

# Reclamation in Walker's Jubilee: The Context of Development of the Historical Novel

by

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## Abstract

This article attempts to contribute to the scholarship on Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, ancestor of a wave of neo-enclaved narratives and African-American historical fictions, by shedding more light on the context of its development. While most critics implicitly tie the development of Walker's historical novel to the sixties, the text is a product of the thirties which gave impetus to the revisionist movement reclaiming African-American history.

Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* is an important marker in the effective development of African-American historical counter-narratives. Walker indeed appropriates feature traditions in the narratives of the enslaved, which she reshapes to create a new mode of representation that will only come to predominate in the sixties. Walker's text anticipates most of the practices embedded in the new body of African-American historical studies and novels on enslavement published after the sixties, which like her work pays attention to the agency and self-representations of the enslaved; privileges description of their community-and culture-building energies; exhibits forms of resistance; and interrogates the myths and stereotypes disseminated in Anglo-American representations. Walker's approach to history has inspired filial African-American contemporary writers. Indeed, as Pettis conjectures, "historical fiction structured in the same manner as *Jubilee* is also a vital precursor to complex...approaches to Afro-American history such as David Bradley's *The Chanesysville Incident*, John A. Williams' *Captain Blackman*, and Ishmael Reed's parody of the genre, *Flight to Canada*" (12).

Margaret Walker's text, as several critics have pointed out, may well have been the impetus for revisions of the history of chattel enslavement from the Black woman's perspective such as Ernest G. Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).<sup>1</sup> The author's confirmation that enslavement did not destroy the spirit of her heroine is her legacy to female protagonists of historical fiction that follows such as Miss James Pittman, Dessa Rose, and Sethe. Most scholarship on *Jubilee* traces back the text's inception to the sixties. Indeed, critics such as Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, in "The Neo-Slave Narrative;" Joyce Pettis in "Margaret Walker: Black Women Writer of the South;" and Angelyn Mitchell in her introduction to *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fictions*—suggest that the novel's development parallels the sixties. This article argues that in accounting for the revisionist undertaking which *Jubilee* represents, however, one should not only take into account the significant ideological base of the sixties, because Margaret Walker's text is a product of an earlier period during which the African-American movement of historical reclamation reached its peak: the thirties.

Indeed, Walker started writing *Jubilee* in the fall of 1934, when she was in her senior year at Northeastern University in Illinois (Walker, *How I Wrote* 12), and she completed and published it thirty years later. Therefore, even though examination of the context of *Jubilee*'s publication—the context of the Civil Rights and the erupting Black Power movements that gave impetus to a wave of neo-narratives of the enslaved—might help to understand the practices embedded in the text, it is necessary to examine the context of its beginnings as well. This is especially necessary since the author herself makes it clear, in an interview with Kay Bonnetti, that notwithstanding the fact that her historical novel was published in 1966, it bears influences of the thinking she acquired in the thirties (128).

The context in which Walker began writing *Jubilee* coincides with the Harlem Renaissance's late stage. This movement of cultural self-assertion saw its fullest development in the 1920s. However, it was still a powerful ideological construct in the 1930s. The development of the Harlem Renaissance had taken place in a climate of protest against the African-Americans' economic and social conditions, of unprecedented development of race consciousness, and of pride in Negro cultural heritage— all ingredients necessary to the eventual birth of nationalism of the 1960s. Writers and theorists of this movement in particular affirmed pride in their Negro identity and celebrated their racial heritage in their works. African-American literary works produced during this period are characterized by a significant accentuation of cultural markers such as the use of African-American folklore that W.E.B. Du Bois had promulgated in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) at the turn of the century.

The works of Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Sterling Brown constitute relevant illustrations of this celebration and embrace of African-American culture characteristic of the Harlem Renaissance and post-Harlem Renaissance cultural productions. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* belongs to this folk tradition established by writers such as Hurston, whom she acknowledges as a literary ancestor (Carmichael 71). With *Jubilee*, her intention was to develop a "folk novel based on folk material: folk sayings, folk belief, folkways" (Walker, *How I Wrote Jubilee* 25). Walker wanted to present extensively in the culture of the enslaved.

