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## LOOKING FOR KUNTA KINTE: ALEX HALEY'S *ROOTS* AND AFRICAN AMERICAN GENEALOGIES

As the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary 2006 edition recalls, Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* was a big popular success: in 1976, the year it was published, "the book sold over one million copies" and in 1977 the miniseries created out of it "was watched by an astonishing 130 million people." David Chioni Moore reports that the book "was translated into twenty-four languages, and sat atop the *New York Times* nonfiction best-seller list for more than five months beginning in late November 1976" (6). *Roots*'s popularity continues in more recent times: in December 2011, BET's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary airing of the miniseries *Roots* was watched by 4.1 million viewers, testifying to the longevity of *Roots*' popular appeal.<sup>2</sup> Haley's family saga starts in 18<sup>th</sup>-century village of Juffure, in the Gambia, Africa, where his ancestor Kunta Kinte was kidnapped and shipped, together with other African slaves, to the United States. His Virginian master Wallace imposes on him the name Toby, which Kunta resists fiercely to maintain his African and Muslim identity. After four escape attempts and having his foot cut off he accepts his American fate and name and eventually marries Belle, the slave cook, thus going against his original disdain for African American slaves. From this union Kizzy is born, who is sold to master Tom Lea. The latter repeatedly rapes the girl, who consequentially gives birth to Chicken George, the family patriarch who leads the Kintes out of slavery. From this moment on the family line proceeds fast till Simon Alexander Haley, Alex Haley's father, and ends with Haley's telling of his researches in Africa, Britain, and the US to trace his family history.

The popularity of the book and the miniseries, together with the extraordinary telling of a never-heard-before story of a long lineage linking African Americans to Africa, have made *Roots* a significant popular cultural event with a high symbolic impact on America's perception of African Americans and their history. Despite such a popular success, Haley's family saga has never enjoyed academic attention. "Since the late 1970s," Chioni Moore calls to mind, "*Roots*, in both its book and televised forms, has been subjected to a near-total silence on the part of the intelligentsia" (7), so much so that those few scholars who have dealt with it have always felt the necessity of excusing their interest by citing numbers as a proof of *Roots*'s importance. Critics' disregard for Haley's *Roots: the Saga of an American Family* comes as a surprise, given the interest in African American studies which has occupied academies in the last years. Since the 1960s, both writers and academics have devoted cultural works to the memory of slavery as an attempt to recuperate a past of which African Americans felt deprived because of misleading official history, absence of documents, and in general national institutions that had nullified slavery as a part of the American past. Critics' work has been supported and fostered by the surge of texts such as Alice Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Gail Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and others, dealing with the issue of African American memories in the US and the slavery past. Regardless of the critics' underestimation, *Roots* can be considered in line with these texts, as it has promoted the entrance of the memory of slavery into the public domain and has provided a literary response to the citizenship, identity, and equality battles and the call for authorization and redefinition of black identity and its past. As the title of the book itself highlights, questions of origins are indeed at the center of Haley's family saga, facilitating African Americans' discovery of racial pride via the celebration of Africa as a mythic motherland and re-positioning slavery at the center of their history in the United States. What is more, for the African American generation who came of age in the 1970s, Haley's forefather Kunta Kinte has turned into a sort of collective

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.deadline.com/2013/11/roots-ramake-history-channel-miniseries/>, visited on September 16, 2014.



ancestor contributing to the emancipative discourse of post-Civil Rights years. In more recent years, Haley's family discovery and sense of completeness coming from the knowledge of his African origins has set in motion a widespread desire for a personal 'Kunta Kinte moment,' a longing which informs today's renewed interest in matters of black family trees.

