

The Truth of the Picnic: Writing about American slavery



i

Writing about American slavery is no picnic. Hard to imagine anyone undertaking this for fun. Writing about slavery is more of a nightmare, although to this writer, this seems like stating the obvious. It is the obvious that rattles you, however.

Finding (or seeking) relief from resonance seems a fruitless pursuit. Images which to others seem simple or even banal rage and scream and writhe under the pen, threaten the writer with dual curses: stories overdone, tragedies understated.

Burning hot sun associates with a criminally violent South. Rope suggests the noose and lash, as tree branches recall strung bodies and intentionally broken necks. (An African American woman in the nineteenth century—Ida B. Wells—had to take lynching on as a personal, fevered, journalistic crusade in order to free us from the trees. And this was in the aftermath of slavery, death by lynching *after* ownership was outlawed.)

Thus, there are images we can't hide from or avoid; images that don't enrage people who haven't known, emotionally, psychologically, in the cells. We live in a tragic vortex, the kind from which sweeping epic stories of a people are spun. We are neither flaxen, nor hidden in towers. We have been burdened with an evil aspect.

Ropes and trees and pyres and sunshine are not innocent, but grim. All the world shudders when you look up from the fields, when you are dodging the whip, when you research your personal history, when you make the effort to identify, to remember, to render.

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Gapers surrounded where niggers were burned. Being tied to a stake and exterminated seemed common, gory, routine. The stakes were high. America refuses to acknowledge this memory, this collective recollection African Americans can't escape. Stinging stinking bleeding draining aching piercing truths. Willful abuse, intentional destruction, shackling, binding, reducing. Only our psychologies know this pain now.

Pain is part psychology; the memory of pain is wholly that. People are consequently crippled by failure to thrive. Failure to thrive can be congenital, inherited. Despair can pass through generations, invade the birth canal, infect the swimming seed. Disease in a public domain. Indignity persists—like cancer—especially shame and unchecked, unacknowledged rage. The plagues of history persist and make a future epidemiology. Blood flows from there. Slavery an infection oozing pus, and the wound unseen, untreated, underneath. From there the future rises. History persists.

iii

Slavery and its aftermath are human drama still unsettled. Administrators, timekeepers, civil servants, guardians of the state try to revise our understanding of the period and its outcomes. An effort to convince us that the drama is over rages. Some of us insist, and rightly so, that we are now in this drama's second act, we have not moved beyond the raised curtain, we are still in shock at what we have finally seen.

We can only argue over whether this drama is done. Both the act (slavery) and its aftermath (now) seem like swirling and flailing and being sucked up. Odd similarities between bondage and its resulting "freedom." To those of us who have inherited slavery as an experience of grand imposition, constraint and abuse, this swirling seizing vortex is unsettling, but deed- and lash- and fire-free. We flail but find groundlessness and chaos an improvement over tending ground for profit, for a separate, avaricious, maddeningly protected class.

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We have been maligned malappropriated and misused by people who misrepresented themselves—purported to be angelic, orderly, appropriate, blessed, sanctioned, right. For centuries they traded in us, worked our bodies and body fluids deep into the fertilized fields. Hid under brims of avarice, wore affluent hats. Meted and obscured deep pockets of knowledge, with dedicated, malicious intent. Used us as tools, and as currency. Wore us out, or passed us on. Sent us out to

the dirt plains to die—chopping or cutting or seeding or weeding or turning ground. Ginning or starving or bleeding under a whimsical punishment, decaying under trumped-up law.



Broadside, “Great Sale of Land, Negroes, Corn & Other Property.” Dated Charleston, 24 November 1860. Courtesy of the Gilder Lehrman Collection, Pierpont Morgan Library.

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This recalcitrant reality is hard to survive, or to revisit. In our time, and in that time, our psychologies suffer(ed) and writhe(d). Every writer knows psychology as artistic terrain.

When we invent or appropriate—narrative, characters, situations—and cast them into text, we writers own the stories we’ve made. When we choose to write about history, though, the hands that precede us have writ, and have cast some facts and some fictions into insistent, resistant, stone. There are only two choices really—write about now or then. Our time, or history. A bald and unyielding duality, this choice.

