AFRICAN AMERICAN
SERVITUDE
AND HISTORICAL
IMAGININGS

This page intentionally left blank

AFRICAN AMERICAN
SERVITUDE
AND HISTORICAL
IMAGININGS

~ Retrospective Fiction and Representation ~

Margaret I. Jordan

palgrave
macmillan

AFRICAN AMERICAN SERVITUDE AND HISTORICAL IMAGININGS

Copyright © Margaret I. Jordan, 2004.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2004 978-1-4039-6497-7

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Excerpts from BEING AND RACE: BLACK WRITING SINCE 1970, by Charles Johnson reprinted by permission of Indiana University Press.

First published 2004 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS.
Companies and representatives throughout the world.

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-52856-1 ISBN 978-1-4039-7832-5 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9781403978325

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jordan, Margaret I.

African American servitude and historical imaginings : retrospective fiction and representation / by Margaret I. Jordan

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Historical fiction, American—History and criticism. 2. American fiction—20th century—History and criticism. 3. African Americans in literature. 4. Literature and history—United States—History—20th century. 5. Johnson, Charles Richard, 1948– Middle passage. 6. Warren, Robert Penn, 1905– Band of angels. 7. Doctorow, E. L., 1931– Ragtime. 8. Morrison, Toni. Song of Solomon. 9. Domesticity in literature. 10. Slavery in literature. 11. Slaves in literature. I. Title.

PS374.N4J67 2004

813'.5409352996073—dc22

2004044579

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Letra Libre.

First edition: August 2004

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my parents,
James W. Jordan and V. Ilene Jordan

For Herb Jordan and Maya Jordan

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi

CHAPTER 1

Introduction	1
Imagining the Past	1
<i>Stepping Back in Time: A Philosophy of Composition</i>	1
<i>To Excavate the Past</i>	7
<i>Social Issues, Then and Now</i>	11
The African American Servant: Cultural Artifact and Agent in Place	18
<i>The Shame of Servitude: Stigma and Status</i>	19
<i>Serving the Text: Elaborating Perceptions of Difference</i>	23

CHAPTER 2

What Made Amantha Lean?: Racial Fanaticism in the 1950s and the Rationalization of Slavery in Robert Penn Warren's <i>Band of Angels</i>	29
<i>Legacies of the Past</i>	29
<i>Unraveling Point of View</i>	41
<i>Shared Complicity: Guilt and Denial of Causality</i>	46
<i>Black Inferiority: Fitness for Servitude</i>	52
<i>Paternalism and the "Good" Master</i>	87
<i>"An innocent victim of a cosmic conspiracy"</i>	98

CHAPTER 3

A Washerwoman Wreaks Havoc: Moral Reckoning and the “National Soul” in E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* 107

Writing in the Historical Blanks 107

A Washerwoman in the Ointment 114

Explicating the Historical Moment: Social Context and Black Servitude 136

Coalhouse Walker, Jr.: The Inscrutable Non-Servant 141

Creating a Constituency: Liberal Humanism and Ragtime 147

CHAPTER 4

“Evolve or Die”: Rewriting “the Disfiguring Hand of Servitude” in Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* 151

Countermanding “the overly discussed victimization of black people”:

A Philosophy of Composition 151

Selective Culpability: Benign Diversity in a Slaving Society 166

“Evolve or Die”: Rewriting Identity and the Social Contract 172

Moral Evolution through Constructive Servitude 186

CHAPTER 5

Elegy for a Dream: Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* 195

“My mode of writing is sublimely didactic” 195

Pullman Porter; Revolutionary 199

Black Social Stratification and Servitude 208

Slave, Servant, Timeless Adjudicator 218

Voluntary Servitude 221

Black Servitude and Victimization 226

Epilogue 231

Notes 235

Works Cited 265

Index 279

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A VERY SPECIAL THANKS TO ALL WHO MADE THIS BOOK POSSIBLE. TO paraphrase Lennon and McCartney, I got by with a lot of help from my friends. First, my family. My parents, James Jordan and Ilene Jordan, for all your support and patience. My brother James Jordan, Jr., who gave me support, encouragement and humor. My brother Bruce Jordan, and my sister Marsha Jordan. My daughter, Maya. Your weekly cards and words of encouragement kept me going. Thank you for your constancy. My best friend and brother, Herb Jordan, for helping me to believe in myself and for never losing faith. There is not enough room here or time to list all the ways you have helped. My deepest gratitude.

My heartfelt appreciation goes to Michael Alston, for always coming to the rescue, in so many ways. Katherine DeLoach, thank you so much for your generosity and effort. Many thanks to Phillip Brooks, Jane Mildred, Sneha Misra, Mary McClintock, Ferne Guillebeaux and Lesley Brill. You all know why.