One of the keys to *Roots*'s popular success, which is also the major reason of suspicion among the few scholars who have faced Haley's narration, lies in its exceptional handling of questions of genealogy in relation to slavery. Family has often been an issue in critical studies and literary works dealing with the memory of slavery; novelists and scholars have addressed the disruptive force of slavery through notions such as denied fatherhood, the rejection of motherhood as a form of resistance, induced orphanhood, and in general the concept of family trauma. The disruption of original family groups as a consequence of the transatlantic and national slave trade, the denial of an official form of marriage for slaves, the *partus sequitur ventrem* principle and the danger of rape by the white masters are only some of the traits that underline the peculiarity of African American genealogical research and the difficulty in tracing clear and documented African American family lines. As a result, Haley's telling of a two-hundred-years family story, able to trace his first African American forefather back in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century village of Juffure, has been perceived (and questioned)<sup>3</sup> as an extraordinary accomplishment, in contrast with the general perception of slavery as a history of orphanhood, social death, and in general as an institution antagonistic to the maintenance of family ties.<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of fact, *Roots* worked as a watershed in the history of how slavery has been depicted in American culture, comparable in its popular iconic acceptance probably only to *Gone with the Wind* (1939) or Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012). The telling of a long and solid genealogy, amid which the fierce Kunta Kinte stands out, in fact reverses some of the most enduring stereotypes about African Americans and provides a counter-hegemonic narration of black identity, which validates a rediscovered racial pride in the forgotten and distant Africanness of Haley's mythical African forefather. To the general perception, Kunta Kinte proves a particularly valuable ancestor, who survives slavery without losing his African identity, so much so that the name Kunta Kinte has turned into an example of self-determination, proud racial identity, and a popular mythical forefather to the collective African American memory. Kunta Kinte's ability to retain memories from his homeland and the family's original name is the central vehicle for a broader self-determination and for the elevation of Africa (and Africanness) from a place of provenance to a symbol of racial pride.<sup>5</sup> His knowledge of his African origins, which distinguishes him from the other Americanized blacks of the United States, is proposed as an authorizing piece of memory, accordingly passed to future family generations till Haley's narrative present.

If on the one hand literary critics have mainly remained silent in front of *Roots*, on the other historians have openly accused the book of a-historicity, dismantling all of Haley's genealogical reconstruction and declaring Haley's detected correspondence between the African Kunta Kinte and the American enslaved Toby uncertain (Mills and Shown 9; Weil 196). They have also invalidated Haley's oral source of knowledge, the *griot* Fofana, whom Haley met in one of his research travels in Africa (Wright 206) and who corroborated the compatibility between the American family's memories and Juffure's oral history. Historians' accusations of absence of proper theoretical work appear justified, above all in the light of Haley's plagiarism of Harold

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<sup>3</sup> As I indicate later in the text, *Roots* has been criticized by historians, who have deconstructed Haley's genealogy and labeled it as pure fiction. See Ambrose, Chioni Moore, Mills and Shown, and Weil, among others.

<sup>4</sup> See Orlando Patterson's classic study *Slavery and Social Death* (1982).

<sup>5</sup> In her book about the Hemings, another African American family who were able to maintain their surname, Annette Gordon-Reed writes that "one of the many ways that slave societies sought to drive home slaves' inferior status was to be careless about the use of slave surnames, signaling that bond people had no families that white society had to respect" (79). Questions of names and surnames therefore indicate the transition from slavery, that is, the objectification of human beings, to personhood. Although Kunta Kinte cannot retain his name in the United States, and is forced to accept to respond to the name Toby, he does not forget his real identity, which he cares to pass on to his daughter Kizzy also by choosing an African name for her.



Courlander's novel *The African* (1967) as his main source for the historical reconstruction of the long first part on Kunta Kinte's life in the Gambia. Yet, if we consider the part set in the United States, recent studies in genealogy such as the one by François Weil prove that although *Roots* is, in Haley's own words, a work of 'faction' (a mix of facts and fiction), it is not so unrealistic.

In his *Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America* (2013), Weil attests that the idea of slavery as the history of abandonments and absence of ties has often obfuscated a serious consideration of African Americans' concern with genealogy, which emerges instead as central in *Roots*. Weil demonstrates that the family question within slavery is more complex than the history of family disruption: African Americans reacted to the slavery-induced de-humanization by developing an interest in the maintenance of kinship relations and of the memory of the existing and traceable bloodlines. Quoting Weil's words, during the colonial period, when the American part of *Roots* begins, "although awareness of kinship and kin consciousness is difficult to document because of its oral nature, it was very much present among Africans brought as slaves to British North America" (29). Cases such as Venture Smith's, able to trace his genealogy back to Madagascar, or Mary and William Butler, who knew their black ancestor had married a free Irish white woman (30), prove that many slaves carried detailed genealogies, even if only orally. Also after the colonial period, "fugitive narratives suggest that many slaves retained memories of kin and forebears in their minds despite forced separation and family disruptions. Genealogical awareness became one of the many strategies slaves used to fight the actual and symbolic violence of slavery" (50). As Weil indicates, within the institution of slavery, genealogy contributes to the creation of counter-narratives against the politics of de-personification and de-humanization perpetuated by the institution.

