the elderly. In her article “Strong Men Getting Stronger: Gaines’s Defense of the Elderly Black Male in A Gathering of Old Men,” Sandra G. Shannon provides her readers with an in-depth

analysis of Gaines' fictional use of older black men, stating that "[t]he inclusion of elderly blacks in Gaines's fiction coincides with a much improved public image of older people in America" (196). Shannon further suggests that

the collaboration among old black men of A Gathering seems to point to a culmination of Gaines's quest to fuse black consciousness with black solidarity. He appears to suggest that success at effecting change is inseparably bound with discovering the special advantages of group strength. In this regard, the novel posits a challenging reappraisal of old black men. (197)

Within A Gathering of Old Men, however, "black solidarity" is a tricky concept for the readers, for they must include within this racially based concept those members of the community who, along with African heritage, have either Indian or white ancestry. If it appears to the reader that Gaines' work is racially complex, one will find that his use of multiple narrators who are of various racial backgrounds is equally provocative.

In Dessa Rose, Williams uses three primary narrators: Adam Nehemiah, Rufel, and Dessa. These narrators reflect the various types of people--white and black, cruel and kind--with whom Dessa contends as she makes her way to freedom in the west.

In A Gathering of Old Men, Gaines uses narrators who reflect the racial backgrounds and attitudes not only of his trickster community but also of Louisiana's society at large.

As each old man voices his reasons for wanting Beau dead, the reader must confront the demeaning position that whites have forced on not only the African Americans of the Marshall plantation but also on the south's overall African American population.



By voicing his own story, each old man also gives voice to the similar experiences of other African Americans in Louisiana. Similarly, when Lou Dimes speaks, he does so not only as a native of Louisiana but also as a white representative of the southern press, and when Sully speaks, he does so not only as Gil's good friend but also as a typical white male LSU college student in the 1970's. In essence, each of Gaines' narrators provides the reader with a mirror image of the various types of people who lived in the south in the 1970's.

In his article "Ernest Gaines' Use of First-Person Point of View Across Racial Lines," Julian Mason suggests that Gaines' narrative strategy "intend[ed] to give insight into an interlocking social unit, a community as a whole, for which a variety of intermixing, interesting narrators is appropriate and needed--young, old, black, white, male, female" (8). The community members to whom Gaines gives the power of narrative authority include several of the elderly African American men, five white men, a white woman, and a young African American male. Just as well as Jeanne R. Smith's understanding of multiple narrative in trickster novels applied to the narration of Dessa Rose, so too does it apply to Gaines' use of fifteen narrators: "The creation of community through multiple narrative is an inherently tricksterlike process. . . . All points of view, including those of the author, the narrators, the characters, and the reader or listener, together create the meaning of the story" (Writing Tricksters 91).

Gaines' narrators function as a collective illustration of the types of people found in Louisiana's society in the 1970's; Gaines chooses from both his pool of narrators and from other characters presented within the novel to form his racially mixed Marshall

plantation trickster community. The way in which Gaines constructs this community of tricksters mirrors the way in which Africans formed communities upon their arrival in colonial America. In their work, The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective, Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price suggest that when Africans first arrived in the “New World” they interacted not as communities but as “groups”: “the fact is that these were not communities of people at first, and they [Africans in the colonies] could only become communities by process of cultural change” (18). It would be naive to suggest that all Africans who were purchased for the colonial slave trade spoke the same languages, had the same customs, or even liked one another. Similarly, Gaines’ trickster community does not instantaneously develop. Beau Boutan’s murder, however, acts as a catalyst by which the “process of cultural change” may begin for a region composed of what one may generalize as former aristocratic whites, light skinned mulattos, Cajuns, Creoles, and full-blooded Africans. Gaines chose and brought together like-minded individuals to rally in defense of an individual and thereby the seeds of the trickster community begin to take root. The racially mixed and white characters belonging to this evolving community therefore have the opportunity to combine their African, African American, Native American, and Euro-American trickster characteristics and to establish a multicultural trickster network.

That the individual old men within this community are racially mixed does not necessarily imply that they largely identify with their white or Indian ancestry. On the contrary, in the introduction to his work, Critical Reflections on the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines, David C. Estes recognizes that the most “predominant theme” within Gaines’

works “is the search for black manhood” (9). Estes writes, “Among Gaines’s noteworthy contributions to African-American literature is his concern for recreating the history of his race. His novels depict characters who find their identity within, not outside of, that particular history” (9-10). Like Faulkner in his short story “The Bear,” however, Gaines both realizes and articulates in A Gathering of Old Men the fact that part of white, Indian, and black cultures includes the sexual relations between and offspring of interracial coupling. Gaines’ tricksterlike use of multiethnic multiple narrators is not the only element of a trickster nature that A Gathering of Old Men has in common with Dessa Rose, for Gaines, like Williams, uses intertextual revision to signify on the writings of his fellow southerners.

Returning to the African American literary tradition from which Gaines emerged, the reader will note that in composing his novel, Gaines, like Williams, not only imbues his trickster community with the standard ability to signify on one another but also lets his novel signify on several literary works and traditions. A Gathering of Old Men is an example of what Gates has termed a “chiasmus, as repetition and reversal” (172) of the Southern white plantation novel. The novel appears also to be a written variation of the traditional oral Creole historical tales. Furthermore, Gaines’ novel signifies upon Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. In The Literature of the American South, William L. Andrews asserts that “plantation novelists of the South did their part to shore up the status quo by portraying the plantation as the bulwark of benevolent paternalism overseen by provincial but goodhearted gentlemen and ladies and attended by their deferential and contented black ‘servants’” (8).



Andrews also states that “African American southern writers from William Wells Brown to Margaret Walker have portrayed the plantation realistically from the vantage point of the slave quarters” (8). Like Brown and Walker, Gaines gives voice to the realities that blacks faced while living in plantation quarters.

Gaines differs from Brown and Walker in that he characterizes Louisiana blacks in the 1970's for whom those acts of racial hatred which are associated with the antebellum South ( lynching in particular) have not ceased. In his re-vision of the plantation novel Gaines first juxtaposes the fall of the once aristocratic Marshall family with the rise of the black community. Gaines signifies that the plantation novelists' portrayal of the south that has been both studied and accepted as a part of history clearly is only one view of life in the antebellum south. Thus, in a tricksterlike maneuver, Gaines challenges the authority of the southern plantation novel and provides his readers with an alternative understanding of historically recent southern plantation living. In Chapter Seven: “Action and Self-Realization in A Gathering of Old Men” of her book Ernest Gaines, Valerie Melissa Babb comments on the decline of the Marshall family:

Candy, Jack, and Beatrice, the last remaining members of the Marshall clan, are symbols of the eroding status quo. The social order that gave their family prominence is gone now, and familial prestige is parceled out with each share of the land rented. All the Marshalls are bending under the weight of their family's slave holding legacy, and each seeks to alleviate the burden in his or her own way . . . . (123-24)



Grant Bello, “aka Cherry,” assesses both his physical location and the decline of the Marshall plantation when he comments, “We still had cane . . . . Morgan on the left, Marshall on the right. But it wasn’t Marshall cane anymore. . . . Now Mr. Beau had it all [land and cane]. Or, I should say, he had it all up to about twelve o’clock that day” (43). The humor that Cherry directs at the traditionally prosperous land holding whites is typical of the behavior of Gaines’ tricksters who tend to mask their derogatory implications within their common speech. That Gaines’ tricksters derive pleasure from the death of their white Cajun overseer, Beau, at the hands of an elderly black man can be seen as a direct reversal and revision of such degrading scenes involving blacks in white plantation novels.

For example, John Pendleton Kennedy’s narrator of Swallow Barn, Mark Littleton, derives pleasure when witnessing a senseless “foot-race” (309), initiated by his mischievous white cousin, Ned Hazard, between the black children at Frank Meriwether’s slave quarters. The winner of the race is referred to as a “hero . . . [who] succeeded in getting the small coin from the ground in his teeth, somewhat to the prejudice of his finery [clothes]” (310). In this case, Littleton finds amusement at the expense of another person’s dignity; in Cherry’s case, the old black man is amused at the expense of a white man. Additionally, as Gaines shifts the power from the hands of aristocratic whites to those of sharecropping blacks in A Gathering of Old Men, he simultaneously signifies upon and revises the traditional Louisiana Cajun / Creole historical tales concerning the southern vigilante.

