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(RE)ROOTS AND (RE)ROUTES: TRANSATLANTIC CONNECTIONS IN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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Source: *CLA Journal*, SEPTEMBER 2008, Vol. 52, No. 1 (SEPTEMBER 2008), pp. 1-12

Published by: College Language Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44325450>

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*A Quarterly  
Official Publication on The College Language Association*

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VOLUME LII

SEPTEMBER 2008

NUMBER 1

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TRANSATLANTIC CONNECTIONS IN LANGUAGE  
AND LITERATURE

BY BOOKER T. ANTHONY

President's Address Delivered at the  
Sixty-Eighth Annual Convention and  
Seventy-First Anniversary of  
the College Language Association  
At the College of Charleston  
Charleston, South Carolina, April 10, 2008

A customary practice of CLA presidents in two-year terms has been to devote the first year to the state of the association and the second year to the current theme. Last year, I chose the two-pronged approach. In addition to addressing the theme of Religion and Spirituality in Literature, I reflected upon our history, addressed the status of the association, and assessed the organization's future responsibilities to academia. This year, I will choose a similar approach. First, I will address the status of the CLA. Second, I will turn to the current theme of the convention.

While the College Language Association is an incorporated organization, there is no central headquarters with a complete administrative staff as one would find in the

Modern Language Association. Officers of the CLA work in tandem via executive committee meetings, electronic and U. S. postal communications, and host institutional support. Except for newly arrived E-communications in the last ten to fifteen years, college professors of English and foreign languages have used this network of support to host CLA conventions beyond forty years. It would be nice to have a corporate office, fully staffed. Area representatives, program chairs, and host institution chairs would have more time to concentrate on planning and implementing successful conventions and less time on administrative mailings and updates. Colleagues, it is a vision, not a dream. As we continue to recruit scholars, I believe that the vision will be actualized during your tenure in academe.

However, to advance beyond the status of just being incorporated and having a corporate office, we would need a CLA staff to include an office of the executive director; an editorial office with a managing editor for the *College Language Association Journal (CLAJ)*, a typesetter, a marketing and sales employee, an internet manager, and a graphic designer. The CLA staff would also include an office of programs, an office of research, and an office of financial operations to include a staff with direct expertise in accounting operations. There would be what some corporations call an office of operations that includes information technology, member and customer service, and personnel and office management.

An alternative to a CLA corporate office would be to institute a headquarters at a CLA institution in the same manner as the *CLA Journal* is currently housed. The CLA officer would field questions regarding fees, finances, and the *CLA Journal*.

Someone among you might be thinking, "We are reaching too high." If this is your thinking, I invite you to revisit Robert Browning's "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" While we do not have a

corporate office in 2008, the CLA officers and program committee, using limited college and university resources, continue to provide a state-of-the art convention. This year, we were able to post the CLA program in February. In the future, we will be able to eliminate completely, or at least streamline, the winter mailing. In your convention packet, you already have the call for papers for 2009 at the University of Maryland, Eastern Shore. The program committee expects to receive panel proposals from the membership by September 30, 2008. We will continue to encourage the CLA membership to process CLA transactions and data electronically. However, we understand that some members do not have access to computers and prefer to continue the paper process.

If you have had an opportunity to peruse the program, then you have seen our newest affiliate group, the Alice Childress Society, organized by Professor Lou Rivers. To members who are new to CLA but especially to student visitors, CLA also is host to the Langston Hughes Society and the Charles Chesnutt Society.

Two years is not enough time for a CLA president to address many issues, but I can update you on areas that the executive committee believes needs attention. Our CLA constitution needs to be updated. For example, while we have guidelines that past CLA presidents have recommended, our Constitution does not address those guidelines. A specific example is the affiliate organizations. What role should CLA play in serving as host to allied groups? Does the CLA constitution, moreover, provide for the succession of the editor of the *CLA Journal*? The executive committee will be making recommendations to the membership through the constitution committee regarding revisions. Currently, the executive committee is the governing body for the *Journal*.

As for CLA revenues, the executive committee recommends that the *CLA Journal* index be put online and that we make back issues of the *Journal* available for sale at

the conventions, along with copies of the indices. The Hugh Gloster Fund has been established for a few years and offers an opportunity for sustaining CLA programs. The organization might accept grant proposals from members with Gloster's name attached.

