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THE ROYAL SLAVE
AND THE PRESTIGE OF ORIGINS

THE *topos*, or literary commonplace, of a "royal slave," unites the extremes of authority and privilege, on the one hand, and servitude and loss of freedom, on the other—thus encapsulating one of western culture's most frequently told stories, of a man or woman whose fall from the pinnacle of prosperity or signal achievement presumably marks the instability of all human fortunes. The conjunction of noble birth and social abjection dates back at least as far as Homer, whose epics not only prophesy the fates of Priam's house during the Trojan diaspora but also offer narratives like those of Odysseus' swineherd Eumaios, the son of a king kidnapped and sold into captivity. Since the age of Shakespeare, however, the "royal slave" has been black. The classical resonance of the phrase—and the conception—remains relevant, conferring a mantle of heroic and classical dignity on the slave to whom it was applied, just as Montaigne, extolling the natives of the New World (the "cannibales," in the language of his contemporaries), found renewed in them the warrior virtue of the ancient Greeks and Romans. In 1793, for example, Bryan Edwards wrote that the "circumstances which distinguish the Koromantyn, or Gold Coast, Negroes, from all others, are firmness both of body and mind; a ferociousness of disposition; but withal, activity, courage, and a stubbornness, or what an ancient Roman would have deemed an elevation, of soul."¹ Edwards's emphasis on a specific part of Africa—not incidentally the region from which the hero and title character of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* is said to have come—as nurturing such qualities in its natives is as much a part of my argument as his classical allusiveness. Heroic classical archetypes, a legacy of African superiority, and royal birth all seem to me tropes for what I have called, in my title, the "prestige of origins,"—a genealogical claim, addressed in large part to whites of European descent, for the human value and dignity of those whom European society has enslaved and degraded, but by definition it is not a claim which can be deployed on behalf of all those whom the society has oppressed. Its very essence is to assert distinction and difference, an elite within misery or a shared historical experience, even if it asserts such distinction in terms which contravene the categories of the dominant society.

The rhetorical weight of the phrase "royal slave" had shifted in its passage into modern history and from one race to another. The "royal slave" no longer embodied merely the vicissitudes of fortune; his "royalty"—and in most instances it is "his"—constitutes a claim to attention. It anticipates and attempts to answer the indifference of the reader to a socially marginalized, outcast, and degraded subject or speaker. In an age of democratic discourse, when each voice and every story has, at least in theory, an equal value and urgency, the anxiety that attends such utterance, or its reception, may seem arcane (though perhaps if democracy of voices were ever achieved, anxiety about audibility would merely take another form).

It may therefore have been inevitable that the first full-scale autobiography of an English-speaking African, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa*, would conform to generic expectations shaped by the story of the royal slave. At first glance it may not seem that Equiano embraces these expectations, but he is acutely aware of the contexts in which his work, first published in London in 1789 and then in New York in 1791, makes its appearance. At every turn its rhetoric signals the difficulty and anxiety that attend address to a non-African audience.² The title, insisting on the interest of what follows, pleads its case even before the narrative's opening statement, and in the first paragraph Equiano worries the question of the terms in which he may be permitted to press his autobiography upon a general readership: "It is . . . I confess, not a little hazardous in a private and obscure individual, and a stranger too, thus to solicit the indulgent attention of the public; especially when I own I offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant" (11).³ One of Equiano's solutions to this problem is pious: he proposes his own story as illustrating "the mercies of Providence" (12); that is, he declares his narrative as belonging to the genre of spiritual autobiography, and on the final page of the *Narrative* he comments,

If any incident in this little work should appear uninteresting and trifling to most readers, I can only say, as my excuse for mentioning it, that almost every event of my life made an impression on my mind, and influenced my conduct. I early accustomed myself to look at the hand of God in the minutest occurrence, and to learn from it a lesson of morality and religion; and in this light every circumstance I have related was, to me, of importance. (178)

The accents of this spiritual accountancy may well sound familiar to readers of *Robinson Crusoe*, and Equiano probably has greater stylistic affinities with Defoe than with any other English author. However, Equiano was by no means content to rely on the destinies of an individual Christian soul as a sufficient claim on the sympathy and interest of his readers. The poetry of Equiano's contemporary, Phillis Wheatley, exemplifies a less ideologically divided allegiance to the egalitarian and universalizing rhetoric of Christianity: it presents her misfortunes as a deracinated African as exemplary but not exceptional.

