FICTION WITH FRICTION: UNRELIABLE NARRATIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY?

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Abstract: Storytelling and oral history are important and preserved aspects of the African identity. But restrictions and language barriers placed on the captives of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, forced African Americans to create new ways of ensuring that their customs and heritage survived for future generations. Oral histories can be problematic, since stories conveyed by word of mouth corrupt and change over decades. The concept of storytelling itself calls for invention and adaptation and when these are applied to the protection of a proud history it reduces it to a genre or trope. Thanks to their creativity, some African Americans managed to preserve their lineage (as demonstrated by the late Alex Haley in Roots), but millions of life stories remain untold. Of surviving narratives familiar to modern readers, many were dictated to custodians in charge of translating the account for a wider audience. Accounts of slaves were invariably prefaced by a gatekeeper (often an abolitionist), in order to validate a narrative, and the tone is sometimes emotive or challenging, due to the interference from a white perspective. This essay addresses the oral tradition and the situation of slaves in captivity before examining the various ways in which slave narratives were recorded and validated. It also considers why white custodians felt the need to authenticate slave accounts and thereby influence subsequent literary movements.

Keywords: African American, African Diaspora, Black Atlantic, Narrative, Myth, Slavery, Storytelling.

Secretive and unreliable, these are terms one would use to describe the expression ‘word of mouth’. Accuracy and viewpoint may render a story’s validity as biased and changeable depending on the audience and storyteller. Here lies the initial problem with the cautious history concerning African American people; the very idea of storytelling. A word synonymous with fiction and fable, storytelling evokes the wounded and pieced history of a people reduced to appearing fictitious, almost imagined or invented. With no ‘traceable beginnings’, traditions, religions and customs are all conceived in an environment of restrictions, thereby creating a patched and restored culture of borrowing (Brand 2001, 5). This does not weaken the African American narrative; it simply highlights the double consciousness and duality of the term ‘African American’. The people being discussed are mobile captives of the global trading of human beings. The newly acquired title of ‘African American’ is a term some people may feel they have earned, being born on American soil and acknowledging an African heritage, but the new classification and reordering of a race is problematic. Agency and
control may be gained but there is also a challenging aspect with the neologism as it furthers the previous thought that the diasporan African people must adapt and an identity can be invented from severed roots.

Survived, betrayed, mercy: these words provocatively describe the anguish of a race of people. The persistence of this anguish has given many authors, such as Toni Morrison, plenty of material for their œuvre. Even the word ‘material’ seems so wrong, so reductive of the events of the slave trade. Black authors write Black history, but where does their knowledge come from? Here again is the idea of word of mouth, an oral history passed down through the generations, not unlike early fairy tales. The need and importance of oral histories stem from the laws during slavery. If caught teaching a slave to read or write the person guilty of this offence could face a fine of up to one hundred dollars. How could the field hand or bed wench take ownership of their stories? Where could they express their contempt or seek solace in a private journal? The panoptic nature of the slave trade ensured that the constant threat of being observed deterred many slaves from even trying to tell their stories. The implications of such stories not existing will be addressed later in the essay. The corpus of work relating to these subjects is very small, considering the number of slaves, this is due to many factors including language barriers and who were the custodians of the early slave narratives.

Perspective is very influential in the written history of African Americans and can often betray them due to a skewed interpretation. It is often thought that history is written by the victors. In the scenario of slavery the concept of competition or victors is a moot point. It implies the battle, to begin with, was fair. But African Americans were not willing participants in a dispute, they were taken. Whatever people know of the slave trade, be it from books or films, one must challenge the source. Where do African American narratives begin? As Dionne Brand observes, slaves appear to be ‘fixed in the ether of history’ (2001, 35). African people, indigenous to their region, could be seen as a curiosity:

Unaccustomed to the requirements of a tropical climate, Europeans mistook seminudity for lewdness. Similarly, they misinterpreted African cultural traditions (White 1985, 29).

They were something to be gawped at and studied, like the local wildlife; so despite the African American narrative having a suggestion of a starting point, primarily it is a start as an oddity. In Edward Long’s The History of Jamaica [1774], he states that ‘The Negro is a creature sui generis, he
fills up the space between mankind and the ape, as this and the monkey tribe supply the interval that is between the orang-outang and quadrupeds’ (336). He also believed that there was no art or science within the African culture. As cited from a personal letter in Professor Alan Rice’s *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic*, a family named Blunt refused to educate their servant Pompey as ‘the negro is happier in life without them ... It is doing him no benefit to place him by our education in our white groove of discontent and restless ambition’ (Rice 2003, 5).

Taken from their mother land and in transit across the ocean, slaves were kept in a log, as merchants may do with cargo. A ledger made up of columns and rows accounting for human beings by a number. This method of recording people/cargo made the ‘beginning’ of these slaves’ lives methodical, easy to decipher and orderly. No names, just numbers. As Hortense Spillers points out:

> The destruction of the African name, of kin, of linguistics and ritual connections is so obvious in the vital stats sheet that we tend to overlook it. Quite naturally, the trader is not interested, in any *semantic* sense, in this ‘baggage’ that he must deliver ... naming ... one of the key sources of bitter Americanizing for African persons (Spillers 1987, 73).

