

Race Gender and Repossession in Walker's Jubilee: A Historical Novel

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Abstract:

Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, the precursor of a wave of neo-enclaved tales and African-American historical fictions, is the subject of this essay, which aims to provide light on its evolution. Revisionist movements in African-American history were spurred by the advent of Walker's book in the 1930s, despite most reviewers' implicit linkage to this period. It is a significant stage in African American historical mitigate in *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker. The tales of the slaves, which Walker reshapes to produce a new style of representation that would only become prevalent in the sixties, are based on feature traditions. New historical studies and novels on slavery written after 1965, like Walker's work, focus on the agency of the slaves; describe their community- and culture-building activities; display modes of resistance; and question the myths and stereotypes that have been spread in Anglo American depictions of the enslaved. Walker's view of history has influenced a generation of African-American authors.

Keywords: Slavery, Marginalisation, History, Identity, Feminism.

Discussion

As several critiques have tried to point out, Margaret Walker's text may have sparked revisions of the history of chattel slavery from the perspective of Black women, such as Ernest G. Gaines' *Dessa Rose* (1971), Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). The author's assurance that servitude did not crush her heroine's soul is her legacy to other female historical fiction heroes such as Miss James Pittman, *Dessa Rose*, and *Sethe*. The majority of *Jubilee* research dates the text's creation to the 1960s. Indeed, critics such as Ashraf H. A. Rushdy in "The Neo-Slave Narrative," Joyce Pettis in "Margaret Walker: Black Women Writer of the South," and Angelyn Mitchell in her advent to *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fictions*—suggest that the novel's evolution parallels the 1960s. This article says that when you think about *Jubilee*, you should not only think about the important ideology of the sixties. Margaret Walker's book comes from when the African-American movement for historical reclamation was at its peak: the thirties. When Walker was a senior at Illinois' Northeastern University (Walker, *How I Wrote* 12), she began writing *Jubilee* in the autumn of 1934. She finished and published it in 1978. Because of this, it is crucial to look at the context of the publishing of *Jubilee* to comprehend the practices buried in the text and the exploding Black Power movements that gave rise to a wave of neo-narratives of the slaves. The author herself makes it apparent in an interview with Kay Bonnetti that her historical work, released in 1966, displays effects of the thought she learned in the thirties, making this clarification all the more vital (128).

Walker started writing *Jubilee* in the late stages of the Harlem Renaissance. In the 1920s, this movement of cultural self-assertion reached its peak. However, in the 1930s, it was still a potent political tool. When it came to the Harlem Renaissance, the 1960s

nationalism movement had all the elements it needed to take root: protests against African-Americans' economic and social situations, unparalleled growth of race awareness, and pride in Negro cultural history. In particular, the writers and thinkers of this movement took pleasure in their Negro identity and cherished their racial ancestry. The usage of African-American folklore, which W.E.B. Du Bois had popularised in his book *The Souls of BlackFolk* (1903) and was prominent in African-American writers' works during this period.

It is important to note the contributions of Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Sterling Brown to this celebration and embracing of African-American culture that occurred during the Harlem Renaissance and in the years after. As a result of Hurston and other authors, Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* is part of this traditional tradition (Carmichael 71). "Folk material: folk sayings, folk belief, folkways" was the inspiration for *Jubilee* (Walker, *How I Wrote Jubilee* 25). Walker hoped to immerse himself in the enslaved culture.

The 1930s through the 1950s was a watershed in American historiography. Until the mid-20th century, the Anglo-American worldview dominated the portrayal of enslaved people's history. A major flaw in this view is that it fails to convey enslaved people's culture or awareness in any meaningful way. According to Lawrence Levine in the prologue to *Black Culture and Black Awareness* (1978), history has "devoted its attention to other groups and other problems" and failed to capture the slaves and other oppressed groups' ideas and consciousness. Furthermore, the African-American experience was portrayed by Anglo-American media that was ideologically skewed.

As Y. N Kly notes in *TheInvisible War. The African American Anti-Slavery Resistance from the Stono Rebellionthrough the Seminole Wars* (2006) worked confirmed and propagated a history that "facilitated the preservation of the most vicious racist stereotypes" of African Americans. Another theory put out by Kly is that "the present-day political-economic order has shaped the history of the Black people to pass on to succeeding generations both its benefits and its liabilities, and the victor's rabid propaganda of the past." (18).

Both Ulrich Bonnell Philips and Dwight L. Dumond's perspectives on slavery throughout the 1920s and 1930s demonstrate the propagandist, prejudiced, and incomplete character. Especially in *American Negro Slavery* (1918), racial attitudes expressed by Ulrich Bonnell Philips (1877-1934) promote slavery. Condemning slavery as an oppressive institution, he portrays it as good for the slaves. In Philips' depictions, enslaved Americans are shown as docile and subservient. *Antislavery Origins of the CivilWar* (1939) by Dwight L. Dumond is an example of the second prominent stance in the study concerning enslavement, which asserts that slavery was an inhumane institution. However, it is important to note that Dumond does not present the enslaved Africans as historical "subjects."

