

The Dramatic Voices of Frank X Walker

by Anita J. Turpin

*If I thought it was worth the effort
I would try not to be too anxious
or too teary eyed
while I hoped at least one of them
would memorize these things
and pass it on
until it mattered.*

Those are the last few lines of *Clifton II*, the final poem in Frank X Walker's collection *Affrilachia*, published in 2000 by Old Cove Press of Lexington, Kentucky. With those lines, the narrator reveals a longing for a voice to keep sacred the stories of a people. In *Affrilachia* and the 2004 *Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York*, Frank X Walker takes on that role, offering himself as both griot and prophet of his culture. While both works are presented in poetic form, my interest lies in Walker's use of narrative and voice to express character and point of view. His poems become dramatic portraits of individuals and of a culture.

Walker understands that it is in the stories of a community that the heart and soul of that community reside. The dramatic oral telling of those stories revives the sacred function of ritual, ensuring the health of the communal heart and soul. As I prepared this essay, I sang out loud, in the spirit of Homer and other poets of the oral tradition, all the poems of *Affrilachia* and *Buffalo Dance*. Even in my pale, thin, white voice, the power, the vitality, the richness, and the strength of the characters leap from the page and take over a room. Wrapped in language that flows and jumps and rushes, the voices come out in a heightened conversational tone marked by linguistic beauty, by a love of language and word play, by an appreciation of the ways in which words bump up against each other and form full-blown ideas. Walker's language can shift seamlessly from standard speech to dialect, often in the same poem. The voice is sometimes warmly teasing, sometimes thoughtful, sometimes sad or angry, sometimes scolding, but always resonant with tempered strength and hope.

While the poems in *Affrilachia* and *Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York* don't fall neatly into a traditional dramatic schemata, one can discover a coherent structure to the collections, a sense of dramatic movement. While that movement may be easier to detect in *Buffalo Dance* which chronicles an actual physical journey, it can also be found in a close analysis of the structure of *Affrilachia*. The poems in *Affrilachia* are

framed by companion pieces: "Clifton I" opens the collection; "Clifton II," closes it. Between the two "Cliftons" rest 36 snapshot poems of a culture.

With "Clifton I," the collection begins at a personal micro level—a father and son, separated by divorce, meet awkwardly at the edge of the road in Clifton, a small rural town in Kentucky. They wander through a nearby graveyard and the father tells stories of the family's past. Near the end of the poem, the narrator, the son, says:

we walked the land
then stood there
in the mud
crowding the road
again
family history clinging
to our souls
his stories
floating in the air
like vapor photographs. (6)

The stories are of the father's childhood and of the lives and deaths of grandparents. The stories emerge from the father's "pockets/like peppermint candy/covered with lint" (4). The son longs for the full meaning of the stories to become clear as he walks with this virtual stranger who looks like him and has some of the same physical gestures.

From this sharp focus on father and son and place, we move into three poems about families torn apart by failed relationships and the struggles of the women of the families who make sacrifices and who hold their children to them through sheer strength of will. "Wishbone," "Statues of Liberty," and "Matriarch" celebrate the strength of African-American women who want their children to prosper and who serve as powerful role models. The next poem, "Cease Fire," moves closer to a focus on those children, specifically the children of mixed races, children who seem to have been able to move past the traditional fear and hatred of other races. These are children, the narrator says, who

do not discriminate
collecting ebony and ivory
prom pictures
like trophies
believing all of the words
to the preamble
consecrating their mtv choices
with white chocolate babies. (15)

With the reference to MTV, "Cease Fire" thus also begins to widen the focus from the family to the society. While the children of "Cease Fire" present what is hopeful and possible in the future, the next four poems seem to present what is less hopeful, but probable. These four poems explore some of the distinct dangers the world poses to African-American children: drug addiction in "Rock Star," violent crime in "Crooked Afro," and AIDS in "Hummingbird." The last of the four, "Death by Basketball," excoriates the selling of the false dream of professional athletic celebrity instead of education.

As if building to a crescendo of cultural triumphs and dangers, the voice of the poems becomes stronger and more prophetic as the collection moves into a lengthy

middle section of thirteen poems. Often the speaker exhorts the community to take action to save its children. In “Violins or Violence,” the narrator describes the lives of the “boyz in the hood”:

these children
claim their manhood early
because they might not be here
when it comes

they raise hell
'cause nobody raised them. (40)

The speaker then calls upon the community to take action:

we can say it's
not our problem
or we can be solutions
we can blame it all
on the man
or we can be solutions
we can just give up
and burn it all down
we can let these children
our children
all children
drown in their own blood
or we can be
solutions. (42)

The poems in this section create a complicated blend of history, geography, anthropology, mythology, and sociology. Many of the poems call forth the strength of African ancestors. For example, “The Harvest” says “we are the seeds/of osiris and isis/we know what the harvest/will bring” (48). In an extended metaphor, the narrator chronicles the travails that lie ahead in history:

having survived the horrific
middle passage
we planted ourselves in the soil
of this new world
harvesting the fruit by moonlight
saving the seeds
and passing them from
generation
to generation
seeds that produced
the harlem renaissance
anti-lynching campaigns
and civil rights movements
bearing fruit as ripe as
underground railroad conductors
buffalo soldiers
and black panthers. (49)