Whereas the majority of existing studies on *Roots* debate the relation between history and faction, according to Weil genealogical knowledge is to be understood as "a powerful lens to understand personal and collective identities" (1). In Robert Law's words, genealogies, be they oral (as in the case of Haley's informant, the *griot* Fofana) or written (as in the case of the book *Roots* itself), "are seldom, if ever, in any straightforward sense intended as accurate records of the past" (133); therefore they should not be considered alongside history. As studies in anthropology had already marked in the 1950s, "kinship does not consist in the objective ties of descent or consanguinity between individuals."<sup>6</sup> Kinship is rather to be considered "a permutative prism, effected by different degrees of rotating, combining, and scattering, and generating different clusters of relations, clumped together on different platforms" (Dimock 87). Kinship, as well as genealogy, is a complex network of relations, which can change over time according to how we perceive family and society, and to how we order our family within society. Genealogies are, in this sense, always symbolical, their aim being that of giving interpretative keys to the present while looking at the future rather than merely at the past. Family (hi)stories can consequently be considered statements about the present when they are written, "about legitimacy, identity, behavioral norms – cast in a historical form" (Law 133).

The link between the past and the present via genealogies as authoritative narrations is paradigmatic in our modernity, when memory is more and more considered as a key source of identity (Lee Klein 135). At the same time, every memory is not only a piece of the past that follows us in the present, but also an act of our agency, as we more or less consciously include or exclude bearers of identity from memory and family lines. Because of their human-made and historically situated narrative form, genealogies are indeed a matter of selection, choice, and, eventually, imagination. This is even more so given that, going back in the family line, ancestors multiply. With regard to *Roots*, Chioni Moore recalls that "if one wishes to go back even seven generations it is not possible to find unitary 'roots,' because the dizzying lateral and longitudinal expansion of cousins and ancestors dissipates all notions of source" (19). According to the theory of the cone of increasing diversity, which Chioni Moore applies to *Roots*, every single person has a wide range of possible ancestors who augment mathematically after every generation. The importance that one ancestor has over another is therefore a cultural process, which has nothing to do with the question of genetic or historical reconstruction. In this sense, genealogy is not a matter of passing information about bloodlines, but of how

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<sup>6</sup> Levi Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (1958) as quoted in Dimock (87).



authors of genealogies write about family history from their narrating present, what lines they choose to follow, and how imagination intersects with documentation.

The mathematically-established multiplicity of familial ties fosters questions on Kunta Kinte's role in Haley's family history as well as in African American and American culture. According to Chioni Moore's calculations, "if one's father is responsible for half of one's genetic identity, or 'blood,' and one's grandfather but one-fourth, the Kairaba Kunta Kinte, Alex Haley's six-times great grandfather, represents only 1/256<sup>th</sup> of his present-day 'self'" (15). Why then the election of Kunta Kinte as the beginning of Haley's line and his main source for a renovated sense of self?<sup>7</sup> And why the emergence of Kunta Kinte as a cultural icon and mythical ancestor against other possible ancestors such as the English-descent great-great-great grandfather Tom Lea, who fathered Chicken George, the other patriarch in Haley's family, or the Indian named Hillian, who fathered Irene? It goes without saying that the highly racially defined American society with its hypodescent rule requires identification with slavery and therefore the transatlantic slave trade as the main source of identity for African Americans. And yet, the narrative and symbolic space Kunta Kinte occupies in *Roots* with respect to other ancestors requires further investigation, as it marks an imagination of the past in the service of Haley's present and his vision of the future.

The relationship of genealogies with the present in which they are created sheds light on why Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* came into light in the 1970s, a period which saw both a new interest in questions of memory and the emergence of identity politics (Lee Klein 143). As Salamishah Tillet writes in her *Sites of Slavery* (2012), after the 1960s African Americans started to experience a clash between their "formal possession of full legal citizenship and their inherited burden of 'civic estrangement'" (18).<sup>8</sup> They "emerged as legal but not necessarily as civic citizens of the United States" (8), due to a lack of positive symbolic inscription within national culture in its broadest sense – literature, arts, cinema, and monuments. *Roots* can be considered as a reaction to civic estrangement, as it tries to contrast iconic marginalization through the new heroic African ancestor Kunta Kinte. After the 1960s Civil rights fight for full citizenship, in the 1970s African Americans demanded a new set of black ancestors, which *Roots* provides: once civil equality was granted by the law, it was the moment for the reconstruction of that silenced, forbidden, and lost past that many claimed, in line with the identity politics of the time and their request of new images for African American men, distant from the existing stereotypes of the *sambo*, the Uncle Tom, or the potential rapist à la Gus of *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith 1915). Just as militancy was declining, *Roots* satisfied "black America's demands about identity, the past, Africa, and slavery" and 'factionally' recreated that cultural and identitarian heroic affirmation of which they felt deprived (Weil 195).

