

Wounded Bodies, Wounded Minds: Afro-Americans and Roma in Lydia Maria Child and Mihail Kogălniceanu

The history of Afro-Americans denouncing black slavery in America begins in the 19th century with David Walker's *Appeal, with a Brief Sketch of His Life*, which is considered by Garnet in his preface as "valuable, because it was among the first, and was actually the boldest and most direct appeal in behalf of freedom, which was made in the early part of the Anti-Slavery Reformation".

David Walker, the son of a free black woman and of a slave father, left North Carolina, the place of his birth, and went to Boston, Mass, where he began to study, learned to read and write, "in order that he might contribute something to the cause of humanity", and published his "Appeal" in 1829. Here he begins by using history to convince the readers that no other nation in antiquity treated slaves as badly as his contemporary Americans. History also serves him to show that "our fathers" did nothing to deserve such punishment and that important army leaders were of African origin, such as Hannibal.

For Walker, blacks are not only victims of whites, but also of their disunion and ignorance that turns into treachery among themselves: "But they were disunited as colored people are now, in the United States of America, the reason our national enemies are enabled to keep their feet on our throats" and "Ignorance and treachery one against the other- [...] these are misfortunes which God has suffered our fathers to be enveloped in for many ages" and there follow some examples of mothers falling victims to their sons, children to their parents and parents to their children.

On the other hand, while it is true that blacks lack courage and "eight white men can frighten fifty of them", they may be the best in the last instance "that one good black

man can put to death six white men”. And that’s because “the blacks, once you get them started, they glory in death.” The treachery is further deplored as one of the main causes of being forever turned into a victim of the whites: “for while they are working for our emancipation, we are, by our treachery, wickedness and deceit, working against ourselves and our children – helping ours, and the enemies of God, to keep us and our dear little children in their infernal chains of slavery!!!”

Therefore, this “Appeal” is addressed to those of his brethren, “men of color, who are also of sense” since “our more ignorant brethren are not able to penetrate its value and need to be enlightened”. What they first must do is to convince whites that they are indeed men. Freedom itself is described as still lacking its true meaning, since free blacks can only work as the white man’s servants and, what is even worse, they are actually enjoying it, as one negro declares: “I am completely happy!!! I never want to live any better or happier than when I get a plenty of boots and shoes to clean!!!”.

True freedom and emancipation, in Walker’s view means education and religion, means not only a neat writing, but English grammar, being able to compose in prose or in verse. Unfortunately, the negro is a victim of a system of education that used to deny colored people the right to study grammar: “The school committee, said he, forbid the colored children learning grammar – they would not allow any but the white children to study grammar.”

The English are black men’s only real friends, unlike white Americans, the “natural enemies” who only pretend to love them but who instead want to colonize them back to Africa and even request their gratitude, which in Walker’s view is owed only to their rightful master, the Holy Ghost.

Walker concludes his book with the Declaration of Independence preceded by another reference to history in order to show again that nobody treated slaves as bad as Americans.

Manhood, dignity, freedom, education and friendship with England are also the central themes in the next and most famous African-American author I am going to talk about, Frederick Douglass. The son of a slave mother and of a white father, his master probably, Douglass managed to learn to read and write as still a slave and then successfully escaped slavery becoming both a writer and an orator, first in the Garrisonian abolitionist camp, and then apart from it. In his first two autobiographies, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), the first written before his visit to England, the second after it, he describes his life, under slavery and in freedom, showing how a victim, a wounded body and a wounded mind, can turn into a real man.

He speaks of his black mother and grandmother in a very affectionate manner in order to prove his pride regarding his origins. The fact that “blackness” was his own choice may be seen in his second autobiography, when the white father figure becomes unknown to the ex-slave “My mother died without leaving me a single intimation of who my father was. There was a whisper that my master was my father; yet it was only a whisper, and I cannot say that I ever gave it credence. Indeed, I now have reason to think he was not.”

Manhood and dignity meant the literal fight against his worst master, Covey, an episode making the transformation from chattel into human being, from a wounded mind

and body into an victorious free person, at least mentally speaking. From now on, he will never be beaten again.

Self-education will lead him to find out about abolitionism, the free states and will make him run away. The most interesting episode from his life as a free men is his journey to England, where he meets important people, a cultural life denied him in the States, no discrimination on account of color and even people charitable enough as to buy him the coveted liberty.