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In contrast, as the title and topic of this essay imply, Equiano's *Narrative* also belongs, almost automatically and perhaps even involuntarily, to another genre which had, if not originated, developed during the eighteenth century: the story of the noble slave—nobly born, that is, but also noble in terms less clearly specified by origin or placement within a social order. Both versions of nobility, high birth, and innate excellence leave their traces on Equiano's autobiography.

In the *Narrative* Equiano does not present himself as royal, although he makes it clear that his family was both socially distinguished and powerful.⁴ "My father was one of those elders and chiefs . . . stiled Embrenche; a term, as I remember, importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language 'a mark of grandeur'. . . . Those Embrenche, or chief men, decided disputes, and punished crimes; for which purpose they always assembled together. . . . My father, besides many slaves, had a numerous family" (12-13, 25). Later on in the *Narrative*, the motif of a god-given preeminence finds more direct, if less aristocratically literal, expression. About two-thirds of the way through the *Narrative*, one of the boats on which Equiano travels as a freeman is shipwrecked and, to quote the chapter heading, "the crew are preserved, principally by means of the author" (107). On the island reached by the wreck's survivors Equiano becomes, by virtue of his natural abilities, their leader, or as he says, "while we were on the key I was a kind of chieftain amongst of them" (111). Whether or not in this situation Equiano is tacitly reclaiming his alienated heritage, it is one of the moments in the *Narrative* which evokes *Robinson Crusoe*; like Crusoe, Equiano instinctively expresses his sense of dominion in monarchical terms. (To anticipate the argument of this essay, the subsequent text in African-American literature which is most visibly and directly indebted to Equiano—in its balance between an initial African setting and its protagonist's subsequent experiences, in the almost anthropological detail with which the African milieu is portrayed and celebrated, and in its social placement of the protagonist—is Alex Haley's *Roots*.)

Equiano also places considerable emphasis on the affinities between the practices of his tribe and those of the Jewish patriarchs of the Old Testament, as though to attach himself to a cultural lineage older than that of his English masters. For example, he stresses the practice of circumcision by his tribe and sees his displacement ever farther from his home as a passage among the "uncircumcised," both physically and spiritually speaking. Africa becomes the seat of both royalty and unsullied religious practice. However much these emphases reflected Equiano's own apprehension of his origins, they were also extraordinarily responsive and well adapted to the rhetorical situation in which any black narrator, in the late eighteenth century, might successfully tell his or her story in order to reach the ears of even moderately well-disposed Europeans.

Philip Curtin points out, in the introduction to his collection of West African narratives from the era of the slave trade, Europeans had a stronger, if

not exclusive, interest in slaves who "were thought to have had high status in their own societies." In the eighteenth century "Prince Aniaba," supposedly a king from Assini on the present-day Ivory Coast, appeared at the courts of England and France, and his fictionalized memoirs (*Histoire de Louis Anniaba, roi d'Essénie en Afrique*) appeared in 1740. In 1734 Thomas Bluett published an account of the life and adventures of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (or Job ben Solomon), who was reportedly the son of the high priest of Bondu in the Senegambia. By 1749 some of its incidents had been appropriated for an anonymous novel entitled *The Royal African: or Memoirs of the Young Prince of Annamaboe* (Curtin 5). However, the primary inspiration of this narrative, as well as of a pair of poetic epistles by the Rev. William Dodd, was the story of the son of a Fantin chieftain, who was sent to England for his education but sold into slavery in the British West Indies by the sea captain to whom he was entrusted. The Prince of Annamaboe—apparently known by no other name—was eventually ransomed and brought to London.⁶ This incident made a considerable impression on the intelligentsia of eighteenth-century England. Dr. Johnson remarked in horror, "In our own time Princes have been sold, by wretches to whose care they were entrusted, that they might have an European education; but when once they were brought to a market in the plantations, little would avail either their dignity or their wrongs."⁷ However, the continuation of Johnson's discourse on the same topic vividly indicates the limitations of an emphasis on royal slaves as an argument against the institution of slavery. Despite Johnson's sympathy for abused royalty, he protests, "To abolish a *status*, which in all ages God has sanctioned, and man has continued, would not only be *robbery* to an innumerable class of our fellow-subjects; but it would be extreme cruelty to the African Savages, a portion of whom it saves from massacre, or intolerable bondage in their own country, and introduces into a much happier state of life" (Boswell 878).

