

FROM SLAVE TO HISTORIAN: THE CASE OF JAMES LINDSAY SMITH'S POSTBELLUM AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The present article⁵¹ analyzes *The Autobiography of James Lindsay Smith* (1881), a largely ignored text written by a former slave after the American Civil War. His text is a remarkable example of the black autobiographies written between the end of the war and the turn of the century which struggled to find a new format, style and language that would distance them from the genre of the slave narrative. Although Smith still relies on certain set episodes from the antebellum genre, he also demythologizes slave solidarity, and emphasizes black servants' strategies to survive in a hostile world. Besides, he incorporates, for the first time in postbellum black American literature, a historical appreciation of the African American war effort and vindicates the figure of the black soldier.

Key Words: slave narrative, postbellum African American literature, black soldiers, autobiography, American Civil War.

Resumen

El presente artículo analiza *The Autobiography of James Lindsay Smith* (1881), un texto escrito por un ex esclavo después de la guerra civil americana y que ha permanecido prácticamente ignorado. Su texto es un ejemplo excepcional de las autobiografías afroamericanas escritas entre el final de la guerra y el cambio de siglo que intentaban encontrar un nuevo formato, estilo y lenguaje que las apartara del género de las narraciones de esclavos ("slave narratives"). Aunque Smith aún utiliza ciertos episodios propios de este género, también desmitifica la solidaridad entre esclavos, y enfatiza las estrategias de los afroamericanos para sobrevivir en un mundo hostil. Además, incorpora, por primera vez en la literatura negra de posguerra, el reconocimiento histórico del esfuerzo afroamericano durante la guerra y reivindica la figura del soldado negro.

Palabras clave: narración de esclavos, literatura afroamericana de posguerra, soldados afroamericanos, autobiografía, guerra civil americana.

⁵¹ Parts of this article belong to my doctoral thesis defended in June 2010.

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

In the present article I analyze James Lindsay Smith's *Autobiography of James L. Smith* (1881),⁵² a largely ignored work by a former slave which places its main emphasis both on a reassessment of the peculiar institution and on the role of former slaves as soldiers in the Union Army. In fact, war and slavery were the leading events in black history up to that time. The Civil War signified a total change in the lives of African Americans, since, metaphorically speaking, their military effort turned blacks into adult⁵³ citizens who sacrificed their lives for their country. My purpose in this article is precisely to highlight the relevance of the testimony offered by one of the less well-known African American voices, who contributed with his writing to the construction of a collective memory of the black race in America.

Very little is known about James Lindsay Smith. His work has practically never been studied –in fact, Rosalyn Howard's introduction to his text published by Humanity Books in 2004 is the only available analysis of his work– and as a result, the only source of information about his life comes from his own autobiographical book. Unlike antebellum black autobiographers such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb and many others, who were widely read and commented on as part of a vivid discussion on the future of the peculiar institution and the confrontation between North and South, slave autobiographies published in the postbellum era seem to have reached an audience that was “less receptive to the[ir] message” (Howard 2004:8). With the abolition of the peculiar institution, slave narratives had lost their potential to influence any debates that might affect the country's political and social context.

As will be analyzed in the present article, Smith's text is an unconventional mixture of slave narrative and an amateur historian's account of African American soldier life during and after the Civil War. His text epitomizes the tension lived by African American narrators at the end of the Civil War between their debt to the slave narrative in terms of form and content, and their need to try new genres. African Americans' postbellum autobiographies did not include radical departures from the slave narrative, although one cannot fail to notice

⁵² Originally entitled *Autobiography of James L. Smith* (1881), it was later renamed *Recollections of a Former Slave* by Rosalyn Howard in her edition of the text in 2004. However, I will use the original title in this article.

⁵³ I use the term “adult” in opposition to the widespread belief among many whites –above all those who were or had been slaveholders– that African Americans were a less developed species of human beings whose intellectual and emotional development was similar to that of children.

important changes in the sections where this traditional genre is incorporated. Smith's narrative is apparently conventional as far as form is concerned. He incorporates the most usual episodes that appear in all antebellum narratives—i.e., the separation of the slave family, the master's cruelty, the atrocious physical punishments, the narrator's longing for liberty, and his final escape. However, it is precisely in these most characteristic passages that the author introduces a series of slight innovations that continue some previous initial attempts at departing from the canonical genre of slave autobiographies, such as those which can be found in other texts such as Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* (1868). By means of these changes, he is able to challenge certain stereotypes related to the image of black slaves.

His narrative can be divided into three different sections: a first one that in terms of form recalls the style, topics and episodes of antebellum slave narratives; a second part in which the narrator focuses on his own experience of the Civil War—with special emphasis on African American troops—and Reconstruction. The final three chapters (numbers 10 to 12) constitute a separate unity in which the author provides a historical evaluation of African American soldiers, racial tensions both North and South and his hopes for the future by means of a sometimes romanticized and yet unsentimental rendering of black heroes. In other words, he does not participate in what Zora Neale Hurston would later define as the traditional “sobbing school of Negrohood” (Hurston 1995: 827).