The 1930s marked a turning point in American historiography as well. Until the mid-century, the representation of enslaved people's past was largely dominated by the Anglo-American perspective. This perspective tended to silence the voices of the enslaved and generally failed to depict their consciousness and culture. Lawrence Levine addresses these issues in the preface of *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1978) in which he argues that historians "devoted their attention to other groups and other problems" and failed to capture the thoughts and consciousness of the enslaved and other marginalized groups. Furthermore, the Black experience was misrepresented as a result of the biased and ideologically oriented Anglo-American representations. As Y. N. Kly notes, in *The Invisible War. The African American Anti-Slavery Resistance from the Stono Rebellion through the Seminole Wars* (2006), these works validated and promoted a history that "facilitated the maintenance of the most vicious racist stereotypes" of African Americans. Kly further conjectures that "the history of the African Americans was and continued to be written to transmit, promote and justify to succeeding generations both the benefits and liabilities of the then-existing politico-economic order, and the victor's rabid propaganda of the past" (18).

The propagandist, biased, and incomplete nature of Anglo-American historical writing is apparent in two views that dominated the scholarship of enslavement throughout the years 1920s and 1930s: that of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and that of Dwight L. Dumond. Ulrich Bonnell Phillips' (1877-1934) racist views, especially seen in *American Negro Slavery* (1918), clearly support the institution of slavery. He presents enslavement as a benign, paternalist, and patriarchal system beneficial to the enslaved. Not surprisingly, enslaved Americans are portrayed as acquiescent and submissive in Phillips' representations. The second dominant view in the scholarship about enslavement is exemplified by Dwight L. Dumond's *Antislavery Origins of the Civil War* (1939) that posits that enslavement was a brutal and horrible system. But significantly Dumond does not portray the enslaved Africans as "subjects" of history.

Dumond, like most traditional historians, only sees defeat and humiliation in enslaved people's past as he focuses on the system's brutality without examining enslaved people's creative adjustments and responses to the system. His work contributes to the perception of "black history as an unending round of degradation and pathology," as Levine commented about traditional histories (x-xi). Thus, even though the racist and liberal perspectives viewed the institution of slavery differently, both forgot the Negro in their representations. "The Negro was innately inferior in the first and a suppliant presence in the second," Herbert Shapiro relevantly remarks in *African American History and Radical Historiography. Essays in Honor of Herbert Aptheker* (1998) (6-7).

Kly and Benjamin Quarles sum up with precision the ignorance, distortion, and misrepresentation of the African American past in Anglo-American historical representations. In the preface of *The Invisible War*, Kly argues that Anglo-American historiography before the beginning of the century devoted little attention to the masses of enslaved people. It did not represent the culture, thoughts, and consciousness of enslaved Africans. It was also ideologically biased as it supported the institution of slavery, and it disseminated several stereotypes and misconceptions about the African Americans. For instance, Anglo-American historiography posited that captured African people did not in any significant way resist their individual captivity or the institution of slavery itself and argued that collective resistance to the system was negligible. It also contended that the self-liberated enslaved people mostly fled northward to freedom, rather than southward to the free territories of Georgia and Florida. Finally, Anglo-American historiography presented African-American wars of liberation from enslavement as merely other Indian wars (19-20), which clearly indicates that Anglo-American chroniclers manipulated history and erased the African Americans' resistance to oppression and agency.

Benjamin Quarles corroborates Kly's observations in *The Negro in the Civil War* (1969) but more relevantly in "Black History's Antebellum Origins." In this essay, he argues that white recorders misinterpreted the historical sources they had ostensibly examined and this "failure of deduction was compounded by a deficiency even more grievous— bias by omission." Quarles further shows how besides these omissions and biases, there were even more threatening assumptions shaping the chronicling of Black history. White historians disseminated "the belief that blacks, past as well as present, had a genetic predisposition to low aim and lesser achievement, destined indefinitely to lag below the historical horizon" (89-90). For Quarles, Anglo-American historians presented the African-American past as "inglorious when it was not insignificant," and this past "was shrouded in mystery when it was not covered with shame" (90).