Curtin's research points to potential conflicts between the biography of Ayuba and the native traditions of Senegal; but whether Bluett misunderstood or misrepresented Ayuba, or whether Ayuba exaggerated the preeminence of his family, it seems clear that by the mid-eighteenth century the easy commerce between historical narrative and fiction had blurred the putative boundaries between romance and history. French and English readers, at least, were sufficiently persuaded that a slave *could* be royal to make fictions which exploited this premise acceptable and even attractive. In France an entire genre of candidly fictional *romans africains* had grown up; *The Life and Adventures of Zamba, an African Negro King, and His Experiences of Slavery in South Carolina*, written by Himself (London, 1847) may stand as a late English exemplar of the same fashion (Curtin 4-5).

The prototype of the genre is usually considered Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko, or, The History of the Royal Slave* (1688), not only among the most notable early fictions in English by a woman but one of the first notable English novels. It is also, according to William Spengemann, the earliest

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Altho novella as royal slave (or has oc highlights natives of character perfect an 'em with a people rep man knew most harr where I w other han gallant so Imoinda, father bec aged king into Imoi say, the anything discovere his grand slavery. I and a hu friendly Indies. T odds—to sold into in servit Caesar a herself v things I great me the prett endeavor petting I

American novel,* and in that respect its equivocal position among various national canons might be compared with that of Equiano's *Narrative*, which seems an indispensable part of African-American literature, even though its author, despite a period of servitude in the West Indies, is in no ordinary sense an "American." *Oroonoko* gives shape and expression to enough of the ambivalences which the notion of the royal slave embodies to make it worth examining in some detail.

Although Curtin misleadingly and somewhat carelessly classes the novella as belonging to the literature of the "noble savage," the point about a royal slave is of course that he is precisely not a "savage," but rather occupies (or has occupied) a place in a highly articulated and hierarchical society. Behn highlights this point by beginning *Oroonoko* with a contrasting account of the natives of Surinam, where the narrator of the novella first encounters the title character as a slave. With the picturesque natives the British colonists live "in perfect amity, without daring to command 'em, but, on the contrary, caress 'em with all the brotherly and friendly affection in the world. . . . And these people represented to me an absolute idea of the first state of innocence, before man knew how to sin: and 'tis most evident and plain that simple nature is the most harmless, inoffensive and vertuous mistress. . . . Those on the continent where I was, had no king. . . ." Oroonoko's homeland Coromantien, on the other hand, is ruled by his aged but still lascivious grandfather, whose thirteen gallant sons have died in battle. When Oroonoko falls deeply in love with Imoinda, the daughter of a general who has saved his life in battle, his grandfather becomes his rival and appropriates her as a royal mistress. However, the aged king cannot consummate his desires, and Oroonoko is eventually smuggled into Imoinda's bedchamber by one of the king's discarded wives. (Needless to say, the rather lubricious orientalism of this tale has nothing to do with anything specifically African.) When the lovers' clandestine union is discovered, Imoinda is sold into slavery; the king is sufficiently frightened of his grandson's wrath that he tells him she has been killed—a lesser evil than slavery. Eventually the king and his grandson are reconciled, but Oroonoko and a hundred of his companions are inveigled aboard the ship of an apparently friendly and cultivated English captain and sold into slavery in the West Indies. There Oroonoko once again finds Imoinda, still faithful—against the odds—to him alone. The other slaves—many of whom Oroonoko himself has sold into slavery—defer to the couple, who remain impressive and regal even in servitude; within limits, their European masters who rename Oroonoko Caesar and Imoinda Clemene, also recognize their distinction. The narrator herself welcomes them into her lodgings, eats with them, "oblig'd 'em in all things I was capable of. I entertained them with the lives of the Romans, and great men, which charmed him to my company; and her, with teaching her all the pretty works that I was mistress of, and telling her stories of nuns, and endeavouring to bring her to the knowledg of the true God" (69). Despite this petting by the narrator—who does not actually own them—Oroonoko grows