2. SMITH THE SLAVE [...] AND THE FREE MAN

Smith's narration of his early life in slavery is preceded by a preface which contextualizes the text in its period and historical circumstances, but which unlike those in slave narratives is written by the author of the text himself. The preface becomes the proper space for the narrator to express his main intentions in writing his narrative. First of all, he lets his readers know that he is an old man at the end of his life: “in purchasing this narrative you will be assisting one who has been held in slavery, who is now broken down by the infirmities of old age” (28). Secondly, he wants to leave a testimony of his life, which was tightly linked to some of the most crucial moments of nineteenth century American history. In this preface Smith summarizes the different aspects of African American life that are not satisfactory in the United States in the 1880s. He exclaims, “As we are entering upon a new decade our thoughts go back to 1861;

and what a period is this to review!” (25). His narrative looks at not only the antebellum period but also the most challenging times of the war and Reconstruction.

Smith engages with the frame of mind of the postbellum period and uses his autobiography to argue for the need for certain urgent improvements in the lives of American blacks. The narrator presents himself as a political and historical commentator, involved with his people and his times. From this position, Smith calls for an active participation from both blacks and whites in the creation of a fairer post-Reconstruction America. He encourages his fellow African Americans to “go forward and possess the land” (27), and to seek the means to become educated because “without this education we must expect to be defrauded of our homes, our earnings, and our lands” (27). At the same time, his message to white readers is one of responsibility towards the race that had been long enslaved yet had helped build America: “There is not a nation under heaven that needs more sympathy and pity from the people of the United States than my people” (27) since “many of the colored people deserve much of this country for what they did and suffered in the great national struggle” and “the treatment [...] received from white soldiers was equal to slavery” (27-28).

2.1. LIFE IN SLAVERY

The first six chapters clearly follow the style of canonical slave texts, with Smith applying what Francis S. Foster describes as the “slave narrative generic formula” (Foster 1979:57). Following the conventions of the genre throughout these six chapters, the narrator guides his readers through the “expected” episodes of slave narratives. Thus, the first six chapters offer a glimpse into Smith’s ancestry and origins –including a description of the cabin where he was raised and its geographical situation– the first instances of cruelty he witnesses as a young boy, his various cold-blooded mistresses and masters, his discovery of religion, his plans of escape and his eventual arrival in Philadelphia, where he starts a new life as a free man. At first glance, these several episodes could perfectly well be a brief description of the main incidents narrated by Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown or many other antebellum narrators in their own autobiographies. As a postwar narrator Smith was not yet capable of finding an alternative form from that of the antebellum slave narratives. However, he also added some modifications to the format of the African American autobiography that can be mostly seen in the third part of the text.

Since the first part of Smith's narrative is so similar to the pattern of previous slave texts, we must focus on particular scenes of the story that illuminate key moments in the life of James Lindsay Smith as a slave. The first notable passage is that of the accident that the narrator suffered as a child while transporting a large piece of timber with other two slaves:

Before we had gone far her foot struck something that caused her to fall, so that it jarred my end, causing it to drop on my knee [...] After hearing this sad news, he [the master] said he had niggers enough without me; I was not worth much any how, and he did not care if I did die. He positively declared that he should not employ a physician for me. (36-37)

Smith uses this episode to demonstrate the horrendous system of slavery, where men and women were treated like cattle and their death meant nothing to their masters. One dead slave could be replaced by another, since the institution provided itself with sufficient resources. The accident that left him crippled for life was in fact his salvation, since as soon as he was cured, Smith was sent to the master's house where he lived in relative safety –although even there he was involved in certain violent episodes in which he was brutally punished. In this context of suffering, abuse and cruelty, Smith provides quite an unusual account of the slaves' various survival strategies. He shows how he and his fellow slaves used wit and flattery to avoid work while keeping their masters satisfied. Such is the case of Jinny, the cook, who is called by her mistress to her deathbed:

[...] Just before she breathed her last, she sent for Jinny to come to her bedroom. As she entered, she looked up and said: "Jinny, I am going to die, and I suppose you are glad of it." Jinny replied: "No, I am not." After pretending to cry, she came back to the kitchen and exclaimed: "Dat old devil is going to die, and I am glad of it." (45)

Here Smith subverts the solemnity of a deathbed scene to show how Jinny is clever enough to play the expected role of contented slave who is grateful for being allowed to live on the plantation and be "civilized" by whites. Certainly, this passage is exceptional, as no one before Smith had included scenes in which the enslaved are not depicted as loving, self-denying people. Smith's portrayal of Jinny's lack of pity at her mistress's death is a much more realistic example than those encountered in antebellum narratives. Evidently, such antebellum narratives were constrained by the political agenda aimed at the abolition of slavery, and when Smith wrote his text such limitations were no longer necessary.

Smith recounts a similar anecdote that involves himself. Early in the text, the young Smith feigns illness to prevent his mistress from discovering he had overslept. Upon her asking what illness he suffered from, Smith invents a stomachache that she proceeds to cure by making him drink a good deal of

whisky. However, after drinking Smith feels even worse than before and is no longer capable of knowing what he is doing. Smith does not want to repeat the experience and before attempting to avoid work on a later occasion, he prepares an alternative strategy:

I studied a plan, while I sat down in the field one Sabbath, how I should accomplish it. First, I thought I would feign sickness; then I said to myself, that will not do, for they will give me something that will physic me to death. My next contrivance was that I would pretend that I had the stomach ache; then, I said again, that will not do either, for then my mistress will make me drunk with whisky, as she had done before by her repeated doses. I devised another scheme, I thought the best of all, and that was to pretend that I had broken my leg again. As this plan was satisfactory to my mind, I arose from where I was sitting and resumed my work. (54)

This is unlike anything one can find in antebellum slave narratives, where dutiful slaves suffer under the whip but ostensibly would never dream of tricking their masters. Smith does not portray slaves as self-denying like those depicted in antebellum texts but rather presents a rather more realistic view of slaves who try to make the best of their terrible situation by outwitting their masters. This does not mean that Smith offers a simplified approach to slavery – on the contrary, since most of his text is devoted to the description of African Americans' suffering and the abuses on the part of their white masters. However, he introduces a certain touch of ambiguity and subversion that seems to show a more honest approach to the real feelings of slaves.