As aforementioned, the narratives of slaves such as Mary Prince are dictated to White ‘custodians’. Prince’s emotional story does not recoil from being too descriptive. But, according to Edward Long, the writer who recorded Prince’s story is, like the writers of other Black narratives, guilty of mimicry. However, one must ask what other way would stories such as these have been presented in 1831 if not in the form of a book using sophisticated English language? Would her Patois or Pidgin English be acknowledged by such a wide audience? It could be argued there is an element of conformity to her story but her agenda to educate the masses on the horrors of slavery needed to cater to their needs before her own.

Susanna Strickland took down Mary Prince’s story and perhaps edited as she went along. Of course one long stream of consciousness may not work as a narrative, but the organic and untouched nature may seem preferable as she tells her story. One wonders, despite the editor’s notes, if the story is truly verbatim. The emotive language, ‘my heart throbbing with grief’, is not only poignant, it emphasises the human within her story (Prince 2000, 11). As many believed that African American people were akin to animals, many of the adjectives used by ‘academics’ of the time, such as Edward Long, veered towards the bestial in their description. The success of stories, such as Mary Prince’s, was preceded by other female authors such as Phillis Wheatley. Wheatley’s *Poems on Various*
Subjects was published in England 1773, due to opposition in America. The authenticity of her poems were scrutinised to the extent that the following introduction was deemed necessary to be included:

‘Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few years since brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them’ (Wheatley 1773, ‘To the Public’). The need to validate and prove the credibility of these authors only affirms that their ability was questioned by some self-appointed literary police. To write and create is an expression of what is within an individual. Their passion and individual experiences; Phillis’s integrity is questioned solely because of her status as a Negro slave. The astonishment that a Negro could write poetry requires a judge to prove her credentials, hence another reason why literature has betrayed the voice of the African American. How can a Black person use literature (in the eighteenth century) to express and share life experiences if it is not prefaced with ‘go ahead’ by the local authority?

In Dionne Brand’s A Map to the Door of No Return the ‘ruptured geography’ of the African American sees to end all ‘traceable beginnings’ (2001, 5). The ‘haunted’ existence of Black people stems from a life born from the sea; inhabiting this liminal space has literally washed away anything ‘worth remembering’ (ibid., 11-12) Envying the cosmopolitan nature of life in a more progressive clime, Brand talks of the islands, one must assume she is talking of the islands in the Caribbean, where novels and plays such as The Tempest and Treasure Island are believed to be set. By including spirits and monsters, Brand illustrates how the British literary canon has often depicted islands to be inhabited by these whimsical entities. The elements of fantasy refer to the aforementioned storytelling. Brand argues that due to a lack of history and a new identity being born from the sea, African Americans are ‘already mythic’ (ibid., 13). Her mention of the ‘Dark Continent’ further challenges the preconceived ideas forced upon a White reader as well as Black slave. During the process of seasoning all memory of home and identity is deleted from the African American’s mind. The image replaced is one of an outsider, a savage, a person from a wild land in desperate need to be tamed. Brand speculates that by erasing the memory, this allowed the racist ideology of the time to filter into these supposedly blank minds. As for second generation African Americans, the continent their parents called ‘home’ became nothing but a story. Not only were their parents picking cotton but they were spinning a yarn.

It is possible to say that all accounts of history have an element of fiction involved. There is often an entertaining nature to reporting famous battles or significant changes in law; so when Brand talks of the ‘mystery of interpretation’ one must consider how these narrations and the people they speak...
of may only ever be fictions: ‘that places and those who inhabit them are indeed fictions’ (Brand 2001, 18). An African American’s life story is hesitantly told or constructed by authors. Brand claims that, ‘to have one’s belonging lodged in a metaphor is voluptuous intrigue; to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction’ (2001, 18), and here she has arrived right at the crux of the matter. Later she mentions ‘horror’ and ‘romance’, and suggests that to be Black you belong to a genre. It is as if ‘African American’ is not an existence or life, but a constant presence in a literary genre. Despite the previous claims of pseudo scientists, Black people do and did enjoy art and science within their culture; Brand highlights this by saluting its comforting nature. But does literature leave African Americans at its mercy? - It seems that literature is all African Americans had: to learn from, to aspire to, contribute to and finally metaphorically inhabiting a genre and becoming fictitious.