I will now turn to the theme of the convention, "(Re)Roots and (Re)Routes: Transatlantic Connections in Language and Literature." Why (Re)Roots and (Re)Routes? The theme for our 2001 convention in New Orleans was "Literature and the Americas: Roots and Routes." When our host institution chair, Professor Valerie Frazier, informed the executive committee that Charleston was hosting a conference on the "End of the Atlantic Slave Trade: A Bicentenary Inquiry," it seemed appropriate for CLA to revisit our transatlantic connections in language and literature. Hence, (Re)Roots and (Re)Routes.

I shall begin with a selection from Robert Hayden's most celebrated work, "Middle Passage," first published in the 1945, and parts of which, I hope, will be explicated thoroughly in several panels this week:

Middle Passage:

Voyage through death

to life upon these shores.

"10 April 1800—

Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says

their moaning is a prayer for death,

ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves.

Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter

to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under." (Hayden 20)

Chinua Achebe describes the slave trade as "mankind's greatest crime against humanity" (1). Why a crime against humanity? In the language of Joseph Conrad, let us consider "The Horror! the Horror." Some scholars liken the Middle Passage to the Israelite's exodus from

Egypt; however, other scholars remind us that while slavery was practiced in Africa, it was more on the concept of service, not power. As Jesus Benito interprets Equiano, “Slavery refers to a social status but does deprive the slave of his status as a human being. Loss of freedom was not viewed as loss of humanity. The term ‘slave’ was therefore rather circumstantial and did not seem to qualify the bearer as ‘the other’ in African society” (48).

This year’s topic arouses many emotions and elicits many themes. As I thumbed through the litany of paper titles in the CLA program, I immediately noticed familiar writers such as Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Olaudah Equiano, Robert Hayden, Henry Dumas, August Wilson, Everett Hoagland, Ernest Gaines, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston. The papers will attempt to provide various interpretations of the transatlantic voyage and of slavery itself. Each of us, for example, knows of the autobiographical narratives, but Helen Thomas reminds us that “[b]y engaging with the Scriptures as a form of (cultural) intertext, black autobiographical texts such as Briton Hammond’s *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprising Deliverance*, and John Marrant’s *A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings* offered a revised paradigm of the Spiritual framework and (re)established the biblical impact between Jehovah and the diasporic identity, drawn from the Old Testament” (182).

Perhaps this conference will reshape your thinking, for example, of Equiano’s *Narrative*, a text that we have read and taught with unceasing passion in literature and language classrooms. We may concur with Thomas that Equiano’s *Narrative* “demarcates a narrative of cultural hybridity—a text propounding the synthesis of principal tenets of dissenting Protestantism with West African epistemology. Hence, the text forms a continuum with belief systems which were transported from Africa across the Middle Passage to the slave plantations of the West Indies and the Americas . . .” (248-49).

Some scholars this week will scrutinize the Middle Passage strictly from a spiritual perspective. Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse* (1938) and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) examine "converted" slaves who are led by spiritual guidance in the same manner as Moses led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. Primarily linguistics scholars of English and foreign languages have a deep propensity to deconstruct Black English and Ebonics within the complex linguistic arena of plantation life and quarters. "On board the slave ships," writes Helen Thomas, "in the plantations and in the domestic households of the colonies, the syncretic speech patterns, nuances and creolised linguistic formats which emerged amongst the slaves provided a means of communication both with, and to the exclusion of, whites" (163).

While we are not history majors, you will see that language scholars can still examine the roots of the slave trade from the Spanish colonies in the South and Central America to the drudgery on sugarcane plantations. What can you expect over the next couple of days? I believe that Keith Gilyard and Anissa Wardi say it best: "Novelistic attempts to render the Middle Passage range from the abstract, enigmatic, and obscure to precise, detailed accounts as writers attempt to capture the horror, the suffering, and the mourning of millions" (3). Dumas' short story "The Ark of the Bones" uses the ark as a symbol of the slave vessel. Texts by writers like Olaudah Equiano provide firsthand accounts of captivity. Toni Morrison's *Be-loved* devotes an entire section to the Middle Passage.