The black hunger for African, more than American, origins was especially big in the divisive climate of the 1970s: in contrast to what was perceived as a demanding, usurping, and raping "Uncle Sam," and in line with some separatist winds that blew in the US in those years (Cox XI),<sup>9</sup> Africa functions as the negated, absent, and idealized mother, to which Haley devotes thirty-six of his 120 chapters by means of the celebration of the African ancestor Kunta Kinte. By enlarging Kunta Kinte's part within the general narrative structure, and bestowing on him the biggest role in the definition of his family's identity, Haley favors a vision of Africa as a mythical source of identity; he thus reverses the negative legacy of slavery, sidestepping it as a scar and recollecting desired histories of an imaginatively archaic ordered and harmonic world. *Roots* functions therefore as a symbolical narrative responding to slogans such as "black power" and "black is beautiful," proving the necessary narration sustaining such a request for a reverse role and perception of African

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<sup>7</sup> The question of the percentage of different biological legacies has also emerged with the election of President Obama and the consequent curiosity about his mixed family. In regard to Obama, the debate has often addressed the question whether he had enough "black blood," in sharp contrast with the usual American scare of hidden black ancestry, as in William Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936).

<sup>8</sup> Explaining her borrowing from Roger Smith's *Civic Ideals* (1997), Tillet clarifies that "civic estrangement occurs because [African Americans] have been marginalized or underrepresented in the civic myths, monuments, narratives, icons, creeds and images of the past that constitute, reproduce and promote an American national identity" (18).

<sup>9</sup> One may think of the separatist stances of certain black leaders such as Stokley Carmichael or Malcolm X, whom Haley knew as his official biographer.





Americans in the US. Although such a way of looking to Africa as a pastoral Eden sounds naïve in the twenty-first century informed by post-colonial studies, *Roots* worked as a booster for a general positive vision of the transatlantic continent. Indeed, the book is generally considered the creator of a new historical consciousness for many African Americans, who ‘discovered’ Africa, even though in a patronizing and purified way, welcomed a new racial pride, and even developed a romantic nostalgia for idealized lost origins.

The symbolical enlargement of Africanness in Haley’s descent line does not mean that the book completely sidesteps questions of African Americanness within the United States. On the contrary, as the book’s subtitle “The Story of an American Family” highlights, the re-inscription of a positive black mythology has to take place within the “American family.” It is exactly the genealogical form and its narrative of filiation that enables Haley to link contemporary American Blackness to Kunta Kinte’s Africanness. Rather than the classical tale of disruption due to slavery practices, Kinte’s lineage can be hence considered as a narrative of historical continuity, in light of its attempt at drawing a line among all the familial and historically situated passages that have led to the present of the narrative voice. In this sense, *Roots*’s clear chronological structure differentiates it from other twentieth-century novels of slavery, whose post-modern approach to matters of memory and the past disrupts linearity and narration (Tillet 12); on the contrary, *Roots* accentuates continuity rather than disruption, links instead of separations, connections instead of divisions. We may therefore consider *Roots* as an expression of the desire to give order to the fragmentation and precariousness of African American memories while tracing a legacy that might explain the contemporary position of African Americans within the United States. Continuity, in this case, is not to be understood as the antithesis of the disruptive force of historical slavery; continuity is an organizing principle, which tries to historically authorize the narrator’s position in today’s society.