This is a common problem with conventional history, which concentrates on the institution's harshness rather than the inventive reactions of enslaved individuals, like Dumond, to the system. As Levine said about conventional histories, his work adds to the idea that "Black history is a never-ending cycle of degradation and pathology" (x-xi). Even while the racist and liberal viewpoints regarded slavery differently, both ignored the Negro in their portrayals of the institution. *African American History and Radical Historiography* by Herbert Shapiro states that "the Negro was innately inferior in the first and a suppliant presence in the second." The Herbert Aptheker Memorial Essays (1998) (6-7).

Anglo-American historical portrayals of the African American past are riddled with inaccuracies, distortions, and misrepresentations. Anglo-American history up to the turn of the century has nothing to say about enslaved people, according to Kly in the foreword to his book, *The Invisible War*. Enslaved Africans' culture, ideas, and awareness were not represented. Because it defended slavery and propagated racist stereotypes and beliefs about African Americans, it was also ideologically prejudiced. According to Anglo-American history, for example, abducted African people made no meaningful effort to oppose their captivity or the slavery system as a whole, and they were thus considered a non-issue in terms of collective resistance. It was also argued that the released enslaved people mostly went northward to liberty rather than southward to the free areas of Georgia and Florida, as was often believed. The history written by Anglo-American historians distorted and eliminated African-Americans' resistance to tyranny and their agency, as seen by the way they portrayed their liberation battles as just other Indian warfare (19-20).

In *The Negro in the Civil War* (1969), but more importantly in "Black History's Antebellum Origins," Benjamin Quarles corroborates Kly's views. He contends that white recorders misread the historical materials they had supposedly investigated, and this "failure of deduction was compounded by a deficiency even more grievous—bias by omission." The exclusions and prejudices Quarles points out are only the tips of the iceberg when it comes to Black history. To a large extent, historians of white descent propagated the idea that black people had an inborn tendency toward modesty and underachievement that would keep them permanently marginalized in history (89-90). He said that Anglo-American historians framed African-American history as "inglorious when it was not insignificant" and that it "was shrouded in mystery when it was not covered in shame" (90).

Slavery and the Civil War have been depicted in literature by white writers with a similar lack of attention, bigotry, and devastation of Black history. Authors of the colonial tradition paid scant attention to the slaves and neglected their culture and awareness. In *The Negro in American Fiction* (1969), Sterling Brown notes that their writings assisted the continuance of slavery by obscuring its horrors and emphasizing the plantation's festivities, such as harvesting, corn-shucking, hunting, and fishing balls. Slavery was portrayed as "an unbroken Mardi Gras," a civilizing and Christianizing institution for happy enslaved people (18). Historical fiction based on the plantation culture perpetuated myths about enslaved African-Americans. Margaret Walker was well aware of the "images of blacks as servile and inferior race" (Christian 19) promulgated by southern authors in the pre-Civil War era. When she tells out that the plantation tradition "marked the beginning of stereotypes from which literature has yet to free itself," she supports Christian's opinion (163). Indeed, the plantation history gave rise to representations of Black men like the obedient plantation uncle, the Black Sambo, and the minstrel. *Black Women Novelists* by Barbara Christian reaffirms what Walker said in *Black Women Novelists* about the crude stereotypes of African-American women that arose in antebellum and postbellum white Southern women authors' fictions, such as the conjure woman, the Jezebel, and the vulgar Black woman. Even male African American authors who perpetuated stereotypes of Black women in their writings would continue this trend.

Civil War novels from the 19th and 20th centuries are another genres in which African Americans are prominently featured. A similar silencing, "othering," and marginalization of Black characters as fictions of the plantation heritage was carried out by these, particularly by white Southern authors in the South of the United States. Like

white historians, White Southern Civil War authors exhibited little care for African-Americans' lived experience, awareness, and desires during their writing. In his book *Fiction Fights the Civil War* (1957), Robert Lively analyzed 512 books set during the American Civil War and concluded. "White authors have not tried very hard to understand individual slave characters or wake in readers any sense of identification with them," he says. Indeed, the authors have taken a different approach, using the Negro characters to represent their views on racial relations (49). To demonstrate this, Lively first points out that the slaves were poorly depicted in Civil War books as evidence. As a second point, he indicates that Blacks were never the focus of these writings. White heroes and heroines were all that mattered to them, and the rest of us were passing by. According to Lively, "outstanding Negroes of war fiction are memorable for noble simplicity, rather than complex human characteristics" (49).