What is the thread that connects the texts CLA will examine this week? Writers like these, says Maria Diedrich, "show [that] the Middle Passage, buried and pathless as it may seem in the Atlantic, can never be forgotten, indeed must be re-examined by all of us who are its 'heirs and descendants,' and perhaps in that retelling its pain may be brought to the surface and the nine million recognized" (267).

I surmise that I am among good company of Americanist scholars today. Since my doctoral specialty is American Literature to 1900, scholars' references to Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Thoreau, or Emerson arouse, in Coleridgean terms, my fancy and imagination. Eric Sundquist contends in *Empire and Slavery in American Literature 1820-1865* that "Slavery, like Indian Removal, often seemed for Thoreau to be a philosophical conundrum rather than an immediate political problem" (186). Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" and *Mardi*, continues Sundquist, are read as transcendental caricatures of Northern Romanticism (186). Most of us have read Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a quintessential representation of a slaveholding South. We know well Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*, written in the tradition of a Melville novel, but how many of us are attuned to Theophilus Conneau's *Captain Canot; or, Twenty Years of an African Slaver* (1854)? Then, there is Thornton Stringfellow's *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery* (1841), a text that espouses one of many proslavery theories. Some persons believed that slaves, if free, like animals, would become murderous. Eric Sundquist likens this theory to the Frankensteinian concept. There is a relationship between gothic novels and the races.

Literature that defends Southern slavery is more prolific than one can imagine. James Kirke Paulding's *Westward Ho* (1836) argues that the abolition of slavery "was not worth the sacrifice of the union" (Sundquist 159). There were also advocates of slavery who thought that slavery was compatible with democratic ideals, supporting the idea that blacks' inferiority was the justification to exclude them from the democratic life. Nat Turner became an example of what happens when blacks gain liberty. There were those who postulated scientific arguments for slavery on the basis of race, believing that blacks were savages and had different origins from the rest of humankind.

On the other hand, there is Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government," often mistakenly called "Civil Disobedience." In this work, Thoreau promulgates his view in 1849 of the role of the individual in a society whose government supports the immorality of black slavery. Scholars will remember, too, that Thoreau spent one night in jail for his refusal to pay his poll tax to a government that supported slavery.

Moreover, there is David Walker's *Appeal* that was published in 1829 and written in the logical and historical structure of the Articles of Confederation or the United States Constitution. Walker's cover page reads as follows:

DAVID WALKER'S  
APPEAL,  
IN FOUR ARTICLES;  
TOGETHER WITH  
A PREAMBLE,  
TO THE  
COLOURED CITIZENS OF THE WORLD,  
BUT IN PARTICULAR, AND VERY EXPRESSLY, TO THOSE OF  
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In these articles, Walker devotes separate chapters to "OUR WRETCHENESS IN CONSEQUENCE OF SLAVERY"; "OUR WRETCHEDNESS IN CONSEQUENCE OF IGNORANCE"; "OUR WRETECHEDNESS IN CONSEQUENCE OF THE PREACHERS OF THE RELIGION OF JESUS CHRIST"; and "OUR WRETCHEDNESS IN CONSEQUENCE OF THE COLONIZING SCHEME." David Walker made an appeal not only to the "Coloured Citizens of the World," but in particular, and very expressly, to those of THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Published on the heels of Walker's *Appeal*, and almost a facsimile of the 1829 text, was William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, a newspaper founded in 1831 and published weekly from Boston for thirty-five years. Garrison called for immediate emancipation of blacks.

Slavery put the South in a crisis, as Hinton Rowan Helper cogently writes:

The truth is, slavery destroys, or vitiates, or pollutes, whatever it touches. No interest of society escapes the influences of the clinging curse. It makes Southern religion a stench in the nostrils of Christendom—it makes Southern politics a libel upon all the principles of Republicanism—it makes Southern literature a travesty upon the honorable professions of letters. (Sundquist 158)

Indeed, slavery tarnished the sacredness of the U.S. Constitution and the founding principles of this country. In his essay “Chiefly about War Matters,” Nathaniel Hawthorne writes, “The ‘children of the Puritans’ were in a singular way, since the ‘fated womb’ of the Mayflower sent forth a brood of Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock in her first voyage and in a subsequent one spawned slaves upon the Southern soil” (Sundquist 141). In many ways, the slave narratives that we read have become impressive orations about plots of escape and folktales (in the purest sense) of blacks’ resistance to violence.