A similar neglect, bias, and destruction of Black history can be identified in literary representations of slavery and the Civil War years by white authors. Writers of the plantation tradition paid little attention to the enslaved and totally ignored their consciousness and culture. Their works, as Sterling Brown remarks in *The Negro in American Fiction* (1969), supported the perpetuation of the institution of slavery by blotting out its horrors and focusing on festive aspects of the plantation such as harvesting, corn-shucking, hunting, fishing-balls, weddings and holiday seasons. They presented enslavement as “an unbroken Mardi Gras,” a benevolent system civilizing and Christianizing contented enslaved (18). Fictions of the plantation tradition projected negative historical images of enslaved Americans. These antebellum southern writers disseminated “images of blacks as servile and inferior race” (Christian 19) and Margaret Walker was very much aware of this. She reinforces Christian’s view in “Black and White Threads in Mississippi” when she points out that the plantation tradition “marked the beginning of stereotypes from which literature has yet to free itself” (163). Indeed, Black male images such as the submissive plantation uncle, the Black Sambo, and the minstrel developed as a result of the plantation tradition. Barbara Christian validates Walker’s comments in *Black Women Novelists* where she elaborates on the various crude stereotypes of Black women such as the mammy, the conjure woman, the Jezebel, and the lewd Black woman that found their origins in antebellum and post-bellum white Southern women writers’ fictions. Ironically, this tradition would be continued even by male African American writers who disseminated stereotypes of Black women in their texts.

Another genre of literary writing about African Americans occurs in Civil War novels written in the nineteenth and twentieth century. These, especially the ones written by white Southern writers, performed analogous silencing, “othering,” and marginalization of Black subjects as fictions of plantation tradition. Like the white historians, white Southern Civil War novelists showed little concern about the African-Americans’ lived experience, consciousness, and ambitions. Robert Lively, who has examined five hundred and twelve Civil War novels in *Fiction Fights the Civil War* (1957), corroborates this view. Indeed, he argues that “white authors have not tried very hard to understand individual slave characters or to wake in readers any sense of identification with them. The novelists have stood apart and have shaped the Negro men and women to symbolize their own philosophies of race relations” (49). As proof to this, Lively first shows that the enslaved were inadequately characterized in Civil War novels. Second, he shows that Blacks were never main characters in these novels. They were merely unnoticeable figures moving around white heroes and heroines to whom all the attention was devoted. Lively also points out that significantly “outstanding Negroes of war fiction are memorable for noble simplicity, rather than complex human characteristics” (49).

Lively further argues that this erasure of the Black presence is perpetuated in the twentieth century Civil War novels in general when he states that the enslaved “have been accorded a smaller and smaller place in the twentieth century’s novels of the war,” he states. “The greatest concern with Negro life was expressed in early northern novels of the war; after that, the story of the southern servant was reduced to sub-plots and stage-dressing in novels about white men and women” (55). Furthermore, Lively shows that history presented in these Civil War novels, more specifically the Southern ones, supported the maintenance of the institution of slavery. He states that the Southern version of the Black person strove to “demonstrate the contentment of Negroes with their ante-bellum lot” (51). Margaret Mitchell’s portrayal of the Black person as a happy and contented creature in *Gone With the Wind* justifies Lively’s contention. In her war novel, Mitchell implicitly defends the acceptability of slavery and perpetuates the myth of the Glorious South, a myth that is apparent in William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust* and *Sartoris* as well. Even the earlier *Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane fails to depict the Black presence in the Civil War. Thus, white Civil War novelists, like traditional historians not only silenced the African American in their representations but also destroyed his history and erased his agency.

