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CREATING THE NORM: THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION

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Abstract

This paper starts from the premise that norm, in the sense of a prescriptive tradition based on a set of standards deriving from past practices and regulating future ones, is the result of an initial creative gesture; in other words, first there was creativity and creativity became the norm. Based on this premise, the paper looks at some of the earliest African-American pieces of writing to trace the itinerary from creativity to norm, thus witnessing the birth of the African-American literary tradition. To this end, the paper analyses the first published Black narrative and identifies the trope of the talking book as illustrating that original gesture which, by creatively incorporating the norm, marks the beginning of a new tradition. Then the paper follows subsequent early Black narratives and identifies the creative transgression of the norm illustrated by the Middle Passage as the process by which the new norm is established.

Keywords: *norm, creativity, African-American, literature, talking book, Middle Passage*

1. A creative gesture

Readers of early African-American writing cannot fail to notice that the establishment of the African-American literary tradition brings forth a peculiar connection between writing and travel. Within the boundaries of travel, like within those of writing, one finds both enslavement and freedom; then it is not fortuitous that the black subject first discovers the book as a metonymic expression of Westcentric discourse upon an actual, albeit enforced, journey. The earliest published black (travel) account, *A narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince* (1774), first reports of this revelation, as well as of the slave's anxiety before it, in what scholars such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., Homi K. Bhabha and Anthony Appiah have called the trope of the *talking book*:

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> "[My Master] used to read prayers in public to the ship's crew every Sabbath day; and when first I saw him read, I was never so surprised in my whole life as when I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips. I wished it would do so to me." (Gronniosaw, 16)

The talking book is a sign of multilayered significance and rampant irony. Among others, it illustrates the dialectic relation between (white) norm and (black) creativity. Written as it is in the name of the F/father, the text to which the former African prince, now a slave, listens in wonder is a religious text supporting an economic mission – a holy paradox of Westcentric discourse. The book fails to convey its contained message of prayer, that is, the content of the norm, but to the innocent listener it does communicate the "immediate vision of the thing, freed from the discourse that accompanied it, or even encumbered it" (Bhabha, 29). That is, the book signifies the Word in itself and thereby signifies signification in the making, communicating norm as form. And what is norm but formalised content, i.e. substance as form? Ironically, the initial refusal of the grand text of Western discourse to speak to the person of African descent is reported in a text written by the latter. This means that, at some point, the norm was internalised in both its form and content and is now being conveyed, albeit in antithetical disguise. The talking book thus tells of a mutual conquest: not only did the book eventually talk to the African prince, but it lent him a voice, first turning him into an interlocutor and then affording him access to self-locution. The talking book becomes a spoken book when its normative content as a master narrative surrenders to its creative reading as a leitmotif in Gronniosaw's narrative.

Indeed, so compelling was the trope of the talking book and its underlying quest for literacy and freedom that the five earliest African-American narratives by James Gronniosaw, John Marrant, Olaudah Equiano, Ottabah Cugoano and John Jea all draw upon the discovery of the English book in a similar scenario of travel played out in the wilderness of colonial India, Africa or the Caribbean. The talking book in the sense of "signs taken for wonders" (Bhabha, 29) becomes the leading metaphor of the slave's progress to literacy and, ultimately, to authorship. Scholars agree that, in a very literal sense, the African-American literary tradition was created with the clear purpose of demonstrating that people of African descent possessed the required degree of reason and wit not only to write, but also to create literature, which serves, however redundant, as a certificate of humanity; hence the act of writing constitutes the first African-American political gesture (Bhabha, 12): "text created author; and black authors, it was hoped,

would create, or re-create, the image of the race in European discourse" (Appiah, 11). The talking book thus illustrates the progress of African-American creativity, which is set against the background of the white norm, and is to acquire a self-normative function, that is, to establish and consecrate a specific African-American tradition.

2. A norm is born

The quest for freedom and literacy as illustrated by the trope of the talking book remains strongly connected to the theme of travel and often takes the form of travel writing throughout the development of the African-American tradition. When it comes to African-American travel writing, scholars agree that, since the concept of travel entails a condition of intentionality, African-American travel excludes the enforced mobility of the Middle Passage. Nevertheless, it is the *Middle Passage* that functions as the permanent, explicit or implicit, hypotext of African-American travel (and) writing; it offers the experiential source and the imaginary theme of subsequent African-American mobility.