Most importantly, Smith incorporates an element hitherto not seen in slave narratives: he shows his readers that in their most extreme desperation to survive, slaves could also try to hurt their fellow slaves, sometimes even fatally. This new element provides a completely different vision of life on the plantation. Traditional antebellum slave narratives showed slaves never in conflict against their peers, but rather as a cohesive group that, united in misfortune, helped each other. In Smith's narration, his own father is poisoned by a fellow slave, a woman named Cecilia –or Cella. Cella, who had been previously in charge of the master's house, finds how her position as housekeeper is transferred to Smith's father. Angered by the change, she plans revenge:

[...] She brought with her some whisky, in two bottles. She asked father if he would like to take a dram; and, not thinking there would be any trouble resulting from it, he replied: "Yes." Giving him the bottle, he took a drink. She then gave the other bottle to my mother, and she took a drink. Afterwards, Cella gave us children some out of the same bottle that my mother drank from [...] The next morning he was worse, and continued to grow worse until he was very low [...] The doctor looked at his cards, and told him [the master] that his Charles was poisoned, and even told him who

did it, and her motive for doing it. Her intention was to get father and mother out of their place, so that she could get back again. (38-39)

Smith's father recovers and Cecilia is beaten in a "brutal manner" (39). It would be difficult to find such a scene in any antebellum slave narrative, where slaves always seem to share each other's burden. It is these details that make Smith's account a more multidimensional portrait of slaves as men and women who were also capable of being driven by their lowest instincts.

One of the defining moments in Smith's life is his chance to learn a trade, since it was his skills as a shoemaker that allowed the fugitive slave to survive in the North. Even more important than that, the certainty that he can provide for himself and his family boosts Smith's self-confidence and returns him part of the manhood that had been emasculated by his enslavement. His learning of a trade runs parallel to his increasing interest in Christianity. Symbolically, his job and his religious faith together provide him with hope, as they both relate to the dignity of the individual. In his first steps as a shoemaker, Smith also acknowledges having stolen money from the amount he was supposed to return to the plantation:

My master lived five miles away, but would come once a week and take all the earnings; some weeks I would make a great deal, then I would keep some back for myself, as I had worked for it. (59-60)

Here Smith is unashamedly honest about his need for money and the means he uses to get it. It would be almost impossible to imagine Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Henry Bibb or any of the antebellum narrators including such an admission in their narratives, since the objective for which they wrote their autobiographical accounts was altogether quite different. While in antebellum times the aim of these texts was to dignify slaves and show the cruel nature of slavery, in postbellum times one encounters a new attitude towards the peculiar institution. Thus, Smith does not seem to show the same necessity to portray slaves as martyrs. This is not to say that he does not highlight the intrinsic cruelty and violence of the institution –quite the contrary– but his view shows other dimensions of slavery that antebellum narrators and those writing immediately after the Civil War did not reveal, such as competition and cunning among slaves.

Smith stresses the importance of having money because it dignifies and distances him from his fellow slaves since, for example, he can buy himself some good clothes:

I saved at one time fifteen dollars; I went to the store, bought a piece of cloth, carried it to the tailor and had a suit made –I had already bought a watch, and had a chain and seal. You can imagine how I looked the following Sunday; I

was very proud and loved to dress well, and all the young people used to make a great time over me. (60)

Money gives him the chance to feel empowered and he feels like a real gentleman in new clothes. Yet young slaves laugh at him because they have internalized the rhetoric of the peculiar institution and Smith's behavior is presented as "improper" for someone of his condition. By his actions, Smith contradicts those ideas just as he had refuted the assumptions of blacks' unconditional faithfulness and respect towards their masters. His direct challenge to white ideas about African Americans becomes clear when his master and another man see him elegantly dressed:

The first Sunday that I was arrayed in my new suit, I was passing the court house bounds, when I saw my master and a man named Betts standing near by. Betts caught sight of me; says he: "Lindsey, come here." Not knowing what he wanted, I went to him; whereupon he commenced looking first at me, then at my master; then at my master, then at me; finally he said: "Who is master; Lindsey or you, for he dresses better than you do? Does he own you, or do you own him?" (60)

Despite the certain mockery that can be detected in Bett's words, this inversion of roles that he disdainfully refers to also conveys a symbolic message of hope for blacks, since it seems to herald future equality between the two races. In this particular scene, then, Smith regains his pride as a male individual by metaphorically defeating his master.

