Anna Scacchi

"Chained to Hope": A Short Story by Noni Carter

I met Noni Carter in Paris last October. We were both speakers in a workshop on "Slavery, Memory, and Literature" organized by Aarhus University and Columbia University and I was immediately struck by this young woman's poise and academic brilliance. Many outstanding papers were presented during the two-day conference – which included such renowned scholars as Anne Bailey, Laura Murphy, and Domna Stanton, just to name a few – but hers was closely connected to my own current research on the memory of slavery and the representation of black bodies in pain, and I found it both profound and moving. Her reading of M. NourbeSe Philip's experimental poem *Zong!* and investigation of the genealogical arc of the trope of the slave ship from Enlightenment literary works to contemporary artistic practice were deeply engaging. Particularly interesting to me was her focus on the expendability of the black body and the fabrication of blackness starting "in the belly of the ship," as the title of her presentation said. So during coffee and lunch breaks we exchanged ideas and bibliographic tips and promised to stay in touch.

To me she was an incredibly gifted PhD student, a promising scholar, a beautiful, smart black young woman with a committed soul, but I certainly did not expect that only a few weeks later I would discover there was a lot more to Noni. I was planning to send her a follow-up message and, as I had misplaced her email address, I googled her name and this is how I stumbled on the title of a novel, a contemporary narrative of slavery for young adults published by Simon & Schuster in 2010, whose author was a teenager – she was just 18 at the time – by the name of Noni Carter. I was delighted to find that the YA neoslave narrative was another mutual interest of ours. The memorialization of slavery in contemporary children's and Young Adult literature is a topic I have studied and written about

and I am constantly on the look out for new titles to add to my research corpus, yet I had not been aware of *Good Fortune*. It would certainly have caught my attention as I was investigating the discussion on how/what to tell children about the slave past which followed the release of Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* and Steve McQueen's *Twelve Years a Slave*, a discussion that was deeply influenced by Trayvon Martin's and Michael Brown's killings. I deeply regretted that I missed it, since it offered the unique perspective of a teenager in a scene dominated by adults discussing how best narrate the past to kids.

Good Fortune, which Noni Carter began writing at 12 and completed by the age of 15, expanding it from the original short story format to an almost 500-page novel, places great emphasis on the power of education, as it was to be expected in a work by an amazingly young achiever, but the message it spreads is also about the importance of cherishing and learning from the ancestors, who never gave up hope or stopped fighting in spite of their excruciating circumstances. The novel won the Parents' Choice Gold Award and was used in high schools to encourage the young to value their heritage and believe in their dreams. It tells the story of Ayanna Bahati, an African child who is kidnapped in the early 1800 and taken across the Atlantic Ocean to be sold as a slave in the US, and follows her journey into adulthood and her flight away from the dangers of the plantation to freedom, schooling and love. Carter's inspiration came from the stories her great-aunt told her when she was a child and especially that of her great-great-great grandmother Rose Caldwell who, at the age of twelve, watched her mother sail away on the Mississippi river, because she had been sold by their master, never to be seen again.

What does it take to survive such a dehumanizing pain and stay human? This was the question that the young Noni felt compelled to try and unravel through writing and one that, in spite of her age, she was able to frame and reply to in very different terms from the college mate who inspired Octavia Butler's writing of *Kindred* – the boy who could not understand resistance except as open, armed rebellion – or from Kanye West, who has recently affirmed that 400 years of slavery "sound like a choice" and can only be explained by mental enslavement. This question is still largely behind both her fiction and her research work as a scholar,

though of course her approach has become much more complex and investigates the very definition of "human," questioning its racialized Enlightenment association with literacy.