In fact, the Middle Passage not only constitutes the original site of the African-American tradition, but also provides an illustration of its inner workings. James Campbell argued that, in discussing the Middle Passage, the focus should shift from the image of the tightly packed ship to another image, as proposed by Harris, of the limbo dance of slaves brought up on the deck (Campbell, 7). In fact, one should note that the two images offered by this original experience are complementary: the Middle Passage does not signify, disjunctively, either the paradox of an immobilized displacement, or, through those moments when African captives replicate their physical contortions in dance, the creation of an alternative, aesthetic space for expression; it signifies both the hold and the deck, displacement and repositioning, and thus provides the dynamic locus where African-American culture originates. Hence, the Middle Passage proposes both an experience and its cathartic re-presentation, an aesthetic beginning originating in an existential end, the oppressions of the norm and the liberation of transgression. It is an act of mobile creativity against the stasis of norm.

Moreover, the first transatlantic journey, suggests James Campbell as well, emerges not as a clean break between past and present, but as a spatial continuum between Africa and America, the ship's deck and the hold (Campbell, 8). Actually, it is not so much continuity as suspension that the Middle Passage proposes: the slaves on the ship are neither in Africa, nor in America; they are suspended in the limitlessness of the ocean, in a space in-between. The Middle Passage rejects the opposition between hold and deck, above and below, constriction and movement, proposing a space in-between, in the sense conceptualized by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*

or by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*. It is this transgressive space that accommodates the first African-American aesthetic expression and therefore comes to serve as the original site of African-American creativity and the measuring rod of subsequent African-American production.

3. Norm as creativity

As such, early travel narratives illustrate the way in which, in a transgressive fashion, black travellers position themselves freely within the space of geography, the conventions of literature and the societal norms of the time. Contrary to the representational stereotype of the black slave in chains, one should emphasize, as Gerzina (2001) does, the intense travel of black sailors who, until the Civil War, played a central role in the formation of the African-Americans' collective sense of self, being central to the very creation of black America (Bolster,,2). The ocean as mobile home, the contradictory space which bears the commercial marks of both servitude and freedom, comes to signify in early African-American travel narratives an itinerary of economic and religious conversion leading to the first affirmation of an African-American identity, whereas the Christian black seaman emerges as the earliest normative image of the enslaved yet free African-American. These early, mostly African-born writers attempt to reconcile their enslavement with the freedom afforded by a Christianity that was instrumental in that enslavement. Moreover, since the Middle Passage as passed down in the tradition of African-American travel (and) writing denotes severance from the African home, the first reflex of the African-American traveler prompts a return to Africa in order to re-establish a home of memory or imagination.

Probably the most prominent of the early African-American travel writers, Olaudah Equiano provides in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) an account of travels in which the economic search for independence is paralleled by a religious quest. By any standard, Equiano did a remarkable amount of travelling: his itineraries stretch as far north as the Arctic Circle and as far south as Nicaragua; nevertheless, although he attempted it twice, he never saw Africa again. Like the other first black writers – James Gronniosaw, John Marrant, Ottabah Cugoano and John Jea, all of them seamen, all of their books written before 1800 – Equiano writes a personal narrative combining economic enterprise and religious revelation. When on land, the traveller never tires to visit places of worship in the West Indies, North America, England, and Turkey, but the epiphany significantly takes place at sea.

In his probably derivative description of his childhood in Africa, Equiano is careful to establish the concept of home as the familiar, but lost,

starting point of his narrative; while he admits that his representation is romanticized, such a representation is the necessary starting point for the eventually unfulfilled goal of returning to origins; every effort Equiano makes to this end shall fail because he has been altered by the education and experiences of his travels, yet not fully assimilated. In this sense, Equiano's creation of two narrative voices, the child and the mature persona, enables his ideological mobility and situates him in a space in-between. Playing on the stereotypes of Africans as cannibals, Equiano offers, through the voice of the child, an impression of whites as the other: upon first seeing white people, the child is "persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me" (Equiano, 17-18). The ironies are too evident not to be intentional; not only will the child become incorporated into white society as Gustavus Vassa, but, as he acquires their language, he "no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us, and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them" (Equiano, 72). It is only later on that Gustavus Vassa chances upon an African Methodist Episcopal church during a visit to Philadelphia and first comes into contact with the notion of Africanness as a self-conscious identity for the dispersed black people of the Atlantic, which eventually causes him to return to the name of his childhood.

Throughout the narrative, Equiano's identity oscillates between his Africanness, in the framework of which whites represent the other, and his Americanness, the desire to become part of the white other and convert his countrymen, too. As scholars have shown, the crisscrossing of the Atlantic takes him to a crisscrossing of identities (Campbell, 55). This anticipates geographically and spiritually what W.E.B. Du Bois termed double consciousness, the two souls of one man which are interwoven in Equiano's narrative, as the white other possesses the black and the black other possesses the white in an uneasy fashioning of the self. Equiano's ultimate exercise of negotiation between the two souls and two thoughts takes the form of a utopian commercial imperialism, which parallels, not without irony, the Christian utopia: his economic utopia would put an end to slavery, and therefore justify his possession of whiteness, but would perpetuate the white possession of Africa in a new kind of servitude.

