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"He's Long Gone": The Theme of Escape in Black Folklore and Literature

Daryl Cumber Dance
University of Richmond, ddance2@richmond.edu

Daryl Dance

(1938–)

WITHOUT A DOUBT, Daryl Cumber Dance is the most noted of contemporary collectors and critics of African American folklore. She is indeed a loyal Virginian: born in Richmond, Virginia, she received her A.B. and M.A. degrees in English at Virginia State College in 1957 and 1963, respectively, and her Ph.D. in English from the University of Virginia in 1971. She is currently a full professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University, where she has been a member of the faculty since 1972. Before going to Virginia Commonwealth, she taught at Virginia State College from 1962 to 1972.

Dance's many fields of interest—folklore, black American literature, Caribbean literature, southern literature, and the American novel—have given rise to numerous scholarly publications. She is the editor of the important resource guide *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical and Critical Sourcebook* (1986) and author of *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans* (1978), *Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans* (1985), and *Long Gone: The Mecklenburg Six and the Theme of Escape in Black Folklore* (1987). Of her many essays, perhaps the most important is her very thorough, indispensable "Zora Neale Hurston," found in *American Women Writers: Bibliographical Essays*, edited by Maurice Duke, Jackson R. Bryer, and M. Thomas Inge.

In the same tradition as Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men, Shuckin' and Jivin'* is an eclectic collection of tales that address the cruelty of whites, marital infidelity, ethnic jokes, self-degrading tales, tales about religion, conjure tales, tales about women, ghost stories, tales of heaven and hell, and many other types. In her introduction Professor Dance explains the significance of black folk tales: "Forced into a closed society, often largely lacking in literacy, Black Americans developed and maintained an oral tradition probably unmatched, and certainly not surpassed, by that of any other group in America. Their folklore reveals the history of Black people in this country and their psychological reactions to their experience. The similarities of themes appearing throughout their tales, from the slave anecdotes to the contemporary stories, suggest that for Black Americans basically very little has changed."

Professor Dance's most provocative book is *Long Gone: The Mecklenburg Six and the Theme of Escape in Black Folklore*. On one level this very unusual book traces the escape of the Briley brothers and two other death row

inmates from the Mecklenburg Correctional Center in Boydton, Virginia, and on another level, *Long Gone* discusses the popularity of the theme of escape in Afro-American history and the historical folk responses to the escapees or fugitives. Among many other points she concludes, "As I met and talked with the condemned men and other inmates, I was amazed at how unlike the stereotype of the hardened, vicious criminal many of them seemed. One cannot interact with and get to know many of these men without feeling a great sense of the loss of human potential and without agonizing over whether a society as great as ours does not have the resources to try to emphasize prevention and rehabilitation and not just punishment."

In addition to being the author of thought-provoking publications, Professor Dance has given more than eighty-one speeches, lectures, and paper presentations across the United States. In 1978 she received a Fulbright research grant to study in Jamaica; she is also the recipient of two National Endowment for the Humanities research grants and a Ford Foundation Fellowship. In April of 1989 she received the College of Humanities and Sciences Distinguished Research Award from Virginia Commonwealth University.

The following selection comes from chapter 1 of *Long Gone*.

"HE'S LONG GONE"
The Theme of Escape in Black Folklore and Literature

Leader: It's a Long John.
Group: Long John.
Leader: He's long gone.
Group: Long gone.
Leader: Like a turkey through the corn.
Group: Like a turkey through the corn.
Leader: He's long gone.
Group: Long gone.

Traditional worksong celebrating Long John's outrunning the sheriff and the deputies and their bloodhounds in his flight from the chain gang to freedom.

Throughout their experiences in this country, certain segments of the Black population have viewed themselves as enslaved, whether

they were chattel owned by slaveowners prior to emancipation, whether they were impressed into peonage and forced to work on white plantations and in chain gangs after slavery, whether they were victims of sharecropping systems that virtually reenslaved them during the twentieth century, whether they were the repressed and disfranchised and persecuted in Southern Jim Crow towns throughout the first half of the twentieth century, whether they are those trapped by unemployment and poverty today, or whether they are among the Blacks who continue to be disproportionately represented in our penal institutions. One has only to talk to contemporary Black slum dwellers, Black prison inmates, and a host of other Blacks as well who may not be ensnared in those situations to have reinforced the observation made by William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, "For white America to understand the life of the black man, it must recognize that so much time has passed and so little has changed."[1]