The slaves "have been accorded a smaller and smaller place in the twentieth century's novels of the war," Lively says, arguing that this erasure of Black presence is continued in the twentieth century Civil War novels in general. During the war, "the greatest concern with Negro life was expressed in early northern novels; after that, in novels about white men and women, the story of the southern servant was reduced to sub-plots" (55). According to Lively, the history provided in these Civil War books, particularly the Southern ones, supports the system of slavery. According to him, the Southern depiction of the Black person sought to "demonstrate the contentment of Negroes with their antebellum lot." (51). In *Gone With the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell portrays the Black person as a satisfied and joyful individual, supporting Lively's claim. Mitchell essentially supports slavery in her war book, as does William Faulkner in *Intruder in the Dust* and Sartoris, as well as the concept of the Glorious South. Even Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* fails to convey the Civil War's Black presence. Like conventional history writers who ignored African Americans, these white Civil War authors likewise distorted his past and removed his agency.

In the period preceding *Jubilee's* writing, African Americans were aware of the loss of African-American history in American history and literature, which resulted in a peak moment of counter-narrating by African Americans. A revisionist movement recovering Black history and questioning accepted paths of reading Black history shook the foundations of American historiography. W.E.B. Du Bois was the forerunner and most visible figure of this historiographic movement that sought to recover Black history from within. In the "Forethought" section of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois advised historians to investigate non-textual expressions of Negro history, including Negro spirituals, to portray the actual meaning of the Black experience in America. Hence, Du Bois seeded these radical historical seeds. A "counter-memory" of Black history was also an important part of his life's work. *Black Reconstruction* (1935) defied many of the basic assumptions of Anglo-American historians' racist portrayals of chattel slavery and reinterpreted the Civil War and Reconstruction period. Carter G. Woodson is another pioneer and symbolic person in this drive to reclaim history. For the study of African American history, he founded the ASNHL (Association for the Study of Negro Life and History) and *Journal of Negro History* in 1915. Woodson studied Non-textual expressions such as folklore to reinterpret the actual representation of Black history.

In the mid-1930s, when Walker began writing her historical book, this revisionist movement reached its apex and would increase in proportion in the coming decades. It is true that Herbert Aptheker, a close collaborator of Du Bois's, fought back

against the skewed perspectives of Anglo-American scholars by writing a 1937 Master's thesis on Nat Turner's slave uprising and a 1943 doctorate dissertation on the subject of the *American Negro Slave Revolts*. According to Shapiro, Aptheker "presents a powerful refutation of the mainstream historian, typified by UB Phillips, which contended that the plantation economy, ruled by superior whites, sought to civilize an inherently inferior black population" Aptheker (2). In a series of writings, he exposed the cruelty and class exploitation of slavery, defended the typical rebelliousness of African Americans, and highlighted the resistance and role of the enslaved in the abolitionist struggle.

The '60s, which coincided with the *Jubilee's* conclusion, saw significant social, political, and intellectual developments, adding fuel to the fire of the Thirties' historical rediscovery. In the stormy years of the Civil Rights Movement, the masses played a crucial role in transforming American culture, forcing historians to reassess their assumptions about the past. They learned a lot about power dynamics in the process. This realization of the complexities of the social agency led to a rethinking of historians' perceptions of slavery and history following the Civil Rights Movement. (Rushdy, "The Neo-Slave Narrative" 88-9). One of the most important movements of the 1960s was the Black Power Movement. As a result of the Civil Rights Movement's political and intellectual upheaval, Harlem Renaissance cultural nationalism was bolstered. In the wake of this movement, African-Americans began to have a greater sense of self-worth and pride in their ancestry. African American history was mined by its proponents to redefine the world on their terms and dispel unfavorable stereotypes of non-Western peoples and civilizations.

The Black Studies movement that sprang out of the Black Power Movement paved the way for a deeper understanding of the genuine experiences and cultures of Black people throughout the Diaspora. To a large extent, it helped to change the trajectory of reading about slavery and servitude because it "provided the pride and perspective necessary to pierce the myths and lies that have grown up" (Williams 248). After all of the changes that took place on various levels, many historical studies and literary works were produced that took into account "the agency and self-expression of the African slaves, their community-building energies and forms of resistance they demonstrated" (Rushdy 88-9). Walker paved the way for this new way of depicting the world. Walker was a "historian" since she had done a significant study on the times she revisited in *Jubilee* as a genuine scholar, and she referred to herself as one. For the sake of objectivity and historical truth, she studied slavery, the Civil War, and the post-Civil War period. *How I Wrote Jubilee* is a comprehensive account of the author's extensive research over the novel's thirty-year lifespan. While in Iowa, Walker first signed up for an "American Civilization" class to better understand the slave trade. A list of literature regarding the South, slavery, and Georgia's slave codes was assembled by her. As a result, *American Negro Slavery* by Ulrich B. Phillips, *The Cotton Kingdom* by William E. Dodd, *A History of the Old South* by Clement Eaton, *Journey in the Seaboard Slave State* by Frederick Olmstead, and *A Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* by Frances A. Kemble were all included in this list of books. Walker also studied textbooks authored by authors of various races and ethnicities, including whites from the South, North, and blacks. She learned "how to find and use primary sources and documents" by researching Black women in the pre-bellum era. (Walker, *How I Wrote* 13).