The last scene to be analyzed from this first section of James L. Smith's autobiography is his escape and arrival in the North. As in all slave narratives, this constitutes the narrative climax, where the hero, who had been badly treated and repeatedly humiliated, finally achieves freedom. Smith escapes with two other men and walks and sails to freedom. In this narration of his own heroic escape from slavery, Smith introduces several extremely dramatic elements intended to move his audience. First, there is a highly sentimentalized departure scene between one of the would-be fugitives and his wife:

When we came to the river, we stood on the beach and embraced, kissed, and bade each other farewell. The scene between Zip and his wife at parting was distressing to behold. Oh! How the sobbing of his wife resounded in the depths of his heart; we could not take her with us for the boat was too small. (72)

Here Smith clearly follows the pattern of antebellum slave narratives and plays upon the motif of family separation, so famous and recurrent in the texts written before the war. The trip is not easy and even Smith's colleagues abandon him since his physical disability prevents him from keeping pace. However, his desire for freedom is greater than his impairment, and an inner voice urges him to go on:

I thought one while I would turn back as far as Frenchtown, and give myself up to be captured; then I thought that would not do; a voice spoke to me, "not to make a fool of myself, you have got so far from home, (about two hundred and fifty miles), keep on towards freedom, and if you are taken, let it be heading towards freedom." I then took fresh courage and pressed my way onward towards the north with anxious heart. (73)

His determination to become free –which metaphorically speaks as in all slave narratives for the black race's determination to achieve freedom– takes him to the North with the help of abolitionists and other people who campaigned against the institution. With \$3.50 in his pockets, Smith reaches Philadelphia. Inevitably the context seems to refer back to Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, in which young Franklin also reaches the "city of brotherly love" with empty pockets. Here we can observe how Smith uses the "rags-to-riches" model as a way to connect with his readers, since this structure was present in some of the most celebrated American literary texts of the day.

As has been shown, Smith's autobiography is the first that challenges certain assumptions about the slaves' behavior. Despite the fact that half of his text is very much indebted to the slave narrative genre, this does not prevent him from questioning the traditional portrayal of African Americans. For the first time, a former slave narrating his life on a plantation includes progressive departures from former stereotypical images. Thus, the author's account of his life becomes both an exceptional testimony of the strategies used by slaves to make the most of their miserable condition, and an appeal to remember the abomination of slavery.

Smith's escape from slavery leads him not only on a geographical journey but also on a spiritual one, which becomes this section's most interesting part. Once in the North, two of the very first things he does are to find a job as a shoemaker and then secure an education. Smith works secretly for an abolitionist, who happens to own a shoe shop:

It was the first work I had ever done in the like of a freedman, which gave me strength to think I was a man with others [...] I well knew a man in Springfield who commenced with only six cents in his pocket –for he was once a poor apprentice boy– who, in the course of time became a wealthy man, which gave me great encouragement to save my earnings. (87-88)

This job and the possibility of saving money for the first time in his life open up a world of possibilities for him. He feels empowered as an individual since he discovers that, unlike what he had been told in slavery, he, too, is a man. His success and self-confidence lead him to do something radically new for an African American man, i.e. to open his own business: "In first coming to Norwich, I established myself in business with a full line of customers" (100). However, this African American self-made man is also well aware that hard

work on its own cannot provide him with his own shoe shop, and that he needs a proper education: “As I had never had any advantages for obtaining an education, I felt the importance of it at this time” (88). The narrator then proceeds to describe his unrelenting pursuit of the education that had been earlier denied to him due to his condition as a slave. Smith must struggle with his own limitations to learn, but he is determined to make the most of his schooling at Wilbraham, where he was also “licensed to preach the Gospel” (88). His job as a preacher helps him work in favor of abolition by preaching against slavery in church meetings. Preaching gives him the chance to tour several towns in New England, where he discovers that in many small villages “they had never seen a colored man before; they would shake hands with me and then look at their hands to see if I had left any black on them” (96-97).

Nonetheless, Smith finds that the North is struggling with its own inequalities and prejudices. Unlike most antebellum slave narratives, which presented the North as the Eden all African Americans had been seeking, Smith’s account of the place does not always cast it in the most positive light. His time above the Mason-Dixon Line includes certain unpleasant experiences such as seeing his own shoe shop burnt down by some racist New Englanders, and discovering how difficult it is for African Americans to own property: “my people are subject to all sorts of abuse for buying desirable homes for their families” (100). This is coupled with his constant fear of slave catchers, who were aided by pro-slavery Northerners: “I feared I should be taken out of my room before morning, so I barred my door with chairs and other furniture that was in the room, before I went to bed” (93).

However, the event that definitely changes Smith’s life is the beginning of the Civil War. This becomes evident at the end of the second part and above all throughout the third section of his autobiography. In the second part of his book, chapters 7 to 9 introduce further innovations in the genre of African American life writing. In fact, these novelties constitute clear departures from the genre of the slave narrative. These departures from the classical genre are mainly (1) the introduction of a narrator whose role as a historian is much more relevant than that of autobiographer, (2) his analysis of the war, and (3) a reunion scene with his former mistress –also present in other postbellum autobiographies written by former slaves such as Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes* (1868) and Frederick Douglass’s *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892).