For any individual who is enslaved, incarcerated, constrained, the major goal is freedom. Escape from his or her present entrapment has been the major theme in the Black American's folklore and literature from its beginnings. Slave songs are full of images of escape, some clearly escape from slavery, others apparently escape from this world—which becomes a safe metaphor for expressing the compelling desire for an escape from bondage. The slave sang, "No more hundred lash for me, / No more driver's lash for me, / Many thousand gone." He intoned, "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home." He advised, "Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus." He acclaimed, "The gospel train is coming . . . Get on board, children, get on board." He extolled, "Oh, freedom. Oh, freedom. Oh freedom over me, and before I'll be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free." He appealed, "Go down, Moses, / Way down in Egypt land, / Tell old Pharoah, / Let my people go / . . . . O, let us all from bondage flee." He taunted, "The devil he thought he had me fast. . . . But I thought I'd break his chains at last." He acclaimed, "I am bound for the land of Canaan." Slave and later tales recount escapes from Ole Master, the paterollers, sheriffs, posses, Ku-Kluxers, bigger and stronger animals, ghosts, the devil, the Lord, or prison. In "Convict's Prayer," the speaker, paraphrasing the twenty-third Psalm, concludes, "Surely goodness and mercy shall find me one of these days in my life / and I will drill away from this house for ever and ever" (*Get Your Ass in the Water*, p. 216). Many is the tale that ends in lines similar to these from *S & J*: "I was

[1]William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 31.

makin' *feet* help the *body*! Yes, Lawd, I was gettin' out the way" (p. 32).

Lacking the political, economic, and military might to win freedom through legal means, through the attainment of economic power, or through revolution,[2] the Black people in this country have found that their best chance for freedom was through running—literally and figuratively. In the Black folk lexicon, noted for its flexibility, its originality, and its vivid metaphors, there is no idea that has so many different words to express it as the idea of leaving, fleeing, running.[3] There is no trait that is regarded as more critical to survival than the ability to run; there is no characteristic more applauded than skill at running:

> You see, the raccoon, you know, he was an engineer
> And the possum, he always tend to the switch,
> Old rabbit didn't have no job at all
> But he was a running son-of-a-bitch.[4]
>
> *Negro Tales from Pine Bluff*, p. 24

> [Dis nigger] jumped de fence and run fru de paster,
> White man run, but nigger run faster.
> .....
> Dat nigger run, dat nigger flew,
> Dat nigger tore his shirt in two.
>
> *Encyclopedia of Black Folklore*, p. 239

> Take dis ole hammer an' carry it
> to the cap'n
> And tell him I'm gone.

[2]This is not to suggest that Blacks have not tried all of these means in their efforts to achieve freedom. From the beginning, individual slaves petitioned in the courts for freedom and other rights, while other slaves organized slave rebellions; and throughout their history in America, Blacks have organized in political, civic, and religious groups that sought redress through the approved channels.

[3]Air out, back off, backtrack, beat it, blow, breeze, brush off, bust out, cop a drill/trot, crash out, cruise, cut, cut out, cut and run, depart, disappear, dodge, drift, duck out, ease on out, ease on down, escape, fade, flake out/off, flee, fly, fly the coop, foot it, freewheel, get on in/off/down/out/back, go, go away, go North, go over the hill/wall, grab a armfull of box-cars/the first thing smoking, hat up, haul ass/it, hightail it, hike, hit the road/street, hoof it, hustle, journey, jump bail, jump a train, lam (or take a lam), leave, light out, make feet help the body, make it, make oneself scarce, make tracks, ooze, percolate, ride, ride the rails, roll out/on, run, scat, scram, sell out, shove, shove off, skip, skivver, slide, space, split, step, take a powder/duck, take off, take to the woods/hills/road, trilly on, trilly walk, trot, truck, truck it, tunnel (go into hiding), vamoose, wheel it, wing it.

[4]In their folklore, Negroes always associate the rabbit with themselves.