Awareness of this destruction of African-American history both in American historiography and literature resulted in a supreme moment of counter-narrating by African Americans in the period surrounding *Jubilee*’s composition. The foundations of American historiography were heavily shaken by a revisionist movement reclaiming Black history and contesting traditional trajectories of interpreting Black history. W.E.B Du Bois was the precursor and the most prominent figure of this historiographic movement reclaiming Black history from a perspective from within. In the “Forethought” of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois urged scholars to explore non-textual manifestations of Negro history such as the folklore, more precisely the Negro spirituals, so as to convey the true meaning of the Black experience in America. Du Bois thus sowed the seeds of this radical historiographic movement. He also spent his career recovering Black history and generating a “counter-memory.” In *Black Reconstruction* (1935), for example, he challenged the basic premises of Anglo-American historians’ racialized representations of chattel slavery and revised Philips’ theses in *American Negro Slavery* by re-interpreting the Civil War and Reconstruction period. Carter G. Woodson represents another precursor and emblematic figure of this movement of historical reclamation. He established in 1915 the ASNHL (Association for the Study of Negro Life and History) and the *Journal of Negro History* to recover African-American history. In reconstructing history, Woodson privileged the study of non-textual manifestations such as folklore in which true expression of Black history was buried.

This revisionist movement reached its peak in the mid-1930s, the period when Walker began writing her historical novel, and would grow in proportion in the following decades. Indeed, Herbert Aptheker, who worked closely with Du Bois, further countered the biased Anglo-American trajectories of reading slavery in his 1937 Master's thesis on Nat Turner's slave rebellion and his doctoral dissertation that would be published in 1943 under the title *American Negro Slave Revolts*. Aptheker, as Shapiro notes, "presents a powerful refutation of the previously dominant historiography, exemplified by U. B. Phillips, which contended the plantation system, ruled by superior whites, sought to civilize an inherently inferior black population" (2). He revealed in a series of articles the class exploitation and brutality of slavery, defended the rebelliousness that was characteristic of African Americans, and made clearly prominent resistance and role of the enslaved in the abolitionist movement.

Significant social, political, and intellectual transformations paralleling the period of *Jubilee's* completion—the sixties—further promote the project of historical reclamation of the thirties. The instrumental role of the masses in the radical transformation of American society during the turbulent Civil Rights Movement years forced historians to alter their views on the past. It taught them a real lesson about the dynamics of power as well. The Civil Rights Movement made historians more aware of the dynamics of social agency, and this awareness promoted a revision of their perception of history and slavery (Rushdy, "The Neo-Slave Narrative" 88-9). Another notable influence of the period is the Black Power Movement of the mid-sixties. This political and intellectual movement that stemmed from the Civil Rights Movement buttressed the ideological fortifications of the incipient cultural nationalism of the Harlem Renaissance. This movement brought increased interest and pride in the Black heritage. Its proponents excavated the African Americans' past to recover aspects that could help re-define the world in their own terms and counter the negative images of non-Western peoples and cultures. The Black Power Movement also led to a better knowledge of the true experience and cultures of Black people throughout the Diaspora as it facilitated Black Studies in the academy. It greatly contributed in transforming trajectories of reading about slavery and the enslavement process, for it "provided the pride and perspective necessary to pierce the myths and lies that have grown up around the antebellum period" (Williams 248). One direct result of these social, political, and intellectual transformations was the emergence of an important body of historical studies and literary works taking seriously "the agency and self-representation of the slaves, their community and culture-building energies, and the forms of resistance they exhibited" (Rushdy 88-9). Walker was a vital precursor of this new mode of representation.

Walker was a “historian,” for as a true scholar, she had extensively researched the periods she re-visits from a new perspective in *Jubilee*. She conducted research on enslavement, the Civil War and Reconstruction to maintain objectivity and historical accuracy. *How I Wrote Jubilee* provides a detailed presentation of her thorough scholarship over the thirty years of the novel’s composition. First, Walker enrolled in a course in “American Civilization” in Iowa to familiarize herself better with the era of enslavement. She compiled a list of books about the South, the status of Black people during enslavement, and the slave codes of Georgia. Hence, Ulrich B. Philips’ *American Negro Slavery*, William E. Dodd’s *The Cotton Kingdom*, Clement Eaton’s *A History of the Old South*, Frederick Olmstead’s *Journey in the Seaboard Slave State*, and Frances A. Kemble’s *Journal of a residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* formed part of this list. Additionally, Walker read textbooks written from all points of views: Southern white, Northern white, and Black. She studied the Black woman of the ante-bellum period and learned “how to find and use primary sources and documents” (Walker, *How I Wrote* 13).

