

By the same author

THE BLACK WOMAN

TALES AND SHORT STORIES FOR BLACK FOLKS

THE SALT EATERS

THE SEA BIRDS ARE STILL ALIVE

GORILLA, MY LOVE



DEEP
SIGHTINGS
AND
RESCUE
MISSIONS

*Fiction, Essays,
and Conversations*



TONI CADE BAMBARA

EDITED AND WITH A PREFACE BY

TONI MORRISON

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THE EDUCATION OF A STORYTELLER

 Back in the days when I wore braids and just knew I knew or would soon come to know *everything* onna counna I had this grandmother who was in fact no kin to me, but we liked each other.

And she had this saying designed expressly for me, it seemed, for moments when I my brain ground to a halt and I couldn't seem to think my way out of a paper bag—in other words, when I would dahh you know play like I wasn't intelligent.

She'd say, "What are you pretending not to know to-

The Education of a Storyteller

day, Sweetheart? Colored gal on planet earth? Hmph know everything there is to know, anything she/we don't know is by definition the unknown."

A remark she would deliver in a wise-woman voice not unlike that of Toni Morrison's as I relisten to it. And it would encourage me to rise to quit being trifling.

As I say, we weren't blood kin but I called her Grandma Dorothy or Miss Dorothy or M'Dear (I was strictly not allowed by progressive parents to call anybody Ma'am or Sir or to refer to anybody as a Lady or a Gentleman or—the very worst-of-all-worst feudalistic self-ambushing-back for one's political health—refer to a fascist pig dog rent-gouging greedy profiteering cap as a "landlord").

Miz D called me Sweetheart, Peaches, You Little Honey, Love, Chile, Sugar Plum, Miz Girl, or Madame depending on what she was calling me for or what she was calling me out about.

One day, I came bounding into her kitchen on the sunny side of Morningside Park in Harlem, all puff-proud straight from the library—and I stood over her with my twelve-year-old fast self watching her shuck corn over the *Amsterdam News* and I then announced, standing hipshot, a little bony fist planted on my little bony hip and the other splayed out sophisticated like I said.

"Grandma Dorothy, I know Einstein's theory of relativity."

And she say, "Do tell," shoving the ears of corn aside and giving me her full attention. "Well do it, Honey, and give me a signal when it's my turn to join in the chorus."

Well, straightaway I had to *explain* that this was not a call-and-response deal but a theory, “an informed hunch as how the universe is put together in terms of space and time.”

“Uh-hunh,” she says, “well get on with it and make it lively, ’cause I haven’t tapped my foot or switched my hips all day.”

So I had to *explain* that this was not a song or a singing tale . . . but a theory.

And she say, “Uh-hunh, well, Sugar, be sure to repeat the ‘freedom part’ two times like in the blues so I’ll get it.”

“The freedom part,” I mumble, kinda deflated at this point, and sort of slumping against her ladder-back chair.

“Sure,” she says, “the lesson that I’m to take away to tell my friends ’cause you know uneducated and old-timey women tho’ we may be, we still soldiers in the cause of freedom, Miz Girl.”

So I just go ahead and slump on down in the chair she’s pulled out for me, and I say, voice real feeble like, “Grandma Dorothy, relativity is not one of them fables, ya know, with a useful moral at the end. It’s not one of them uplift-the-race speeches like they give on Speakers’ Corner. It’s a ahhhh . . .”

“Hmm, Chile,” she says, giving me a worried look like she’s real concerned about my welfare. “What kind of theory is this? Is Br’er Rabbit in it, or one of them other rascals I dearly love?”

“Miss Dorothy, Mr. Einstein, one of those white guys from Europe, I don’t think he know from Br’er Rabbit.”

“Uh-hunh. Well, Sugar Plum, am I in it?”