> If he ask you was I runnin', tell him
> no, I was might' near flyin'.
> *American Negro Folklore*, p. 195

Countless tales and songs in the folk tradition have lines that encourage,"Run, nigger, run, or the paterollers will catch you"; "O, run, nigger, run, cause it's almos' day"; or acclaim, "You ought to see that preacher [nigger, man] run"; or brag, "I'm a greasy streak o' lightning" (the last line is from *Negro Workaday Songs*, p. 65). If any conflict comes down to running, there is usually no question that the Negro will win.

So common is the theme of running in Black literature from the slave narratives (whose basic theme is that of the flight from slavery) and the first novel written by a Black American (William Wells Brown's *Clotel*) through the popular works of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and a multitude of others that Phyllis Klotman has entitled her study of Black American literature *Another Man Gone: The Black Runner in Afro-American Literature*. The theme continues with the recently published *Brothers and Keepers* by John Edgar Wideman. As one reads each of the many works that focus on this theme, one witnesses repetition after repetition of the scenarios that involve Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, wherein everyone seems to conspire to "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."[5] Indeed many of the writers themselves, from Frederick Douglass to Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Eldridge Cleaver, have experienced the dilemma of the man on the run. Several of them fled the American South, and some of them ultimately fled the country.

Thus, as is revealed in both their folklore and their literature, as much pleasure as the Black people might derive from out-smarting white people, there always comes a time when the skill of running is requisite. As the old proverb says, "Whut you don' hab in yo' haid, yuh got ter hab in yo' feet" (*American Negro Folklore*, p. 325). And as a young Black child told Robert Coles in an interview a few years ago: "Legs mean more than hands. So I gives them more attention. If you can run, you're O.K."[6]

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[5]I do not mean by this discussion to imply that the theme of running, of escape, is unique to Black literature. It may be said to be the common theme in a country founded and populated by a host of peoples running from religious oppression, political oppression, poverty, and imprisonment. The theme laid out in the diaries and travelogues of the Founding Fathers continues as several of our major White writers, such as Irving, Cooper, Melville, Twain, and Faulkner, recorded the journeys of men fleeing everything from domineering wives to the restrictions of organized society. Given the history of Blacks in this country, the theme does, however, have unique implications and variations within the Black tradition.

[6]*The Negro American*, ed. Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark (Boston: Houghton, 1966), p. 258.

Obviously when the Black man speaks of running, he does not always mean it literally. In addition to "putting on my walkin' shoes," he may find that his flight requires that he "hitch up my buggy," "saddle my ole grey mare," "jump a rail," "get a ole Greyhound bus and ride" (all traditional), or "[cool] 'bout hundred-fifteen miles an hour in my / own limousine" ("The Great MacDaddy," *Deep Down*, p. 163). While his travels might take him many places, most of his songs and tales tell of his traveling some road or highway—"a lonesome road," or "a lonesome highway," the "king's highway," or the "gospel highway." The Black runner most often follows the North Star, traveling from South to North, usually leaving towns in Georgia, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi (especially Vicksburg and Clarksdale), and other such "mean ole Jim Crow towns," and setting out for New Orleans, Memphis, Nashville, Chicago, New York, Detroit, and St. Louis. The runner's songs frequently depict the horrors of life in the mean old Southern towns and the anticipation of a better life in the North: he's "*sweet* Chicago bound" or he's headed "up north where money grows on trees." In the Black folk tradition, even snakes get out of Mississippi, and God is afraid to travel any further South than Memphis.

Most of their songs and tales allude to, but generally do not detail, the suffering, hardships, and pain that Blacks are trying to escape. Generally there is enough information (coupled with our own knowledge of the history of race relations) to convince us that escape is requisite for survival, and that it is worth the risk of life and limb that it probably entails. Thus the Black man sings, "I'd rather drink muddy water, sleep in a hollow log, than to stay in this here town, treated like a dirty dog" (traditional). He sings, "The devil he thought he had me fast, but I thought I'd break his chains at last" (*Negro Spirituals*, p. 23). Blind Lemon Jackson sang, "Gettin' tired of sleepin' in this low-down lonesome cell" (*Blues Fell This Morning*, p. 216).

