

Frank X Walker's York and the Exploitation of an Eroticized Wilderness

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—*Those people are much pleased with my black Servent—*

Their womin verry fond of carressing our men.

Captain William Clark, 15th Octr 1804

Seventh grade history does not prepare you for the amount of sex had on the Lewis and Clark Expedition. A summary of what took place in January 1805 suggests how “a thrilling and humanly complex adventure” (Parini 82) can be drained of its sensuality and thus made dull enough for public history. On its website, *National Geographic* describes the party’s activities of that month *in toto* as “The Corps [of Discovery] attends a Mandan buffalo dance, performed to call buffalo to the area” (“Lewis and Clark Expedition Timeline”). But this is how William Clark¹ describes what happened on one “Satturday,” January 5:

a Buffalow Dance (or Medison) [...] for 3 nights passed in the 1st Village, a curious Custom the old men arrange themselves in a circle & after Smoke a pipe, which is handed them by a young man, Dress up for the purpose, the young men who have their wives back of the circle [...] go to one of the old men with a whining tone and [request²] the old man to take his wife (who presents necked except a robe) and — (or Sleep with him) the Girl then takes the Old man (who verry often can Scercely walk) and leades him to a Convenient place for the business, after which they return to the lodge, if the Old man (or a white man) returns to the lodge without gratifying the man & his wife, he offers her again and again. [...] (we Sent a man to this Medisan [Dance] last night, they gave him 4 Girls) all this is to cause the buffalow to Come near So that They may kill thim[.]

As in other entries in the “American Epic of Discovery” (Moulton), the writer assumes a scientist’s stance befitting President Jefferson’s charge to Meriwether Lewis regarding “the people inhabiting the line you will pursue [,including] the state of morality, religion, & information among them” (310-11). But Clark’s anthropological distancing slips away with this entry’s penultimate parenthetical remark: it is not only tribal elders but also the white men who perform “the business.” Today we can only imagine how the white men’s fickle commitment to objectivity would dumbfound a horrified Institutional Review Board.

One of the Corps’ “white men” was, in fact, Clark’s African-American slave York,

whose account of January 5, 1805, is imagined in the Kentucky poet Frank X Walker's collection of persona poems titled *Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York*. In *Buffalo Dance* and its sequel, *When Winter Come: The Ascension of York*, Walker essays the "reclamation of mute voices" (*Buffalo Dance*, "Preface"), most prominently that of William Clark's slave, an unofficial albeit crucial member of the Corps of Expedition. *When Winter Come* is the more shapely, more controlled, and more politically mature re-vision of the Corps' epic story and York's place in it, allowing more room for the voices of others—York's father and mother and his heartbreakingly un-named wife. (I mean that Walker, like the historical record itself, makes a point of erasing her identity.) The collection more deeply examines the ways that naming, re-naming, and un-naming open others' bodies and their land to exploitation. The latter volume is, however, perhaps *too* comforting, a volume to admire for its cohesion. *Buffalo Dance* is the wilder volume, more capable of startling, and it is the one on which I will focus.

In the opening stanza of "Buffalo Dance," York describes, and contextualizes, the dance:

young men leaped an circled 'round the fire
dressed in whole heads and horns, some in tails
all singing for the return a Katonka,
an begging seasoned warriors to gift them
with they courage an hunting skills
by passing it through they favorite wives. (2-7)

York, it seems, is a better anthropologist than Lewis. He understands *why* the young men share their wives. A historian, Brad Tennant, speaking with NPR's *Day to Day* in the year *Buffalo Dance* was published, 2004, clarified why such "gifting" took place and why young men invited the white explorers to join in when the elders had sex with their wives: "If a person had intercourse with a woman, then that woman had intercourse with her husband, then the power from one person to the next would be transferred [...] and here you have this new group of people who are seen as being very special, as having 'big medicine'" ("Lewis and Clark ... and Sex"). The introductory poem in *Buffalo Dance*, its incantatory prologue, has York invoking his muse (his enslaved wife) and yearning for the words—or literacy—to write her a letter about how "the Arikara an Mandan think me / 'Big Medicine' / Katonka, who walk like a man" ("Wind Talker" 21-2). Brad Tennant goes on to emphasize how York, the buffalo-man, contributes to the exchange of power—"York[s] dark skin and physique suggested very big medicine. One Arikara warrior had York spend a night with his wife and sat outside the lodge to keep the two from being interrupted"—which Walker versifies thus:

Now, I ain't a perfect man, [. . .]
but I don't know how
to bring offense to a man
who ask me to his lodge
an leave one a his wives to pleasure me
while he stand guard
out front.