Carter's dissertation project explores scientific and literary investments in the "human," a category elaborated and debated in the scientific work of the European Enlightenment and re-scripted in recent science fiction (in literature, visual art, and performance) of the Anglophone and Francophone African diaspora. Her most recent fictional work, a YA novel which is currently being reviewed, and a SF novella which she is pitching for publication, translates into literary practice the very same inquiries into the human, with a marked gendered perspective. This is how she described to me both works:

> *Womb Talk* is both a historical and speculative Young Adult fiction epistolary novel following a year in the life of a young woman of color who writes to an aborted child as she works through the post-traumatic stress disorder surrounding the pregnancy, and contends with the sudden appearance of a ghost-like character that takes her deeply into the (troubling) folds of her family history, all the while trying to determine what "feminism" means for her. The novel treats many tangled, touchy topics – abortion, the loose definitions around "rape," sexual fluidity, mental health in People of Color communities, and what it means for a teenager (or *this* teenager) to navigate them all. *Expendability* is a wild dystopian sci-fi novella exploring what it might look like in a futuristic society for people of color to live out the legacies of black expendability (that began during the slave trade) and what this would mean for the way we love, nurture, and relate.

When Gianna Fusco and I started to work on this special issue of *RSA* on BLM and current forms of black activism in the US, I immediately thought of Noni as a possible contributor to the "unpublished manuscript section." And she was so generous as to grace our journal with a short story that speaks right to the concerns of this issue. In "Chained to Hope" we are presented with two characters, a young man, Xave, and a young woman, Gelé, who traverse the full spectrum of black life in the US. Xave is one of the million black inmates in American prisons legally enslaved under the 13th amendment, a number completely disproportionate to their

ratio in the country's population.[1] Gelé, an Ivy League graduate, works in a San Francisco corporate company, one of the handful token blacks the corporation hires. Xave has been sentenced to seventeen years for a crime that should have amounted to half the time, because of misdemeanors he committed when he was a gifted, inquiring, outspoken teenager but also a grieving boy who dropped school and ran away from home. Gelé is an achiever who has survived the death of her parents, her mother in Hurricane Katrina, her father of a heart attack, completed her education and landed a well-paid job away from Louisiana.

Xave and Gelé, though, are twins. Like the two brothers in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" they have responded to racism in different ways, Xave by falling in a mandated pattern of engulfing blackness, and ending up in solitary confinement, Gelé by distancing herself from blackness, though she refuses to "whiten" her black body and sometimes relapses into her southern drawl. Both however are isolated in a cage, literal or metaphorical. Life and the different impact anti-blackness has made on their existence have separated them but they are mysteriously connected, as, like the Marassa twins of Afro-diasporic religions, they are halves of the same whole and they strive to regain wholeness. When Gelé discovers that the company she works for is going into a new investing venture, the private prisons business, she is incensed as a black person but also deeply wounded, in ways that she cannot understand, as if their willing to profit from the labor of black bodies is connected to her not only historically, politically and culturally, but also on a personal level. She starts feeling sick and the memory of her lost brother, who disappeared from her life when she decided to attend an Ivy League university, hits in full force after years of fighting it back so as to cope with the "white" world. The physical pain she is feeling – something that neither her physician nor her therapist can explain – is Xave's, who is feverish and has gangrene on his hand because they refused to treat it. Her body is what tells her the truth, her black body acting as a conduit to wholeness. When they finally reunite, her brother has lost a hand and is a broken person, yet Gelé spots a humanity in his eyes, one which defies Western definitions of the human, as well as black superhero versions of it: "Not a 'Universal Rights Declaration' kind of

humanity. Not a Kantian humanity. Not even a Wakandian humanity. It's a humanity that this world has yet to know."

A dedication to three Garners ends the short story: Margaret, the fugitive enslaved mother who in 1856 killed her daughter and tried to kill her other children so that they would not be returned to slavery, whose story inspired Toni Morrison's *Beloved*; Eric, who in 2014 died at 43 in a chokehold, guilty of illegally peddling cigarettes, whose agony, like that of Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, and so many others, was captured in a heartbreaking video and shared on social media; Erica, his daughter, mother of two, BLM activist, who died at 27 of a heart attack. Only two of them were kin, yet Carter's dedication weaves them together into family, wonderfully chaining a long history of abuse to hope in a declaration that black lives matter.

Notes

[1] According to the NAACP, in 2014 African Americans constituted 2.3 million, or 34%, of the total 6.8 million correctional population. The 13th Constitutional Amendment reads: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."