To the staff at Palgrave Macmillan, many thanks for your help and patience. Special thanks to Melissa Nosal, Alan Bradshaw and Farideh Koohi-Kamali.

For all those who have helped sustain me during this endeavor, by word or deed. Family, friends and colleagues, near and far. I could not have done this without your caring, concern and support. Many, many thanks. Words fail.

This page intentionally left blank

PREFACE

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN TO THINK ABOUT AFRICAN AMERICAN SERVANTS and servitude as vehicles or forms of cultural expression as a possible research project, I tried to remember what had first sparked my interest in the subject. I remembered conversations with my paternal grandmother about her experiences and the experiences of others she had known as workers in other people's homes. My grandmother, who was born in the last decade of the nineteenth century in a small town in the Mississippi delta, had tales to tell about what was required on the job. Almost always with a wry humor she recounted strategies for survival and her perceptions and those of her friends about their employers. Her memories of and anecdotes about her employment always centered around how much work she was expected to do for the families, and for so little compensation, and how unself-conscious the families were about their personal habits and business in the presence of their servants. As a child, it was inconceivable to me that in her early life my grandmother performed the same functions for other families that she did for her own. I remembered incidental conversations with other women in my community who worked in domestic service, including African Canadian women who as teenagers worked just after World War II in the homes of wealthy industrialists in Detroit. I was struck by the remarkable similarities of their stories.

I tried to imagine these women I knew as laborers within those other households and was curious about their employers. I had one side of the story, at least a part of it. I knew to some extent how they were treated and could from this infer, to some extent, how they were valued both as employees and as people by their employers.

As a child in the 1950s and early 1960s, because of the stories told by my grandmother and others in service, children's nurses and scullery maids in fairy tales, cooks on pancake and Cream-of-Wheat boxes, and lady's maids and mammies in movies always got my attention. When we watched an "old" movie and an African American made an appearance waiting on or clearing off a table, answering the door and admitting guests into someone else's home,

standing quietly at attention in the periphery of a lavishly appointed room, tending to the needs of their employers' children, or stirring the pots and rolling the biscuits in the kitchen, one of us, adults included, would invariably remark that those were the only roles available to black actors in Hollywood "back then," as though there was much discernible difference from the filmic depictions of the 1950s and early 1960s. When a white servant appeared performing the same types of duties, someone invariably remarked that this was an exception. Our perception as African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s was that most servants were black.

As elementary school children on field trips to the Detroit Institute of Arts, we would rush up to paintings with those most noticeable of figures, black servants, marveling at their presence in European works from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We personalized those paintings: Were *we* really there? What were *we* doing? What were *our* lives like? Were *we* only servants? Were *we* only slaves? What's the difference between being a servant and a slave?

We were required to take a class called "Auditorium," in which we watched newsreels and documentaries and listened to music, mostly classical, for our cultural edification. The presence of servants and the concept of servitude were in Negro spirituals in recordings by Marian Anderson and the Robert Shaw Chorale: "Set down servant / I c'aint set down / My soul's so happy that I c'aint set down"; in the liturgy we heard in church that instructed us that "We are God's servants, working together";¹ and in the songs we sang: "My Master, Let me walk with Thee / In lowly paths of service free; / Teach me Thy secret; help me bear / The strain of toil and care."²

The "idea" of servitude that resonated in my imagination was inextricably linked to the continuously available presence of servants and the idea of service in my immediate world and in the world I perceived through the images and references to servants in a much larger cultural context. My interest in servants and servitude is informed by personal exposure, and any impulse to a knee-jerk response to the images or presence of African American servants in the products of culture is often mediated and mitigated by a prevailing awareness that on some level, in some significant way, these figures resonate with a certain familiarity. I realize that for a very long time I have been foraging through the products of culture in search of the images and meanings of these people/figures who assist, maintain and support the personal lives of others, in an effort to go beyond the easy predictability of stigmatization to a more comprehensive understanding of these intriguing representations.

I take issue with those who cannot or will not see beyond the presumed lowliness and insignificance of servitude and servants, such as William Henry,

who states in *In Defense of Elitism* that “we cannot reinvent the past to pretend that [. . .] studying the quotidian existence of bygone peasants and serving wenches will more than marginally enlighten us about the past’s richest legacy, the high-cultural attainments for which these serfs provided, at best, support staff.”³ We need not reinvent. We need not pretend. This study challenges the very notion of the “quotidian existence” of those who serve. The fictive servant, no less quotidian than those in real life, is informed by as well as informs our understanding of American history and cultural values. Through the representation of African American servants and engagement with the idea of African American servitude, writers offer, at the least, myriad ways in which to discover America and Americanness. Furthermore, the ways in which African American servitude is manifested in fiction often provides significant insights into the sensibilities and the philosophies of life and composition of the writers themselves. As Harold Bloom has said, “That the writer somehow is in the work, we need not doubt.”⁴

The texts under consideration in this book are works that contemplate the past, retrospective novels, by four twentieth-century writers: *Band of Angels* (1955) by Robert Penn Warren, *Ragtime* (1975) by E. L. Doctorow, *Middle Passage* (1990) by Charles Johnson, and *Song of Solomon* (1977) by Toni Morrison. Why these texts and authors?