dubious that he will ever be allowed to ransom his and Imoinda's freedom, and the approaching birth of their child, with the prospect that he will be born into slavery, spurs Oroonoko to lead an exodus of the slave population to another part of the country and the promise of freedom. He is pursued and overcome—most of his followers abandon him—and the clemency he is offered, like virtually all promises by white men in the course of this narrative, proves false. Scourged and humiliated, though protected from immediate execution by the authority of the narrator—she has fled with the other white women during the slave revolt and only now returns—Oroonoko resolves to take revenge on his white tormentors, particularly the treacherous governor of the province. Foreseeing this revenge will mean his death, he kills Imoinda (and their unborn child) to save them from reprisals. Overcome by these deaths, Oroonoko proves too weak to fulfill his threats; already dying, he is seized by government functionaries and barbarously dismembered.

As may be clear from this summary, romantic elements in this text dominate its fragmentary social observations (although the representation of the local economy and of slavery in Surinam has persuasive and harrowing elements, quite distinct from the generalized representation of Africa). Recent critical discussions of *Oroonoko* have also emphasized the royalism of the tale, even suggesting that Oroonoko's final agonies figure, for a readership with monarchical sympathies, the martyrdom of Charles I. However, as Laura Brown has pointed out, ". . . both King Charles and the African slave in the New World [can be seen as] victims of the same historical force," namely, the power of the Puritans as expressed in the rise of "an antiabsolutist mercantile imperialism" (59).¹⁰

Whatever the particularities of Behn's political design or the complexities of *Oroonoko*'s construction, the historical fate of the text was emancipationist—and that despite a rhetoric which often seems coarsely racist. Racist, because the superiority of Oroonoko and Imoinda consists precisely in their difference from other blacks:

His face was not of that brown rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony, or polished jett. . . . His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turn'd lips, which are so natural to the rest of Negroes. (33)

Moreover, though Oroonoko's "perfections of . . . mind" are offered as evidence that not "all fine wit is confined to the white men," he receives European instruction from a French tutor. As for Imoinda, "to describe her truly, one need say only, she was female to the noble male; the beautiful black Venus to our young Mars" (33-34). Nevertheless, as Brown observes, the "obvious mystification involved in Behn's depiction of Oroonoko as a European aristocrat in blackface does not necessarily damage the novella's emancipationist reputation: precisely this kind of sentimental identification was in fact the staple component of antislavery narratives for the century and a half, in

England and America" (48). One might even venture, in passing, that the short-term historical and political efficacy of a given text is often in inverse relation to its political correctness, as judged in hindsight. The story of Oroonoko and Imoinda was given even wider currency by Thomas Southerne's dramatization of Behn's story, which held the stage from 1696 to 1801; among the more remarkable incidents of its stage history is a performance at Covent Garden, on 1 February, 1749, attended by the Prince of Annamaboe. (In his verse epistle, based on the fortunes of "The African prince," Rev. William Dodd imagines his reactions as expressed to the bereaved African princess Zara: "O! Zara, here, a story like my own, / With mimic skill, in borrow'd names was shown; / . . . I can't recall the scenes, 'tis pain too great . . ." [qtd. in Sypher 167-68].) Although it shares the romantic extravagance and aristocratic biases of its source, the emotional value of Southerne's play for the antislavery movement is suggested by this apostrophe from Hannah More's politically important poem *Slavery* (1788):

O, plaintive Southerne! whose impassion'd strain
 So oft has wak'd my languid Muse in vain! . . .
 For no fictitious ills these numbers flow,
 But living anguish, and substantial woe; . . .
 For millions feel what Oronoko felt:
 Fir'd by no single wrongs, the countless host
 I mourn, by rapine dragg'd from Afric's coast. (qtd. in Sypher 117-18)

During this period, from the late seventeenth century through the highwater mark of the English antislavery movement, only one representation of what Wylie Sypher calls "the noble Negro" achieves comparable currency with *Oroonoko*, particularly in its theatrical version; this second narrative is the story of Yarico, originally represented by Richard Steele as an Indian but eventually—in subsequent versions—an African maid, and Inkle, the treacherous Englishman whose life she saves and who subsequently sells her into slavery. Given the popularity and pervasiveness of *Oroonoko*, it was all but inevitable that, in 1789, Equiano's *Narrative* would be received as a further episode in the literature of exiled and degraded nobility.

