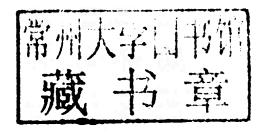


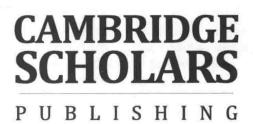
EDITED BY MARSHA R. ROBINSON

Purgatory between Kentucky and Canada: African Americans in Ohio

Edited by

Marsha R. Robinson





Purgatory between Kentucky and Canada: African Americans in Ohio, Edited by Marsha R. Robinson

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Purgatory between Kentucky and Canada

INVERTING HISTORY WITH MICROHISTORY SERIES

VOLUME 1: LESSER CIVIL WARS: CIVILIANS DEFINING WAR AND THE MEMORY OF WAR

VOLUME 2: Women Who Belong: Claiming a Female's Right-Filled Place

> VOLUME 3: PURGATORY BETWEEN KENTUCKY AND CANADA: AFRICAN AMERICANS IN OHIO

INVERTING HISTORY WITH MICROHISTORY: PREFACE TO THE SERIES

Inverting History with Microhistory is a series of edited volumes in which scholars lead us to question the allocation and appropriation of power by individuals in relationship to their societies. Microhistory has a long tradition of fascinating stories about the past that help us interpret the present and shape our immediate future. Microhistory can be as powerful as macrohistory and, therefore, microhistory makes some people nervous.

The oldest microhistory that I have ever read was that of a great hunter standing up to a charging bison. It was painted on the walls of a Lascaux, France cave some fifteen thousand years ago by prehistoric humans. Actually, I "read" the second edition of the story in a full-size reproduction that was created for tourists like me. Even though it has been two decades since I visited that microhistory, its story is so basic that I have not forgotten it. In fact, I have been inspired by its powerful message. In our lifetimes, events happen in a way that can be described as charging bison that suddenly appear in our paths. What we choose to do at those moments is our contribution to the drama of human history.

The oldest stories that I am aware of are stories about individuals who faced overwhelming challenges in particular places. When the stories were told near firelight or by moonlight, the great story tellers could capture the passing breeze and work it into the story. They illuminated the stages of our imaginations with moonlight and fire flare-ups. They held us in a spell as we waited to hear about the choices the protagonists made and the traumas they endured. We remembered the stories and the life lessons of cleverness and foolishness, of bravery and loyalty. We came to identify each other by the stories we shared. Our stories are where our communities were born. We were members of small communities in those moments and we told microhistories that we could relate to on a personal level.

Along the way, other storytellers introduced new characters such as Nation and Empire. These giants were invading us or we were numbered with them as invaders. Our stories now featured great monarchs and generals who led us or our enemies into macrohistory and who were justified by the metanarratives written by the victors who broadcast these bigger histories to larger audiences by daylight in imposing and official public places like schools and stadia.

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Behind the waving flags of battalions and nations in marketplaces and military encampments, humans continued to gather around the firelight to hear stories of individuals facing the challenges of ever more complex societies with all of the rules and structures that provide order out of the chaos of masses of people engaged in the art of survival. The micro-level stories grabbed us, comforted us, taught us, inspired us, and identified us as individuals who matter.

Inverting History is a series of edited volumes that contain stories about individuals, the challenges that they faced and the decisions that they made. In our globalizing world, we have a challenge facing us. Will our stories of the past unite us or divide us? Will we fight over limited resources or share our knowledge and creativity to overcome zero-sum game local and regional wars? How will we choose to deploy our power to shape the present and the near future? Our resource desperation is charging at us like giant bison.

Stories and Power

Power is perhaps the most elusive prey in history. The hunt for power seems to be one plot in that oldest recorded story in the Lascaux cave. The quest to capture power from the Other is a plot in discussions about adding marginal individuals and groups to official narratives of history. Stories empower their audiences. So, it may be important to control microhistory if one wishes to limit or expand the number of empowered individuals.

Stories about events along the human trek through time influence the allocation of power in the present. Sociologist and historian Charles Tilly saw this connection. "Social pressures," he wrote, "are path-dependent. That is why history matters." Tilly identified three types of constructions of past events: metahistory, world-systems, and macrohistory. Such narratives often imbue the Nation/Empire/State with so much power that only superhuman titans like Octavian Augustus or Elizabeth I could discipline these new characters. Ordinary people seem to follow almost mindlessly in their wake, sucked into history en masse by the riptides and crosscurrents of the charisma and superiority of each titan who is singularly qualified to challenge the charging bison of historic moments and trends.