As a consequence, he will return to the U.S as a free men both de iure and de facto, and will continue his brilliant career as writer and public orator in the abolitionist struggle.

His Romanian counterpart, as I showed in one earlier paper, is a “narrative voice”, whose story is told by a Romanian abolitionist writer, George Sion, the Gypsy slave Dinca, the son of a Gypsy slave woman and her master. As I mentioned there, the similarities lie in their origins, since both Douglass and Dinca began as slaves in the countries of their births; both were mulattoes; both reached a foreign abolitionist country and there were made to perceive themselves as free and equal to the whites. They differ in their ethnic origins, one being an African-American, the other a Roma, in the countries of their births, America and Moldavia, in the countries they visited, England and France respectively, and in the final result: happy in the case of Douglass, who returns home as a free man, tragic in the case of Dinca who is denied that freedom by his mistress and commits suicide.

Other examples of African-American voices in the 19th century which I am only going to briefly mention are *The Narrative of William W. Brown: A Fugitive Slave*

(1847); *The Narrative of Henry Watson: A Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1848); *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northrup* (1853). The century ends with Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Frances Harper's *Moses: A Story of the Nile* and *The Mission of the Flowers* (1869). Unfortunately, there is no other Romanian, that is, Roma, counterpart in the 19th century, until young historians in the 21st come again to write about their own people and to denounce former slavery.

An important fact about both feminine escaped slaves' memories is that they are connected with the name of the first white abolitionist woman in 19th century America, Lydia Maria Child, which leads to the second part of my paper, that is, the parallel between this American author and Romanian Mihail Kogalniceanu. The usefulness of this study lies in the similarities in both authors' works: both are white abolitionists; both write for a white audience; both write in the same decade historical-political texts regarding the slaves in their respective countries.

Lydia Maria Child was born in 1802, in Medford, Massachusetts, in the family of a successful baker and businessman, grew up with her bookish older brother Convers and attended local schools and an orthodox Congregational church. After her brother's departure to Harvard, she was free to use the library of the Rev David Osgood, the first Parish minister. According to Carolyn Karcher, in her 1998 *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child*, she was denied further studies by her family, and this made her feel marginalized. For Karcher, this might explain Child's early and deep sympathy towards disenfranchised groups, the victims of America, that is women, Native Americans and slaves. She began by writing about Native Americans in 1824, and continued until 1833 when she published *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of*

Americans Called Africans whose preface asked the reader: “Read it, if your prejudices will allow, for the very truth's sake:--If I have the most trifling claims upon your good will, for an hour's amusement to yourself, or benefit to your children, read it for *my* sake:-
-Read it, if it be merely to find fresh occasion to sneer at (a zambi batjocoritor) the vulgarity of the cause:--Read it, from sheer curiosity to see what a woman (who had much better attend to her household concerns) will say upon such a subject:--Read it, on any terms, and my purpose will be gained”.

Mihail Kogalniceanu was born in 1817, in Moldavia, the son of the police commander under ruler Mihai Sturza. He was first educated at home, with friar Ghermen Vida, than in the former French officer Cuenim's boarding school and in the new Institute of French Lincourt, Chefneux and Bayard, where he learned Greek, universal history, composition, grammar, geography, ancient history, astronomy, French and German. He continued his studies in France together with the ruler's sons, until the Russian council forbade them education in such a liberal country and made Sturza send them to Germany. According to George Calinescu, Kogalniceanu developed a special feeling of democracy that appreciated merit rather than birth. In Berlin he learns, among other things, Latin, French, German, English, Maths, and is tormented by an ardent wish to make his Moldavia known in Occident. And, since people kept asking him about his nation, he endeavoured to write a sketch on the Romanin history in 1837 to which he added the first history of Roma people written by a Romanian, called *Esquisse sur l'histoire, le moeurs et la langue de Cigains* (A Sketch on the History, Customs and Language of the Gypsies). In the preface, he addresses the reader: “If certain mistakes, if certain involuntary errors happened to have penetrated this sketches, I beg the readers’

forgiveness. In the absence of any other merit it will be that of the opportunity to inflame or inspire some voice in favor of the Gypsies, something unfortunately perhaps short-lived, because such are the Europeans! They form philanthropic societies for the abolition of slavery in America, while in the middle of their continent, in Europe, there are four hundred thousand Gypsies that are slaves and two hundred thousand others covered with the shades of ignorance and barbarity! And no one is willing to civilize an entire people!”