Ancestral strength is reinforced by contemporary religious Faith. “Fireproof” says that no matter how many times you burn a black church down you will not destroy the members. They will just build again because “church people/are fireproof/and Faith/won’t just go up/in smoke” (58). In “A Wake,” the last poem in this central section, a narrator, dismayed by the “quiet respectful/organized sobbing” stirs up a funeral with the call “to moan and wail/to open up heaven’s door so wide/that everyone knows/a chariot is coming/to take this black woman home/make some noise/damn it” (62). The narrator wants a tribute worthy of the life of this mother of the community, a tribute which would ring out with the power and passion of voices such as Mahalia Jackson’s or Aretha Franklin’s, a tribute from a community which has not forgotten how to mourn the loss of one of its own.

The next section moves from the community back to the personal, in fact to the most personal, the most intimate of human actions—the act of creation, whether that act be for artistic or human propagation. Some of the poems merge the two creative acts. “Poetry Moments” ends with:

inspired by these
new zorras and langstons
who have discovered
that i am
the kind of poet
who likes to cuddle
after penning a piece

i lie here
exhausted
seduced by this
either or-gy
begging for cigarettes
and waiting for the moon
to dry
yet another sweat stained
silk page. (69)

In this poem and in others, Walker celebrates the accomplishments of individual artists. For example, “Ed Works” is a poem dedicated to talented African-American sculptor, Ed Hamilton, whose statue of York stands in Louisville’s Belvedere Plaza overlooking the Ohio River.

The next three poems return to themes of racial and ethnic differences. “Jibaros” celebrates the brotherhood of the African-American with the Latin-American and the Native-American. “Sara Yevo” and “Indiana” focus on the cultures of the Af-frilachian and the African-American and on the influence of both those cultures on the narrator.

The collection ends quietly with a return home to Kentucky, but the narrator and the audience come home with a deeper sense of family and of racial, communal, and cultural history. “Kentucke,” the penultimate poem of the collection, recounts the history of the state, from its pre-settlement stage of “hunting Eden” to its contemporary stage of intersecting interstate highways that form a “crucifix” across the state (95). Walker recites the names of cultural icons, from Coach Rupp to jockey great Isaac Murphy, who died at age thirty-six in 1892 and whose parents were slaves.

The final poem, “Clifton II,” ends with the lines quoted at the beginning of this essay. The poem opens with the narrator wishing he could bring everybody he knows to Clifton in order to show them “what used to be/ours” (98). That would include the land itself which curves along the Dix River, but it would also include faded images of aunts and granddaddys and of their “great great grandmother/margaret” (99). If he could get his children and his nieces and nephews to this place, the narrator says, he would show them the photograph “of mamma e’s graduating class”:

I’d draw attention
to the proud and focused faces
standing and kneeling
in two-feet-high weeds
wearing dark caps and gowns
like gold crowns and kente
clutching diplomas
like freedom passes
holding on to each other
with their eyes.
If I thought it was worth the effort
I would try not to be too anxious
or too teary eyed
while I hoped at least one of them
would memorize these things
and pass it on
until it mattered. (99-100)

This passage brings us back to the beginning of the collection, back to the family cemetery in “Clifton I” and the passing along of stories from father to son. In a creative twist, the collection which began in a graveyard ends with a focus on the schoolhouse, on the future and the children of the future, children who will themselves draw inspiration and strength from their familial and cultural history.

As with *Affrilachia*, Walker’s construction of *Buffalo Dance* uses a framing device. “Wind Talker,” which opens *Buffalo Dance*, takes place at the mid-point and climax of the expedition’s journey west—when the explorers reach the Pacific Ocean. With the second poem, “Work Ethic,” York goes back to his childhood to pick up the story, back to the time when he “was deeded to Massa Clark/down on the plantation in Virginy/when he was just a green sapling” (3). The poems then move along in progression, telling the story in chronological order until we arrive at the end of the journey, the return to St. Louis of the Lewis and Clark expedition. The final poem, “Birth Day,” which will be discussed later in the essay, takes place after the reported “death” of York.