2.2. FROM AUTOBIOGRAPHER TO HISTORIAN

At the onset of the Civil War, African Americans were not allowed to enlist. However, many blacks –either free or enslaved– rallied to the Union army ready to fight or at least help out with everyday tasks among the troops. Right from the beginning of the war, there were voices in favor of black enlistment. One such voice was Frederick Douglass's, whose passionate articles in favor of organizing black troops even led him to the White House, where he debated the issue with President Lincoln himself. Douglass wrote a series of speeches⁵⁴ in which he enthusiastically endorsed the potential of black men to become soldiers. He encouraged enlistment both by appealing to African American's sense of duty towards their country, and by calling for white Americans to accept black soldiers in the army. Douglass understood the important opportunity that enlistment represented, and in his speeches he directed passionate words to his fellow black Americans:

I now for the first time during this war feel at liberty to call and counsel you to arms. By every consideration which binds you to your enslaved fellow-countrymen, and the peace and welfare of your country; by every aspiration which you cherish for the freedom and equality of yourselves and your children. (Douglass 1999:526-7)

At the other end of the color line, other voices were also raised in favor of black enlistment. The prohibition to enlist African Americans as soldiers did not deter some generals in the Union Army like David Hunter –also known as “Black Dave”– from disobeying orders. Hunter's belief in the necessity of enlisting blacks in the army, led him to organize the first unofficial African American regiment. Furthermore, without presidential authorization, Hunter ordered the emancipation of slaves in three Southern states –Georgia, South Carolina and Florida– in 1862. Although Hunter's measures were rapidly overruled by Lincoln, these events confronted the president once more with the unavoidable dilemma of what to do with African Americans in the United States which eventually culminated in the Emancipation Proclamation (1863). Shortly after its passage, the War Department allowed the enlistment of black Americans and created the United States Colored Troops. However, this significant movement forward towards the acceptance of black soldiers did not mark a smooth transition. As scholars such as Wineapple, Farrar and Fahs who

⁵⁴ Some of his most celebrated speeches on this issue are “Men of Color to Arms!” (1863), “Why should a Colored Man Enlist?” (1863), “Another Word to Colored Men” (1863), “The Commander-in-Chief and his Black Soldiers” (1863), “The Mission of the War” (1864), and “The Bloody Shirt” (1888).

investigate the role of African Americans in the Civil War have shown, there exist a wide variety of sources such as letters and diaries which corroborate the animosity that many Northern soldiers felt towards blacks. As Wineapple notes, very few Northerners had truly interacted with African Americans, either free or enslaved (Wineapple 2008:127), so it is no wonder that comments like “We want you damned niggers to keep out of this, this is a white man’s war” (quoted in Farrar 2005:259) proliferated in the letters written by white Northern privates. This animosity was still present in later documents written after the war: “No less than 300,000 of our own free white citizens have already been sacrificed to free the [...] mite” (quoted in McPherson 1994:61). Some of these white privates were completely oblivious of the fact that African Americans had previously experienced the atrocities of slavery, were thus paying the psychological cost of enslavement, and had furthermore suffered the dramatic disruption of their families. On the contrary, they behaved as though blacks had not been “compelled to separate from those [they] hold dear [...] Their midnight dreams are not made terrific by visions of bloodshed and of death” (quoted in Fahs 2001:150). As a result, African Americans soldiers “found themselves fighting a war on two fronts: against the Confederacy and against their fellow white soldiers” (Farrar 2005:263). In the army, blacks could not aim at promotion –they were always led by white officers– and earned substantially less than white privates.⁵⁵ In addition, African American soldiers were assigned the toughest tasks, and their sanitary and food conditions were not precisely the best. Farrar quotes from the testimony of a South Carolina soldier who describes the food given to black soldiers as “moldy and musty and full of worms, and not fit for a dog to eat” (Farrar 2005: 264). So, although the Union seemed to be theoretically engaged in the military struggle for freedom, it seemed “it had no intention of offering equality” (Cullen 1992: 83).

⁵⁵ According to Farrar and Williams white privates earned \$13 a month plus \$3.50 for clothes, while blacks received \$10 a month with \$3 deducted for their clothing. Some black soldiers even refused their pay as a protest against this discrimination. Farrar and Williams quote from a black private’s letter published in Jack D. Foner’s *Blacks in the Military in American History* (1974) where he writes: “We have done a soldier’s duty. Why can’t we have a soldier’s pay?” (quoted in Farrar 2005:263).

2.2.1. SMITH'S ANALYSIS OF THE WAR

It is precisely around the inequality, the struggle and heroism of African American life at the front that John Lindsay Smith articulates the last section of his work. In chapter 7 his voice is radically transformed from that of an autobiographer to that of a historian. His narrative "I" disappears almost completely and gives way to a narrator who describes the causes and unfolding of the Civil War. The process Smith initiated in chapter 7 continues in chapters 10 through 12, which work as a kind of *coda* and constitute an assessment of African American life during and after the Civil War. These chapters represent an extension of what Fabre and O'Meally noted about antebellum slave texts: "*the first black American historians may have been the authors of slave narratives*, those whose testimonies comprised not only eye-witness accounts of remembered experience but also a set of world views with interpretations, analyses, and historical judgments" (Fabre 1994:6, my emphasis). In this sense, Smith takes a further step in that direction, since his "I" completely disappears from the narrative and becomes the narrative voice of a historian. His text leaves his personal testimony momentarily aside to introduce an assessment of the Civil War.