Nevertheless, *Oroonoko* is not the earliest place in the English tradition where one might look for a constellation of blackness, royalty and slavery, and it is a plausible speculation that Behn's imagination was touched not only by accounts of the New World and the slave trade but also by the figure of Shakespeare's Othello, who tells Desdemona "Of being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery" (I, iii, 137-38)¹¹ and who also proclaims that he fetches his "life and being / From men of royal siege" (I, ii, 21-22). The reason I think it is important to invoke the Shakespearean context is that Othello seems to me to participate in Shakespeare's "magic royalism." That is to say, Othello's "royalty" derives from the majesty and authority of his presence ("Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them," I, ii, 59), and not

the other way around. What I mean by "magical royalism" is best explained by the Shakespearean romances, in which some foundling or changeling, some displaced or kidnapped scion of royalty, expresses his or her hidden identity in alien or hostile circumstances:

How hard it is to hide the sparks of nature!
 These boys know little they are sons to th' King. . . .
 I' th' cave [wherein they] bow, their thoughts do hit
 The roofs and palaces, and nature prompts them
 In simple and low things to prince it much
 Beyond the trick of others. (*Cymbeline*, III, iii, 79-80, 83-86)

Each your doing
 (So singular in each particular)
 Crowns what you are doing in the present deeds,
 That all your acts are queens. . . .
 Nothing she does, or seems,
 But smacks of something greater than herself,
 Too noble for this place. (*The Winter's Tale*, IV, iv, 143-46, 157-59)

Although it is possible to attribute such moments to superstitious royalism on Shakespeare's part, the romances repel such literalism. The actions and language of Perdita and Marina, Guiderius and Arviragus, "manifest" their inherent royalty; the discovery of royal birth adds nothing, but metaphorically affirms and sets its seal of confirmation upon an already achieved identity.¹² Othello participates in this romance mode of royalism, and whether his claims of royal descent are true or verifiable, within the fiction of the play, is profoundly irrelevant. I suspect that later representations of the "royal slave" also operate in this metaphorical register, even in historical texts, and to the extent that Curtin or any other scholar interrogates the literal veracity of such genealogies, he or she may be missing the larger symbolic claim which underwrites them.



Why do I want to emphasize the metaphorical status of the royalty attributed to slaves or their descendants? I have already suggested that during the history of black slavery in Europe and America while the pathos of degraded majesty could dramatize the more pervasive suffering of slaves in general, it could also, as in Dr. Johnson's responses, rewrite and even displace this suffering. These particular pitfalls of literalism are no doubt a thing of the past, but it seems to me that some kind of nostalgia for origins, collective if not individual, for a locus of authenticity and purity—for a starting place if not absolutely royal, at least undegraded by history—is a feature of African-American self-representations even in the twentieth century, and I want to

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consider, however tentatively, its status as literal or figurative discourse. This inquiry also has some pertinence for our own relation to such texts as Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*; it seems possible to me that this prestige of origins inflects *our* reading of Equiano and later African-American narratives as the tradition of the "royal slave" affected that of his contemporaries. Is it not, in particular, tempting to accord a special value to Equiano's representation of his African past as marking the success of his autobiographical enterprise, the very essence of his self-recovery? Thus far, this essay has also emphasized the specific rhetorical pressures which shaped Equiano's self-presentation and that of other black writers as they first made their appearance on the stage of European literature. When African-American writers rely imaginatively upon the appeal to origins which marked the strategy of earlier writers, do they continue, implicitly, to justify the representation of their own history and identity to a white audience still skeptical of its value, or even to a black audience which has internalized such skepticism?

The quest for African-American origins as the recovery of an elevated and unsullied past is a characteristic and urgent motif of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives—too many to allow more than a suggestive sampling. The most widely disseminated of the royal slave's literary progeny is Alex Haley's *Roots*, at least insofar as it traces the history of Kunte Kinte. It is also one of the most literal in its attempt to locate and recuperate an uncontaminated genealogy, receding untroubled into an infinitely distant past:¹³

One by one, the arafang recited the names of the Mauretanian forefathers of whom the baby's grandfather, old Kairaba Kinte, had often told. The names, which were great and many, went back more than two hundred rains. Then the jaliba pounded on his tangtang and all of the people exclaimed their admiration and respect at such a distinguished lineage. (3)