In his collection, Cajun and Creole Folktales: The French Oral Tradition of South Louisiana, Barry Jean Ancelet writes, "If a story is defined functionally as a relatively constant oral text told (and retold) for the entertainment of listeners . . . then many oral history accounts qualify as tales. Such accounts . . . eventually enter into active repertoire of oral tradition and begin to take on forms to fit the telling experience" (emphasis mine) (xlvi). The overall plot of Gaines' tale in which white Cajun vigilantes are overpowered by a seemingly weaker party--in this case a group of old black men who even have difficulty aiming their weapons--is not unlike Ancelet's recording of Westley "Kit" Dennis' tale "Confrontation in Town" (175-78), wherein Kit gives his account of the time his father chased off two white vigilantes. In his brief biographical sketch of Kit, Ancelet states that "[m]any of his [Kit's] stories describe the time when vigilante posses roamed the countryside intimidating members of the Creole community" (lxi). Certainly Gaines' written form, his use of multiple first person narrators, who in past tense tell their versions of a vigilante story which occurred in the 1970's, and who frequently have more than one given name (Robert Louis Stevenson Banks aka Chimley, Grant Bello aka Cherry, Cyril Robillard aka Clatoo), "fit[s] the telling" (Ancelet xlvii) of the traditionally oral Louisiana historical folktale.

Gaines not only signifies on and revises the traditional form of the plantation novel and the traditional Cajun / Creole vigilante folk tales of Louisiana but also on the African American folk novel as well. Within the African American literary tradition which places significance upon the practice of signifyin(g) between texts, Gaines'

construction of Snookum, the young narrator who asks the spinster Janey four times for some tea cakes, can not be accidental. On the contrary, Gaines is signifyin(g) on the connection between Zora Neale Hurston's Janie and Tea Cake in Their Eyes Were Watching God. The connection between Gaines' work and Hurston's is most clearly articulated by Gaines himself. Estes recalls Gaines' assertion that "'probably the only Black writer who has influenced my work is Zora Neale Hurston'" (6). The most convincing evidence to support the theory that Gaines signifies on Hurston's Their Eyes is the play on words in which Gaines' Janey is involved. The eyes of Gaines' Janey, like those of her predecessor's, are figuratively watching God, for within her brief three page narration in A Gathering of Old Men she calls upon "Lord, Jesus" (10) a startling twenty-one times.

That Janey's name has two connotations for the reader should not be surprising when one considers the importance that names and the process of naming have in Dessa Rose. Furthermore, Janey's name is not the only significant name in the novel. Benston explains to his readers that "[t]he practice of naming in Afro-American literature reflects . . . tensions (between self and community, intuition and influence, self-reliance and history)" (156). Valerie Babb discovers in Gaines' old men "the dual consciousness of men who have existed in a world of silent acceptance while dreaming of a world of willful action" (114). The struggle that these men face has its roots not in the present but in their ancestral past: slavery. By giving each of the old men two names



and implying that the same was true as well for their family ancestors,<sup>7</sup> Gaines draws attention to the divided sense of self that African Americans have continually had to endure: from the slavery era, into the 1970's. Without the two names these characters would not be able to bridge either the personal with the social or the past with the present.

Because Snookum, Gaines' young black narrator, has two names, the reader must also recognize Gaines' assertion that blacks will continue well into the twenty-first century to bear the burden of a divided sense of self within the larger society. Babb categorizes the two types of names the characters are given: "all the characters have two identities, one for larger society and one for their own intimate community" (114). Babb further suggests that the each character has a "formal name" and an "oral name" and while the formal name belongs to "the world in which the black men . . . have . . . been denied entry," the oral name "is in keeping with one's history . . . [and] is a reflection of character" (114-15).

While on one hand these names represent a divided sense of self or, as Babb terms this phenomenon, "dual consciousness" (114), on the other hand the names suggest to the reader the presence of trickster's multiplicity. Beau's younger brother (son of the notorious vigilante Fix Boutan), Gil Boutan, aka Salt, and his friend Cal, aka Pepper,

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<sup>7</sup> The reader should consider that Johnny Paul's family members, "Mamma, Papa, Aunt Clara, Aunt Sarah, Unc Moon, Aunt Spoodle, Aunt Thread" (90), in all likelihood had more formal family names by which whites would have addressed them.



play together on the Louisiana State University football team. Like Dessa and Rufel who play the mistress and the maid routine while visiting Mr. Oscar's plantation, Salt, who is white, and Pepper, who is black, play with one another on the field and try to outmaneuver common opponents. Asking his father not to intervene in Sheriff Mapes' investigation, Salt dons the mask of the trickster and suggests to his father that his chance to play as an "All-American" (138) will be ruined if the Boutan family gets involved. Salt states, "I want to be an All-American at LSU. I have a good chance--Cal and me. The first time ever, black and white, in the Deep South. I can't make it without Cal, Papa. I depend on him" (138). Like the trickster, Gil and Cal possess multiple identities. Instead of being stigmatized for being friends of different races, Cal's and Gil's nicknames enable them to be hailed by the community as the football team's all-stars, Salt and Pepper. Similarly, as they provide one another with nicknames, Gaines' old men (and those who empathize with their position) display those attributes by which Lewis Hyde characterizes the African American trickster: "the wit . . . to make one's way anew from the materials at hand . . . [and] an unusual talent for 'making a way out of no-way'" (277).

Since Candy initiates the gathering on Mathu's behalf and may be characterized, initially, as the community's spokeswoman, her role as a community member and confidence woman must be explored. Recalling Gary Lindberg's definition of the confidence man, Hyde writes, ". . . a confidence man is someone who is in the business of creating belief. That is to say, the confidence man is not necessarily a crook, which is why he is so problematic" (296). Following this definition, Candy--the niece of Jack

Marshall, owner of the Marshall sugarcane plantation--may be said to be a confidence woman. Claiming that she killed Beau Boutan, Candy is the first to try to redefine the reality of Beau's death, and she believes that her actions will protect her father-figure, Mathu, from the wrath of Beau's notorious vigilante father, Fix. When explaining to Miss Merle what happened to Beau in the Quarters, Candy boldly lies:

I shot him. But all of a sudden Mathu said he shot him. Then all of a sudden Rufe said he shot him. Johnny Paul was nowhere around here. But after he came here and saw what had happened, he said he had as much reason to shoot Beau as anybody, so he ran home and got his old gun. But I shot him. (16)

Candy's plan to gather as many men together as possible, each of whom individually asserts that he himself has killed Beau, will work. This young white woman's plea for help to Miss Merle testifies as to why the plan will succeed: "There's not a black family in this parish Fix and his crowd hasn't hurt sometime or other. You're older than I am, you know that better than I do. . . . [G]et all of them. Now is their chance to stand" (18).

Donning the mask of the confidence woman herself, Miss Merle complies with Candy's plan and, having been placed in charge of phoning the men, addresses Janey, saying, "I'm going in there and get that number out the phone book . . . . You and Bea think up some more names. Think up a dozen of them. We might as well all go to jail--or all go to the crazy house--one" (26). Even Candy's aunt, Beatrice, maintains the trickster spirit, for when Miss Merle informs her as to what Candy claims to have done,

Beatrice states, "About time she shot one of them Cajuns, messing up the land with those tractors. Yes, that gal's got spunk in her" (23). The role of the white confidence woman in Gaines' novel is to provide a bridge between the white authority figures and black community members. Because Candy, a white southern woman, claims responsibility for Beau's murder, Sheriff Mapes is unable to arrest Mathu automatically. In essence, Candy uses her gender, her southern-ness, and her racial identity to postpone an arrest. Additionally, by rallying all of the old men together before she notifies Mapes of the murder, Candy is able to further mislead and confuse the Sheriff long enough to implicate everyone (young, old, white, black, female, and male) in the murder.

The African American tricksters in Gaines' novel fit Smith's definition, in "Trickster," of the trickster commonly found in contemporary African American literature: "The trickster of the African American literary tradition has become a figure for cultural survival--and its costs" (736). Because the crime committed against Beau appears to be one of murder, the reader might wish to assert that the tricksters in A Gathering, as Dessa initially appears to be a bad woman in Dessa Rose, are actually "badmen." Yet because they find their strength inside of a community instead of as individualists existing on the margin of the black community, these old men cannot be mistaken for badmen. The African American badman / outlaw folkhero tradition has been studied by Roberts as "a transformation of the trickster tradition or the trickster as proto-outlaw" (185). According to Roberts,



[T]he emergence of the white law enforcement officer as the most visible symbol of white power to the black community . . . dramatically influenced black people's perceptions of their relationships to whites. . . . [T]he brutality of black treatment by the law . . . provided African Americans with sufficient justification to envision behaviors which subverted the power of the law for black gain as a justifiable response to persecution. (197-98)

In his entry "Badman," in the Oxford Companion to African American Literature, Christopher C. DeSantis suggests that the badman is characterized by "his propensity for gambling, violence, and other acts of lawlessness; by his strength and virility; and . . . by his purely self-interested antagonism toward both the dominant white social order and the oppressed African American community" (42). The group of old men in A Gathering, however, is characterized in ways diametrically opposed to the badman. Gaines' men are old, not virile; they are law-abiding not lawless; they can barely shoot straight, and, when they do shoot, they do so in self defense, not because they are under attack by "the law," but because they are being persecuted by southern vigilantes.