Brought to a new land, and at the mercy of their owners, African American slaves faced pro-slavery literature and illustrations on a regular basis. Isaac Teale’s poem, ‘Sable Venus: An Ode’, is one example. Accompanied by an illustration, when published as ‘The Voyage of the Sable Venus’ in 1793, the poem is filled with racist rhetoric and depraved ideas of comedy. In it a Black Venus is portrayed as the temptress and her rape is glorified: ‘But when her step had touched the strand/ Wild rapture seized the ravished land’ (Basker 2002, 148). Marcus Wood notes that ‘young slave women when they do feature in sexual contexts operate in a narrative and symbolic space approximately equivalent to that reserved in mainland Britain for prostitutes’ (Wood 2004, 130). The use of mythic iconography (Neptune and cupids) in the poem and accompanying illustration serve to perpetuate the idea of fiction and a people belonging to a trope. Distanced in art, from the horrors of reality, ‘the sexual union of sailor and slave woman is strangely transposed’ (Wood 2004, 132).

The poem and its author had a toxic agenda to its creation; the sexual assault of African American women was commonplace and simply literary fodder. The exoticism of Black women in the poem was a widely held belief, the distribution of a poem such as this would facilitate abusive rhetoric aimed towards African American women and in turn they would internalize these negative feelings and feel worthless.

Hortense J. Spillers has written extensively on the subject of literature and African Americans, in ‘American Grammar’ she discusses the beginnings of Black history and the aftermath of such a brutal introduction to history and literature.
The massive demographic shifts, the violent formation of a modern African consciousness, that take place on the sub-Saharan Continent during initiative strikes which open the Atlantic Slave Trade in the fifteenth century of our Christ, interrupted hundreds of years of Black culture. We write and think, then, about an outcome of aspects of African-American life in the United States under the pressure of those events (Spillers 1987, 68).

The aggressive nature of the slave trade has affected African American lives in a way people are unable to comprehend. These ‘silent chapters’ of history are hidden due to shame and fear of accountability (Spillers 1987, 73). The rape of female slaves was commonplace. On board the ship these events were not processed or reported; ‘sexual violation of captive females ... did not constitute events that captains and their crews rushed to record in letters’ (ibid.). If they had the likelihood is it would not have made any difference. Once again slaves and their treatment went unreported or misreported, they needed people to know of the horrors, and they needed people protesting against this treatment. No record, no evidence, just silenced marginalised voices.

The language of law often betrayed slaves; in Mississippi a trial where a young female slave was raped by a male slave, the law had no precedent for such a crime and passed a new state legislature in 1860 making rape ‘to a Black female under twelve punishable by death or whipping’ (White 1985, 152). This being the same law which would refer to them as ‘animals’; “slave” appears in the same context with beasts of burden, all and any animal(s), various livestock’ (Spillers 1987, 79) The law allowed for this treatment to continue, the protection afforded to slaves was due to their performance as slave labourers and breeders. Their wellbeing was never taken into account, this is an example of how the legal literature of the period would destroy them, rather than protect them. Once again African Americans were at the mercy of a governing body and the cruel ‘order’ imposed on plantations and over their bodies.

The law, ship records and ‘academic’ study of people all referred to African Americans as either animals or an exotic sexual plaything. Here is where African Americans were betrayed by the written word and forced to abide by laws which saw them treated in the most appalling ways. Contemporary Black authors such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have written extensively on the aftermath of slavery and the Western influence over a growing African American canon. Will these stories ever become part of the American canon? Would African Americans desire that, or does the separation of genres offer Black writers more control and agency over their work? Morrison claims that:
Recent approaches to the reading of Afro-American literature have come some distance; have addressed those arguments ... that have, since the seventeenth century, effectively silenced the autonomy of that literature (1989, 208).

Often the frontispiece to slave narratives would confirm a Black writer’s credibility or pay respects to the person who transcribed the work. What does this do to Black voices? It erects instant parameters, barriers for the author to work within. Sit and tell your intimate details to somebody you have been conditioned to please and serve or have your abilities authorised before the page is turned to reveal your truths. Everyday bombardment with images and literature of the time; posters of runaway slaves and slave auctions would make the venture into writing a problematic one as the only encounters of the slave story on paper was on promoting ownership of the body or fugitive slaves. Anti-slavery activists such as Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), Ottobah Cugoano (1757-1791) and Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) and Robert Wedderburn (1762-1835/36?), each took an incredibly bold move to publish work; but these were intelligent men with the ability to express themselves coherently: ‘I have felt great satisfaction when reflecting on the wonderful progress of the Arts and Sciences within the last few years’ (Wedderburn 1991, 143). White authors such as Thomas Pringle (1789-1834) often wrote about the plight of Black people, but such work will always be from a place of privilege.

As literary movements change, as, for example, The Harlem Renaissance, Black culture procures a status where it is almost celebrated and spoken about favourably. The Black hand that previously toiled in the field has taken hold of the pen and its destiny. No longer shackled or refused an education, the oral histories passed through generations are now entering bestselling book lists and winning Nobel Prizes. Nonetheless, the fragmented and disjointed nature of Black literature presents difficulties as the author or subject is jointly a protagonist and antagonist. Entering a sphere not prepared or acknowledging of Black literacy, modern authors have used the trail-blazing ambitions of people past to mark the white of the page with black ink and Black voices.

References


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