Smith's religious beliefs play an important role in the ways in which he describes his people's achievements and the results of the Civil War. He establishes a strong link between the historical events that took place between 1861 and 1865 and Divine Providence. Thus, the way he starts chapter 7 seems to predict that a miracle will take place:

For many years, while slavery existed, I have never ceased to pray that God, in his all wise providence would bring it to pass that I might return to the land that gave me birth, and see my former friends. As the signs of the times looked dark and doubtful, I began to think I should never realize such a blessing. (107)

Throughout the chapter, Smith insists on the almost mythical connection between the black race and God. So much so, that at the end of the war he even compares the African American struggle to the crossing of the Red Sea: "[blacks] feel as did the children of Israel when they passed through the Red Sea, and were freed from the hand of Pharaoh and his pursuing host" (116). God –according to Smith's interpretation of historical events– was on the Union's side since "the hand of God has been seen in the war; seen in the overthrow of the proud, and uplifting of the lowly; seen in the fall of the taskmaster and the emancipation of the slave" (108-109).

But beyond religious intervention, the war is the clash between two ways of understanding economic structures, cultural values and above all, the institution of slavery. Smith provides readers with his own historical understanding of the conflict, analyzing not only the political aspects but also some of the most significant battles. As noted, he does so more from the point of view of an amateur historian than as an autobiographer. Many examples of this can be found in the text, among them his explanation of the South's secession:

The Northern party triumphed, and though no unlawful act was charged against it, and no simulated claim or assumption offered that it had not succeeded in a lawful and constitutional way, the defeated Southern party refused to accept the decision of the ballot box, and rushing into open revolt proceeded to organize a government of its own. (108)

Smith tries to capture the historical relevance of the events he describes to pass it on to future generations of blacks. His prose acquires an epic tone when he describes particular battles:

[...] *Their polished arms shone* in the morning's light, and *their silken banners glittering* in the sun. The long *line of bayonets flashing in the sunbeams*, extended rows of army wagons with their white tops, winding columns of cavalry, the dark looking ambulances, all combined to form a scene of thrilling interest, and presented a *magnificent spectacle*. (109-110, my emphasis)

In his account of the war to stamp out the peculiar institution, Smith analyzes the role played by former slaves and laments the lack of tolerance on the part of white soldiers, who "eager for glory and greedy for honor [...] would not allow him [the black man] to wear the cast-off clothing of their soldiers for fear the imperial blue of this great republic would be dishonored by them" (109). As mentioned before, part of this reluctance to accept African Americans in the army came from deeply entrenched prejudices against blacks. Many white Northerners "questioned [black soldiers'] loyalty, and distrusted their fighting qualities" (113). However, with the inclusion of African Americans in the army, black men demonstrated they were capable of receiving the Founding Fathers' inheritance: "they have shown themselves worthy to be free, and entitled to all the inalienable rights, among which are 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'" (114). The narrator pays a warm tribute to veterans and fallen heroes alike by highlighting their qualities, which were systematically questioned by white Americans. Thus, African American men showed to "the world their true patriotism in their valor, and courage", did not fear death since they "met death calmly", and regained their manhood which had been "ignored" (113). The narrator's description of black soldiers ends with a desperate appeal to American society to integrate African Americans:

And can this nation [...] go backwards so much as to re-enslave a people that have assisted in fighting its battles? Forbid it, justice! Forbid it, humanity! Forbid it, ye spirits of our fathers, still hovering over us! Forbid it, our Country! Forbid it, Heaven! (114-115)

As in many other accounts written shortly after the Civil War, Smith's could not forget the war's greatest hero: Abraham Lincoln. Although he discusses this historical figure briefly, Lincoln becomes for Smith the figure that gives a cohesive meaning to his discussion of the war. Despite the fact that he idealizes Lincoln to a certain extent, he does not hide the President's motivations for acting as he did. The author states that "it was not the intention of the government at the beginning of the war to free the slaves"⁵⁶ (112) since the "martyred President, proud in strength of his high position said 'the Union must be saved with slavery, if it can, without it, if it must'" (108). However, the President's capacity to understand the historical context and act accordingly brought him to allow blacks to enlist and later to proclaim their freedom from bondage. Smith in a sense tries to capture the contradictory nature of Lincoln's character by briefly depicting the President's transformation from a leader who only wanted to restore the Union to the Moses who liberated the slaves. In the same chapter, the narrator defines Lincoln as a "proud" man but also as a "father", "pure patriot", and "great champion" of freedom (116). In the end, Lincoln arouses intense fascination among liberated slaves based on their "kinship with his life and character as well as in gratitude for the gift of freedom" (Peterson 1994:173). In fact, the words with which Smith describes Lincoln's assassination are those of a child left fatherless, of a believer left without his God:

Pen cannot begin to describe the sadness; deeply the people felt the loss of one whom they loved as a father [...] He was stricken down at the time when his great wisdom was so much needed in bringing his distracted and blood-drenched country into the harbor of returning peace and prosperity. His course, from the time of his inauguration, had been marked with wisdom and justice; his manner had been unfaltering; his feelings could be touched by all classes of the nation, from the highest to the lowest –an instrument in the hands of God in avenging and redressing the wrongs of years, and the emancipator of my heretofore enslaved brethren of the South. None were afraid to approach his Excellency, and justice was always meted out, as the circumstances of the case required. (116)

⁵⁶ An early example of the future sixteenth U.S. president's initial attitude towards slavery can be found in the first debate between Lincoln –the Republican candidate for Senate in Illinois at the time– and Senator Douglas –the Democratic Party aspirant: "I have no purpose directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists" (Lincoln 2009:149).

