

The African Slave Trade and American Slaves: The Migration of Black Mythology

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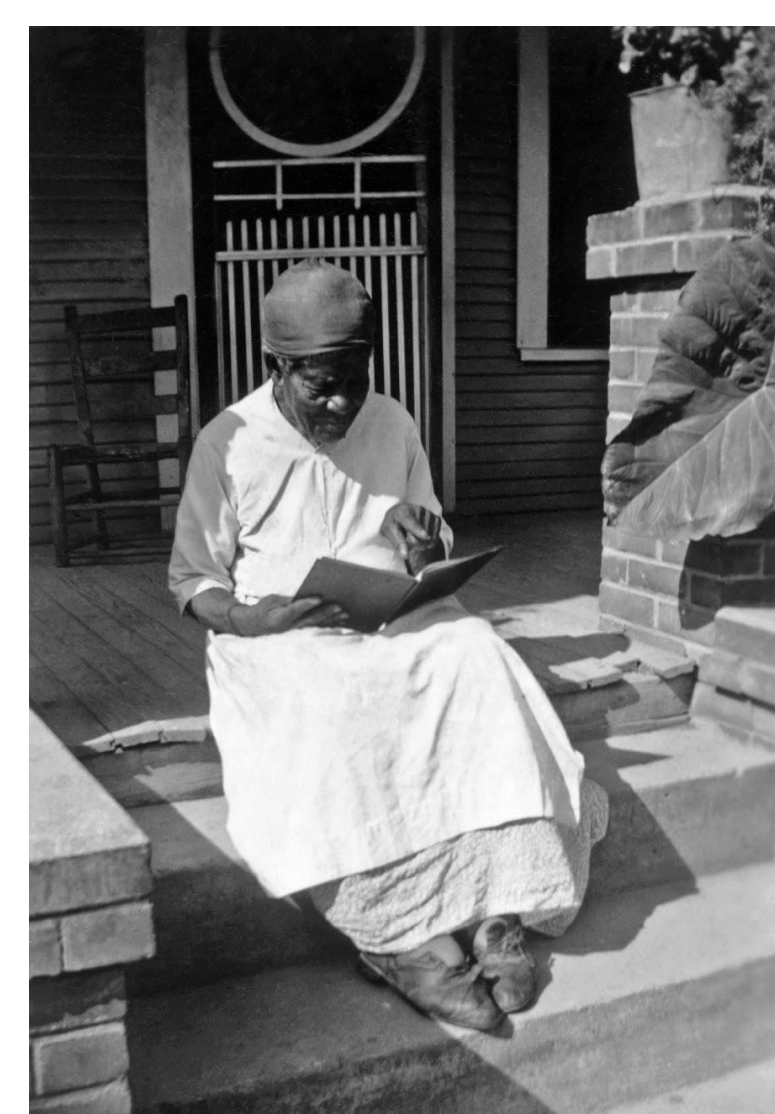


Background

During the spring of 2017, I consecutively took two courses within OSU's history department, the History of Modern European Migration with Professor Dragostinova as well as African American History to 1877 with Professor Shaw. Focusing on the impact of migration on communities with Dragostinova while simultaneously studying elements of development of African American culture with professor Shaw, I began to think about the ways in which the culture of African American communities were shaped by both the forced migration from Africa and subsequent migration during the slave trade. I was particularly fascinated by African American folktales that referenced enslavement in Africa and wanted to explore how migration shaped folklore. To what extent and how did African folk culture survive the forced, transatlantic journey and subsequent forced migrations within America?