It is precisely the aspiration to fix and attest this ancestry as a literal legacy which has exposed Haley to criticism of his historical researches and the charge of wishful naiveté. It seems to me it would be possible to honor the impulse of his project even without endorsing its historiographic integrity, and there are other African-American versions of this quest which display, either tacitly or frankly, the constructed quality of the past they wish to reclaim. Sidney Bechet, for example, in *Treat It Gentle*, wants to recover jazz from a degraded myth of origin—"all that red-light business"—and he hears *through* the music, back to a lost idea of community, mediated by memories of his grandfather Omar. When his grandfather was a slave, but when, on Sundays, he beat out rhythms on a drum at the Square—"Congo Square they called it"¹⁴—all the slaves would gather.

Sundays was free for the slaves. . . . Sometimes, if they dreamed, things would come to them out of Africa, things they'd heard about or had seen. And in all that recollecting somehow there wasn't any of it that didn't have part of a music-form in it. Maybe they'd hear someone from some tribe signalling to another, beating the drums for a feast maybe. They'd sleep, and it would come to them out of the bottom of that dream. . . .

They'd hear the chants and the dance calls, and always they'd hear that voice from the other tribe calling, talking across the air from somewhere else. (7)

Not only is this Africa formed between sleep and waking, between hearsay and memory, but one-armed grandfather Omar himself becomes a figure imagined as well as remembered — his history borrowed (whether by Bechet or by grandfather Omar) from the rebel leader Bras Coupé, who died in 1837. These African “memories” are not so much a genealogy as a counterassertion against Bechet's Creole contemporaries who chose to claim and honor only their French and Spanish ancestry.

Bechet's vision of Congo Square also seems to be a rewriting — how conscious or deliberate it's hard to say — of a scene from George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* (1880), in which the “present name of Congo Square” is said to preserve “a reminder of its old barbaric pastimes” and “the beating of tom-toms, rattling of mules' jawbones, and sounding of wooden horns” are “hideous discords.”¹⁵ In this Dionysian setting Bras Coupé, who has been hiding from white retribution in swampy fastnesses, makes his re-entrance: “the blackest of black men, an athlete of superb figure . . . jingling with bells, his feet in moccasins, his tight, crisp hair decked out with feathers, a necklace of alligator's teeth rattling on his breast and a living serpent twined about his neck” (190).

The story of Bras Coupé, as incorporated in *The Grandissimes* (of which it supplied the first seed), appears to offer a specifically American rewriting, again from a white perspective, of the story of captive royalty, and despite the progressive racial politics of the novel, from the first the royal slave is treated with a certain irony: “Bras-Coupé, they said, had been in Africa and under another name, a prince among his people. In a certain war of conquest, to which he had been driven by *ennui*, he was captured, stripped of his royalty, marched down upon the beach of the Atlantic, and, attired as a true son of Adam, with two goodly arms intact, became a commodity” (169). (In this version, unlike Bechet's allusive use of the story, the name *Bras Coupé* does not refer to a literal mutilation but rather expresses the sense “that the arm which might no longer shake the spear or swing the wooden sword, was no better than a useless stump,” [171].) In the American context it is the idea of royalty itself which is faintly absurd; Bras Coupé expresses his royalty most forcefully in his recoil from the idea of work and in his imperious sexual desires, and the whitewashed cabin in which he is lodged is said to be “finer than his palace at home” (170). Nevertheless, against the grain of the novel's democratic (and, no doubt, to some extent racist) dispositions, Bras Coupé emerges — especially, like Oroonoko or a Shakespeare monarch, in defeat and disaster — with a somber majesty.¹⁶ His voodoo magic has genuine power, capable of extinguishing the line of his oppressors. When he dies scourged, hamstrung and branded, his fate diverts, among the white elite who witness it, the whole current of feeling about the Black Code, that is, the legal articles governing both the slave and the free black population of Louisiana. If like Oroonoko, Bras

Coupé achieves moral authority preeminently through martyrdom—thus ensuring of course that his power can be *only* moral—his figure does challenge the whole hierarchy of racial and social relations of which he is victim. Like *The Grandissimes* as a whole, “The Story of Bras-Coupé” (Chapters 28 and 29) confronts the complications of royalism, whether literal or metaphorical, white or black—that is, of a nondemocratic or even antidemocratic claim to personal or familial distinction—in the American regime.