Furthermore, their antagonism toward the white vigilantes is not "self-interested" (42) as DeSantis' characterization of the badman suggests. These men have sacrificed their identities as individuals to form a collective or, as Charlie implies, "a wall" (192) that white aggression cannot penetrate. Gaines' men are selfless, not selfish like the badman. Therefore, similar to Mickle's proposal that the characters in Dessa Rose, who participate in the buying and selling of themselves for profit, produce a "minstrel parody



of [the] slave auction" (211), the old men in A Gathering of Old Men behave in ways that parody the badman. Clearly then, the novel is a product of a trickster novelist who in his writing process even attempts to parody the African American trickster tradition.

In the style of the African American verbal art form of signifyin(g), the old men who narrate, constituting nine of the fifteen different narrators of the novel, tell their stories to the reader and embellish their tales with many humorous asides. The majority of Gaines' characters have the trickster's ability to signify, and the humorous character sketches begin early on within A Gathering of Old Men. When Candy's messenger Fue Berto comes across Chimley and Mat, who are fishing at their regular spot on the parish river, Fue tells them that Candy wants them to come to the Marshall quarters with "twelve-gauge shotguns and number five shells" (28). When asked why Candy wants them to perform such a radical act, Fue tells the old men that it has "[s]omething to do with Mathu, and something to do with Beau Boutan dead in his yard. That's all I know, all I want to know. . . . Y'all can go do like she say or y'all can go home, lock y'all doors, and crawl under the bed like y'all used to. Me, I'm leaving" (28). Mat tells Chimley, "[I'm] [s]eventy-one and a half. I ain't got too much strength left to go crawling under that bed like Fue said" (30). Chimley responds, "I'm seventy-two" (30). The response of the two old men to Fue's suggestion is set up to be both humorous and empowering. What the two men are actually saying to one another is that they both agree that they are too old to care what the ramifications of their assistance to Candy might be. Chimley and Mat want to take this opportunity to stand up finally for a member of their community and, as the turnout suggests, they are not alone.

When Lou Dimes, the voice of the southern press in the novel, arrives at the Quarters, he provides the reader with a description of the gathering: “a wall of old men with shotguns. I don’t know how many there were--fifteen, eighteen of them; standing, squatting, sitting--scattered all over the place. And waiting. Waiting” (59). Within this group of racially mixed old men, women and children, some individuals come from Marshall quarters while others come, as the black preacher Reverend Jameson states, from as “far as Silo, the old Mulatto Place, Bayonne--ten, twelve miles” (56) from the quarters. Wearing the mask of the trickster is essential to the survival of this community, for this group, initially led by the white plantation daughter, Candy, and consisting of African Americans from various locations in Louisiana, has united to form a community of tricksters whose aim is to challenge society’s acceptance of violent racist southern vigilantes. In her critical work, Writing Tricksters, Smith suggests that Toni Morrison’s character Jadine in Tar Baby “escap[es] the confining, tarlike strictures of community and responsibility . . . [and] embodies a tricksterlike survival . . .” (135). The individual old men in Gaines’ novel, however, do not attempt to escape from their responsibility to their community. The willingness of these individuals to combine their wits and signifyin(g) skills, to acknowledge the humor of the surface of their situation, and, like the Euro-American confidence men, to try to create for themselves a new reality, is the source of strength by which these normally cowering old men are transformed into tricksters who reorganize the social hierarchy that has kept them on the bottom rung for far too long.

Signifyin(g) on the African American albino, Clabber Hornsby, Cherry remarks, "Clabber's head and face from this distance was all one color--white white. What he had a gun for, only God knows. He couldn't stop blinking long enough to sight, let alone kill somebody" (48). As well, several of the men signify one another's inability to shoot:

"Missed him, huh, Billy" I [Cherry] asked.

Billy didn't answer. He wouldn't even look at me or Yank.

He was too' shamed.

"I hope he don't miss Fix like that," Dirty Red teased Billy. Dirty Red had a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, and he held his head a little to the side to keep the smoke out of his eyes. "Rabbit was so close I started to hit him in the head with the butt of my gun, but I wanted Billy to have him." (43-44)

Later, Dirty Red and Billy again exchange words regarding the rabbit. When Clatoo asks the men if they have all shot their guns once, Dirty Red replies, "Billy shot at a rabbit on his foot and missed him," to which Billy responds, "That rabbit was moving . . . . But you ain't, and don't forget it" (emphasis mine) (48).

Once Luke Will and his gang of vigilantes arrive at the quarters and the shooting starts, Snookum supplies the reader with additional humorous commentary: "They was shooting everywhere. Soon as the Sheriff went down [shot in the arm by Luke Will], they started shooting. Shooting out the front door, shooting out the window, shooting up in the ceiling" (200). Coot narrates, "'I want to get that son of a bitch myself,' Clatoo said" (197), and describing the shooting with humorous affection, recalls, "We [Coot



and Clatoo] both got on our knees, hooted, fired, and fell back down. We got one of them, 'cause I could hear his scream. Me and Clatoo looked at each other and grinned, and reloaded" (198). On the surface, Gaines' old men epitomize the African American trickster's capacity for, as Smith qualifies in "Trickster," "laughter, outrage, and rebellion" (737).

It is interesting that the tricksters are not primarily concerned with convincing Sheriff Mapes that Beau's murder was justifiable. In fact, all of the standard authority figures whom the reader might expect to see maintaining order--the black Reverend, Jameson; the white Sheriff, Mapes, the white Judge, Reynolds--are the dopes who are troped in A Gathering of Old Men. Yet the fact that the usual authority figures lose their significance in Gaines' novel should not come as a surprise to the reader. These old men have long awaited the day at hand, and, signifyin(g) on the way in which whites are unable even to perceive blacks as human beings with needs, families, and ties within the community, Johnny Paul is able to silence and explain to Mapes just what the gathering means to those present. Looking in the direction of where the old quarters once were, Johnny Paul inquires, "'Y'all look,' he said. 'Look now. Y'all see any thing? What y'all see?'" and, after Mapes asserts that he sees nothing, Johnny Paul states, "Yes, sir, I figured that's all you would see. But what do the rest don't see" (88). Confusing Mapes, and thereby silencing him, Johnny Paul, addressing his friends, continues, "'Remember?' he said. 'When they was't no weeds--remember? Remember how they used to sit on the garry--Mamma, Papa, Aunt Clara, Aunt Sarah, Unc Moon, Aunt Spoodle, Aunt Thread. Remember?'" (90). Continuing to explain, Johnny Paul addresses Mapes:



You had to be here then to be able to not see it and don't hear it now. But I was here then, and I don't see it and don't hear it now, and that's why I did it [shot Beau]. I did it for them [black community ancestors] back there under them trees. I did it 'cause that tractor is getting closer and closer to that graveyard, and . . . one day that tractor was go'n come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all the proof that we ever was. (92)

Shannon offers an explanation of Johnny Paul's narrative: "[A]ssociated with a dwindling relationship between the Louisiana blacks of A Gathering and their land is a haunting sense of annihilation of the black man's cultural past" (213). Mapes listens to each man's story, listens as each voices his reason for shooting Beau, yet Mapes, the old men, Candy, Miss Merle, Reverend Jameson, and Lou Dimes, all continue to believe that Mathu shot Beau. Everyone, even the tricksters, is duped by Charlie, the real murderer.

Before the shoot-out between the old men and Luke Will's gang begins, Charlie, the fifty-year-old tractor driver on the Marshall plantation, returns to Mathu's house in the quarters to confess to killing Beau Boutan: he had run away out of fear. Charlie explains that after he told Beau he was going to quit working for him, Beau started beating him with a cane stalk. For the first time in his life, Charlie decided to return the blows with a cane stalk of his own and, after hitting him, Charley believed that he had accidentally killed Beau. Charlie then ran to Mathu's house, and, when he arrived, he turned to see that Beau had followed him. Charley confesses, "Beau was coming in the yard, putting a shell in the gun. Parrain [Mathu] reached and got his gun and pushed it in

my hand” (191). Speaking to Mapes, Charlie continues, “. . . they comes a day, Sheriff, they comes a day when a man got to stand. I don’t know how I did it. But I held that gun steady as a rock. . . . He [Beau] raised his gun, and I pulled the trigger” (191). Charlie shot Beau in self-defense. When he is asked about what he saw in the swamp that made him turn around and come back to the Quarters, Charley plays with his words in response, signifyin(g) on the past and providing direction through indirection, just as Johnny Paul did with Mapes. Dirty Red asks, “What you seen back there, Charlie?” and Charlie responds, “You seen it, too, Dirty.” Confused, Dirty Red says, “I didn’t see nothing, Charlie” (209). Poignantly implying that he saw what and who no longer existed--the ancestors--Charlie concludes, “You got it, Dirty” (209). In the shoot-out between the old men and Luke Will, both Charlie and Luke Will are killed; thus Charlie literally illustrates Smith’s understanding in “Trickster” of the trickster within contemporary African American literature: “a figure for cultural survival--and its costs” (736).

