

Alex Haley's *Roots* and Hyperreal Historiography

By Randy Laist

The publication of Alex Haley's *Roots* and simultaneous broadcast of the ABC miniseries adaptation was one of the most successful multiplatform media events of the twentieth century. *Roots* turned Kunta Kinte into a household name and reshaped the way Americans discussed the legacy of slavery. Published in the fall of 1976, in the midst of the USA's bicentennial ceremonies, Haley's representation of American history from his black characters' perspectives presented a counter-narrative for which audiences demonstrated a clear hunger. The phenomenal popularity of *Roots* stands as clear evidence of the widespread appetite among American media consumers for convincing narratives of black ancestry. Haley's saga spent 22 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and the miniseries remains one of the most successful programs in the history of US television. The book's central appeal was that it was not just a novel, but a work of history. The book's website includes a page of laudatory blurbs from contemporary reviews observing that *Roots* "proves that not all histories 'have been written by the winners'" and that *Roots* "gives us a fresh view of history itself" ("Praise").

Along with enormous success, however, *Roots* also brought controversy to its author. Two separate novelists leveled charges of plagiarism against Haley, one of whom, Harold Courlander, received a large settlement and an admission from Haley that passages from Courlander's novel *The African* had found their way into *Roots*. Haley's genealogical scholarship was also challenged. On the American side of the Atlantic, an accumulation of historical discrepancies ultimately caused Haley to acknowledge that *Roots* should be understood as a work of "faction," even as he contradictorily defended the integrity of the oral history passed down through his family as fundamentally reliable. Simultaneously, on the African side of the Atlantic, further scholarship has revealed that the Gambian village of Juffure, which *Roots* describes as Kunta Kinte's idyllic home community, was likely a slave-trading epicenter, through which slaves from all over West Africa passed on their way to the new world (Gijanto). The *Time* review of the miniseries refers to Haley's publication as his "bestselling whatzit (not quite a novel, it is not quite history either)" (Schickel).



Alex Haley

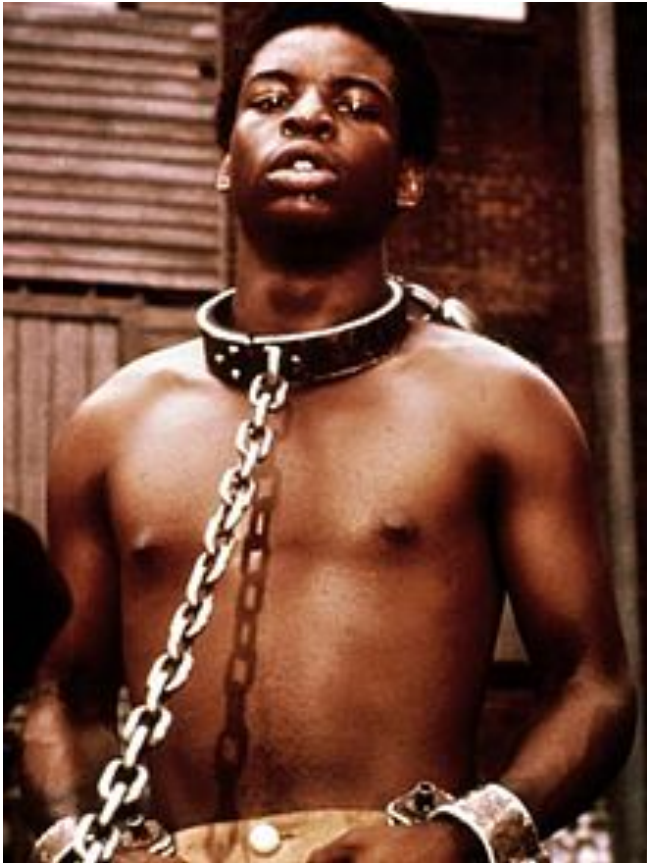
It is ironic that a novel about the importance of authentic origins is dogged by charges of misrepresenting its own literary and historical origins, but this circumstance also invites us to consider the manner in which Haley shapes the narrative of his family's genealogy into a commentary on the nature of historiography itself. *Roots* represents a counter-history not only by supplementing the master narrative with the subaltern's perspective, but also in its situation of being something other than history in the conventional sense. Indeed, the very concept of novelized history recalls the observation of Michel de Certeau that "Historiography (that is, 'history' and 'writing') bears within its own name the paradox – almost an oxymoron – of a relation established between two antinomic terms, between the real and discourse. Its task is one of connecting them and, at the point where this link cannot be imagined, of working as if the two were being joined" (xxvii). Considering *Roots* in light of postmodern and multicultural approaches to historiography suggests a way of understanding both the story of the saga and the cultural impact of the phenomenon as vivid demonstrations of the manner in which fictional narratives and historical narratives are and have always been codependent.

Chapter 8 of *Roots* describes the visit to Juffure of an itinerant holy man, called a marabout, who performs an ecstatic ritual. "The magic man's body writhed, his face contorted, his eyes rolled wildly as his trembling hands struggled to force his resisting wand into contact with the heap of mysterious objects. When the wand's tip, with a supreme effort, finally touched, he fell over backward and lay as if struck by lightning. The people gasped, but then he slowly began to revive. The evil spirits had been driven out. ... In his mercy, Allah had seen fit to spare Juffure once again" (30). Haley includes this incident and many like it to provide his Africa with a degree of atmospheric verisimilitude, at least insofar as descriptions of such rituals reflect the ethnographic expectations of his North American readers. The scene is particularly significant, however, because the Kinte ancestry, which is the central preoccupation of the text, traces itself back to Kunta's grandfather and namesake, Kairaba Kunta Kinte, who was the holy man renowned for driving the evil spirits out of Juffure on a previous occasion. The Kinte lineage that is the dominant subject of *Roots* itself, therefore, recedes into the vanishing point of this ritual of fertility and exorcism.