William Melvin Kelley’s *A Different Drummer* is similarly alert to the ironies of royalism in an American context, and particularly of the imputation of royalty to disempowered blacks; it is the *rhetorical* force of this imputation—like the counterdiscourse of jazz royalty (see note 13)—which his novel registers. Its protagonist, Caliban Tucker, is also descended from a regal African who broke away from the slave market and led raids to free other slaves. (Caliban, it might be remembered, is also the name of a royal slave, who in *The Tempest* tells Prospero, “This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak’st from me,” I, ii, 331-32). It is the whites in this novel who insist upon the literal potency of this genealogy, which they see as the disruptive seed of the black aspiration to civil equality in the 1950s: “the way I see it, it’s pure genetics: something special in the blood. . . . I can see whatever was in his blood just a-laying there sleeping, waiting, and then one day waking up, making Tucker do what he did. Can’t be no other reason. We never had no trouble with him, nor him with us. But all at once his blood started to itch in his veins, and he started this here . . . this here revolution.”¹⁷ At the same time the story of the African is carefully framed as a mythic event: “Like I said, nobody’s claiming this story is all truth. It must-a started out that way, but somebody along the way or a whole parcel of somebodies must-a figured they could improve on the truth. And they did. It’s a damn sight better story for being half lies. Can’t a story be good without some lies” (Kelley 17). Inspiring to the black characters, frightening but comfortingly explanatory to the whites, the figure of the African loses none of his stature for his frankly fictive elaboration.

As mentioned earlier, the royalty of the royal slave seems nearly always marked as masculine, although clearly there are many female-authored narratives which invest in the yearning for an African return (perhaps most conspicuously those of Alice Walker). It is tempting, however, to speculate about whether there is a female version of the specifically genealogical narrative which corresponds to the kind of story of degraded royalty I have been tracing. My sense is that the narratives of women’s experience under slavery begin not at a moment of purity, but rather of violation and self-division; that for them origin is always already disputed, troubled by incest and rape, the intrusion of white blood and semen. A genealogy doubled in itself cuts them off from a version of the past which might seem purely themselves, purely black or African-American. Like Janie, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, such female protagonists frequently bear the (self-)alienating marks of whiteness, and their quest for wholeness, or at least healing, must be enacted through a

succession of relationships with men and other women. In Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, for example, Corregidora is both the surname of the narrator Ursa and the "Portuguese seaman turned plantation owner,"¹⁴ who is both her great-grandfather and her grandfather. Ursa muses,

Shit, we're all consequences of something. Stained with another's past as well as our own. Their past in my blood. I'm a blood. *Are you mine, Ursa, or theirs?* What he would ask. What would I ask now? (45)

Ursa repeatedly interrogates what her great-grandmother and grandmother must have felt towards Corregidora, and the violent divisions of feeling she imagines, the contest of hatred and desire, is reinscribed in her and her mother's relations with other men, black men who bear their own troubled legacy from a past of slavery. Whatever healing storytelling, or successive relationships, can accomplish must be worked out within history, not before or apart from it.

It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora—like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram. But was what Corregidora had done to *her*, to *them*, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return, making her walk down the street looking like a whore. (184)

Ursa's exclusively female family—mother, grandmother, and Great Gram—urge her to "make generations," less to continue this genealogical narrative than to bear witness, but in fact this possibility is foreclosed when the novel opens with Ursa's aborted pregnancy and hysterectomy, consequences of her husband's shoving her down a flight of steps. Bearing witness devolves upon us, as readers of her story, or upon no one.

While a metaphorical understanding of royal or aristocratic origins, as they figure in the narratives of African-American culture, may be preferable to any literal inscription of hierarchy in genetics or genealogy, the question remains open of whether even the metaphors of royalty or uncontaminated origin are suspect or problematic. Deconstructive criticism would no doubt advance an *a priori* critique of the prestige of origins, but it may be more immediately useful to ask: what after all is at stake in the imagining of royalty or of an Edenic place and condition before history? It offers a fantasy of absolute freedom and power, of operations of the will unconstrained by material limitation or political opposition, or of an escape from the disappointments and betrayals of historical process. Is this utopian (or Edenic) vision a helpful supplement to or an evasion of human history? It is not of course the Africa supplied by the most historical narrative this essay considers, Equiano's *Narrative*—unsparing if laconic in its allusions to tribal conflict, crime and punishment, and the hierarchical disposition of power—but it may be the world for which the very *form* of the narrative of remembered and hence recovered origins makes us long. It seems possible to honor the value of such impulses to

recuperate the past and heal the wound of history; to recognize the pleasures of the homecoming story, without ignoring the problems inherent in those pleasures or mistaking nostalgia for a viable ideological program.