While two hundred years separate the voices of *Affrilachia* and the voice of York in *Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York*, many of the themes echo from one work to the other. Both collections reverberate with the central role of story-telling, the need to draw strength from ancestors, the importance of place, and the key role of a reverence for nature in the development of spiritual well-being. In the Preface to *Buffalo Dance*, Walker explains that he undertook the project in order to provide “a vessel for his [York’s] voice and for His story.” York himself continually refers to the importance of the oral telling of stories, especially as slaves were not allowed to learn to read and write. The opening poem, “Wind Talker,” begins with York longing to communicate with his wife:

If I could make my words
dress they naked selves in blackberry juice
lay down on a piece a bark, sheep
or onion skin, like Massa do

If I could send a letter home to my wife
float it in the wind, on wings or water

I'd tell her 'bout Katonka
an all the wide an high places
this side a the big river. (1)

Denied the tools of literacy, York reflects often on his appreciation for the life-giving and life-preserving role of the story. During his childhood, his father, Old York, played the vital role of griot for York and the other slaves, telling them stories of their history. In the fourth poem of the collection, "Primer," York says:

I figures my respect for a good telling
come from listening to Old York
weave his magic at night.
Folk hung from our porch like baby possums
an lived off the breath
he give to every story, no matter how many times
they tasted the tale. (6)

These lines reflect York's understanding that Old York was doing more than just recounting tales—he was, instead, literally giving life to his listeners. He was breathing life into the stories and thus breathing life, the archaic meaning of the word "inspire," into them.

On the journey west, York recognizes the kindred spirits of the Native American tribes he encounters. In "Ananse" York tells of sitting around the fire listening to the creation stories of the Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa tribes, stories he says which were "so full they puts/that tale from Genesis to shame" (42). York determines to remember the stories he hears so that he "can carry them back an warm the fires at home" (42). He believes the stories will be appreciated back home because they are stories of survival.

In addition to the central theme of story-telling, *Buffalo Dance* contains several compelling and recurring themes, including the injustice of slavery and the corrupted human nature of a white population that thinks it can own both nature and other humans. York's appreciation of the natural world rings through the collection, an appreciation made more vivid by the way in which the mountains, the rivers, the trees, and the buffalo represent a natural order, an order in which freedom and harmony exist. Through the journey, the spirit of York achieves that same freedom. In "Sad Eye," York's close experiences with nature remind him of the stories Old York used to tell of his time in Africa before he was stolen for the slave trade. The title of the piece comes from York's recognition that Old York's eyes became sad when he told the stories because he missed Africa and he missed his freedom. At this point in York's journey west, he has become aware of what it might be like to be a free man, free physically and spiritually, free the way his father was in Africa. York dreams of that freedom and of being able to serve as a freedom guide for his family in the poem "Vision Quest." In his dreams he becomes a creature that is free enough to escape

human and earthly bonds. "Vision Quest" opens with York dreaming he becomes a buffalo. When he looks behind him, he can see back to Kentucky and Virginia where all his family members have also become buffalo. The poem ends with York promising that he will return to free all those he loves:

Then as a strong wind came an carried me off
 I hollas back to the herd an say
 "One day I will return an bring all a you wings." (39)

As we go further west and further into the collection of the poems, we see York's growing awareness of his own humanity and of the injustice of slavery. We also feel more intensely the pain of York's separation from those he loves, especially his wife. In a constant refrain, York longs for his wife, a longing made more poignant by the fact that even if he weren't crossing the continent, he would not be allowed to be with his wife except on Sundays and Christmas, as she is owned by a Louisville family other than Clark's. His reunion with his wife after his return from the trek is brief and reflects York's new understanding of the universe both without and within. In "A Love Supreme," York says:

On that first night back
 me and her move like turtles
 unwrapping the old, the news
 an each other.

We out last the candle an the moon
 laughing an talking an crying
 then pretends we are earth an sky
 hunger an fruit, a black mountain
 ana all-skin-quilt a snow.

Salty an sticky an wet
 we knows all we have
 is this here,
 so we unshackle us clothes
 become one with the night
 an be free. (65)

This freedom to love represents the ultimate rejection of the power of one human to enslave another.

The final two poems of *Buffalo Dance* sing with a new strength of purpose and will. "Cumulonimbus" opens with: "What I come to know is/no man born a slave" (68). York realizes that his father, Old York, also knew this, a realization he gives voice to later in the poem:

Old York say
 it take something African
 to stand in the rain an smile
 while it storming all 'round.
 He say nobody choose to slave. (68)

That York refuses to be a slave any more is evident in the final poem of the collection, "Birth Day." The birth referred to in the title is the birth of the free York.

The slave York died when he refused to serve Clark any more. The reborn York, the last lines tell us, resides

the other side a Rock Mountains,
in the middle ova herd a wooly headed buffalo
breathing mountain air so clean an cold it make
your ears fill up, your head try an float away
your eyes just turn to ochians. (70)

In *Buffalo Dance*, Walker, as the storyteller, resurrects and gives voice to York. Just as Old York's stories breathed life into the listening slaves, Walker's stories breathe life into York and into all the characters we meet in *Affrilachia*.

The works of Frank X Walker contain a transformative power. In *Affrilachia* and in *Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York*, Walker himself becomes the vessel through whom the past and present are merged, united, made whole. He gives a voice to the voiceless and restores the integrity of the historical images of the past—reinserting the figure of York into one of America's most familiar tales of adventure and exploration and survival. He unites cultures—from the global to the regional, from the African to that of Eastern Kentucky. As a griot, a prophet, and a spirit doctor, Walker calls on the present to pull strength and wisdom from the past in order to save the future of the children and thereby of all of us.

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