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Claiming Power in African American Women Storytelling

BEGINNING WITH SLAVE NARRATIVES AND CONTINUING TO the contemporary day, black autobiographers have shared and perpetuated the values and experiences of their communities through the medium of stories, which seek to expose perspectives that are often withheld or overshadowed by white voices. Tracy K. Smith's memoir *Ordinary Light* participates in this tradition as she writes about her experiences as an African American woman in the United States. Near the text's close, Smith asserts that storytelling is an act of "claiming the power to name and state and face the events, even the most awful events, making up a life" (279). This argument might seem naïve compared to how power has historically been seized through means of violence and hate, but most malicious power grabs have been fueled by hate-filled stories, which are used to justify or moralize the oppressor's actions. Stories have the power to shape individuals, communities, and even nations in both negative and positive ways, and black Americans have tapped into the power of storytelling to combat negative stories that would control their communities. Slave narratives sought to expose injustice, Civil Rights activists wrote to fight for equality, and black voices today share their experiences with racism through digital and social media channels to promote social and legal reform. When Smith writes down her experiences, she endows herself with power to influence her readers and promote positive change.

In this essay, I refer to "stories" and "storytelling" as the autobiographical act of creating narrative from firsthand memories and experiences. Recently, researchers have been examining this type of storytelling. Autobiographical storytelling as a field of study is interdisciplinary and has garnered attention from sociologists, linguists, social justice advocates, and others. Their research examines not just what a story says but where, when, and how it's told. Linguist Teun van Dijk, who specializes in discourse analysis, argues that "storytellers implement, enact, legitimate, or challenge group knowledge, attitudes,

and ideologies and thereby contribute to the reproduction of ethnic prejudices, which in turn underlie discrimination and hence indirectly condition ethnic inequality” (122). To put it more simply, as researcher Lee Anne Bell did, “how we talk about race matters” (1). While I agree that the language used in discourse on race is important, I want to more closely examine the language used in autobiographical storytelling and how that language can be used both as a tool for individuals and communities to claim power and as a weapon to strip other individuals and communities of their power.

While literature’s stories of oppression are often told by the oppressors, or the ones who hold “power,” African American autobiography seeks to counteract those narratives as authors use their own language and experiences. Literary critic William L. Andrews argued that the “linchpins of African American autobiography” are “selfhood and the community of historical precedents, social identifications, and literary-cultural traditions that constitute it” (“Introduction” 7). Personal narratives do influence self and community, but they also influence society on a national level, demonstrating that black autobiography also has the power to challenge national politics and influence social reform.

Smith argues that storytelling is a way to claim power, but this isn’t the same kind of power that white people have used to control African American communities; the power that Smith is speaking of doesn’t include power over other people. It includes the power to author and authorize oneself to create cohesion within the community and promote change on a national level. In this paper, I will explore how African American writers have historically used storytelling as a source of power. Then I will examine how Smith tells personal, community, and national stories as a means of reclaiming narrative control. Ultimately, I’ll argue that the very act of storytelling redefines what it means to be powerful in America.

The First American Genre

Ordinary Light is part of an African American autobiographical tradition tracing back to slave narratives, which worked to author distinct, human subjects while exposing individual and institutional injustice that denied them their selves. Written primarily by fugitive slaves, slave narratives gave their authors a chance to narrate their experiences in slavery and expose the injustice they faced. In the opening letter that acts as a forward to *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, Equiano writes, “Permit me, with the greatest deference and respect, to lay at your feet the following genuine Narrative; the chief design of which is to excite in your august assemblies a

sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave-Trade has entailed on my unfortunate countrymen” (iii). Equiano’s reason for sharing his narrative is to create empathy and compassion in his oppressors and those in control of that system of oppression by showing how unjustly he and other slaves were treated within that institution. He aims to educate those who are unaware of the horrors happening on slave plantations, hoping that education will lead to action.

Not only did storytelling allow former slaves to expose systemic oppression and injustice, but it also was a way for them to contest white-controlled narratives of blackness by authoring and authorizing their selves. Both Equiano and Frederick Douglass’s narratives are clear examples of literary critic Bertram Ashe’s assertion that “African-American writers periodically use a narrative frame as a medium for negotiation with their readers” (1). Because their audience was typically their oppressors or those who were complicit in their oppression, their narratives sought to expose readers to the cruelty of their experiences and negotiate for equal and equitable treatment. For example, at the close of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass writes:

Sincerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system, and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds—faithfully relying upon the power of truth, love, and justice, for success in my humble efforts—and solemnly pledging my self anew to the sacred cause,—I subscribe myself, FREDERICK DOUGLASS (125).