Also before the shoot-out starts, Sheriff Mapes is shot in the arm, falls down, and is rendered ineffective by one of the white vigilantes. After Reverend Jameson tries repeatedly to dissuade the old men from the task at hand, the old men playfully threaten to shoot him: Coot narrates, “I could hear Jameson over by the house calling on God to have mercy on all of us. If it wasn’t Jameson calling on God, it was Glo calling for her little grandson Snookum. Jameson, then Glo; Glo, then Jameson. I heard Dirty Red call to Rooster to go shoot Jameson and shut him up” (198). When the old men are finally brought to trial, Judge Reynolds places them on probation “for the next five years, or

until their deaths--whichever came first," and he forbids the old men ever to carry "any kind of firing arm" (213), but he never accuses them of premeditated murder.

Perhaps Reynolds deals leniently with them because they initially believed they were going to have to kill Beau's father, Fix Boutan, but never had the opportunity.

As the novel concludes, Sheriff Mapes gives a rather embarrassing testimony as to his whereabouts during the shoot-out: "The whole fight, I was sitting on my ass in the middle of the walk. Luke Will shot me, and I was sitting on my ass in the middle of the walk" (213). In light of the humor that fills the courtroom at Mapes expense, the reader may surmise that the spirit of laughter and rebellion, the spirit of the trickster, is influential in altering the outcome of the trial. Humor, after all, is the trickster's most pervasive means of redefining reality. In Writing Tricksters, Smith states, "The trickster's ability to express multiple and conflicting possibilities, her or his talent for engaging an audience on various levels, points toward the political and aesthetic aims of [the black writer's] . . . art: challenge, provocation, and engagement" (115). Using the narrative techniques of intertextual revision, nicknaming, and verbal signifyin(g), Gaines develops a rebellious community of tricksters who, using Beau's death as a catalyst for social change, stand up to a group of white vigilantes. Gaines' plot challenges the reader's assumptions of the elderly, provokes questions concerning race relations in the south, and engages the imagination of his readers. If Gaines may be said to be concerned with the human motivations of fear, outrage, and anger, then one can assert that Gloria Naylor, in her novel Mama Day, molds her plot around the all too human emotions of

love, jealousy, revenge, and faith (belief in the unseen). Using trickster figures in their novels, Gaines and Naylor not only explore the human condition but also teach their readers the value of communal living wherein one is able to both laugh at and learn from the mistakes made by oneself and others.



### Chapter Three: Teachings of the Conjurer in Naylor's Mama Day

Gloria Naylor's narrative structure in Mama Day challenges the reader's ability to suspend disbelief and engage with a text in which events occur in the past, present, and future and within natural and supernatural contexts. Unlike the works of either Williams and Gaines, which subtly signify on the trickster tradition while inviting the reader to view fictional creations of events that have a basis, at least in part, in historical events, Naylor's novel places her readers in the future to look back in time at an island community where ancestors can speak to their living descendants, "where flowers can be made to sing and trees to fly" (139), and where "the mind [belief] is everything" (90). Like Williams and Gaines, however, Naylor situates her protagonist, Mama Day, and antagonist, Ruby, within a community comprised of conjuring tricksters. By manipulating societal norms, treating the Western world's mainstream Judeo-Christian religious beliefs and social etiquette as mere artificial constructs, and laughing all the while, Naylor's conjuring tricksters both expose the limitations and inconsistencies inherent within narrow-minded world views and provide alternative ways of functioning within an all too often judgmental and racist world.

Unlike Williams' tricksters, who resemble the antebellum animal and Slave John tricksters, or Gaines' tricksters, who parody the badmen of the trickster of the postbellum period, Naylor's tricksters fit into the African American conjuring tradition, for, as Roberts states: "The black conception of the conjurer as folk hero was . . . that of a trickster possessed of spiritual power" (103). He also contends that "[c]onjuration itself

involved the use of ‘tricks’” (103). Similar to the narrative structures of both Dessa Rose and A Gathering of Old Men, the symbolism of character names, the process of signifyin(g) between works, and the presence of characters who signify within the novel are strategies in Mama Day that identify Naylor as a trickster novelist and emphasize the trickster’s witty use of language. Furthermore, the verbal and physical games and rituals in which her characters engage signal to the reader that the trickster’s spirit guides the Willow Springs island community.

In Writing Tricksters, Smith’s characterization of Toni Morrison’s Pilate “as a community-centered conjurer, perhaps the most powerful of all culture-building trickster figures” (emphasis mine) (126), is equally applicable to Naylor’s female conjurer, Mama Day. That Pilate, Smith suggests, is “just barely tolerated on the outskirts of her community” (120-21), however, is quite unlike Mama Day, whose ancestor, the conjurer Sapphira Wade, established the Willow Springs free black community. In The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller’s Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan, Trudier Harris not only discusses the elements of conjuring within Naylor’s novel but also explores the southern-ness of Naylor’s narrative strategies. Harris contends that the text is intentionally written for a southern audience.<sup>8</sup> Harris’ comments regarding the

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<sup>8</sup> In The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller’s Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan (1996), Harris argues that through her narrative strategy in Mama Day “Naylor . . . [has] written with specific, southern African American audiences in mind and [has] indeed built features of [her] audiences into the interactive and silent spaces in [her text]” (54).

trickster elements present in Mama Day invite further discussion. She suggests that the “first-person plural” (57) narrative voice, which both opens and closes the novel and represents the views and opinions of the Willow Springs community, “invites the hearers to share in . . . potential triumph, to play for themselves the role of trickster against slave owner, for Sapphira Wade’s success [triumph over her white master] becomes a historical rewriting in the minds of the hearers” (59). Thus, Harris casts not only Sapphira but also the empathetic reader in the role of trickster. Harris also characterizes the behavior of the Willow Springs community as tricksterlike because, when approached by white land buyers to sell out Willow Springs, the community members play a “cat and mouse game” (64) with the buyers--accepting generous gifts while pretending to consider the offers when, in reality, the community has no intention whatsoever of selling the land. Harris concludes that “[t]heir leisurely responses resonate with southern slowness as well as with traits of the African American tricksters” (64). These are Harris’ only references to the trickster in Mama Day, for, although she does not imply that southern literature and folk literature are mutually exclusive, she focuses on the work as a text written for an African American southern audience, not as a novel which fits within the trickster novel tradition.

Like Williams and Gaines, Naylor continues the trickster novelist’s tradition through her use of symbolic names. In her article “Names and Naming,” Bettye J. Williams writes that “Africans would commonly name a child after the day or month of birth” (523). She explains that “[e]ven though most slaves could not read, they often



wanted to see their names written ‘down’ in the master’s family bible” (523-24).

Williams suggests that “many [slaves] were given the names of Old Testament patriarchs, prophets, and kings” (524). Williams’ list of common Old and New Testament names includes most of the names Naylor bestows upon the Day forefathers: Elijah, Elisha, Daniel, Joshua, Amos, Jonah, Matthew, Mark, Luke, Timothy, James, John, and, contracted, John-Paul. As Kristine A. Yohe notes in the Oxford Companion to African American Literature, Naylor’s novel is based on a “Shakespearean model (The Tempest)” (474); hence, Mama Day’s given name, Miranda, signifies on and reverses Shakespeare’s characterization of Prospero’s daughter, Miranda, who, unlike Mama Day, does not inherit her father’s magical abilities.

In Mama Day, the name of Abigail Day’s daughter Peace (named for Abigail’s deceased sister), signifies on the biblical connotation of “peace” which, according to the concordance of the Oxford King James Bible, means “calm repose” (99). Both Peace, Abigail’s sister, and Peace, Abigail’s daughter, die as children; therefore, when one makes a slight pun on the biblical term “peace” and applies the connotation to Naylor’s characters, the Day family members may be categorized as people who are unable to maintain a sense of familial “peace,” in the biblical sense. Again, according to their biblical connotations, Grace (Abigail’s second daughter and Cocoa’s mother) means God’s “favor” (69) and Hope (Abigail’s third daughter) means “confident expectation” (78). Abigail, too, derives her name from a biblical counterpart who is categorized not only as a “woman of good understanding” (1 Sam. 25:3) but also as “a virtuous woman”



whose “price is far above rubies” (Prov. 31:10). Punning on the biblical context of the term “ruby,” Naylor slyly indicates that Abigail maintains moral superiority over “Ruby,” Naylor’s evil conjurer. The very fact that the last name of the individuals of the first family on Willow Springs island is “Day” indicates a biblical connection. As the footnote to Jonah Day’s name in Sapphira Wade’s family tree, which appears at the beginning of the novel, indicates, “‘God rested on the seventh day and so would she [Sapphira].’ Hence, the family’s last name.” Sapphira’s last name, Wade, is that of her white owner, Bascombe Wade. Yet not even Mama Day, the oldest living Day, can recall Sapphira’s name when pressed for it. Instead, the Willow Springs community acknowledges Sapphira’s legacy by referring to dramatic situations and gossipy innuendo as ‘18 & 23’s’<sup>9</sup> (4): as legend has it, 1823 is the year that Sapphira murdered Bascombe Wade.