2.2.2. REUNION WITH HIS FORMER MISTRESS

There is a very significant scene that takes place after the war, which is crucial to understand the innovations brought about by emancipation narratives. This is the passage that has been previously described as the “reunion scene”⁵⁷ between Smith and his former owner. Here Smith decides to go South to visit the plantation where he had been raised. His visit to the South contains certain idealized passages but he does not hide his contradictory feelings when reaching Virginia: “I felt as though I wanted to get down and kiss the free ground upon which I stood. I could hardly restrain my feelings [...] This visit was fraught with many sad reminiscences of the past” (123). Smith visits the old places where he had toiled and suffered and even reunites with his brothers after so many years have passed. But the most significant moment is that of his meeting with his master’s second wife. According to the narrator, his former mistress asks him to explain his escape from slavery, as if she were interested in hearing about the romantic adventures of a fictional hero. This is a moment of satisfaction and fulfillment for him, as he has the chance to exhibit his regained masculinity and prove his power before his former oppressor.

This is not an isolated episode in postbellum slave writing. On the contrary, Smith’s account of his visit to his former mistress continued a convention inaugurated by Elizabeth Keckley in *Behind the Scenes* (1868) and followed by other ex-slaves such as Frederick Douglass, who, in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881) also included a similar passage. For William L. Andrews, this “reunion scene” between former master and ex-slave

[...] points up a *psychological complexity* in the Afro-American slave narrative tradition that can be too easily ignored. The attitude of the ex-slave toward her or his past in the South is complicated by the obvious fact that *the antebellum past is the locus of much pain as well as some pleasure in recollection*. [...] *the past is not something that can or should be selectively forgotten*. (Andrews 1989:13, my emphasis)

Therefore, Smith’s return to the plantation can be understood as part of his healing process. The former slave is tied by his memories to the South, and needs to go back in order to revisit his origins and start coming to terms with his past. It is a difficult and often painful experience, but as Elizabeth Keckley writes in her autobiography “the past is dear to everyone [...] To surrender it is to surrender the greatest part of my existence” (Keckley 1998:217).

The visit to his former master’s house, which lasts several weeks, also allows Smith to observe the degree to which the South has been devastated: “the

⁵⁷ This is a concept coined by Andrews (1989:5-16).

fertile soil which once brought abundance [...] presented an unbroken scene of barrenness and desolation" (130), and the tables turned. Powerful landowners are now working the fields with their own hands:

Said I, "is it possible that you can work out in the hot sun?" She replied, "Lindsey, we can do a great many things when we are obliged to, that we once thought we could not do." I saw the changes that freedom had wrought, and I thought, "How people can accommodate themselves to circumstances." When we were on the plantation together she would not allow herself even to walk out doors in the hottest part of the day, without a servant to hold an umbrella over her. (128-129)

Former masters even accept presents from ex-slaves: "I gave her a nice pair of shoes, for which she was very thankful" (Smith 2004:126). Thus, the former good-for-nothing who had tried all kinds of tricks to avoid working, and who had stolen money from his enslaver returns to the plantation in a position of superiority, advanced in that previous episode in chapter 3 when he had bought himself nice clothes. The evidence of what is going on in the South during Reconstruction encourages Smith to again address the connection between African Americans and God. Smith has returned dignified to the South because it has been God's will that he should do so, and also because of the intrinsic generous nature of the black person:

The colored people, unlike all other nations on the face of the earth, are ready to fulfill that passage of Scripture: "Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head." Many of them, when bleeding from the effects of the knotted whips applied by their cruel task masters, could have risen and made the land knee deep with the blood of their oppressors, and thus avenged themselves of the host of cruel wrongs which they have suffered; but, instead of raising an insurrection, they calmly left the plantations without injuring a hair of the heads of their masters, and went on the Union side; and not till the United States put arms into their hands, and bade them go forward in the defence of their country, did they attempt to show any signs of revenge. (129)

The generosity and higher moral values of African Americans permitted them to achieve the dream of freedom as a reward from God. His words echo those of Alexander Crummell, African American pastor and professor, when he said that the "destiny of any given race was determined by a seamless combination of religious and racial attributes" (Crummell quoted in Bay 2002:98). That is to say, blacks were the chosen people of God because of their special connection to Him and also because of the intrinsic moral values of their race. Smith idealizes the expected prosperous future for the black race in America, though he eventually portrays it as discouraging in the last part of his book.

2.2.3. SMITH'S CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the final section involving chapters 10 to 12, Smith continues with his historical appreciation of black Americans. The last sentences of chapter 9 are written as the closure to the text in which he addresses the reader and asks him to accept his goodwill in writing such an autobiography –which after all is only a “story that is real, that is earnest” (138). Then in chapters 10 and 11 Smith goes back in time and resumes his role of historian. He begins chapter 10 by claiming that:

It is a fact to be lamented that the historians of our country speak so little about the heroic deeds of the colored troops; in fact, by some no mention is made of them at all; but, let it be as it may, the fact that they, after many petitions to be allowed to take their place in the ranks, fought bravely and well, lives in the heart of every true American citizen. Many were the commendations they received from their officers. Look at them at Fort Pillow, Milliken's Bend, Port Hudson, Fort Wagner, and Olustee! Where do we find them? In places of most imminent danger, where the battle raged hottest, closing up where their ranks were thinned out before a reeking fire of grape and canister. (141)

This part returns to most of the issues already discussed in chapter 7, but his concern here is to articulate a cohesive text of the unacknowledged sacrifices of African American privates. The structure of chapters 10 and 11 is mostly fragmentary, as he seems to recall an assortment of important events involving African Americans and introduces them in no specific order. Thus, the reader encounters fragments where he discusses black soldier life in the Union army, the tricks used by Southerners to make their slaves join the Confederates –for example by offering “slaves freedom if they would join the [...] army” (146)–, the celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, as well as the successful deeds of particular regiments exclusively formed of blacks.