Sometimes, empowered, mindful, ordinary individuals like Fannie Lou Hamer or Napoleon Bonaparte succeeded and that makes some titans rather nervous. Such individuals, whether born into work-a-day families or as less-empowered nobility, manage to focus the energies of compatriots into a political wedge that threatens the stability of elite castes. Individuals

like Joan of Arc, Sundiata Keita, Sojourner Truth, Vicente Guerrero, Aung San Suu Kyi, Benjamin Franklin, Rosa Parks, and Mohandas Gandhi empower ordinary people through their example. Histories about such relatively ordinary people who stood up to the political bison of their times fall into a category called microhistory. Tilly identified this fourth type of history as microhistory which is the study of "the experiences of individuals and well-defined groups within the limits set by large-scale structures and processes." Stories about these individuals have the potential to reinforce or to weaken the power of the official histories that created a comfort zone for the ruling titans.

One scholar whose words seem to express some trepidation over microhistories of ordinary people is Gertrude Himmelfarb, an American expert on Victorian intellectual history.

Race/gender/class...any part of that trinity involves a considerable revision of the past . . . but the whole requires nothing less than its deconstruction.³

As far as I know, there were people of varying races, social classes, and genders in the Victorian era and many of them were intellectuals who were featured on lecture circuits and in various gazettes. Queen Victoria graced many of them with an audience. Queen Victoria's audiences confess, to some extent, a measure of the diversity of her imperial subjects by race/class/gender and reflect the diversity of her empire's global trading partners. This reality gave me pause when I read Dr. Himmelfarb's words about "women, blacks, Chicanos, etc." She wrote,

What they are all 'clamoring for' is not a place on the periphery of history—that they always had—but at the center, and not intermittently but permanently.⁴

Himmelfarb's comments suggest that history belongs to white male titans and everyone else is relegated to a dream-like story of standing up to charging bison as painted on the wall of a cave.

What if titans fear ordinary people more than they fear bison? This question arises after reading Sigurdur Gylfi Magnusson's summary of microhistory as a movement in Europe. Magnusson was associated with the Center for Microhistorical Research in Reykyavik, Iceland. His essay can be used to map a tense space between Tilly's and Himmelfarb's perspectives on the subfield of microhistory. Magnusson wrote that his entry to microhistory occurred around the time of the Ronald Reagan administration. At this time, Magnusson saw that microhistory was tinged with the residue of European colonialism. He included the linguistic turn, the contribution of Foucault and Derrida, and the microhistory tension

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between the French *Annales* school and the post-fascist Italian school exemplified by the work of Ginzburg. "In the final analysis," he wrote in 2003, "so far as I am aware, the ideology of microhistory has as yet failed to make any deep and lasting impression upon the discipline at large." If Magnusson is correct, then from his side of the Atlantic Ocean, microhistory must fail as surely as the Lascaux artist recorded the injury of a human who stood up to the charging bison.

Magnusson's assessment, however, leads me to query the trepidation even further by interrogating the very ancient microhistory in the Lascaux cave. As I understand Foucault and the others mentioned by Magnusson, the question underlying those approaches is this: How in the name of titans' History did the colonized subjects ever find the power to topple European colonial administrations? Titanic histories lose power when microhistories are admitted. Therefore, if Magnusson's assessment is correct, microhistory must fail for its success will open up a Tilly-type path that leads to the democratization of global economic power and a Himmelfarb-type reconstruction of the European-dominated global economic order. (Before I proceed, it is important to reveal that I toured Versailles Palace, emblem of French national and imperial power, before I visited Lascaux.) What if the paintings on the wall of Lascaux's caves are an invocation or a spell rather than a history? What if a shaman wished individuals to take on the spirit of the rampaging or charging bison and dominate the other humans and animals of the region? Given that the territory above the Lascaux cave became a stage upon which Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, Louis XIV, and Napoleon launched empires, we should leave a door open to the possibility that the Tilly-type residue of the least microhistory, even the simple yet empowering story of a human standing up to a bison, may change world orders on a Himmelfarb scale over many generations and millennia.