Regarding Sapphira’s name, the first-person plural omniscient narrator suggests that Sapphira is a “legend” whose story varies in the telling:

[S]omehow, some way, it happened in 1823: she smothered Bascombe Wade in his very bed and lived to tell the story for a thousand days. 1823: married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons in just a thousand days, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman’s noose, laughing

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<sup>9</sup> The first-person plural omniscient narrator suggests that “Sapphira was African-born, Bascombe Wade was from Norway, and it was the 18 & 23’ing that went down between them two put deeds in our hands” (5).

in a burst of flames. 1823: persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed to all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs . . . .

(3)

That Sapphira changed her children's last name to Day seems natural when one considers that re-naming was a common phenomenon among slaves who either were given or took their freedom during slavery. That Day was the last name Sapphira chose, Harris explains in The Power of the Porch, equates the creation of Willow Springs with the biblical creation story in Genesis.

Although Sapphira in the New Testament<sup>10</sup> dies after she commits the sin of lying to the apostle Peter about the amount of money she and her husband were given for their parcel of land, Naylor's Sapphira, as Harris claims, "is god"<sup>11</sup> (61) in Willow Springs. Both Sapphira's insistence that Bascombe Wade deed the land to the island slaves and her request that God leave behind the stars he "spit out" (110) over Willow Springs suggest that Sapphira's biblical story has been re-envisioned in Mama Day. Sapphira's name is also a revision of the Amos and Andy television series character Sapphire.

According to Beverly Guy-Sheftall's Oxford Companion to African American Literature entry "Sapphire," Sapphire, a character on the 1950's television show Amos and Andy "was loud-talking, abrasive, overbearing, bossy, controlling, and

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<sup>10</sup> See Acts 5:1-10

<sup>11</sup> Harris writes, "In this world, Sapphira is god; her empowerment strikes a chord in the audience Naylor has in mind . . . . [T]his audience has 'cut its teeth' . . . on tales of the extranatural, from legends of shapeshifting Bras Coupe in Louisiana, to the historical conjurer Dr. Buzzard in South Carolina" (61).

emasculating” (644). Guy-Sheftall asserts that even after the Amos and Andy show ended, Sapphire entered the realm of African American folk culture and was acknowledged as “one of the most damaging stereotypes in the mass media, one that influences contemporary conceptions of Black womanhood” (644). In Naylor’s novel, however, Sapphira’s control over Bascombe Wade enables the slaves to gain possession of the island, and, after Sapphira kills Wade, the slaves are freed and therefore can begin their lives anew.

Additionally, the name of Grace’s daughter, Ophelia--nicknamed Cocoa--signifies upon and re-presents one of the characters in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Unlike Shakespeare’s Ophelia, the temporary madness which Naylor’s Ophelia experiences as a result of Ruby’s conjuring does not drive Ophelia to commit suicide. Harris also suggests that the con-man hoodoo doctor, Rainbow Simpson, aka Dr. Buzzard, derives his name from the “historical conjurer Dr. Buzzard in South Carolina” (61). Whether shifting from “rubies” to “Ruby,” re-casting Sapphire as Sapphira, or rewriting Prospero’s Miranda and Hamlet’s Ophelia, Naylor, a trickster herself, is intentionally recasting the fates of well-known characters to present her western readers with cultural paradigms other than white and Euro-centric ones.

Interestingly, names and the practice of naming in Mama Day not only allow Naylor to practice revisionist techniques on characters within her novel but also provide Cocoa and George with a topic of discussion on their first date. While they awkwardly dine with one another, George asks, ““Ophelia, why are people food to you?” and continues, “that’s what you’ve been saying most of the evening--fudge sticks, kumquats,



bagels, zucchinis. You just called Harman Badillo a taco. Number one, it's ignorant because tacos aren't from Puerto Rico, and number two, your whole litany has just turned the people . . . into material for a garbage disposal" (62). Cocoa responds, "the way I talk is my way of coming to terms with never knowing what to expect from anything or anybody. I'm not a bigot, but if I sounded like one, I guess its [sic] because deep down I'm as frightened of change and difference as they are" (63).

From this interchange the reader may surmise that the power inherent in names and the practice of naming is as important to Cocoa's perception of the world as it is to Naylor. Naylor is a trickster author concerned with the process of transformation and other forms of double identity. She reveals her awareness of the importance of names and naming within the African American tradition by carefully selecting symbolic names to bestow upon her characters. To George, whom Cocoa calls a "bonbon" (63), the foodstuff for which he is called represents a racial equation: "'dark on the outside and white on the inside'" (63). Yet for Cocoa, who indiscriminately calls everyone out of his or her proper name (a form of signifyin(g) and a tricksterlike thing to do), George's equation is not radical enough. Of the bonbons, Cocoa suggests, "there are other varieties" (63). She then asserts, "If you remember, I answer to Cocoa" (63). This type of verbal play between George and Cocoa, which continues as their relationship matures, reflects the overall narrative structure of Mama Day. Because the narrative switches back and forth between the first person past tense narratives of George and Cocoa--while the first-person plural omniscient narrator is intermittently juxtaposed between the



two--Harris, in The Power of the Porch, suggests that Naylor's form follows the call-and-response "interactive pattern long recognized and much discussed in African American culture" (91).

Since the reading audience overhears the verbal play between George and Cocoa, Harris also contends that their running dialogue is an equivalent of "a game of dozens" (93). Similar to the verbal contest between Dessa and Rufel over the identity of "Mammy," the dialogue between Cocoa and George is heard by an audience who, Harris suggests, "pass judgment on the quality of the exchange and challenge the participants to higher levels of verbal achievements" (93). Cocoa's and George's game of dozens with one another gives an oral account of their history and establishes yet another link between the two characters and the African American trickster. Like the trickster in contemporary African American fiction whose tale must first be interpreted from the oral tradition and secondly placed within a written context, Harris notes, "[t]he stories they [Cocoa and George] tell are not the usual folktales or toasts, but the varying interpretations of their own meeting, dating, and marriage experiences" (The Power of the Porch 93). Following traditional storytelling formulas while adapting trickster's characteristics to fit the characters in Mama Day, Naylor not only enables her characters to mature within the fictional context of the future but also allows her characters to develop a past through their shared oral history.

Since the first-person plural narrator speaks in a self-reflexive manner, addressing the reader as he or she reads, the reader quickly develops a sense of being part of the

Willow Springs community. Similar to Gaines' multiple first-person narrators who speak in conversational past tense, Naylor's first-person plural narrator invites the reader to participate in the storytelling process. Essentially, the story that the reader hears in the voices of the first-person plural omniscient narrator, George, and Cocoa becomes part of the reader's repertoire, as this narrator explains:

Think about it: ain't nobody really talking to you. We're sitting here in Willow Springs, and you're God-only-knows-where. It's August 1999--ain't but a slim chance it's the same season where you are. Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own. (10)

The voice of the novel is attributed to the reader. One is therefore forced to become aware that, while reading, he or she is as responsible for creating and perceiving the story being told as is the author who wrote the story. Through this self-reflexive voice, the power to conjure up the Day ancestors, to listen in on the re-telling of their family's oral history through multiple voices, and to place oneself temporarily on the threshold of the future (in this case 1999: *Mama Day* was first published in 1988) is transferred from the narrator to the active participant-reader. Thus, according to Velie's definition of the trickster novelist as one who turns her reader into tricksters, Naylor, who transforms the reader into an active participant in the storytelling process, can be said to be a trickster novelist.

Naylor's first-person plural omniscient narrator plays yet another significant role in the novel. Not only do the visible characters within the novel--such as Cocoa, George, Mama Day, and Abigail--have the power to signify on one another and play the dozens,

but the disembodied first-person plural narrator also performs this humorous function. Commenting on the wedding that Ruby and Junior Lee have planned for themselves, this invisible voice signifies on Ruby's obesity: "Their wedding is gonna be BIG--beginning to end (in more ways than one, folks say)" (133). Later, the disembodied voice again signifies on Ruby's weight:

She's [Ruby's] gonna do it [fix the food] all herself: twenty chickens, a whole hog, and fifty pounds of drumfish. But what are the rest of us going to eat? some ask. Oh, the jokes don't end. There's one for every pound on Ruby, so we're talking about a lot of fun. And yet, you couldn't rightly call Ruby fat--she's amazing. (emphasis mine) (134)

Very much like the trickster, this narrator is at once audible yet invisible. The reader hears the narrator's communal voice but cannot attribute it to any one character on the island. The voice is androgynous and an individual yet a communal presence responsible for articulating the sentiments of both the women and men in the Willow Springs community. This voice is a fictional creation, but because it addresses the reader and comments on its own existence, it shows an awareness of being overheard. The voice speaks to the reader from the future, in August of 1999, while recognizing that its audience can not be geographically fixed. Finally, this voice also knows that the location of Willow Springs and the island's inhabitants cannot be pinpointed: Willow Springs' location is directly off the coast of both South Carolina and Georgia--in fact, a bridge connects the island to the invisible division between both states; however, the island belongs to neither state.