Chapter 12 –meaningfully entitled “The Exodus”– continues this historical appreciation of African American soldiers and veterans but brings events back to the narrator’s present, i.e. the recent period of Reconstruction and its aftermath. The narrator guides his readers through the different difficulties faced by the freedmen, from the lack of wages to the inhuman conditions in which they had to survive. Thus, he quotes the testimonies of mothers who, seeing how their now free children can barely survive, exclaim: “in slavery [...] our children never dies; it ‘pears like they all dies here” (172). It is as if Smith the historian had constructed his analysis of the situation from both his own experience and his conversations with fellow African Americans to build a “patchwork” of impressions in the aftermath of the Civil War. As an author,

Smith asks the American government and society to rise to the occasion, otherwise “the poet’s tribute to ‘Columbia’ as ‘the land of the free and home of the brave’ will be a satire that shall provoke a reproachful smile” (177).

John Ernest stresses the relevance of black history writing, because it represents the “conditions and struggles that can only be understood if one accounts for the perspective and the moral understanding that arise from lived experience” (Ernest 2004:162). In this sense, Smith’s text provides his readers with a “perspective” and “moral understanding” that has two very clear objectives: he seeks on the one hand, to acknowledge the sacrifice of those who had been in bondage and voluntarily offered their lives –while asking for fairer treatment and swifter integration of the former slaves and veterans into American society– and on the other hand, to initiate a historical narrative of the African American people that so far had not existed outside antebellum slave narratives. Smith is thus one of the earliest and unjustly neglected black autobiographers who started describing the African American military experience as a breakthrough for hundreds of blacks.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The historical, psychological, and literary weight of slavery has represented an unavoidable issue for black authors which must be taken into account in the study of post-slavery texts. I want to suggest that after the war there emerged new ways to approach the narrator’s relationship to slavery and that Smith’s was a pioneering one. For him, enslavement is still a vivid memory and is given a prominent place in the narrative. Clearly, there is a dependence on the slave narrative formula –episodes, topics, motifs– and the author still follows the conventions of the antebellum genre by including in his autobiography all the crucial passages contained in any canonical slave narrative, such as the narrator’s descriptions of his/her origins, the conditions of his/her enslavement, the separation from his/her family, cruel punishments, the longing for freedom, and the eventual achievement of liberty. In doing so, Smith relied on the only African American literary model existing at the time in order to use it as the necessary ideological and formal background to his emancipation narratives. His case is not an isolated one, since other authors such as Elizabeth Keckley (*Behind the Scenes*, 1868), Frederick Douglass (*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 1892), and even Booker T. Washington (*Up from Slavery*, 1901) did the same to a greater or lesser extent. Beyond slave

narratives, there were practically no other structures, patterns or language available for black authors at that moment. This inevitably meant that postbellum authors had to deal with slavery in their writing to one degree or other, because it was both part of their collective memory and their literary tradition.

This dependence on the structure and pattern of slave narratives created a profound dilemma for postbellum African American autobiographers. On the one hand, their cultural and historical background was unavoidable when it came to the remembrance of their past. On the other hand, authors such as Smith felt the need to break away from the tradition of slave narratives, since the new postbellum reality had to find its own form and language, for which the antebellum genre was no longer suitable. For one thing, after the Civil War slavery was a thing of the past. Moreover, readers who had avidly devoured antebellum slave autobiographies were no longer interested in slavery, since American concerns after 1865 were of a different nature, such as the country's economic and political concerns and the promotion of sectional reconciliation between North and South. Smith and other postbellum autobiographers had to go beyond slave narratives and adapt their stories and their literary format to the new times by becoming both amateur historians and political commentators. Thus, the social and political uncertainty of the times is also reflected in the unstable form of the postbellum narratives.

Smith's text thus helps define a "transitional" genre and to provide an African American perspective of the conflict that divided the nation from 1861 to 1865. He shows the tensions, expectations, and disappointments that the war and its aftermath brought to black Americans. Thus, despite sharing some formal and thematic interests with the antebellum slave narrative, postbellum autobiographical texts such as Smith's necessarily become a new genre in their own right as they introduce new features such as detailed descriptions of the cruelty of war, the outcome of the conflict, the "reunion scene" between former masters and slaves and, above all, the role of African American soldiers. Black privates became metaphors of the African American desire to be recognized and integrated in American society. Thus, the description of the soldiers' tireless determination to defend their country also served as a metaphor for the hundreds of black Americans and their constant effort to survive and be accepted in the United States. Smith's text represents more than a mere autobiography. His book is an early example of the first attempts by African Americans to reconstruct and narrate their own history and vindicate a distinct identity in a white-dominated world.

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