NOTES

¹Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1793; rept., New York: Arno Press, 1972), II, 59, as quoted in Laura Brown, "The Romance of Empire: *Oroonoko* and the Trade in Slaves," in *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*. Ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Methuen, 1987), 59.

²Perhaps this is one reason that, two centuries later, Samuel Delany, chose an epigraph from Equiano for his autobiographical *The Motion of Light in Water*. While Delany's readership is certainly more plural than Equiano's would have been, the resistance of a mainstream readership to the story of a narrator who is both black and gay is by no means to be discounted.

³My text of *The Interesting Narrative* is that supplied in *The Classic Slave Narratives*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1987). Page references to this edition are indicated parenthetically in the body of the essay.

⁴Recent research by Prof. Catherine Acholonu suggests that there are good reasons for regarding Equiano's family as royal in a stronger sense; that his kidnapping was planned, with the connivance of corrupted servants, by a rival dynasty; and that the dynastic politics of the region played some role in Equiano's continuing reticence on the topic.

⁵*Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison, Milwaukee and London: U of Wisconsin P, 1967), 4-5.

⁶Wylie Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1942), 166-67, as well as *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (1942), 237-47.

⁷James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (London: Oxford UP, 1953), 877.

⁸William Spengemann, *A Mirror for Americanists: Reflections on the Idea of American Literature* (Hanover and London: UP of New England, 1989), 45-76.

⁹Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko and Other Stories*. Ed. Maureen Duffy (London: Methuen, 1987), 27, 29-30. Subsequent page references to this edition are indicated parenthetically.

¹⁰Other intriguing aspects of this text are only tangentially relevant in this context, for example, the equivocal relation of the female narrator to Oroonoko and Imoinda. Although both the narrator and the royal slave possess some version of authority (which might be variously defined as heroic, class-derived, literary, moral), neither is able to give effect to that authority, presumably because of femaleness in one case and blackness in the other; as Brown points out, *Oroonoko* presents a conspicuous test case for "the contemporaneity of issues of race and gender in a particular stage in the history of British capitalism associated broadly with commodity exchange and colonialist exploitation" (47).

¹¹The text for my quotations of Shakespeare is *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans *et al.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). Act, scene and line citations are supplied parenthetically.

Gayl Jones's *Cor-*
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or theirs? What he

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¹²Hence also, I presume, the aristocratic titles that seal the greatness of jazz's indispensable figures: "Duke" Ellington, "Count" Basie, the "Empress" of the Blues, "Lady" Day, and so on. At the same time that such nominations mark and celebrate an inalienable, irrefutable distinction, they also comment ironically on the power and entitlements which the world beyond the jazz community withholds from its black royalty.

¹³Alex Haley, *Roots* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976), 3.

¹⁴Sidney Bechet, *Treat It Gentle* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1960), 6.

¹⁵George Washington Cable, *The Grandissimes* (New York and Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1988), 189. Subsequent page references to this edition are indicated parenthetically.

¹⁶To the extent that *Bras Coupé's* magnificence is somewhat gaudy, it merely recalls the presentation of the Natchez princess, Lufki-Humma, from whom several of the first families of New Orleans claim to derive their preeminence. To whatever degree that the Creole aristocracy of the city can assert anything like a royal descent, it depends not upon their French blood, but rather their Incan, their Toltec blood, as transmitted by the Natchez tribe through Lufki-Humma. At the same time, according to Agricole Fusilier, the doyen of one of these leading families, "whatever is not pure white is to all intents and purposes pure black" (59). *Bras Coupé* therefore emerges as both the prototype and the mockery of the dynastic prestige asserted by the New Orleans aristocrats who give the novel its title.

¹⁷William Drummond Kelley, *A Different Drummer* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1990), 15-16.

¹⁸Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (1975; rept. Boston: Beacon, 1986), 10. Subsequent page references, to the Beacon Press reprint edition, will be given in parentheses.