The ambiguity of the island's location further enhances the tricksterlike qualities of its inhabitants. The characters signify on one another, play both games with and tricks on one another, participate in various folk and individual rituals, and hold firm beliefs in the supernatural. These forms of play signal to the reader the presence of the conjuring trickster's spirit. Naylor's tricksters differ most significantly from those of Williams and Gaines in their unique belief system. Conjuring or "hoodoo" is described by Bernard W. Bell as the "syncretistic blend of Christian and sub-Saharan African, primarily Yoruba, religious traditions in the United States" (32). Bell asserts that a person's "belief in the mystery, magic, myth and ritual of residual African religions complements and contends with the paradoxical rationalistic yet Judeo-Christian mode of Western consciousness" (32). In the same vein, John Roberts contends that the "African concept of ontological being derived from a religious view of 'life-force' as a . . . principle for apprehending the nature of existence" (74). Roberts also suggests that God was the source of all life-force and, like the western concept of the laws of matter, this force can neither be created nor destroyed, only transformed. Roberts explains that the transformation of life-force could only occur through ritual or "symbolic . . . causality" (75). In addition he writes, "[a]s forces interacted, the effect could be either good or evil; however, the effect that an act could have depended on which beings performed it and not on the nature of the act itself" (75). Because conjuring involves the ritual transformation of life-energy from one being to another, the reader should not be surprised when George's life-force is needed in the ritual for Cocoa's transformative healing. It is both regrettable and surprising for the



reader when George is unwilling to follow Mama Day's ritual instructions and subsequently dooms himself: sacrificing his own life-force in the process.

George, a native New Yorker, frequently employs tricks to appease Cocoa when she is fretful: "The trick was to make you [Cocoa] laugh, or get you mad enough to leave me in peace but still avoid any arguments at breakfast. Living with a female: a day-to-day balancing act, and I really enjoyed the challenge" (142). Cocoa attributes ritual action to George: "It was more than a routine; you operated by rituals. A place for everything and everything in its place. I guess a lot of it came from growing up in an institution [home for boys] . . ." (145). When it comes to football, George recognizes a realm of life beyond the empirical world. Addressing Cocoa's inability to appreciate the wide world of sports, George comments, "[E]ven being there for someone like you wasn't enough--you'd only see twenty-two men on a field and seventy-odd thousand screaming people. So why tell you what you couldn't believe? The crowd became a single living organism--one pulse, one heartbeat, one throat." (124). He further suggests that for someone like Cocoa "being there [at the Super Bowl of 1976] wasn't enough. You'd have to feel the force that suspended almost two hundred pounds of flesh above the ground to believe that we had willed him those wings" (emphasis mine) (124). It is incredible that George can hold such a strong belief about a crowd's ability to alter the outcome of a football game when, much later in the novel, Naylor reveals that George's untimely death occurs because he is unable to place his faith in the unseen forces at work on Willow Springs. Nonetheless, George, an outsider within Willow

Springs, is a part of Naylor's trickster community, consisting of the Day family members, George, Dr. Buzzard, Parris, Ruby, Junior Lee, Francis, and--as it is represented by the first-person plural omniscient narrator--the Willow Springs community at large.

Although he never acknowledges his own ability to conjure, George's beliefs regarding the Super Bowl, his life which is governed by ritual, and his affinity for tricking Cocoa, characterize him as a trickster of sorts. Additionally, George's sense of humor and ability to signify enhance his performance, even as a northern outsider, as a trickster. After George and Cocoa spend their first night together on the island, Cocoa wakes up and finds that George has wandered off alone. When he returns, several hours later, Cocoa is angry with him for being gone so long. George attempts to explain to Cocoa where he has been and why, and, in the process, signifies on her lack of physical attention towards him, she responds by signifyin(g) on his genitalia: George begins,

"I woke you up [before leaving] for a little attention and--"

"You woke me up to talk some nonsense about a tree growing in the bedroom."

"It was a redwood--right there beside you."

"Ohhh, light dawns [in Cocoa's mind]. Well, I could have saved you all that frustration if you had mentioned something a little bit smaller in scale, like a--"

"Don't say it [George replies]."

"You'd deserve it if I did." (189)

Since the conversation is being held between George and Cocoa after George's death, one may suggest that George, as a character, never dies: he is transformed, upon his death, into the spiritual guide of a Day conjurer, Cocoa Day. His power to transform imbues him with the trickster's capacity for shape-shifting.

The humor that arises from the signifyin(g) that pervades the interpersonal relationships among individuals within this community likens Naylor's community to those of Williams and Gaines. All three of these communities use humor in ways that instruct the larger society as to what may and may not pass for acceptable behavior. That the trickster teaches may seem odd to the reader since the trickster is forever acting in ways that serve to ostracize him or her from the larger community. Yet, as Carol S. Taylor Johnson suggests in her essay "Conjuring," "The conjurer as spiritual guide and teacher is evident in . . . Naylor's Mama Day. Most often their [conjurers] powers are used to bring about harmony in the community and hope to a dying world" (170). Mama Day teaches primarily through signifyin(g). When she signifies on the Willow Springs high-school principal who is a renowned pedophile, she does so in a way that both warns and instructs him while simultaneously providing the reader with a bit of humor that makes the heinous situation bearable. Abigail and Miranda co-author a letter to Cocoa in New York and, while Abigail writes down partial truths, Mama Day fills in Abigail's textual gaps by sarcastically signifyin(g) on the principal:

"Your principal, Mr. Samson Wilbright, has left Willow Springs High after thirty years of dedicated service."

“Good thing, too [Mama Day responds]. Wonder somebody ain’t shot him over their daughter before now.”

“He calmed down in later years, Miranda.”

“He calmed down plenty after I got after him about patting on Baby Girl.”

.....

“I [Mama Day] told him something soft too. Leaned over and whispered that I could fix it so the only thing he’d be able to whip out of his pants for the rest of his life would be pocket change.” (68)

In the same letter, Mama Day responds to Cocoa’s statement that she is “now having a lovely time seeing New York” (67) with the comical comment to Abigail, “Sounds fishy to me. You think Baby Girl [Cocoa] is into them mind-altering drugs or something? The folks were just talking about that on my program [Donahue] this morning” (67). Humor, an inherent part of Mama Day’s signifyin(g) on the high-school principal and commenting on her Baby Girl’s odd behavior, is a tool by which Naylor’s characters can lighten the impact of yet continue to address the presence of potentially harmful situations that arise within the community.

Because rituals in the African American conjuring tradition depend more on who performs them than on how they are performed, the reader may begin to visualize the conjuring hierarchy Naylor establishes in Mama Day. This hierarchy helps to promote the Day women as centers for communal power and authority: Sapphira, at the top, is



followed by John-Paul (Mama Day's father), Mama Day, and Cocoa. Ruby's abilities approach Mama Day's, but Ruby is not the daughter of the "seventh son of a seventh son" who, in terms of conjuring, is a very powerful person. The reader finds out little concerning the origin of Ruby's powers, whereas Mama Day inherited hers from her father who, as the seventh son of a seventh son, inherited his from the matriarch Sapphira. Because George was orphaned as a child and the reader has no knowledge of his heritage, one would be hard pressed to connect him biologically with the conjuring tradition. However, because his house mother taught him to believe only in the potential of the present, the reader can see why George would not be readily influenced by an old woman who wants him to put all of his belief into what he perceives as irrational faith healing. Francis, another member of the Willow Springs community (and Junior Lee's girlfriend before Ruby), tries her hand at conjuring Ruby. Yet Francis' hog's head concoction fails her in her attempt to regain Junior Lee's devotion, and she is left to suffer the consequences of her actions when Junior Lee's new love, Ruby, a practiced and powerful conjurer, works spells and uses roots against her. As Mama Day suggests, "Ain't no hoodoo anywhere as powerful as hate" (157). And Ruby possesses a large quantity of this emotion.