To “subscribe” oneself is to sign one’s name at the end of a document, typically a legal document. At the end of his story, Douglass grants himself the power to authorize his writing and his perspective by the virtue of his name, which only a distinct self can have. This action speaks to his literacy, but it also highlights his desire to push back against the narratives that prevailed at the time. He is using his name to “throw light on the American slave system,” a system that was kept in darkness by those white voices who controlled the narrative. While enslaved, Douglass was unable to share his experiences because his life and voice were controlled by the slave owner. Once free, Douglass was able to use his own voice, name, and signature to write and verify the truthfulness of his story.

Resistance to injustice and the white voice were key social outcomes of slave narratives, but these narratives also served a more personal purpose, as they were also a way for fugitive slaves to redefine themselves as freemen. Andrews wrote of slave narratives, “Autobiography became a very public way of

declaring oneself free, of redefining freedom and then assigning it to oneself in defiance of one's bonds to the past or to the social, political, and sometimes even the moral exigencies of the present" (*To Tell* xi). For many, this redefinition of freedom was a shift from "legal" freedom to social freedom. Because the only people with the legal power to free enslaved people were slave owners, the act of writing to declare one's freedom was an act of open rebellion, a rebellion that used words rather than force to defy the power structure of their day. Fugitive slaves claimed the power to rename themselves as "free," thus redefining their social role as full American citizens with the right to free speech.

Underlying all these acts (exposing injustice, authoring/authorizing, and redefining freedom) is the concept of power and how it is used within an organized system. In the system of slavery, power was held by white slave owners seeking to control their "property." Social worker Mary Parker Follett theorized, "Genuine power can only be grown, it will slip from every arbitrary hand that grasps it" (xiii). Follett also categorized social relationships into two methodologies: "power over" and "power with." She describes "power with" as "when you and I decide on a course of action together and do that thing, you have no power over me nor I over you, but we have power over ourselves together" (186). Philosopher Scott L. Pratt expanded on Follett's theories: "Power-over is a sign that two agents are at odds. What happens next depends upon the ability of the agents to recognize the nature of conflict and the potential for converting the activity between them into power-with" (87).

In the case of slave owners, power was synonymous with "power over" a group of people—power over their narrative, their voice, and their social status. This control created agents that were "at odds," so fugitive slaves sought to convert the power differential between white and black people to a "power with" structure by working with anti-slavery campaigns to publish and publicize their stories. Slave narratives challenged the existing power structure and sought to replace it with a more equitable social model. Even after slavery was abolished, though, black people were refused their basic human rights. Time after time, African American autobiographers have picked up their pens to continue this pattern of generating "power with" by telling personal stories that influence both communities and the nation.

Story, Power, and Self

Toward the end of *Ordinary Light*, Smith restates a phrase her daughter learned in school: "When we tell our stories, we make power" (278). Smith used storytelling to process difficult experiences and act as a witness to them,

thereby empowering herself to control her own story and use narrative to heal. At one point she writes, “What I needed more than anything, was someone to listen to my story, someone to help me starve even this pain—this small, private pain—so that I could stand up and figure out how to go on” (278). In this instance, not only did Smith need to tell her story, but she also needed someone to listen to her story. Storytelling turned her “private pain” into a shared experience, and through that connection, she was able to “figure out how to go on.” For Smith, narrative not only gives her a chance to tell the story to someone else, but it also gives her a chance to tell the story to herself and to claim control over the narrative. Literary critic Adetayo Alabi talks of black autobiography’s concern with “the power of the narrator as witness, what Opoku-Agyman calls ‘the wisdom of the eye’” (3). Smith’s text demonstrates the “wisdom of the eye” as she places her own stories under a microscope to examine how they reflect on herself and her community. It also demonstrates the “wisdom of the *I*,” as it both acknowledges the singularity and universality of Smith’s stories. Smith’s entire memoir is an act of cathartic storytelling which allows her “to stand up and figure out” how to proceed in life for her self, community, and nation.