Methodology

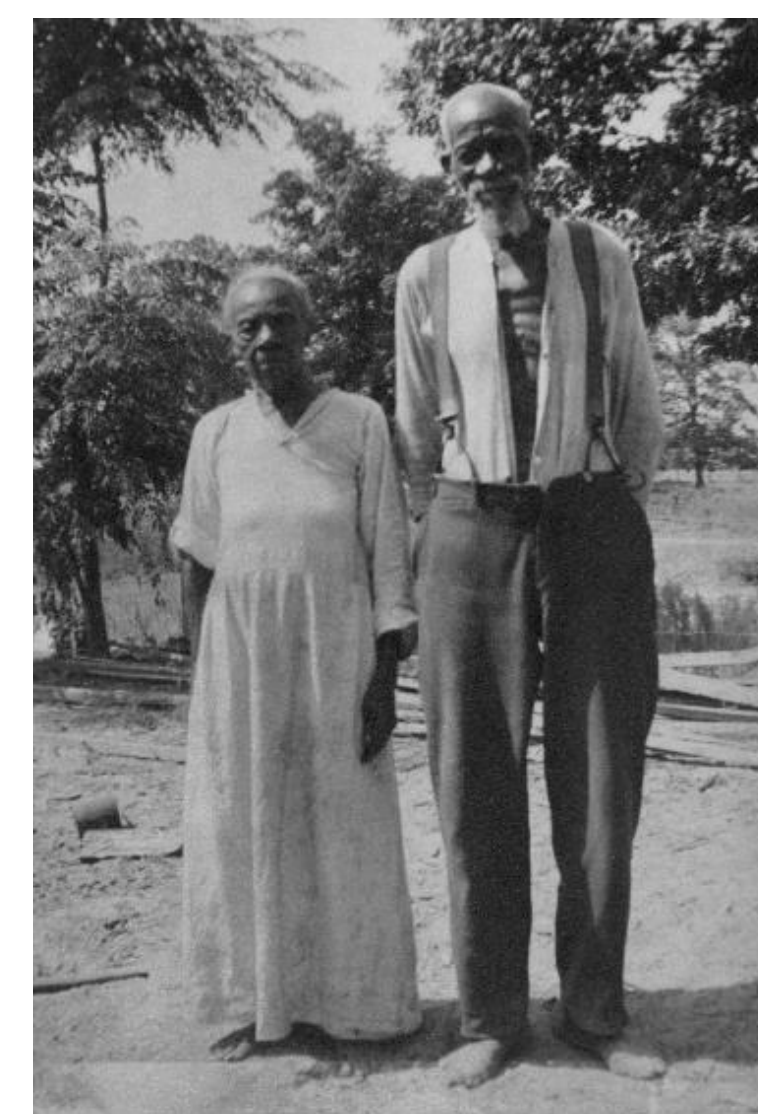
During the 1930s New Deal, Federal Writer's project personnel interviewed over 2,000 former slaves throughout the country. Many of these narratives include folktales the slaves grew up hearing in their communities. They reflect aspects of the larger development of African American culture that arose after the forced migration from Africa and, for some, their movement from the Upper South to the Lower South and Southwest as slavery expanded in the United States. These stories demonstrate the intersection of traditional African folklore and new circumstances. My goal was to study the folklore within these narratives in order to gain a greater understanding of their development and dispersal.



Mary Armstrong, 91 years old in 1936; living in Texas, born in Mississippi.



Charles H. Anderson, 91 years old in 1936; Living in Ohio, born in Virginia



Sarah and Tom Douglass, Age 82 and 89 in approximately 1936-1938; Born in Mississippi and Louisiana respectively, living in Arkansas.

The Migration of Black Mythology First-Person Accounts

Account of "Granny Judith," relayed by her grandson, Richard Jones, born in South Carolina in about 1820

"Some strangers wid pale faces come one day and drapped a small piece of red flannel down on de ground. All de black folks grabbed for it. Den a larger piece was drapped a little further on, and on until de river was reached... Finally, when de ship was reached, dey drapped large pieces on de plank and up into the ship 'dill dey got as many blacks on board as dey wanted."

Judith Gist's account is a frequently used example of this phenomenon. According to her grandson, red fabric was especially enticing because it was an uncommon color where they lived in Africa.

Account of Bonnie Tolbert, born in Alabama in the mid-1850s
"The way them refugees enticed them children to they wagons, they had ... all kinds of pretty little red trinkets, and they'd hold them up, and then call them come and get them. Then they grab up the children, put them in the wagons, and you'd never see them no more."

As slavery spread, kidnapping was a real danger, even in America. Red flannel was no longer unusual or enticing, but perhaps red trinkets were perfect bait for a child.

Account of Patsy Moses, born in 1863 in Texas
"A good charm bag am made of red flannel with frog bones...Dat bag protect you from your enemy."

Slaves had been emancipated for some time when Moses probably learned this folk tradition. The red flannel, while still suggesting danger and power, is now used for the empowerment of the freed person.

Conclusion

These examples, and many others like them, feature red flannel, red trinkets, and even red boats. The brightly colored lure took many forms and people easily adapted them to their new environments. They were central to capture narratives of the Africans, kidnapping warnings in America as the nation expanded southward, and ultimately in the slave's self-empowerment in the folk culture before and after emancipation. What these accounts don't mention is that the Europeans regularly traded cloth for slaves, therefore part of the story might have already been altered—for practical purposes—by the Africans who told it to members of the first generation of slaves born in America.

My Summer in DC

Having received funding for my project through the Global Mobility Project at OSU, I was afforded the opportunity to spend the summer of 2017 at the Library of Congress, working with the original WPA ex-slave narratives in the Rare Manuscripts Reading Room.

Moving Forward

This semester, I am continuing to work under the mentorship of Professor Shaw to develop my research into a paper and to graduate in May with undergraduate research distinction in history. In the near future, it is our hope that we will be able to continue this research in an archive in the Deep South.

Acknowledgements

My research would have been impossible without the support of the Global Mobility Project at Ohio State. The grant that they gave me allowed me to study in DC this summer which was critical to my project.

Most of all, I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Professor Stephanie Shaw. In addition to her mentorship in developing this research project, she was the first person to instill in me a passion for history. She has helped me build my confidence as a reader and writer through her instruction and encouragement, and were it not for her support, this project would not exist. She is the type of instructor and scholar I hope to become some day, and I cannot thank her enough for everything she has done for me.

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