Unlike Ruby, who uses her knowledge of conjuring to seduce Junior Lee and poison Cocoa, Mama Day employs her conjuring abilities to help improve the quality of life for the individuals who live in Willow Springs. Mama Day often supplies the Willow Springs community with herbal medicines. For example, when Carmen Rae's son gets croup, Mama Day makes a tincture out of "senna pods, coltsfoot, horehound,

white cherry bark, and black cohosh" (193). A benevolent trickster, Mama Day also uses her reputation as a good medicine woman to trick people into helping themselves. After Mama Day diagnoses Bernice with ovarian cysts--caused by her misuse of fertility pills--and calls Dr. Smithfield, a white doctor from the mainland, over to the island to find out what, if any, permanent reproductive damage Bernice will suffer, Mama Day supplies Bernice with a dose of "mother-wit" (97). Her cure is an instruction to Bernice: plant various colored pumpkin seeds according to her variety of needs. Mama Day tells her sister Abigail that "[t]he mind is a funny thing . . . and a powerful thing at that. Bernice is gonna believe that they [pumpkin seeds] are what I tell her they are--magic seeds. And the only magic is that what she believes they are, they're gonna become" (96). Mama Day, therefore, is a trickster who uses the belief others have in hoodoo and relies on the knowledge she has of herbals remedies to promote faith and well-being within the island's community.

Mama Day's cure for Bernice, however, does enact the type of conjuring life-force exchange that Bell describes, and Bernice's belief is the catalyst for the exchange. After Bernice recovers yet remains unable to conceive, Mama Day resorts to pure conjuring: a thickly veiled art combining trickery, belief, and magic. In a powerfully narrated but mysteriously cast ritual that Mama Day performs with Bernice at the old Wade plantation home, the life-force from the fertilized egg of a chicken is transformed into the inseminated egg of Bernice's unborn child: "Space to space. Ancient fingers keeping each in line. The uncountable, the unthinkable, is one opening. Pulsing and alive--wet--the egg moves from one space to the other. A rhythm older than

woman draws it in and holds it tight” (140). Early in the novel Mama Day observes that the “mind is everything” (90). As the work progresses, the reader realizes that this statement may be applied to both mundane and supernatural beliefs: if a woman, Bernice in this case, cannot believe in her own ability to conceive, she will not conceive; if this same woman believes, however, that through supernatural intervention and ritual she will conceive, chances are good that soon after the ritual is performed she will conceive. In the Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing In the United States, Jeanne Campbell Reesman and Michelle Powe suggest that “[t]hrough spiritualism [the belief that mortals communicate with departed souls (837)], women were and are able to turn inner strength into an external force” (838). Mama Day transfers Bernice’s “internal” longing to have a child to belief in an “external” ritual of planting seeds; therefore, Mama Day gives Bernice’s body a chance to heal before she once again attempts to conceive. Similar to Milton’s assertion that the mind can create a heaven out of hell and a hell out of heaven, Naylor’s tricksters can, through belief and ritual, make the unimaginable an actuality.

Belief in oneself alone, however, is not enough to alter a course of events or reality. Before Mama Day performs the ritual of life-force transference with Bernice she first considers the ramifications of her actions: “she wasn’t changing the natural course of nothing she couldn’t if she tried. Just using what was there” (emphasis mine) (139). Mama Day’s actions suggest the African American trickster’s unique way, to use Hyde’s words, of “making a way out of no way” (275). Mama Day makes use of what she has on hand, and the best thing she has going for her is Bernice’s belief in the “other place” (87),



for in the Willow Springs trickster community it is the belief in both one another and the unseen forces that serve as catalysts for what Judeo-Christians term miracles.

Harris suggests that "George dies because he cannot believe in what he cannot see, feel, or touch" (91). In addition, George dies because he is unable to relinquish control over a situation and share in Cocoa's care with Abigail, Mama Day, the Willow Springs community, and the departed Day ancestors: George's self-reliance, therefore, hinders his understanding of communal support. When Dr. Buzzard explains to George that he, George, is to play a role in a ritual that will assist in Cocoa's healing process, George, who wants nothing to do with the ritual, states, "We're going to be fine because I believe in myself" (emphasis mine) (292). Dr. Buzzard's reply, "That's where folks start, boy--not where they finish up" (292), indicates the pressing need for George to place his faith outside of himself: in both the unseen and in Mama Day's superior understanding of the situation. When George discovers that Mama Day is relying solely on her beliefs and rituals to assist Cocoa, he is only able to perceive her as "a crazy old woman" (266). George's disbelief is equal to the one that he accused Cocoa of having regarding the Super Bowl: that collective strength and belief can alter the outcome of a given situation. Ironically, George is unable to perceive this fact. Unlike Mama Day, George has no knowledge of herbs and the potential for the herb nightshade (which Ruby uses to poison Cocoa) to inflict sickness and death. Even if he were able to believe in the potency of a charcoal plaster to purge the effects of the nightshade, he would not be able to accept a ritual as a substitute for western medical care. At this juncture, the readers,



like George, are challenged by Naylor to put their faith in one of two areas: either with George and his scientific methods or with Mama Day and her knowledge of conjuring.

The seeming difference between Cocoa's and George's belief systems is, from the beginning of the novel to its end, at the forefront of the reader's mind. Interestingly, Cocoa's and George's beliefs, quite frequently, are the same, yet the ways in which their beliefs manifest themselves are different. As previously noted, George is able to believe in the unseen when what is at stake is a football game. Cocoa, however, takes the unseen "in stride" (273), for when Cocoa wakes up and finds that Mama Day has cut off all of her (Cocoa's) hair, she thinks to herself, "My God, these were the women [Mama Day and Abigail] who raised me--I would trust them with my life, and so whatever Mama Day had done, it was for a good reason" (273). Again, after Mama Day instructs George in his role in the ritual, George expresses his disbelief in Mama Day's powers: "It's cruel of you to play these games, when it's your own niece that's sick" (emphasis mine) (296). Unlike George, Cocoa is able to put her absolute faith and trust in the careful rituals performed by both Mama Day and her grandmother, Abigail, who sings the spiritual "No Ways Tired" (287) again and again to ease Cocoa's mind.<sup>12</sup> When left alone with Abigail, Cocoa thinks longingly to herself, "If [only] there was a way to bring me this

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<sup>12</sup> The words to the spiritual allow Abigail to remind Cocoa to maintain her faith: "Oh, I don't feel no ways tired. / I've come too far from where I started from. / Nobody told me that the road would be easy -- no, no / I don't believe He brought me this far -- / I won't believe He brought me this far -- / I can't believe He brought me this far to leave me" (288).

kind of peace forever" (290). Like George and Cocoa, Mama Day's conjuring and Abigail's Christianity, at first, appear to be at odds. Nonetheless, both traditions comfort the ailing Cocoa. When the reader considers Bell's definition of the conjurer as a "syncretistic blend" (32) of the African and Judeo-Christian faiths, however, Mama Day's belief in African traditions combined with Abigail's devout Christianity may be seen as a literal illustration of this blend.

The disparity between George's and Cocoa's belief systems, however, is best summed up by their reaction to the custom of putting moss into their shoes before entering the Day graveyard. Cocoa is satisfied that putting moss into one's shoes is "a tradition" while George must ask "what does it mean?" (217). Cocoa grew up with traditions, but George, an orphan, grew up without any: he has learned only one motto from his house mother: "Only the present has potential" (23). The traditions Cocoa grew up with such as quilting, braiding, walking with her grandmother and grandaunt on Candle Walk night, and putting moss in her shoes before entering the cemetery gave Cocoa, George thinks to himself, "a history" (129). Since conjuring is a Day family tradition, it is only natural that Cocoa accepts the implications of ritual symbolism whereas George cannot, unless the symbol is linked to what, in his mind, is "real" (291). Naylor's characterization of George is not one of a man who will not believe--for he believes in himself--but of a man who does not understand that belief in others is, much more than a game, important to his survival.

Outside of wanting to “play Adam and Eve” (222) with Cocoa, George has no affinity for what he perceives as frivolous rituals. When playing poker with Dr. Buzzard and his gang, George knows that Buzzard is cheating. George also knows that the other players know Buzzard is cheating, and George knows that Buzzard knows the others know he is cheating: it is a game to the men, a ritual. Normally, each man who plays with Buzzard knows beforehand that he will lose. George, however, decides to trick the trickster and applies to the group dynamic a mathematical “[formula] for behavioral strategy” (211) that he learned in graduate school and beats Buzzard at his own game of trickery. Harris suggests that “George dies as resistant to extra natural phenomenon as he was in the beginning” (98). What Harris does not discuss, however, is George’s role of a trickster who both tropes a dope--who happens to be another trickster, Dr. Buzzard--and wears the mask of the dope: this is George’s communal role as a two-sided trickster who teaches. Like the trickster who teaches through signifyin(g), George, through his mistakes, teaches the reader, as well as all others who live “beyond the bridge” (291), outside of Willow Springs, the values of both living within a supportive community and believing in unseen forces who, while living, influenced the past and now, as spiritual guides, have some control over the present, and future.