How does Haley intend his Western audience to respond to the magical accomplishments of these Mandinka holy men? To be sure, there is no sign of supernatural agency in the book (Kunta's prayers repeatedly go unanswered), yet the Juffure chapters of *Roots* narrate the Mandinka belief system with a seriousness and attention to detail that draw its readers in to the community of believers whose history is defined by magical connections between the body and the earth. The Mandinka perceive a causal connection between the shaking body of the marabout and the arrival of rain clouds, and the power of collective belief is enough to give this historical hypothesis a functional truth. The people of Juffure organize their history in relation to such magical meteorological interventions, and by nesting his own history into this non-Western historiographical paradigm, Haley suggests an essential affinity between his understanding of American history in 1976 and Kunta's understanding of Juffure's history in the 1750s.

To the extent that we admire Haley's Mandinka villagers and despise his slave traders, we become receptive to the possibility that the aboriginal "mythical" understanding of history is preferable to the Western model of history in all the ways that Haley's idealized Mandinka society is preferable to a society structured around trade in human chattel. The representation of the Mandinka belief system in the opening chapters of *Roots* establishes the theme of alternative modes of historiography as a structural element of the narrative as well as of Haley's genealogical project itself.

On the one hand, Haley's depiction of Mandinka historiography addresses Richard Drinnon's lament regarding the overly literalized conceptualization of history that prevails among Western scholars: "With our objectified Time, we historians have hidden the cyclical world of myth under our linear writings and have thereby robbed tribal people of their reality" (111). More fundamentally, however, the necessity of squaring Mandinka history with Haley's challenges our basic ideas about what history is. The connection that the Mandinka accept as authentic between the praying holy man and the coming rain, a connection which a Western reader would likely dismiss as spurious, is nevertheless one which has an undoubtedly real effect on Mandinka society. This circumstance is a clear example of F. R. Ankersmit's definition of narrativist historiography, according to which, "the historian's language does not reflect a coherence ... in the past itself, but only gives coherence to the past" (154). At the same time, however, this relativizing effect of narrativist historiography redounds upon Haley's project and the epistemological status of historical accounts generally.



LeVar Burton as Kunta Kinte

As a narrative, *Roots* is an encyclopedia of open connections. The story's vast catalog of people, places, and incidents is held together by associations that are compelling but imprecisely articulated. The clearest example of this phenomenon is the relationship between the successive generations portrayed in Haley's chronicle. Haley's abrupt transitions, from Kunta's story to Kizzy's to Chicken George's and beyond, oblige the reader to perform the connective tasks of identifying patterns of behavior and instances of narrative repetition that provide continuity across the centuries. The story's most abrupt transition, that from the scenes set in Africa to those set in America, is also transversed by a number of compelling analogical resemblances (Kunta is struck by the marked "Africanness" of much of the slaves' behavior, for example, as well as by the agricultural patterns of life that establish the seasonal and diurnal routines of both Mandinka and plantation society) the significance of which remains unspecified. Most pivotally, the relationship between the history of slavery in North America and the current state of race relations in the USA remains unarticulated in the story itself, requiring the reader of Haley's saga to construct a belief system capable of imposing coherence on this labyrinthine constellation of accidents, genetics, language, and capital. By conceiving of his text as an indefinite network of implied but inconclusive interpretive possibilities, Haley suggests that, like the people of Juffure interpreting the contortions of the marabout, we all collectively construct the meaning of

slavery, as of any important historical question, according to the stories which constitute our own mythological traditions.

Of course, as already mentioned, Haley's *Juffure*, along with the traditions that he describes so vividly, are themselves essentially mythic constructions, cobbled more or less self-consciously from Haley's research, which included not only archeological and ethnographic data, but also, evidently, fictionalized treatments such as Courlander's novel as well as, more generally, stereotypes culled from hundreds of years of sentimentalized portraits of "the noble savage." Haley's flaws as a historian, however, are his gifts as a writer and a mythologizer in the West African tradition. Within the logic of this tradition, as the main character of Courlander's *The African* explains, "Every story is true for one man, maybe the man who tells it, or for everybody in the village, or maybe for someone not yet born" (211). As a book and a cultural event, *Roots* can best be conceptualized as a kind of hyperreal object, one of many such entities to populate American letters, from "The House of Usher" to *Moby-Dick* to Jay Gatsby to *V.* to *Beloved*: an uncanny interfusion of imagination and reality. This effect is intensified by the adaptation of Haley's book into a television mini-series. The mini-series' melodramatic, celebrity-studded, commercial-break-punctuated presentation fatally compromises any claim the story might have had to factual authenticity. As both a book and a mini-series, *Roots* destabilizes conventional categories of fiction and reality in a way that mirrors the sense in which slavery itself is a tragic historical reality supported by an elaborate fiction of racial superiority. By challenging the Western separation of history and fiction, *Roots* has been enormously successful in provoking dialogue and deepening our understanding of the "factions" that constitute our social environment. Haley's praiseworthy accomplishment is similar to that of his distant ancestor Kairaba Kunta Kinte: summoning the power of myth in a heroic effort to make his land a place where it is possible to live.

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