The question of contrasting fragmentation emerges with the narrative voice as well. Unlike other family sagas which have appeared in the last couple of decades, such as Edward Ball’s *Slaves in the Family* (1998) or Kathrina Browne’s *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep South* (2008), *Roots* introduces Haley’s narrative voice only at the very end of the book. This explains the highly fictional character of the book, whose narration in the past is never interrupted by glimpses of the narrative present when Haley reconstructs family history. The erasure of the difficulties of African American genealogical reconstruction facilitates identification between reader and characters, as is typical in fiction. Haley’s genealogy moves thus from history to myth. It fabricates, in other words, an “imagined family,” which historically coincides with Haley’s family tree but symbolically accommodates the African American community as a whole. This is exactly Haley’s aim: “My own ancestors’ would automatically also be a symbolic saga of all African-descent people – who are without exception the seeds of someone like Kunta who was born and grew up in some black African village, someone who was captured and chained down in one of those slave ships that sailed them across the same ocean, into some succession of plantations, and since then a struggle for freedom” (*Roots* 879).

Using Alison Landsberg’s idea of prosthetic memory, Kunta Kinte “represents a black body that Americans can inhabit to remember prosthetically a past that has for too long been the site of a shameful silence” (105). Landsberg is primarily interested in forms of collective memory arising from the modern age’s technologies such as cinema or museums. However, because of its popularity both in the book and TV series forms, *Roots* can be ascribed to this set of prosthetic “memories that have no direct connection to a person’s lived past and yet are essential to the production and articulation of subjectivity” (20). The possibility of collectively inhabiting Haley’s family memories expands the limits of personal genealogy and turns *Roots* into a mythic representation of African Americans in the United States: because of this collective and mythic capacity, the text functions as a poetic beginning for African Americans within the United States, that is, as an epic book whose role extends Haley’s familial genealogy and his creative use of historical records.

*Roots*, especially in the figure of Kunta Kinte, is in Homi Bhabha’s words a “symbolic and affective source[...] of cultural identity” (292), whose implicit force and meaning has made it a piece of popular culture, also quoted in contexts such as rap songs and films that do not directly deal with Haley’s narration. Although poor in historical accuracy, *Roots* is indeed so rich in rhetorical and symbolical power that in the 1970s it started a new dialogue about black families in the United States and created a greater and expanding curiosity about



one's ancestry. For example, in the same decade when *Roots* was published, the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society was founded, while between 1976 and 1977 self-help manuals such as Charles L. Blockson's *Black Genealogy*, Jeane Westin's *Finding Your Roots*, F. Wilbur Helmbold's *Tracing Your Ancestry*, Dan Rottenberg's *Finding Our Families*, and Charles Blockson and Ron Fry's *Black Genealogy* flourished (Rushdy 14-15).<sup>10</sup> This paved the way for the explosion in more recent years of a number of similar paperbacks, such as *Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African-American Genealogy and Historical Identity* by Dee Parmer Woodtor (1999), *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your African-American Ancestors* by Franklin Carter Smith (2002), *Black Genesis: A Resource Book for African-American Genealogy* by James M. Rose (2003), and many others.<sup>11</sup> Its imaginative influence continues today, renewed by the new scientific progress and genetic DNA testings employed to support and detect black genealogies unimaginable in Haley's days.<sup>12</sup> The cultural success of Henry Louis Gates's programs about family history, such as *African American Lives* (2006) and *Faces of America* (2010), lies in that desire of having one's own "Kunta Kinte moment." As Gates himself explains on his weblog The Root, which plays with Haley's 1976 book title and contains a number of posts and articles on how to practice black genealogical research also thanks to new DNA research techniques, "my goal was to create a contemporary version of the television series *Roots* – think of it as *Roots* in a test tube, *Roots* for the 21st century."

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<sup>10</sup> African Americans' interest in genealogy is a part of a general trend that genealogy scholar Weil detects in the United States at large. As he writes, "by the 1970s the emergence and increasing acceptance of diversity, itself a joint product of the civil rights movement and the new interest in white ethnicity, helped transform the practice of American family history in much greater depth. Many Americans who had not previously done so now turned to genealogy in order to reconsider and redefine their individual and family identity in new terms. A number of books explored the ethnic dimension of American society and genealogical memory and insisted on the democratic effect of diversity" (191).

<sup>11</sup> Among them, *Black Roots: A Beginners Guide To Tracing The African American Family Tree* by Tony Burroughs (2001), *Finding Your African American Ancestors: A Beginner's Guide* by David T. Thackeray (2001), *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your African-American Ancestors. How to Find and Record Your Unique Heritage* by Franklin Carter Smith and Emily Anne Croom (2009), and *Slave Genealogy: A Research Guide with Case Studies* by David H. Streets (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Companies investigating personal genetic genealogy are Ancestry.com, MyFamily.com, or the National Geographic's Genographic Project.



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