

Speak Right On: Conjuring the Slave Narrative of Dred Scott
by Mary E. Neighbour

MEDIA Q&A

Q: So little biographical data for Dred Scott remains—how did you build your story?

A: What I could learn about Dred Scott, the man, was scant. Scant, but tantalizing. The few news reports about him that were published after the Supreme Court decision were wildly contradictory. I decided to focus on quotes that were attributed to him. Such as:

There is not a drop of the white man's blood in my veins. My ancestors were free people of Africa. ...

I responded strongly to the pride and eloquence of this statement, to the solid sense of identity, as well as the implicit sophistication regarding any notions of white superiority.

Another magnetizing quote, just a fragment, occurred when Dred Scott was asked about Henry and Taylor Blow, the sons of his original slave owner. He referred to the Blow brothers as:

... them boys I was raised with.

I became confused as further research informed me that Dred Scott was considerably older than Henry and Taylor: as much as 15 to 20 years older. Was this phrase a colloquialism? Or did it express an abiding affection and intimacy?

Of course, these two brothers would prove indispensable to Dred Scott's struggle to win his freedom. History is clear about that. They found him lawyers, put up the bond money, helped sustain the Scott family through the tedious years of litigation, and they ultimately were responsible for the manumission of Dred, his wife, and daughters. This relationship between Dred Scott and the family who owned him fascinated me. It became a strong motivation to learn more.

A final quote attributed to Dred Scott sealed my fate as a researcher into the life and times of Dred Scott:

I thought it hard that white men should draw a line of their own on the face of the earth and on one side of which a black man was to become no man at all, and never say a word to the black man about it until they had got him on that side of the line....

I began to "hear" the voice of Dred Scott. He was engaging, a man with a nimble mind and a fluent tongue. Though he was denied an education, he was articulate, even eloquent. Though he was enslaved, his voice reached the U.S. Supreme Court.

And I wondered: what happens to an agile mind that is deprived literacy? What happens to eloquence that has a bit shoved in its mouth to hold down the tongue? The paradox fascinated me. At first I questioned if he perhaps pretended to be illiterate. Stories exist of slaves who did just that, for fear of punishment. But it was the first quote, the expression of pride in his African ancestors, that swayed me toward believing that his power with words came from his African

heritage, from the griot tradition of storytelling and history keeping, and that the power of this legacy lived in Dred Scott independent of both literacy and slavery. The more I explored this rich heritage, the more I understood the roots of much of our current wealth of myth and lore.

It took only one more ingredient to launch me on writing this novel. I read a brief parable, the satchels tale, that became the crucible in which I could mix all the ingredients I had researched, and blend in the many more I would need:

At the beginning of the world god set down two satchels. The white man come along, opened the one, and claimed the paper and pencil. The black man come along, opened the other, and brung up the hoe and reed flute. Some say this explain why the black man be slave to the white man . . .

Q: What element of history do you think is most relevant today?

A: There are several, quite different, aspects of the Dred Scott history that remain relevant today:

1 – U.S. slavery ended; racism didn't. Dred Scott struggled to end his enslavement, and in so doing sparked a war to end slavery for all Americans. That's quite a legacy, but racism continues to be an issue for all Americans, whether they're aware of it or not. Each individual needs to become aware and speak out—as Dred Scott did.

2 – The course of the legal controversy in the Dred Scott case demonstrates the wisdom of our Constitution's division of powers, the importance of an independent judiciary, and the dangers when a single political party dominates all three branches of government.

3 – Today some advocate the repeal of the 14th Amendment, which is directly tied to the 1857 U.S. Supreme Court decision in Dred Scott v. Sanford, which pitched America into bloody Civil War by denying citizenship to Dred Scott and all descendants of Africans. The 14th Amendment was passed in 1868 to rectify that injustice by granting citizenship to all persons born on U.S. soil.

Q: Writers are often extolled to "write what you know"; what did you know about Dred Scott?

A: In my case, the phrase should be "write what you'd like know/understand"; it was what I didn't know that got me interested in Dred Scott; it was what I couldn't find out that set me to writing about him.

Q: What was your biggest challenge?

A: From the start, I was apprehensive about crossing racial and gender boundaries to create a persona for Dred Scott. The controversy that confronted William Styron with his Confessions of Nat Turner, literally gave me sleepless nights.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison writes: "The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity."

While this may be true of writing in general and the fabrication of any persona, I think it is especially true for me, a white woman, fabricating a persona of an enslaved black man. At the outset, I expected to write a dark story, an expression of my often bleak view of humanity and of a universe that seems to insist on demonstrating human insignificance and meaninglessness. I expected to wind up with a story about our human inability to control our aggression and greed; about how trauma isolates the individual and makes real relationship and communication impossible; how difficult it is for any individual to rise above the constant message, "you're worthless." What system better represents all these dark forces than slavery?

So I was truly astonished to wind up with a hero in Dred Scott: someone who struggled out from under imposed obscurity to find meaning and possibilities. For me, my character's triumph was not so much securing his and his family's freedom—rather, it was his success in managing to define himself and declare his truth and his reality to a world that was largely indifferent at best, antagonistic/murderous at worst. Hence, the Nigerian proverb:

A chicken says why she is crying is not for the kite carrying her to leave her, but for others to hear her voice.

Storytelling is on the surface and at the heart of this book, crystallized in the notion of stories having two sides: "upriver and downriver."

Q: Explain this concept and why it was important to you.

A: I became fascinated by the idea that Dred Scott was an articulately powerful person—after all, his voice reached the US Supreme Court—yet he clearly was denied literacy. What happens to someone like that?

At first, I imagined how he suffered; then I became much more interested in seeing how he succeeded, and I believed that he plausibly could have derived much of that verbal power and ability from African oral traditions of storytelling and history keeping. ["My ancestors were free Africans..."]

So I researched anthologies of African folklore and mythology which had been derived from oral tradition; and I came to resent how these styles are often unfairly assigned a "second-class" status compared to written literary styles; I wanted to work against that bias in the novel.

Q: Many writers shy away from using dialect; why did you choose it?

A: I needed to hear him, his voice, and that's how I heard him; I'm sure I was influenced by reading so many slave narratives that were set down in dialect, and then that became a curiosity itself: did the person really speak that way? How much of what was transcribed was influenced by the stereotypes of the transcriber or of the culture of that time?

Language was a very crucial part of what I wanted to address; not head-on, but insidiously: how we speak doesn't always represent who we are, but it usually represents who we want others to think we are; this was particularly a conscious process for many slaves, who often hid their true personalities to protect themselves

For myself, I'm often frustrated by my inability to find words that strike the right tone and meaning. I sometimes become self-conscious that I sound very academic; but I also know that I "wear" the academic style because I typically don't want to be vulnerable emotionally. But then there are times when I'll unconsciously slide into an accent if I'm around someone talking that way, and if I trust that person and I'm not feeling self-protective; there were many times after writing in Dred's voice that I came away from my desk talking like him—in ways, at certain times, that feels more genuine than the academic voice.

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