Smith mimics this model of sharing and healing in the very act of writing *Ordinary Light*, telling stories of her childhood and using her memories to create and cement her sense of self—a foundational component of social change. In her chapter “Book a Big Band,” Smith tells stories of her and her sister’s experiences with bullies in school and questions what it means to be black. After one instance of being bullied on the bus, she recalls thinking, “Was that the kind of thing that happens whenever you’re black?” (128). Later, her adult persona reflects and almost answers that question: “There’s always a place in the mind that feels different, distinct; not worse off or envious but simply aware of an extra thing that living in a world that loathes and fears us has necessitated we develop. Perhaps that thing is the counterbalance to the history of loss I often tried to block out with silence” (134–35). It’s evident in the very fact that this text exists that Smith’s attempt to “block out” her community’s troubling history by remaining silent was unsuccessful. In breaking that silence and telling her story, Smith confronts and processes that “extra thing.”

Telling her story and then questioning its meaning is what led Smith to a point of insight. A packet published by the American Values Institute (a nonprofit organization dedicated to finding ways to eliminate implicit bias and racial anxiety) titled *Telling Our Own Story: The Role of Narrative in Racial Healing (TOOS)*, states, “Stories are crucial not only because they engage our attention, but because of their role in creating meaning. They orient us to

what we perceive to be true, possible, and ideal” (Godsil 3). By using her experiences to create meaning, Smith is able to more fully understand her identity. Because Smith successfully “orients” herself to what she believes is “true, possible, and ideal,” she’s able to effectively communicate her views to her readers. This strong sense of self is essential in laying the groundwork for her social commentary.

Smith acknowledges the difficulties in turning one’s own “private material into a book”; however, by writing the text she asserts that storytelling, even when it is autobiographical, is actually an act of community and connection. She writes, “It is one thing to excavate one’s own private material and another thing altogether to share it with the world, having discovered, along the way, how much other people’s lives and stories are integral to it” (“Acknowledgements”). This “excavation” of self creates a powerful sense of identity, as it requires Smith to look more closely at her life and how the choices that she’s made along the way have influenced the self. The work of excavation also reveals Smith’s connection with “other people’s lives and stories,” especially with those close to her. By telling her story and the stories of those connected to her, Smith creates an even larger network by forging connections between herself and her readers. Paradoxically, the more specific details a personal narrative contains, the more universally relatable it becomes. And it’s that connection that enables Smith to enact the power to expose her experiences and persuade her audience. Stories are powerful tools in shaping one’s sense of self and worldview. Whether they are stories we are told, stories we tell others, or stories we tell ourselves, they have a major influence on the kind of power that we create.

Giving Voice to Marginalized Communities

Furthermore, Smith’s memoir examines the power of story to create and sustain community in the face of discrimination. Early on she writes, “No matter what the world thought it knew about blacks, no matter what it tried to teach us to believe about ourselves, the home we returned to each night assured us that, no matter who was setting the bar, we could remain certain we measured up” (19). While not all black Americans have the benefit of returning to a supportive home, all black americans must deal with what the “world [thinks] it knows about blacks.” Because racism is such a universal experience, black autobiographies often function as community narratives. Black writers place strong emphasis on community, a pattern that was carried from Africa to the United States through the slave trade and is still true today. Alabi argues that

“even when an autobiography is the story of an individual, it is characteristically the representation of the individual in the service of a community” (5). *Ordinary Light* serves as a “representation” of Smith that seeks to help its audience understand the struggles of members within the black community. Thus, Smith is empowering her voice to speak “in the service of” her community.

Stories like Smith’s are essential because they offer a corrective to white supremacist stories weaponized against the black community. An example is an experience she has with a guidance counselor whose discrimination attempts to author and control her education. He tells her, “You’re an African American woman . . . You should take advantage of the opportunities that will bring you.” But even as the counselor rehearsed this commonly told story, Smith thought, “Where he’d said ‘opportunities,’ my mind revised the statement to hear ‘handouts’” (194). The counselor’s choice to focus on Smith’s race rather than her academic achievement perpetuated the stereotypical and harmful narrative that people of color can take advantage of the collegiate system’s diversification efforts without being competitive applicants; however, by including it in her memoir, Smith exposes the racism and diffuses its power.

In his paper on the power of narrative in social theory, Stewart Clegg writes, “One needs to move in a full circle in analyzing power and language to focus on not only the language of power but also the power of the language of power” (40). Smith’s counselor used the “language of power” by choosing words like “take advantage of the opportunities,” which masked the discriminatory message of his statement. The “language of power” masks and misrepresents people and situations in order to reframe them within its own narrative. Reflecting on this experience, Smith writes, “But the advice stung nevertheless, because it also told me that it might be hard to be seen for who I was beyond or beneath the category to which I most visibly belonged” (194). This is a clear example of what Clegg called “the power of the language of power.” The words that the counselor chose claimed power over Smith’s educational narrative, reframing it as being about race rather than merit. The “language of power” is often used as a way for white people to gain or retain power over narratives that are told about the black community.