According to the oldest story that I have ever read, the crafting of microhistories is older than the crafting of macrohistories. According to Kathleen Canning, the trinity of race/class/gender was practiced in the field of women's history long before it was discovered by Foucault or Derrida.⁶ In this subfield, the great charging bison was white male dominance. Women's history had at least two objectives: "the decentering of the Western white male subject and the reformulation of subjectivity as a site of disunity and conflict," and an end to the "historical exclusion of women and the identification of human with male." With their pens, early women's historians claimed a permanent place in the narratives of the past, just as Himmelfarb described.

Historians who factored for race/gender/class show something rather

curious, something that is not always so readily apparent in other history. In African American history, the master narrative centers upon slavery, namely that most African Americans entered the American theater of history as conquered commodities. Microhistories of the plantation experience, including abolition literature, often reinforced the idea that power belonged to white males. However, an early African American practitioner of microhistory, George Washington Williams, used his pen in the late nineteenth century to restore African American soldiers to the stage of macrohistories about American wars when he published his History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880; as Negroes, as Slaves, as Soldiers, and as Citizens. He claimed a place for them in the victors' narratives just as surely as many African American veterans received their pensions. In the history of the nation of India, European dominance is only the most recent hegemony. In the imperial cycles of Indian history, the elite castes eventually shared power with the invaders. Mrinalini Sinha affirmed this with her observation that in Indian history, "neither feminism nor women are ever articulated outside macropolitical structures that condition and delimit their political efforts."8 Such Indian women, along with many American women, were not standing up to the charging bison of social power. In both of these cases, those who are identified by race/gender/class, some African American veterans and some privileged women in India, claim a share of power in the established Nation or Empire. The subjects of these microhistories wanted to run beside the charging bison called Nation or Empire. They reinforce the macrohistory that Himmelfarb did not wish to see deconstructed.

So, while I think that the images painted on the Lascaux caves are the texts of one of the oldest microhistories, I dare not pretend to give an authoritative interpretation of the text. In the same manner, I do not predict that microhistories will undermine official histories. In fact, some reinforce macrohistories, world histories and metanarratives written in the long twentieth century. Microhistories often privilege the experience of an individual or a small group of individuals against the backdrop of narratives about such historical titans as Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Mao Zedong. In these contexts, microhistories do tend to invert the place of historical actors on the stage of the past but they do not always subvert the hegemony. The microhistories in this series recognize that individuals and groups have the agency to support and to reject systems of organizing society.

Notes

¹ Charles Tilly, "Future History," in *Theory and Society* 17, no. 5 (September 1988).

² Ibid., 706.

³ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Some Reflections on the New History," *American Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (June, 1989): 668.

⁴ Ibid., 664.

⁵ Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, "'The Singularization of History': Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge," *Journal of Social History* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 701-735.

⁶ Kathleen Canning, "Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience," Signs 19, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 370.

⁷ Ibid., 371.

⁸ Mrinalini Sinha, "Mapping the Imperial Social Formation: A Modest Proposal for Feminist History," *Signs* 25, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 1078.

SOME SOCIAL NETWORKS USED BY OHIO AFRICAN AMERICANS

American Civil Liberties Union
Black Aristocracy
Cleveland Call and Post
Cleveland Plain Dealer
Cleveland Community Relations Board

Commissions and Committees

inssions and Committee

Conventions

Congress of Racial Equality

Dayton Daily News

Dayton Journal Herald

De Facto Segregation Committee

A Sorority at Defiance College

Democratic Party

Disk Jockeys

Executive Committee of Fifteen

Freemason

Garreston House

Interracial House Visit Days

Jet Magazine

Karamu House

Ministers and Clergy

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

National Association of Colored Women

National Catholic Welfare Conference

Ohio Anti-Slavery Society Palladium of Liberty

Radio

Ravenna Town and Country Club

Republican Party

Task Force

The Guardian

The Philanthropist

The Mystery

Underground Railroad

United Freedom Movement Women Religious

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CHAPTER ONE

PURGATORY, PROLOGUE, AND DEMOCRACY: AFRICAN AMERICAN SCRIPTS FOR THE SECOND STAGE OF MEDITERRANEAN SOCIAL NETWORKING REVOLUTIONS

MARSHA R. ROBINSON

Democracy is a multigenerational project.

Democracy is carved out of tyranny by the liberal and diligent application of the sharp-edge of social networks. As we crafted these chapters for this volume, we were aware of fresh waves of democracy erupting around the Mediterranean Rim where spaces of political heaven are the goals of those living through the hell fires of social revolutions and demonstrations of the Twitter Revolutions of 2010, 2011 and 2012.