“Ahhhh.” I’m about to give up on my whole program for self-development at this point. But she, Miz Dorothy, is not concerned with my distress. She has tugged her dress down between her knees, dug her heels into the ruts in the linoleum, is leaning over, her wrists loose against her kneecaps, and she is just rattling on, encouraging me about the many ways I can tell this theory—in terms of air, earth, fire, and water, for example—or in terms of the saints, or the animals of the zodiac, or the orishas of the voodoo pantheon, or as a parable assuming my scientific/progressive mother would allow her children (us) to read the Bible and assuming I could remember a parable that might have enough similarities to the theory blah blah blah.

Finally she says, “Well, let me hush, Precious, and you just go on and tell it however Cynthia would tell it or one of your other scatter-tooth girlfriends.”

And I come alive at that point—jump up switching hands on hips.

“Well, my girlfriends don’t know it. Cynthia don’t know it and Rosie don’t know it and Carmen don’t know it—just I know it.”

And she say, “Madame, if your friends don’t know it, then you don’t know it, and if you don’t know that, then you don’t know nothing. Now, what else are you pretending not to know today, Colored Gal?”

It was Grandma Dorothy who taught me critical theory, who steeped me in the tradition of Afrocentric aesthetic reg-

ulations, who trained me to understand that a story should be informed by the emancipatory impulse that characterizes our storytelling trade in these territories as exemplified by those freedom narratives which we've been trained to call slave narratives for reasons too obscene to mention, as if the "slave" were an identity and not a status interrupted by the very act of fleeing, speaking, writing, and countering the happy-darkey propaganda. She taught that a story should contain mimetic devices so that the tale is memorable, shareable, that a story should be grounded in cultural specificity and shaped by the modes of Black art practice—call-and-response but one modality that bespeaks a communal ethos.

I would later read Fanon on the subject—"To speak is to assume a culture and to bear responsibility for a civilization."

Later still, I read Paolo Freire, speaking on activist pedagogy, engaged cultural work. "The purpose of educational forms is to reflect and encourage the practice of freedom."

While Grandma Dorothy was teaching me theory, and the bebop musicians I eavesdropped on while hanging around fire escapes and in hallways were teaching me about pitch, structure, and beat, and the performers and audiences at the Apollo and the Harlem Opera House were teaching me about the community's high standards regarding expressive gifts, I was privy to a large repertoire of stories.

As told by women getting their heads done in beauty parlors, or stretching curtains on those prickly racks on the roofs, by women and men on Speakers' Corner—the outdoor university on Seventh Avenue and 125th Street in front

of Micheaux's Liberation Memorial Bookstore—men from trade unions, from the Socialist party, the Communist party, the African Blood Brotherhood, the National Negro Congress, women from Mary McLeod Bethune clubs, the women's department of Sanctified Church, women of the Ida B. Wells Club, from trade unions, Popular Front organizations formed in the mid to late thirties.

Representatives from the Abyssinia Movement whose membership grew as a result of political mobilization in 1935 in support of Ethiopia's struggle to oust invasionary forces from Italy and Mussolini.

Representatives from the temple men—what we called Muslims in those days.

Stories that shaped my identity as a girl, as a member of the community, and as a cultural worker.

Two types of stories struck me most at the time. One, about women's morality. Now, outside the community and in too many places within the community, "women's morality" had a very narrow context and meant sexual morality. One was taught not to be slack, sluttish, low-down, but rather upright, knees locked, and dress down.

But in the storytelling arenas, from kitchen tales to outdoor university anecdotes, "women's morality" was much more expansive, interesting, it took on the heroic—Harriet T. and Ida B. and the women who worked with W. E. B. Du Bois, the second wife of Booker T. and the Mother Divine of the Peace and Co-op Movement, and Claudia Jones, organizer from Trinidad who was deported during the Crackdown, when the national line shifted from

“blacks as inferior” to “blacks as subversive” and wound up in a stone quarry prison and wrote “In every bit as hard as they hit me.”

These women were characterized as “morally exemplary,” meaning courageous, disciplined, skilled and brilliant, responsive to responsibility for and accountable to the community.