But Equiano was not the only far-reaching traveller and writer of his time and his travelogue is only one of the many accounts of black people who travelled far from/to home. Some of them, like Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells, first made their way North and then travelled abroad to support the American abolitionist cause; others, like Mary Seacole, travelled through the Caribbean and Central America before reaching London and as far as Crimea as a nurse. Such travellers fill in the space between Equiano, the African-born slave who freed himself, sailed the

world, yet never returned to the African home, and Paul Cuffe, the free-born sea captain who eventually travelled to the dark continent in order to establish an early back-to-Africa scheme and consequently wrote *A Brief Account of the Settlement and Present Situation of the Colony of Sierra Leone in Africa* (1812).

The descendant of a landowning mixed-race family, Cuffe was at the time the very image of the travelling entrepreneur – whose most famous ship was given the name of "Traveller". His high economic success and deep religious and social commitment (the racially-integrated school he set up illustrates more revolutionary views than Washington's race-bound Tuskegee project) led him to imagine, plan and almost achieve a revolutionary enterprise: to establish trade between the colony of Sierra Leone and the countries of England and America, in order to end Africa's dependence on the slave trade; he is thus the first of the earliest African-American travellers who successfully carries not one, but two trips to Africa. His goal, as explained in his travel account, was to reunite the entire Black Atlantic in a new trade against slavery, by behaving in his own life as if the phenomenon never existed while fighting to end it all the while. Nevertheless, in spite of the length and variety of his itineraries, Cuffe's travel account is permeated by a well established sense of his American home, where he was born, raised and where he returned to die.

The second frequent destination of early African-American travellers is, apparently, quite opposite: Europe. Here, a founding text of African-American travel writing about Europe is Booker T. Washington's *The Man Farthest Down: A Record of Observation and Study in Europe* (1912), silently co-authored by Robert E. Park. In narrating his European tour, Washington positions himself, as G. Totten demonstrated in "Southernizing Travel in the Black Atlantic" (2007), against the familiar tropes of leisure travel by focusing on sociological assessment; Washington rejects tourist culture and implicitly the position of white travellers, while also distancing himself from the image of the black traveller as constructed by Olaudah Equiano or Paul Cuffe. Equiano on his voyage to the Arctic creates tales of adventures of the picaresque type; B.T. Washington, G. Totten suggests, resists both the touristic and the fantastic by framing his journey to the "commonplace things" of Europe as a working trip in support of his Tuskegee project. Furthermore, his anti-tourist desire to explore the unmapped sites of Europe evokes a colonialist perspective, employing the familiar rhetoric of exploration and conquest. The passages in which he proclaims a preference for uncharted spaces also reveal a very selective use of history, both black and white; it can thus be concluded that Washington's disregard for European history parallels his avoidance of African-American history.

In spite of his double urge for differentiation from both white and black travel practices, Washington's journey, like the itineraries of previous and contemporary African-American travellers, retraces the transatlantic routes of the Middle Passage. It does so by recasting the signification of work as a condition of bondage enforced upon blacks into a condition of freedom, thus making possible their racial uplift. This new conceptualization of work, materialized in the Tuskegee project, is sustained by a strategically narrow-sighted eulogy of plantation labour in the discussion of black southern life and a pre-fabricated sociological reading of working conditions in Europe. Washington has carefully selected the places, routes and questions of his journey, employing Europe as a case study designed to serve as an argument for his thesis on the value of work and thus to rewrite not only the historical meaning of the Middle Passage, but also slavery into a lucrative path to racial uplift.

4. Creativity as the norm

In the African-American tradition, travel and writing are associated from the very beginning in shared significance; the book and the road as interchangeable metonyms uphold each other in a literal, figurative and literary quest. Beginning with the narrative of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, positioned both within and against the grand code of the Western world, African-American writing by Olaudah Equiano, Paul Cuffe or Booker T. Washington represents the correlative quest for freedom and literacy, that is, the very process of creating within and against the norm, as the cause and purpose of the African-American tradition. In assimilating and then transgressing the Westcentric norm, African-Americanness establishes itself as a reactive norm – the burdens of which shall be challenged in their turn from within. This is how a new norm is established by creative gesture against a previous norm, in a never-ending cycle.

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