

Questions for Class Discussion

1. The oral tradition is extremely important — in fact, for many cultures it is the only way of passing on traditions, beliefs, stories, etc. How has modern life infringed upon or altered this tradition? In the media age, does oral tradition have a place in literature?
2. Many contemporary African-American authors found inspiration in Zora Neale Hurston's work. In reading these folktales, are you able to recognize their influence? And if so, can you think of any particular authors whose style recalls Hurston's? What does the oral tradition lose in the translation to the written word? Do you think that Hurston succeeds in being true to the stories and storytellers in her rendering of these tales? What sort of images do you conjure about the tellers themselves?
3. Do you agree with John Edgar Wideman that "translation destroys and displaces as much as it restores and renders available" (p. xvi)? Discuss how this premise manifests itself in this collection.
4. In the Foreword, John Edgar Wideman draws a connection between African-American oral tradition, jazz, and hip hop. Do you agree with him that Zora Neale Hurston began a trend the cultural impact of which even she could not foresee?
5. In a letter to Langston Hughes, Hurston writes, "I am leaving the story material almost untouched. I have only tampered with it where the storyteller was not clear. I know it is going to read different, but that is the glory of the thing, don't you think?" (p. xxviii) Discuss the balancing act Hurston had to negotiate between the free flowing storytelling tradition of the rural south and her more formal academic training.
6. In her Introduction, Carla Kaplan suggests that if Hurston had published this volume of folktales during her lifetime it may have "derailed" her career as a novelist. Do you agree? How do you think it would have affected her career? How would it have affected our perception of African-American literature?
7. Do you feel that the exactness of the dialect in Hurston's transcriptions — a dialect that can often be difficult to read — contributes to the value of these folktales as a historical document? Discuss the pros and cons of reading the folktales in the dialect they were spoken. If your students are having difficulty with the dialect, consider playing the audiocassette which is performed by Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis.
8. The title of this collection — *Every Tongue Got to Confess* — came from one of the Folktales, but Hurston didn't choose it. Do you think it

sums up the essence of the collection? If so, how? And if not, what other titles you would you propose?

9. Discuss your favorite tales in this collection. What is it about these particular stories that you especially liked?