When the Brileys and their cohorts drove out of Mecklenburg prison and entered that long, lonely, dark country road, they triggered on one level the gut reaction that many Blacks have to the archetypal runner.[7] One must remember that the Black runner, whether he or she be Nat Turner or Harriet Tubman or Frederick Douglass or JoAnne Little or Angela Davis or Stagolee or James Briley, is always labeled and regarded by the system as a fugitive, a des-

[7]It is interesting to observe that the runner, the legendary hero in Black folklore, and the warrior, the legendary hero in the Western tradition, were ironically counterposed in newspaper accounts of the Great Escape, which shared the headlines from the day the escape was announced (June 1, 1984) and the ensuing days with recollections of D-Day.

perado, a dangerous criminal, a vicious threat to society; and his flight is always in violation of the established law. Whatever one's view of the individuals involved in the Great Escape, whether one reacted fearfully to the threat posed by those convicted felons or whether one harbored suspicions that perhaps they were victims of an unjust legal system more inclined to execute its poor and Black,[8] there was often, before these balanced considerations, a visceral reaction to the *flight* and a recollection of a host of other runners. And those who recognized themselves most susceptible to the possible loss of their own freedom undoubtedly recognized even more keenly that the fugitive who might generally be judged undeserving craved freedom every bit as much as the runner whom some deemed worthy.

Inside looking out,
I see the happiness
and sadness, the hurt
and pain that everyone feels,
even while here
Inside Looking Out . . . .
James Briley, *Fysh Magazine*,
Summer 1984, written before the escape

Very likely they recognized as well that while on one level it may seem blasphemous to link the name of so valiant a heroine as Harriet Tubman with that of a cold blooded murderer, that chain was forged by their respective societies who judged them both the same and hunted them in like manner as similarly dangerous threats to the maintenance of order.

RUNAGATE RUNAGATE

I.
Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness
and the darkness thicketed with shapes of terror
and the hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing
and the night cold and the night long and the river
to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning beckoning
and blackness ahead and when shall I reach that somewhere
morning and keep on going and never turn back and keep on
going
Runagate
Runagate

[8]The blues are full of lines of men being "judged without a trial," and folktales treating the theme of injustice in the courtroom are legion. For additional examples, see Ch. 8.

Runagate

Many thousands rise and go
many thousands crossing over

O mythic North
O star-shaped yonder Bible city

Some go weeping and some rejoicing
some in coffins and some in carriages
some in silks and some in shackles

Rise and go or fare you well

No more auction block for me
no more driver's lash for me
If you see my Pompey, 30 yrs of age,
new breeches, plain stockings, negro shoes;
if you see my Anna, likely young mulatto
branded E on the right cheek, R on the left,
catch them if you can and notify subscriber.
Catch them if you can, but it won't be easy.
They'll dart underground when you try to catch them,
plunge into quicksand, whirlpools, mazes,
turn into scorpions when you try to catch them.

And before I'll be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave

North star and bonanza gold
I'm bound for the freedom, freedom-bound
and oh Susyanna don't you cry for me

Runagate

Runagate

II.
Rises from their anguish and their power,

Harriet Tubman,

woman of earth, whipscarred,
a summoning, a shining

Mean to be free

And this was the way of it, brethren brethren,
way we journeyed from Can't to Can.
Moon so bright and no place to hide,
the cry up and the patterollers riding,
hound dogs belling in bladed air.
And fear starts a-murbling, Never make it,
we'll never make it. *Hush that now,*
and she's turned upon us, levelled pistol
glinting in the moonlight:
dead folks can't jaybird-talk, she says;

you keep on going now or die, she says.

Wanted Harriet Tubman alias The General
alias Moses Stealer of Slaves

In league with Garrison Alcott Emerson
Garrett Douglass Thoreau John Brown

Armed and known to be Dangerous

Wanted Reward Dead or Alive

Tell me, Ezekiel, oh tell me do you see
mailed Jehovah coming to deliver me?

Hoot-owl calling in the ghosted air,
five times calling to the hants in the air.
Shadow of a face in the scary leaves,
shadow of a voice in the talking leaves:

Come ride-a my train

Oh that train, ghost-story train
through swamp and savanna movering movering,
over trestles of dew, through caves of the wish,
Midnight Special on a sabre track movering movering,
first stop Mercy and the last Hallelujah.

Come ride-a my train

Mean mean mean to be free.

"It was just like, hey, yawl ain't gon' leave ME in here. You know, if you got a chance to be free, you aim to take it." Escapee Derick Peterson
Conversation, June 28, 1985