Because of the way that white supremacists use language to attempt to author black individuals and communities, Smith uses her own stories to combat the harm caused by racist narratives. As Smith recounts a visit to her mother’s family, she talks about one of her uncles who loved telling stories: “sitting on the couch that would unfold into his bed for the night, he’d told story after story about his life at school. . . . His stories triggered other stories, too, even ones that were about his brother and sisters who weren’t there with us” (60).

He told stories about the difficulties of attending a newly integrated school. These were “stories that, in another context, could have been viewed as sad or dangerous [but] were occasions for joy on that night” (61). Rather than allowing white supremacy narratives to control how they remembered and told stories, they used their own voices and experiences to reconstruct “sad or dangerous” narratives and turn them into sources of joy. In her book *Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching*, education researcher Lee Anne Bell promotes the creation of “race-conscious counter-storytelling communities” (1) that “seek to expand knowledge, to reveal what has been left out, suppressed, misunderstood and ignored in order to build a broader understanding of our history as a society and to challenge the country to live up to its ideals” (3). As Smith’s family tells stories about their experiences with racism, they create a counter-storytelling community that enables them to “expand knowledge” and “reveal what has been left out, suppressed, misunderstood and ignored.” Telling stories is a way for those who were and are oppressed to process and share their experiences to promote positive change.

Through creating “counter-storytelling communities” and offering a corrective, Smith exemplifies how black communities use storytelling to create unity. In *Ordinary Light*, when Smith takes a trip to New York City and drives around Harlem, she notes, “It felt like a homecoming.” The imagery of “homecoming” here refers less to a physical return to location, as Smith had never been to Harlem before, and more to a feeling of return to culture and community. In one interview, Smith said, “The history of Jim Crow is a big part of the history that I come from. But I’m thinking, too, about the ways that we now are treated. The language is different, but . . . it’s the same kind of thing. When I think about black americans, I feel a real kinship” (“Moving”). Smith had grown up with a localized narrative of blackness, but as she was exposed to more communities and more stories, she was able to acknowledge and participate in those as well, essentially unifying her own sense of community while also acting as a bridge between those worlds. This work is evident in all forms of her storytelling—memoir, poetry, and lecture. In a lecture Smith delivered as poet laureate of the United States, she said, “poems lead us first more deeply into ourselves, and then, more naturally toward the areas of common feeling we share with others. That’s how poems teach us to recognize that there are forms of community that exist across or in spite of the obvious dividing lines we are taught to respect” (*Staying Human*). These elevated “forms of community” aren’t defined by race or location but by common experiences or opinions. These are the kinds of communities that reinforce a “power with”

dynamic rather than a “power over” one, and they must be formed in order to create lasting social change.

Reshaping the Stories of America

Smith is joined by countless other black voices who are participating in the work of reshaping the stories of America by telling their personal histories, along with those of their family and community. For example, former First Lady Michelle Obama writes in her memoir, “We grow up with messages that tell us that there’s only one way to be American—that if our skin is dark or our hips are wide, if we don’t experience love in a particular way, if we speak another language or come from another country, then we don’t belong. That is, until someone dares to start telling that story differently” (Obama 454). As black authors participate in the work of autobiography, they bring light to perspectives that are often overlooked or purposefully obscured, and they offer a way to tell “story differently.” Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison writes, “In matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” (9). By elevating stories of race told by people of color, individuals and communities can break the silence which has “ruled literary discourse” and spread important race stories on national platforms.

Storytelling is more expansive than the dominant culture allows. The stories of others make readers and listeners more humane, which has larger social consequences leading to reform. When Smith decided to get dreadlocks as a tribute to her blackness, she was met with resistance. She remembers one person saying, “You can be black without going overboard about it. . . . Why stir up trouble trying to make such a big statement?” (289). Smith was living in a way that was true to her identity as a black woman, but she was met with resistance to the narrative she was telling through her appearance. Alabi wrote, “When black autobiographers write, they represent their own versions of truth, which are often in direct conflict with existing discourses” (140). While these stories create conflict, it’s a conflict that is necessary to drive change: “Perhaps more than any other literary form in black american letters, autobiography has been recognized and celebrated since its inception as a powerful means of addressing and altering sociopolitical as well as cultural realities in the United States” (Andrews, “Introduction” 1). Smith uses autobiography to expose her own experiences with racism while also showing how her community is influenced by racist stories. Her experiences are reflective of a wider narrative that exists for many African Americans. By telling these stories, Smith is inviting her audience to examine their own biases and join the fight for social reform.