That Mama Day waits for George at the old plantation home of Bascombe Wade--the “other place” (292)--is symbolic of her belief in the necessity to bridge the



past with the present before the future can be determined. When she considers the situation Cocoa is in and attempts to define George's role in the healing ritual, Mama Day states,

[Cocoa] needs the belief buried in George. Of his own accord he has to hand it over to her [Mama Day]. She needs his hand in hers--his very hand--so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before. A single moment was all she asked, even a fingertip to touch hers here at the other place. So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over. Yes, in his very hands he already held the missing piece she'd come looking for. (285)

Mama Day's role within the community, therefore, is of one who mediates between the masculine and feminine as well as the past and the present to secure a positive future: no outcome is predestined as there are always multiple paths to follow. Mama Day also listens to the voices of her ancestors for guidance and direction. Unlike Ruby, whose position as a conjuring trickster serves to create dis-ease, literally Cocoa's unnamed disease, within the island community, Mama Day serves both as a healer and as an island authority. Deciding to kill Ruby for the pain and suffering that she causes Abigail and Cocoa, Mama Day assumes the role of moral law enforcer. Yet as she calls Dr. Buzzard out of his name as an "addle-brained, slew-footed, son-of-a-crow" (46), "out-and-out bootlegger and con man" (51), and "a shiftless, no-good, slew-footed, twisted-mouth, slimy-backed" (191) man, Mama Day shows the reader that she is able to maintain a



lively sense of humor while she, the most powerful living conjurer-trickster in Willow Springs, works to maintain social order on the island.

Regarding the conjuring trickster's role as a culture creator, folk hero, and teacher, Roberts suggests that "the actions of conjurers reinforced the lesson most clearly revealed in the John and Old Master trickster tale cycle, that behavior involving trickery against a fellow sufferer . . . was not in the best interests of their community" (103). Roberts adds that "[a]lthough conjurers characteristically succeeded by using supernatural 'tricks' against members of the black community, their antagonists were tricksters who . . . attempted to manipulate the force in nature to rob others of their very being" (103). By casting her characters as members of a conjuring trickster community, Naylor implies from the novel's beginning that Mama Day will be an instructive novel. Similar to the logic behind Harris' argument that Naylor wrote her work specifically for a southern African American audience, the reader-response critic who is interested in the African American trickster tradition may suggest that Williams, Gaines, and Naylor wrote their novels for an audience who would have specific knowledge of both trickster tales and trickster novels and novelists.

Arguably, Naylor intentionally designed her trickster community with character flaws: Ruby's insatiable jealousy, Dr. Buzzard's affinity for alcohol, George's lack of faith, Cocoa's stubborn pride. The result of such a design would naturally provoke her morally sound heroine, Mama Day, to take corrective action: killing Ruby, signifyin(g) on Dr. Buzzard, showing George the two paths he may choose from, and healing Cocoa. Through her characterization of George, a non-believer who eventually dupes himself

and dies as a result of refusing to acknowledge folk beliefs and practices, Naylor suggests to her readers the cultural importance of maintaining a strong belief in folk traditions. Harris suggests that “[w]e [the readers] have the potential to join Cocoa, abandon our inclinations to absolute rationality, and become the next generation of . . . hearers and tellers of stories” (104). Yet the reason we are allowed to do so stems from Naylor’s community of tricksters who redefine what acceptable behavior is within one’s community, insist that individuals work communally, imply what is possible on the margins of reality, repair the bridge between the past and the present for us to walk over and embrace the future, and, ensuring the trickster continuum lives on, cast the reader in the position of storyteller, so we might have a taste of what lies ahead.

## Conclusion

Constructing their novels around communities of tricksters--instead of following the normal trickster novelist's tradition that includes an individual trickster within a given community--Sherley Anne Williams, Ernest Gaines, and Gloria Naylor parody the rebel or loner trickster tradition in literature and conceptualize a world in which African Americans, white Americans, and Native Americans work communally to deconstruct the stereotypes associated with race, age, class, and gender. In Writing Tricksters, Jeanne R. Smith comments on the use of parody in trickster novels:

A chief value of parody is in exposing any one perspective, or any one language, as necessarily limited. Tricksters can parody languages, and therefore worldviews, because of their liminal cultural position. Their position outside the confines of rigid social structures gives them a privileged perspective. (12)

The authors of Dessa Rose, A Gathering of Old Men, and Mama Day use parody as a humorous narrative technique: the group of slaves who, in Dessa Rose, parody a slave auction; the group of old men who, in A Gathering of Old Men, parody the badman; and George and Cocoa who, as Cocoa calls out to her deceased husband George in Mama Day and receives an immediate response from the spiritual world, use signifying to parody the call-and-response pattern used in African American church spirituals and prayers.

The verbal signifying sessions which occur between the characters within these works add humor to the novels. This humor enables the modern reader to

look into the past at the wrongs imposed on African Americans by chattel slavery; to look at the relatively recent 1970's, when vigilantes were not "a thing of the past" but a threat to the future cultural survival of African Americans; and to look into the future in which, Naylor's first-person plural narrator suggests, "[s]ome things stay the same. . . . [s]ome things change. . . . [and] some things are yet to be" (312).

Possessing the ability to signify, Williams', Gaines', and Naylor's tricksters all display the ability to play with and "parody" standard English. Because these three authors establish communities that are "liminal[ly]" positioned--Dessa's as a slave community, Candy's as downtrodden farmers, and Mama Day's as believers in conjuring--the tricksters within these communities are able both to re-define their day-to-day realities and to place themselves in a position of power equal to that of mainstream society while maintaining, as Smith suggests, a "privileged perspective."

Williams' multiple narrators are examples of the various types of antebellum southerners with whom an escaping slave might contend. The names of two of her characters, Nehemiah Adams and Ruth, signify on and revise the traditional stories surrounding three biblical characters. The name of Williams' narrator, Odessa, signifies on a location in west Texas, thereby denoting where the runaways are likely to end up. Williams' contemporary vision of events that occurred in history provides the reader with a tricksterlike perspective: readers hear the story first in Odessa's voice as she recites the story to a female member of her family. By characterizing Rufel as a confidence woman, Williams links the Euro-American trickster figure with the African American tricksters of both animal and human trickster tales. Using cultural differences between whites and



blacks as well as the language of signifying and parody to provide the reader with humor, Williams illustrates a situation which could have deadly consequences, yet turns a community of underdogs into the spiritually privileged class.

Similar to Williams' use of narrating voices, Gaines, in A Gathering of Old Men, uses fifteen first-person narrators who provide his readers with examples of the types of people who were living in Louisiana during the 1970's. His multiple narrators not only establish a sense of community but also involve the readers as active participants in an oral storytelling process. Also, the construction of Gaines' trickster community resembles the construction of African American culture in the colonial United States. Gaines' community, like those of colonized Africans, is established out of a pressing need to protect a group member from an external and potentially more powerful opponent. Like Williams, who uses nicknames to provide the group of antagonists with a recognizable and internalized power structure, Gaines uses names to signify on the traditional Cajun / Creole storytellers of Louisiana. His theme, combating vigilante groups, also signifies on traditional Louisiana folktales. Gaines' setting, on the old Marshall plantation, signifies on and inverts the conventional antebellum southern plantation novel. The Marshall plantation has been sold off in pieces and the Marshalls no longer maintain their once aristocratic social status. Gaines also re-presents the African American folk novel as he signifies on Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. Gaines parodies the badman by characterizing his community of old men as tricksters. He, like Williams, incorporates several white confidence women within his community, thereby empowering and showing preference for a multicultural-minded

group of tricksters. Casting the traditional authority figures, for example, Reverend Jameson, Sheriff Mapes, and Judge Reynolds, as easily duped characters, and placing the power of authority in the hands of the old men, Gaines articulates a new power structure: placing community action above mob mentality.

Similar to both Williams' and Gaines' use of multiple narrators, Naylor uses one narrator, the androgynous and communal first-person plural omniscient narrator, to provide the reader with a welcoming storytelling voice. Naylor, like Williams, uses biblical names to imbue the Day ancestors with characteristics similar to their Old and New Testament counterparts, the one exception to the rule being Sapphira, whose biblical equal died as a result of keeping part of the profit from her land sales. Naylor's Sapphira, however, serves as a culture-creator and goddess figure for the people in Willow Springs. As with Williams and Gaines, intertextual revision and signifying within the novel serve as important vehicles for carrying hidden meanings and revealing humor within the text. As there are no traditional authority figures in Mama Day, Mama Day herself serves as the community's moral law enforcer. Teaching through signifying and the exploitation of character flaws, the trickster figures in Willow Springs appear to the reader as social guides and instructors of morality. Because these tricksters are conjurers who believe in active unseen forces, the reader is allowed to see firsthand the multiple levels of daily human existence as well as the multiplicity of available cultural paradigms outside of one's own that are waiting to be revealed.

Williams, Gaines, and Naylor, within their respective novels, Dessa Rose, A Gathering of Old Men, and Mama Day, re-present the animal, Slave John, badmen, and

conjuring tricksters of the African American oral tradition. Their works educate contemporary readers about the perils of slavery, racism of the 1970's, and multicultural intolerance still present in contemporary America. Including multiethnic, androgynous, and various-aged members within their revolutionary trickster communities, these authors offer hope of growing intercommunication and tolerance among the races.

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