Walker read a considerable number of narratives of the enslaved and consulted primary sources and documents as well to have an objective picture of enslavement. She consulted narratives of the enslaved from the Martin Collection in the Library of North Carolina. Thus, these narratives, recounting such atrocities as branding, whipping and mutilating of enslaved people, which corroborated her great grandmother’s account. She also spent months at Chapel Hill delving into the Nelson Tift papers—a collection of account books, diaries, letters, bills of sale, and other personal papers of a wealthy white Georgia planter who had lived in the environs of the setting of her story during the ante-bellum days (Walker, *How I Wrote* 18). Grimes’ letter to John Dutton when the enslaved had broken up in the smokehouse and the conversation between the planters at Dutton’s Dinner party were drawn from this collection. In 1942, Walker visited the Schomburg Collection of Negro History on 135<sup>th</sup> in Harlem. At that time, her former professor at Dilliard University, Lawrence Reddick, who held a Ph.D. in history, served as curator of the collection. Reddick not only taught her about Southern history, but also gave her helpful leads. In 1944, when she received a Rosenwald Fellowship, Walker conducted research on “free Negroes in Georgia as well as the ante-bellum slave woman” (15). Walker worked in close collaboration with several librarians around the US.

Walker also thoroughly researched the Civil War years. She read most of the prominent Civil War novels examined in Robert Lively’s *Fiction Fights the Civil War*, a study of 512 novels. She read Simkins’ *History of the South*, W.E. B. Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction*, Benjamin Quarles’ *The Negro in the Civil War*, and Charles Wesley’s *Collapse of Confederacy*. In 1961, Walker purchased a package of reprinted Civil War newspapers including “ads for runaway slaves, stories about the ammunition workers, Jefferson Davis’ speech on the increasing rate of desertions from the Confederate Army, and the failure of Confederate currency” from which she lifted some items for her novel (20).



Four years later, Walker went over the famous references that Crane utilized in *Red Badge of Courage*: the old *Century Magazine* with “Battles and Leaders of the Civil War.”

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

These years of unremitting research made Walker aware that the true nature of African-American experience was not depicted in Anglo-American historical writing and fiction. Indeed, she realized that the “Negro was simply a pawn” to whom little attention was devoted and certain aspects of his experience such as his role in the liberation struggle were blotted out of Anglo-American representations. Walker also gained consciousness of the bias and subjectivity of these works. She discovered that white Southern historians and novelists misrepresented the process and institution of enslavement. They claimed it was a beneficial system with benign masters. As for Northerners, they did not oppose enslavement as long as it was “contained” in the South and did not spread into the territories. With *Jubilee*, Walker wanted to revise history to accommodate a valid Black perspective and to revive the African-American memory swept away by these master-narratives. As she explains in *How I Wrote Jubilee*, she planned to write a folk novel so as to capture the true experience and cultural memory of the enslaved and to show the significance of Black people and their role during the war because these aspects had been blotted out of the dominant culture’s representations (26). Additionally, Walker wanted to tell the story from a Black woman’s perspective because she felt that “the black woman’s story has not been told, has not been dealt adequately” (Giovanni 55). She felt that the historical novel would be the most suitable way to teach people about a time and a place as they “are more inclined to read fiction than history” (Rowell 23).

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

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<sup>i</sup> For a more elaborated discussion of *Jubilee's* impact on African American literature see Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's "The Neo-Slave Narrative;" Joyce Pettis's "Margaret Walker: Black Women Writer of the South;" and Angelyn Mitchell's introduction in *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fictions*.