Capt. Clark an his men say it wrong. [. . .]
Them want me to be shamed
but I can't find fault

with a man who think so much a me
he want his wife to hold my seed. ("No Offense" 7-27)

York, then, not only politely accepts the generosity of his host, but recognizes (cf. Jefferson's instructions to the Corps) the spiritual and moral dimensions of this Arikara practice as well.

As David Cowart remarks, symbiotic re-visions of precursor texts "reveal . . . the natural, perhaps universal grounding of the symbiotic text in a reading or deconstructive rereading of the host text" (30). In his preface to *When Winter Come*, Walker writes that his "book is about deconstructing accepted notions of history, love, marriage, and freedom while simultaneously reaffirming the power of literacy and the role of mythology and storytelling in exploration of the truth. . . . It seeks to validate the voices of enslaved African Americans and Native people during a time in American history when their points of view were considered invalid." These recovered voices are often ironic, as in a poem titled "Concentric," in which Walker impersonates Sacagawea, pointedly enclosing the word *savages*, in quotation marks: "I laugh quietly when I hear the party complain / that when the 'savages' circle up it's hard to know / who is in charge. As if even a circle need a captain" (4-6).

The rhetoric of Walker's York is not so wry. Instead, Walker gives his York persona poems an air of weary didacticism: York wants or needs to correct the official story. For example, in "Role Call" (*sic*), the first poem in *When Winter Come*, York does not so much reflect on the facts of history as explicitly foreground the writing of national myth vis-à-vis the facts of national history:

To hear hero makers tell it
wasn't nobody
on the great expedition but captains.[. . .]
An though alla the books praise the captains
the most valuable members a the party
was even lower than privates [. . .]
The real heroes be old cowardly Charbono's young squaw [Sacagawea]
and Drewyer, another man full a both French
and Indian blood. [. . .]
And then, there was me, just along to cook an carry,
to hear them tell it, [. . .]
This story be born a my own spit and memory
it be the only thing I own outright
an I gives it to you freely. (1-40)

Walker's extended impersonation of York and consequent highlighting of the Corps' "least significant member"—at least among the "hero makers"—focus our attention on the process of mythmaking. "To hear them tell it" is how history gets made. Walker proposes to interrogate that practice.

One remarkable text, Walker's revision of Lewis's entry of May 31, 1805, suggests how intently the poet probes the "hero makers'" rhetoric. I quote extensively from Meriwether Lewis's journal entry for that day to show what he includes and what Frank X Walker leaves out of York's revision of the official account:

The hills and river Cliffs which we passed today exhibit a most romantic appearance. The bluffs of the river rise to the high of from 2 to 300 feet and in most places nearly perpendicular; they are formed of remarkable white sandstone which is sufficiently soft to give way readily to the impression of water The water in the course of time in

decending from those hills and plains on either side of the river has trickled down the soft sand cliffs and woarn it into a thousand grotesque figures, which with the help of a little imagination and an oblique view at a disance, are made to represent eligant ranges of lofty freestone buildings, having their parapets well stocked with statuary; collumns of various sculpture both grooved and plain, are also seen supporting long galleries in front of those buildings; in other places on a much nearer approach and with the help of less imagination we see the remains or ruins of eligant buildings; some collumns standing and almost entire with their pedestals and capitals; others retaining their pedestals but deprived by time or accident of their capitals, some lying prostrate an broken othes in the form of vast pyramids of connic structure bearing a sereis of other pyramids on their tops becoming less as they ascend and finally terminating in a sharp point . . . As we passed on it seemed as if those seens of visionary inchantment would never have and end; for here it is too that nature presents to the view of the traveler vast ranges of walls of tolerable workmanship, so perfect indeed are those walls that I should have thought that nature had attempted here to rival the human art of masonry had I not recollected that she had first began her work.

The extended metaphor rather brilliantly compares the great "architecture" of the America wilderness—"eligant ranges of lofty freestone buildings"—to that of the civilized world. (And it is worth noting that Meriwether Lewis, who was more or less raised in Monticello under Thomas Jefferson's tutelage, calls "nature" and not God the architect.) But Walker does not respond directly to that metaphor when he revises Lewis's "hero making" journal entry. That is, he does not so much engage in a "deconstructive rereading of the host text," locating and exploiting the aporias in the host text, as impersonate York and thereby construct an entirely new metaphor especially suited to his slave's consciousness.

Here is "Sandstone Thighs." It begins with an epigraph drastically edited from Meriwether Lewis's journal entry for that day. Now there is no extended architectural metaphor. Instead, as he develops his poem, Walker focuses on an anachronistic definition of *romantic*:

the hills & river cliff which we passed today exhibit
a most romantic appearance . . . they are formed of
remarkable white sandstone . . .
—*Meriwether Lewis, May 31, 1805*

After many campfire talks between lonely men
'bout who seen the best parts a the most
beautiful gals, the argument was settled
when we float by tall wide cliffs
so soft on the eyes it cause all the men
to whistle, shout an carry on
like we was passing a porch full
a bare-legged women
showing off a little more than thigh.