To gain an unbiased perspective on slavery, Walker studied a wide range of first-person accounts written by enslaved people and primary sources and historical records. The Library of North Carolina's Martin Collection contains narratives written by enslaved people. In this regard, the stories of enslaved people's brutality, such as

branding, whipping, and mutilation, were substantiated by her great-grandmother's story. Walker also studied the Nelson Tift files, a collection of personal documents belonging to a rich white Georgia planter who resided in the area where her novel takes place back in the antebellum days (Walker, *How I Wrote* 18). This collection contains Grimes' letter to John Dutton after the slaves had broken up in the smokehouse and the planters' talk at Dutton's Dinner party. At 135th and Schomburg, Walker visited the Schomburg Collection of Negro History in Harlem. Lawrence Reddick, who had a Ph.D. in history, was the collection's curator at her death. As well as teaching her about Southern history, Reddick provided her with useful leads. Walker studied "free Negroes in Georgia and the antebellum slave woman" in 1944 when she was awarded the Rosenwald Fellowship. (15).

Walker collaborated with several libraries around the United States. A significant portion of Walker's study focused on the years leading up to the American Civil War. Robert Lively's *Fiction Fights the Civil War* studies 512 books, including several of her favorite Civil War novels. Reading W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction and Benjamin Quarles' The Negro in the Civil War*, and Charles Wesley's *Collapse of Confederacy* were her favorite books. Ads for runaway slaves; stories about ammunition workers; Jefferson Davis' speech on the accelerating rate of mutinies from the Confederate Army; and failure of Confederate currency" were all found in a Civil War newspaper package purchased by Walker for her novel in 1961, from which she drew some material for the novel. (20).

Four years later, Walker went over the famous references that Crane utilized in *Red*

Badge of Courage: the old *Century Magazine* with "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War." Walker conducted field research to substantiate her material and authenticate the oral story of her maternal great-grandmother. She took a trip to Dawson, where Randall Ware lived, and a setting in her historical novel. A man who had known his great-grandparents even took her to Ware's smithy, grist mill and home. In 1953, when she was granted a Ford Fellowship to complete her research, she took a trip to Greenville where she talked to her grandmother's youngest sister, who corroborated her material. From Greenville, Walker returned to Dawson for more information. She found a bus depot standing on the place where Randall Ware's smithy and grist mill were. Through an elderly white attorney who looked at her great-grandfather's records, she discovered that wealthy white people now owned Randall's property. But like Woodson and DuBois, Margaret Walker also consulted alternative historical sources such as folklore. More specifically, she carefully researched the enslaved's songs and their language, customs, and beliefs. In *How I Wrote Jubilee*, she remarks that Miss Hovey's collection of songs helped her complete the novel (22).

These years of ongoing research made Walker aware that the true nature of African-American experience was not depicted in Anglo-American historical writing and fiction. Indeed, she realized that the "Negro was simply a pawn" to whom little attention was

devoted, and certain aspects of his experience, such as his role in the liberation struggle, were blotted out of Anglo-American representations. Walker also gained consciousness of the bias and subjectivity of these works. She discovered that white Southern historians

and novelists misrepresented the process and institution of enslavement. They claimed it

was a beneficial system with benign masters. As for Northerners, they did not oppose

enslavement as long as it was “contained” in the South and did not spread into the territories. With *Jubilee*, Walker wanted to revise history to accommodate a proper Black

perspective and revive the African-American memory swept away by these masternarratives.

As she explains in *How I Wrote Jubilee*, she planned to write a folk novel so as to capture the true experience and cultural memory of the enslaved and to show the significance of Black people and their role during the war because these aspects had been

blotted out of the dominant culture’s representations (26). Additionally, Walker wanted to tell the story from a Black woman’s perspective because she felt that “the black woman’s story has not been told, has not been dealt adequately” (Giovanni 55). She thought

that the historical novel would be the most suitable way to teach people about a time and

a place as they “are more inclined to read fiction than history” (Rowell 23).

Conclusion

Thus, Margaret Walker wanted to reclaim the “true” nature of their experience from the African-American subject’s perspective. The practices and theories embedded in the narrative may well be linked to the context of its publication for various reasons; however, the novel is a product of the revisionist movement that began in the early century with scholars such as W.E.B Du Bois and reached a peak in the thirties, the period when the idea of writing a historical novel germinated in Walker’s mind.

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