The other type of memorable tale bound up in these women heroics was tales of resistance—old and contemporary—insurrections, flight, abolition, warfare in alliance with Seminoles and Narragansetts during the period of European enslavement; the critical roles men and women played in the revolutionary overthrow of slavery; and in the Reconstruction self-help enterprises founded, the self-governing townships founded, the political convention convened and progressive legislation pressed through; and in days since—the mobilization, organization, agitation, legislation, economic boycotts, protest demonstrations, rent strikes, parades, consumer-cooperative organizations.

One tale heard in girlhood that I do believe informs me, transforms me, is still told today in the islands off the coast of Georgia and the Carolinas. A tale about that moment of landing on those shores not as in very old times when we came as invited guests of the leaders of Turtle Island territories, those days when we came in ships with spices, gold books, and other gifts of friendship and solidarity, visiting the Cheyenne, the Aztecs, the Zapotec, the Aleuts.

Not then, but later.

In that terrible time when we were kidnapped, herded in ships, and brought here in chains as enslaved labor.

The tale goes:

And when the boat brought the Africans from the big ships to the shore, those Africans stepped out onto the land, took a look around, and with deep-sight vision saw what the European further had in store for them, whereupon they turned right around and walked all the way home, all the way home to the motherland.

That's the story version. The historical events on which the story is based, on which a cycle of stories is derived, is used by numerous writers and independent Black film- and video-makers. Paule Marshall in *Praisesong for the Widow*, and Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, Richard Perry in *Montgomery's Children*, Julie Dash in her film masterpiece *Daughters of the Dust*. And are documented in ship's logs and journals, and bodies of correspondence written by numerous European slavers.

“The ship foundered off the coast and much of the barreled cargo was lost. The Africans stampeded and went overboard with the horses. Many drowned, some reached the shoreline and were never seen again, but most of the Africans who reached the shallows returned themselves to the depths weighted down within their irons. And the sight of hundreds of men, women, and children, holding themselves under as the waves washed over them, drove onlookers quite mad indeed.

“And when we saw what was further in store for us, we turned right around and walked all the way home to Africa.”

OR

“And there on deck, we looked to shore and saw what was further in store, and we flew away to Guinea.”

OR

“They took one look and were struck blind by the abomination, and when they hit the depths, they hung on to the horses till they reached land—and till this day, you can hear those Blind African Riders thundering in the hills, thundering in the hills.”

OR

“And when the horrible news grazed the ear of the goddess, she turned, and in turning, the hems of her skirt swept the sands in patterns meter neter nu, and swiftly running across the savannahs on newly bruised feet, streaking red across the outdoor altars burning, tearing bark from the trees with her teeth, rising, ripping roofs from the homes with her nails, whooping, tumbling birds bald and beakless from the clouds shrieking, she was chasing the ships, chasing the ships from the tropic of Capricorn to the Horse Latitudes.

“And there on deck a girlchild in one yard of cloth bent back over the rail of the ship; across her throat an arm as stout as the mast of a man who would brand her or break her, pressing out her breath, wood splintering into her spine, hate poring into her pores, her eyes lifting to the red eye of the twister; then up she rose, from the fingers that clutched

and claimed, up from the rust of the anchor chain, up from the nick of seashells in the salt museums, up past the sails that snapped like teeth, she bore her bronchia to the gusts, and was swept up in the skirts of Oye Mawu, blowing all the way home, blowing all the way home, all the way home, blown home.”

Grandma Dorothy, in an effort to encourage our minds to leap, would tell us, “Of course we know how to walk on the water, of course we know how to fly; fear of sinking, though, sometimes keeps us from the first crucial move, then too, the terrible educations you liable to get is designed to make you destruct the journey entire. So send your minds on home to the motherland and just tell the tale, you little honeys.” And my mama—not one to traffic in metaphors usually, being a very scientific woman—would add, “Yeah, speak your speak, ’cause every silence you maintain is liable to become *first* a lump in your throat, then a lump in your lymphatic system.”