Knowing my place, I sneaks a few glances
over my shoulder an stare at the pretty
white legs in the face a the river. (1-12)

In "Discipline and Hope," Wendell Berry writes: "I do not know how exact a case might be made, but it seems to me that there is an historical parallel, in white American history, between the treatment of the land and the treatment of women. The frontier,

for instance, was notoriously exploitive of both, and I believe for largely the same reasons" (162). The erotic conflation of nature with women is, in fact, an important theme in *Buffalo Dance*, as it is throughout American cultural history. Walker's poem partakes of that familiar imagery for subversive reasons. It continues, for example, into the next poem in the collection, "Mouths and Waters," in which York refers to a waterfall as "a wide wet woman."

Throughout *Buffalo Dance*, sex (or "romance") is on York's mind, but it is not usually prurient, as it seems to be in the explorers' astounding reaction—whistling and carrying on—to the "sandstone thighs" they encounter in the Missouri Breaks. More often, York focusses on his love—and affection and friendship—for the wife he sees only occasionally, on "Sundays and Christmas," as one poem's title puts it. She is a slave in Louisville who is constantly available to her master and other predatory whites:

I cares plenty for my wife
but I been told a slave can't truly know love
being as Massa an white mens in general
have an takes certain privileges with our women.

I suspect the deepest hurt in the world
be . . . standing on the front porch
while the massa part her thighs

But what else but love
make you hold that woman even tighter
try to rock her back to whole. [...] (1-13)

Similarly in the poem titled "No Offense"—the one in which York sleeps with a man's wife while he stands guard outside—York compares that act of spiritual commerce with the bought-and-sold sex of "the slave quarters, back in Kentucke / [where the white men] have they way / with any girl child or woman" (19-21).

This predation—slavery as culture of rape—was, and to a great extent still *is*, suppressed by the "hero makers." But York's response to the sandstone thighs, the way he averts his eyes rather than be seen looking at them and deriving some kind of sexual pleasure from what are, after all, rock formation, is the result of a far more familiar myth. In a 1988 issue of *Studies in the Humanities* focused on "feminism, ecology, and the future of the humanities," Patrick Murphy described the literary trope of the "two-pronged rape and domination of the earth and the women who live on it" (87). Walker's poem incorporates another yet cultural motif, one that Angela Davis has called "the myth of the black rapist." While Walker contends, in the preface to *Buffalo Dance*, that he will "[a]llow [. . .] York's own distinct historical voice [. . .] to surface while surpressing [*sic*] my own twenty-first century activist voice," readers must recognize that York seems to have fore-memories of Emmett Till. "Knowing [his] place," York averts his eyes. Till, of course, was not the only African-American male ever to "forget his place." American history is rife with incidents that coalesce around the Till lynching, incidents that cast all African-American men as potential rapists³.

Thus, York turns his eyes away from the sandstone thighs, only glancing at their eroticized beauty; what he sees he must see secretly. Thus, Walker foregrounds the exploitive nature of the man/woman civilization/nature dualisms Wendell Berry mentions; that is, Walker's York reminds us that the phrase *rapacious land policy* has the word *rape* buried not too deep within it. In his preface to *Buffalo Dance*, Frank X Walker describes his project as "[t]he reclamation of mute voices." The voice that is

muted in the York poems speaks an explicit sexuality of the American wilderness, one that recognizes the confluence of eros and "Big Medicine" in the virgin landscape but also one that, in the discomfiting anti-erotics of "Sandstone Thighs," adds the bloody promise of Euro-American hero myth to the whole exploitable West.

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Endnotes

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1. Throughout this article, I preserve original spellings and punctuation from the *Journals* and Walker's York. *Sic* should be presumed.
 2. The original editorial insert at this point in the manuscript was written by the editors of the University of Nebraska Lincoln *Journals* website. It read [NB?: request]. The editors of the website apparently were postulating that Lewis (or Clark) had omitted the word "request" in the sentence.
 3. It says something that Walker's definitive statement on the river-as-woman (see also the aforementioned "Mouths and Waters" [28], as well as "Her Current" [12] and "The Portage" [20]) is "Mythology," whose semiotically alive title appears to be a trick on the reader. (Significantly, the preceding poem is titled "Ananse" [42].) The "mythology" of the poem's title is

that of the African-American male's sexual endowment. When York returns from urinating in the river, his white companions tease him with "Boy, was that river cold?" He answers, "No Sir, but it plenty deep." What appears to be a simple dick joke, however, explodes with intertextuality. Walker alludes, obviously enough, to Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," but even more pointedly to Richard Pryor, whose 2000 box set was titled *And It's Deep, Too!*