Lydia Maria Child starts her book with the history of slavery and of Africans as slaves, the victims of the white merchants who ruined their “primitive simplicity, without substituting in its place the order, refinement, and correctness of principle, attendant upon true civilization”. The image of Africa is that of green valleys and beautiful rivers on the one hand, and of the country of despotic kings and kidnapers on the other.

Christians resemble the Mahomedans and the Moors in their considering the negro as ignorant and thus, inferior, deserving to be a slave, and in insisting on keeping him in ignorance “lest we spoil them for slaves”. Masters are seen as kind in majority, but kindness as such is defined as limited, since it means keeping someone in bondage, and since it practically decides the Negro’s fate. Therefore, “it is the *system*, not the *men*, on which we ought to bestow the full measure of abhorrence.”

Kogalniceanu starts his book with the history of the Gypsies, whose origins and appearance to Europe seem controversial, according to the different historians he quotes. They are either an Egyptian colony looking for new land on the Black Sea Coast, or Christians made by heathens to leave their country around the 7th century rather than give up Christianity; still others see them as inhabitants of the city Singara in Mesopotamia, or immigrants from Cilicia and Asiria, or Ethiopians, Moors or coming

from Arminia; finally, others see them as coming from India, the one version considered as right by Kogalniceanu. The date of their coming to Europe is uncertain and impossible to prove, but it is somewhere around 1417 when a part of this wandering people are seen in Moldavia, in Hungary and Germany. Interestingly enough, he does not mention whether they came as free people later enslaved by Romanians, as Petre Petcut would have it in his book at the beginning of the 21st century, or as slaves as Viorel Achim would say also in the year 2000. For Kogalniceanu, “wherever Gypsies passed by, they had a nomadic life, they settled near inhabited places, under tents or in huts, they entertain the boyars and the people with their music and their obscene dances, they work the iron, they sell horses, and some pick up gold from rivers.”

Lydia Maria Child continues with a “Comparative Views of Slavery, in Different Ages and Nations”, in order to show that nobody treated slaves as bad as Americans, in the pattern of African-American writers, a chapter that Mihail Kogalniceanu will only write in 1853 for the Romanian translation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *UTC*. However, what they do have in common the 1830s is an enumeration of laws in both America and Romania which show that Romanian laws might have been kinder than American ones.

In her next chapter, “Free Labor and Slave Labor – Possibility of Safe Emancipation”, Child uses an ugly image of the slave in order to prove that by freeing negroes they will look and behave much better: the black boys and girls are ragged, the cow or the mule is lean, “and I have seen a mule, a bull, and a cow, each miserable in its appearance, composing one team, with a half-naked black slave or two, riding or driving as occasion suited.”

Mihail Kogalniceanu's descriptions are at first neutral, when he divides the Gypsies in four categories and describes the occupations of each of them as any objective historian would do. They are the slaves of the King and they are goldsmiths, bear-leaders, spoon-makers, who are, in his view, "the most civilized from the four categories; they even start building fixed dwellings"; and the wandering Gypsies, the category Kogalniceanu most dislikes, "people without rent, with no fixed profession: either bricklayers, or ironsmiths, or comb-makers." These are permitted to wander and "most of them live by theft: although they are very skillful in all they do, they work very little: they spend their day sleeping and in the night they go stealing. If sometimes they work, they'd rather work iron." His favorite category are the "vatrasii" ("vatra" – home), whose men and women are really beautiful, at least until they marry, and who have a fixed dwelling, deal with agriculture and almost forgot their traditions, and are better workers than Romanian peasants and better musicians than Romanian trained ones.

They both further analyze the slaves in point of customs and intellect in the case of Child, in order to prove that even if they are not what they should be now, they can still be civilized and used as workers in factories in the case of Kogalniceanu, and they are human beings, with the same capacities of improvement as other men, in the case of Lydia Child.

I conclude my paper by noticing how a victim, either regarded as a wounded body and wounded mind in the case of the African-American writers and of Lydia Maria Child, or as vicious peoples in the case of Kogalniceanu, can be civilized and can become true men, as Douglass and Walker would have it, if provided with freedom and with a fixed dwelling.