Some writers shy away from writing about the present. New years, new decades, new sunrises—incoming phone calls even—could change the course of events unfolding. The present is not fixed. And so, devoting time and sweat and angst to characters wrestling over fluid events seems improvident, daunting, a slippery slope.

Comparatively considered, history is fixed. Toni Morrison has asserted, by contrast, that history is fungible. Certainly, the facts and fictions that

constitute "history as accepted" bear examination, study, sorting out. Those of us who have studied and written and lived long enough have learned an almost nasty truth about the past: we get the "power version" of the time that came before us. That is, history as we read it (and therefore know it) has been propagated—planted, tilled, nurtured, weeded, guarded, managed, harvested—by the holders of the pen, those who wear the badge, the self-proclaimed community of power, the perpetrators.

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Who owns history? Everyone and no one, or both. A more important question, though, at least for the writer-me, is who tells the truth? We are, by now, in this, our new century, familiar with liars and manipulators, and their strategies: racism by omission, disenfranchisement by law, genocide by lash and under-education, paint by number.

The spirit or the soul partners body and its instincts with mind and its labels. From this multiplicity personal psychology springs. What intellectual acrobat will you find stooped in the cotton fields with sore and bleeding hands and split and bleeding feet? How much mental energy greets those sore and swollen hands and feet? How can anyone's thoughts possibly leap? What lessons of pain or grace will the stooped fieldworker teach the young ones? How much hope burns in the abject? Who can healthily remain conscious, awake?

vii

There is a flip side to this misery: the owner class revels. They controlled people. Underfed them. Overworked them. Raked in profit. And passed all this on to their descendants in the name of empire, inheritance, trust (an oxymoron), wealth. This horrid past of prejudice. Massive money made, unshared.

All this the writer has to grant her characters. Even though so many would rather not hear it, so many of the owner bunch vehemently decry, deny.

viii

In our country, there is real estate. This notion of what's palpable, tactile, and perpetual. There was no real ownership for slaves, none of any kind. Where slaves lived was called the quarters, which suggests, in itself, places partial, subsidiary, undeeded, unkind.

Living was segregated, and it stayed that way, for an unarguably long time.

But worst, it seems, was the calculated refusal to teach the culture, to share the culture. No counting, no reading, no money. No sense of humanitarianism, no admission of worth.

There were the slaves, in the center of a commerce. Money flowed around them and through them, money was made and manufactured by them.

And they had none.

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We—writers, readers, regular people—cannot escape the language either. We are assaulted by word, by image, by historical fact.

There are right now, for example, arguments between legend (or folklore) and academia, about the definition or origin of the word “picnic.” American English defines the word, of course, *as an outdoor meal, planned in advance, and usually for fun*. Or, alternatively, colloquially, *a pleasure*.

Folklore has it that picnic derived from the slaveholding practice of playing games, planning amusements, with “picking a nigger” being a central part of the game. Sometimes the word picnic is reported as a straight derivation of “pick a nigger” and sometimes as a variant of “pick a pickaninny.” (This word, pickaninny, has a dictionary definition of a small Negro child. Of course, no one has used this word outside the context of slavery, and I continue to be surprised when I find it in the dictionary. I daresay I have looked this word up a hundred times in my life, and I continue to be amazed; I continue to be intrigued by the shades of difference in the definitions.) The fabulous new encyclopedia, *Africana* (Boulder, Colo., 1999), has a special missive that reports that there is no verifiable connection between the word picnic and the word pickaninny or the phrase “pick a nigger.” Of course, it isn’t the word or phrase that’s so unsettling: it’s the notion of games being played at the expense of a people. Fun games, evil games, war games—no difference. That the *African* missive exists seems to me to represent evidence. Oral history being impossible to argue against, inherited opinions being impossible to refute.

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Occasionally, I feel trapped in this box as a Negro writer. The questions I’m asked to address, the issues I can worry over and write around, but certainly cannot resolve. I am concerned with broader ideas than race. On many mornings, race hardly seems relevant, since I often write about love and sex and intelligence, about human possibility. But to be who I am is to be a child of the slave institution. To be who I am is to be a writer whose awareness has three hundred years lost. To be who I am is to be angry and outraged and sometimes falsely humble.

To write about slavery is to face honestly what is denied, to wage war and not die.

This article originally appeared in issue 1.4 (July, 2001).

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