As one researches writings surrounding the Middle Passage, one learns that non-African American writers also address the conditions, dehumanization, and politics of slavery. In her book *Romanticism and Slave Narratives: Transatlantic Testimonies*, Helen Thomas refers to English writer Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Lecture on the Slave Trade*. Thomas writes, “Thus Coleridge’s lecture ‘on’ rather than ‘against’ the slave trade strategically avoided a discussion of the slaves themselves; rather, it centered upon a discussion of the concept of luxury and the sufferings of the English peasantry . . .”(95). In *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman demonstrates outrage in his antislavery poetry as follows: “I am the man . . . I suffered . . . I was there . . . / The hounded slave that flags in the race and leans by the fence, / blowing and covered with sweat, / The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck, / The murderous buck-shot and the bullets, / All these I feel or am” (*Heath Anthol-*

ogy 2894). There is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Poems on Slavery* (1842) that was, Sundquist submits, "next to John Greenleaf Whittier's pieces, the most comprehensive poetic statement of Antislavery" (185). Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno," writes Sundquist, is central to the literary treatment of revolt, or slave insurrection (186). For Sundquist, Melville's *Mardi* (1849) is another caricature of Northern Romanticism (186).

Simultaneously, it is impossible to ignore the literature of the critics of antifreedom or emancipation. In particular, Sundquist reminds readers that the "plantation myth generated much Southern literature (both before the Civil War and even more prominently in the later nineteenth century in the work of writers such as Thomas Nelson Page) and often exploited aristocratic and feudal elements as the basis for confederate tradition" (160). Scholars of literature and language can find numerous texts that defend Southern slavery or that idealize plantation life.

I quoted earlier from Diedrich that the "Middle Passage, buried and pathless as it may seem in the Atlantic, can never be forgotten, indeed must be re-membered by all of us who are its 'heirs and descendants,' and perhaps in that retelling its pain may be brought to the surface and the mine million recognized" (267). The remembering and retelling surface specifically in texts such as Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*; Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise*; and Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River*.

Moreover, as you explore the literary panels this year, I hope that you will experience the works of black women writers and their presentation of what Elizabeth Brown-Guillory calls "healing rituals" which, she shows, serve as a unifying link. These rituals, contends Brown-Guillory,

empower women to resist the systems of oppression that are both internal and external to the community. The rituals generally involve water and motion and are intricately connected to the reenactments of the Middle Passage and the subsequent

voluntary and involuntary migrations. The women often race to bodies of water where they bear up each other, riding the waves of disappointment, disenfranchisement, dislocation, and disconnection. The bonds that the women develop become the bridge that allows them to survive destabilized terrain. (3)

In order to understand present American and African American culture, it is essential to (re)root and (re)route the path that African Americans have traveled. James Weldon Johnson's second stanza of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" provides a fitting portrait of this path:

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chast'ning rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet,  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed? We have  
Come over a way that with tears has been watered,  
We have come, treading our path thro' the blood  
of the slaughtered,  
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of the bright star is cast. (Traditional)

Trudier Harris reminds us in her seminal essay "African-American Literature: A Survey" that

Africans brought to the United States and enslaved were obviously not brought here to produce poems, plays, short stories, and novels. Nor were they here with any consideration of perpetuating their own cultural traditions. Thus thrown into circumstances where their bodies were emphasized over their minds, and where the usual bonds of language were absent, enslaved Africans adapted the English language and used it to communicate as best they could. Through this hybrid, they passed on what they remembered of their own cultures, and combined it with what they witnessed on new soil, or created something totally new. (Patton 223)

CLA community, from a gloomy past, we now have volumes of riches to devour. *Africana Studies* on major campuses is as popular as English and history. We have kept a steady beat in the publication of African American literature. I encourage you to continue to explore the literature of Africa and the African Diaspora. Every page of these texts connects us to the path of the blood of the

slaughtered. Every story, poem, novel, or play we write and read connects us to our African families. Now, “we stand at last” on the shoulders of those who crossed the Atlantic. Thank you, for coming to Charleston. Enjoy the richness of our heritage. Have a great convention.

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