What these seemingly disparate texts have in common is that they deal with African Americans as servants in ways that encourage consideration of social and cultural issues, particularly where national and individual identity are concerned. I consider these texts ideal for this project because all four do not simply present African Americans represented as slaves or servants, but actually deal significantly, in both a literary and sociohistorical sense, with the *idea* of African American servitude and what it means or represents to American society and to these individual authors. I regard black servitude in retrospective fiction as the manifestation of deeply ingrained beliefs and attitudes, as an expectation and function of life, and, correspondingly, as identity and status in American society. These texts acknowledge servitude, on some level, as *the* perceived context for African Americans—a context in need of review and revision. Most important, they invoke black servitude in the past to confront the present.

It is how the idea of black servitude, free or otherwise, has driven and continues to drive the social contract that most interests me. A historical approach helps to facilitate this inquiry. Warren deals extensively with both African American slavery and free servitude in mid-nineteenth-century America; Doctorow with servitude, and very particularly with the difficulties whites in the early twentieth century have conceptualizing and dealing with an African

American who is not only *not* a servant, but not servile. In a pre-emancipation context, Johnson deals with slavery, free servitude and the African American who is not a servant; and, Toni Morrison, with slavery and then servitude up to the mid-twentieth century.

Slave and servant are, of course, two very different things, the obvious difference being that one is free and one is not, a distinction I discuss later. But, they do share many common attributes. Long after slavery had ended, African Americans could not escape servitude, having few if any other alternatives for employment. As Gerda Lerner says, “[t]here is always domestic work. The pattern has changed very little since the days of slavery.”⁵ There are many reasons for this dearth of options, but prominent among them is the assumption of the utilitarian nature of black people based on the conviction of black inferiority, and an accompanying resistance to reconceptualizing the potential for anything else for blacks. This almost immutable belief is what unifies these two categories of service. The consequences of this thinking have troubled the United States for centuries, remain unresolved, and resonate in interesting ways in American retrospective fiction, particularly for Warren, Doctorow, Johnson and Morrison.

Once noticed, they seem to be everywhere, these figures that serve. The Negro washerwomen in William Faulkner’s short story “That Evening Sun” walk the dusty streets of a small southern town with their bundles of laundry balanced on their heads. In this powerfully visual scene time seems to stand still, the imagery of an African past superimposed over an American present. Even later, when it is collected in automobiles, it is still “dirty laundry” in a modern world where black women must be washerwomen.⁶

It may be the precarious friendship between a black *au pair* and her wealthy employers and their family in contemporary New York in Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy*, or the continual splicing of white women as mistresses/employers, and black women as slaves/servants who facilitate personhood for them in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. Whether it is the supporting roles and representations of Negroes compared to Indians in James Fenimore Cooper’s pre-Revolutionary tale *Satanstoe, or the Littlepage Manuscripts, A Tale of the Colony*, or the idea of “voluntary” slavery in Octavia Butler’s post-apocalyptic *Parable of the Sower*, African American servants and the idea of African American servitude simply abound in American literature, period.

In fact, it must be said that I have not found a single text, retrospective or otherwise, with the presence of African Americans in servitude that does not suggest something meaningful about American history, society, culture or literary representation, or about the author of the text. Indeed, an interesting line of pursuit may be to find texts with black servitude that do *not* provoke consideration of these and other issues. This is, one might say, the point here.

This study is an effort to rehabilitate perceptions of the representations of the African American servant, which I regard as an authoritative figure empowered to influence reading audiences in unexpected and compelling ways. The black fictive servant—the product of authorial wish-fulfillment—elucidates, articulates, demarcates, mirrors and ratifies a discernible system of complex beliefs, both enduring and mutable. Those who serve, even those seemingly innocuous, infrequently visible or silent servants, are vehicles through which history, culture and social values and practices are imagined, cultivated, celebrated, perpetuated and challenged. This occurs not only through the construction of the servants, but also by the social schemata of the past observable in the texts themselves. The resulting didactic potential of the African American servant and servitude in American retrospective fiction is enormous.