Purgatory between Kentucky and Canada: African Americans in Ohio focuses on the micro-tactics of ordinary people who sought peace in the middle of societies at various degrees of unrest. Some chapters focus on the printed word as a tool to change perceptions about African Americans. Other chapters focus on individuals acting in their communities. All of the chapters address the agency of individuals who attempted to create a little space of peace in a place that is less heavenly than some might suppose. We hope that the lessons that we have learned from our research subjects will inspire ordinary people everywhere to continue to pursue full inclusion in their social contracts until liberty and civil rights are common traits of the normal human condition.

Why Stage This in Ohio?

Ohio was a purgatory for people seeking to exercise and allocate the power of citizenship. While crossing the Ohio River was similar to the biblical crossing of the Jordan River for those seeking to leave the realm of slavery, individuals and institutions were torn about the lingering residue of slavery, namely practices such as social death in the form of disenfranchisement and racial segregation. Individuals, black and white, exercised their own agency to make Ohio more of a social heaven however they defined it.

Between the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland are eighty-eight Ohio counties with a history of ambivalence about African Americans' social and political status. Once an enslaved person crossed the Ohio River, that person might have left slavery behind but there was no guarantee that they had acquired full citizenship rights in Ohio's social contract. It was literally an African American citizen's purgatory in that it was neither heaven nor hell.

The Ohio River was commonly known as the Jordan River in Negro spirituals because it marked the frontier between freedom and slavery just as crossing the Jordan River marked the end of the Exodus journey of the Hebrew descendants of Abraham who left slavery in Egypt. The theme of the Ohio River as a frontier has been taken up by David Gerber in *Black Ohio and the Color Line* (University of Illinois Press, 1976), by Nikki Taylor in *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati's Black Community 1802-1868* (Ohio University Press, 2005), and by Darrel E. Bigham in *On Jordan's Banks: Emancipation and Its Aftermath in the Ohio River Valley* (University Press of Kentucky, 2005). Unfortunately, the frontier was not confined to a map. The frontier between African-Americans and European-Americans was too often etched on the colorless soul. Global citizen and native of Detroit, MI, Ralph J. Bunche described the damage that racism does to democracy.

One of the rocks on which the noble philosophy of human equality has run afoul takes shape as the frightful bogey, race...In a world such as ours some such creed of inequality is both inevitable and indispensable. For it furnished a rational justification for our coveted doctrines of blind nationalism, imperialism, and the cruel exploitation of millions of our fellow-men.¹

In this volume, we present a multigenerational history of African Americans in Ohio who diligently used social networks and informed reason to combat the rationale of racism as a justification for rationing civil liberties.

Ohio African American History for an International Audience

Actors in mid-performance under stage lights are marginally aware of their audience. So it is for the historian, especially one who is so dedicated to making sense of their own ethnic or national history that they may not be aware of the international audience of their narrative. For these scholars the question is "What happened to us?" or "What did we do?" There is little risk in saying that these questions often drive many African American scholars of Black history. It is evident in the abundance of works that privilege slavery, the plantation, the migration away from slavery and the neo-slavery of twentieth century urban experience in which too many of the working class cycle between housing projects and the Constitutionally-endorsed slave labor inside modern prisons. These macro-level experiences were real—very real—and they continue to limit the options of many people of African descent in the United States.

Very recently, the residue of slavery polluted public discourse in the 2012 presidential election. Every now and then, a candidate or a supporter of a candidate was so engrossed in their performance of race on the campaign stage and before the bright lights of the media that they would forget about the composition of the audition. So, if many of the most politically empowered agents of the present continue to be bound by the script of race and plantation economy, it is quite reasonable to assume that many historians of the African American experience have been trained and encouraged to continue to contextualize the present by reifying the dynamics of the past in an endlessly looped Möbius strip of race versus oppression and suppressions and repressions that can ensnare the audience and the reenactors in a black hole of historicized prejudice.

Over the last decade, though, someone in my audience coughed and drew my attention away from historicized prejudice. Most of those in my recent audiences are members of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's Dream Generation, people whose feet are shod in a purer democracy that repels historicized prejudice. Many are first or second generation New African Americans from African nations where slavery is not a racial issue, places where their ancestors were not enslaved but were forced to answer "Suh" to the colonizer for the span of three or four generations. I am not the only one with a changing audience. The audience to the performances of African American history proliferates around the world and their increasing identification with African American cultures is getting my attention. Why is this international audience watching the historical drama of African American ancestors?