Smith's assertion that "When we tell our stories, we make power" (278) challenges the traditional view of how power is gained in the United States. Personal and community narratives, such as those shared by Smith and other black writers, are a foundational way for black communities to influence national narratives. History is often written by dominant classes, but uncovering buried narratives can help promote healing for both majority and marginalized communities. Whether it's the stories of police brutality against individuals such as Trayvon Martin or George Floyd, or the stories of social inequality against communities such as Flint, Michigan, stories provide a means of negotiation and persuasion, and are thus a method of shifting from "power over" to "power with."

In Smith's collegiate education, she had the opportunity to learn about and face cultural trauma, which allowed her to name and face the oppression she'd encountered. Explaining the reasons why she was drawn to studying Afro-American culture in university, she writes, "There were many of us who were exploring the discipline not merely for intellectual edification but as a means of recovering something we believed had been withheld by the mainly white schools many of us had attended" (285). The act of "recovering," or reclaiming, national narratives wasn't merely in pursuit of education but an act of defiance that sought to promote the importance of black communities in the American story. United black voices can help create "power with" as their white audiences learn what they need to do in order to work together with black communities for the benefit of the entire nation. We know this method is effective from the historic pattern of black storytelling and social justice. Looking again at the slave narrative, literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes, "In this process of imitation and repetition, the black slave's narrative came to be a communal utterance, a collective tale, rather than merely an individual's autobiography," (x) and these stories combined to testify "against human bondage and oppression and on behalf of their own will to be free, black, and human" (xviii). While these narratives alone didn't eradicate slavery, they played a pivotal role in unifying the enslaved, fugitive, and free Black communities and in changing the public perception of slavery and reform. This pattern of black voices combining against white supremacy has been employed time and again to expose injustices within social systems and call their audience to action against oppressors. These efforts shift social dynamics from "power over" to "power with" diverse communities.

Conclusion

While Smith focuses on the healing and growth benefits of storytelling, she also admits to the dangers that story can pose to individuals, communities, and the nation. Personal narratives that don't include room for growth and change of perspective can be mentally and emotionally paralyzing. For example, when Smith's mother was diagnosed with cancer just after Smith went through a difficult breakup, Smith recalled "talking to a gathering of stars: *Please help me to let go of this story. Please help me to give my heart over to my mother.*" The story of Smith's breakup was so prevalent in her mind that it was causing her to lose focus on the more important narrative of her dying mother. This same situation can happen on community and national scales. Dramatic stories can force their way to the front of public attention and sometimes mask the more important stories that lie beyond. Communities that weaponize stories against one another in this way can contribute to the ongoing issue of racism. When stories about police brutality are masked by stories about a victim's past, the focus of the story is stolen, and the truth is obscured. The stories that politicians and educators teach and hold as true about the United States are often exclusive or insufficiently representative of minority groups, such as solely focusing on Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech to talk about civil rights. These narrow stories cause unbalanced historical narratives to continue being taught in public classrooms.

Smith remains hopeful, though, as she writes about how we can take control of these stories, redefining what it means to be a powerful American; Smith shows us that through authoring personal narrative, one can create self-authority. Storytelling that is done for public benefit rather than individual gain succeeds in guiding American society toward a more equitable future. Power in America has long been synonymous with whiteness and maleness. These were the landowners and the slaveholders, and now they are the CEOs and government leaders. This pattern of power has been so ingrained in the American story that many do not even realize they are beneficiaries of this legacy. As a black woman, Smith doesn't have the advantage of generational "power over," but through telling her story she's able to redefine power itself. As Andrews wrote, "African American autobiography has testified to the ceaseless commitment of people of color to realize the promise of their American birthright and to articulate their achievements as individuals and as persons of African descent" ("Introduction" 1). One of the best ways to combat discriminatory narratives is to create, empower, and share narratives that challenge white supremacy. Narrative is a powerful method of persuasion and

a driver of empathy. By revealing stories previously hidden, minority groups make their voices heard and move the nation toward a more democratic “power with” social structure. The power that storytelling creates can benefit individuals and communities, but it can also help expand and rectify the story of America.

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