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Book Review: Bid The Vassal Soar

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THE ARTS



Books

Bid The Vassal Soar

By Merle A. Richmond
Howard University Press
216 pp., \$8.95

Reviewed by Peola Spurlock

Bid The Vassal Soar is an historical analysis of slavery in the North and the South at two distinct periods of American history. It investigates the effects of war on slaves and compares the male slave to the female slave. The title is taken from a line ("On Liberty and Slavery") of a poem by George Moses Horton, one of the two principals in the book. Its literal interpretation is: "Offer the slave his freedom; tell the servant to ascend to higher levels."

Broadly, the author offers an interpretive analysis of the life and poetry of two slaves, Horton and Phillis Wheatley, who in spite of their conditions of servitude were able to ascend to higher levels as poets.

Wheatley, a female born free in Africa who was brought and bought into American bondage, lived in New England as a "house nigger," during the American Revolution. She was taught to read and write by a tutor and was, the author writes, "assigned" to write day and night in order to perform her literary works for the entertainment of her masters.

Wheatley's poetry reflects the Puritan New England ideals, an admonition of sinners to conversion. Although she read for the upper New England crust, she was neither a friend nor an associate of theirs. She was not permitted to associate with her slave peers and was isolated from developing any substantive relationships with them. This isolation, writes Richmond, must have caused her great loneliness. But neither her loneliness nor her race is reflected in her poetry. Upon reading her work, one is left with the feeling that the writer is, in fact, a very delicate, religious white female who only feels

what the majority feels, and who never achieves a concept of self.

Wheatley scarcely remembered anything from her past life, having been brought to America at the age of seven or eight. The only reference she ever made to her slave condition was in a congratulatory poem written to Lord William Dartmouth, Secretary of State for the Colonies, after he repealed the Stamp Act in 1766. [The Stamp Act was a tax imposed on the colonists by the British Parliament in 1765 to buy stamps on deeds, legal papers and other matters.] In this poem, Wheatley explained that her love for freedom came from the anguish her family felt when she was stolen from Africa and brought to "this cruel fate" of slavery; she wished that no other man would befall the "tyranny" of slavery.

Crispus Attucks, a runaway slave whom history records as the first fatality of the Revolutionary War, was killed just blocks from where Wheatley lived. Yet she does not write about this historical event. At the age of 17—six months after the "Boston Massacre"—Wheatley wrote an elegy to Reverend George Whitefield, a deceased Methodist missionary from England who had endeared himself to the colonists through his beneficence and evangelism. This poem projected her to renown as a poet.

In 1778, Wheatley was granted her freedom—later went to England for health reasons during the period of the celebrated "Boston Tea Party." While there, her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, became the first book by a Black woman to be published. She died on December 5, 1784 in Boston at the age of 31.

George Moses Horton lived in North Carolina as a slave "field nigger" during the Civil War era. He learned to recite poetry while pushing the plow and tending the cattle alone. Horton's

poetry was a call for freedom from oppression which reflected the aspirations of freedom in the obvious style of the Black Spirituals. Quite different from Wheatley, he had family ties, being the younger of two boys with eight sisters in a matriarchial family. He vaguely knew his father but had unlimited encouragement from his mother and rivalry with his brother in learning writing skills. He was innovative and wrote for white students for a fee; he even made a profitable business by being "hired out," which required him to pay his master for letting him work outside of the plantation.

On many occasions, he would walk eight miles to the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill to recite poems for white students who thought of him as a jester. But he capitalized from the situation and was paid 25 to 50 cents for each poem he recited. Although he wrote about slavery, his poetry was basically for the pleasure of white audiences. And he did not seek the company of other Blacks. He was also paid to ghost-write love poems for white male students to give to their girl friends.

Horton's first book of poetry, *Hope of Liberty*, contained 22 pages and was published in 1829. When news of the publication reached the Abolitionists in the North, there was a cry for purchasing his freedom. Even the governor of North Carolina, David L. Swain, made a bid for Horton's freedom, according to Richmond. But events of history were against him. That same year, David Walker, a free Black native of North Carolina who migrated to Boston because of his hatred of slavery, published a pamphlet, the *Appeal*, calling for Black revolt against white oppression. When news of this pamphlet reached the South, legislation was enacted which forbade the teaching of reading and writing to slaves; the exception was arithmetic.

34 Horton's first publication was reprinted as *Poems of a Slave* in Philadelphia in 1837. The following year, it was bound with poems by Wheatley and published in Boston. During this period, the style of Horton's poetry changed, and in 1845 another book, *The Poetical Works*, was published.

Richmond's book describes how Horton, in his bid for freedom, wrote letters to William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist editor of the *Liberator*, and to Horace Greeley, the celebrated editor of the *New York Tribune*, which he entrusted to Swain, who was then president of the University of North Carolina. The letters are now included in the papers of the university—never having been mailed.

Horton obtained his freedom in 1865 on Easter Sunday as the Union soldiers marched into North Carolina under the command of General William T. Sherman. Horton, then 68, did not wait in Chapel Hill, but walked to Raleigh to meet the Army.

In 1866, after moving to Philadelphia, Horton made his first approach to Blacks for assistance in publishing his works. The Banneker Institute, a small exclusive fraternity of educated Black men, turned him down. After that, there is no trace of him. The date and place of his death are unknown, but it is believed that he died in 1883.

Both Wheatley and Horton were married, but neither mentions much about personal life. Wheatley could be called the "Mother of Black Literature in America"; Horton the "Father of Black Protest in America." But how Black was Wheatley's poetry? How much could Horton protest? Whites have compared Wheatley to Alexander Pope, and Horton to Edgar Allan Poe; neither has been acclaimed great in her or his own right.

One is left with the feeling that certainly Wheatley was not exemplary

of the slave woman. Many questions go wanting for answers: What was the plight of Northern slaves—particularly the women? What was happening to Wheatley psychologically? Was her socialization such that she did not perceive herself as a member of the slave society, or for that matter any society?

If Horton's life was in any way representative of slavery, then one would deduce from this book that Southern slaves had time to actualize themselves—after completing their laborious tasks. One would develop the belief that the brutality in the North was mental rather than physical and that slavery in the South was better than slavery in the North. From this treatment, one should be thoroughly convinced that a few extraordinary Blacks were able to pull themselves up by their imaginary bootstraps . . . that Wheatley and Horton were and continue to be enigmas to the racist contention that Blacks are innately inferior.

The author gets into the psyche of Horton and permits the reader to see Horton as a man striving to fulfill his needs. When confronted by barriers, one sees him devising methods to circumvent these obstacles. His poetry gives a suggestion of power and imagination.

Wheatley's poetry demonstrates a sure taste. But based on the image of Wheatley the author allows the reader to see, one would certainly denounce the Black Matriarch concept as a myth and a great misconception of the Black female from an historical point.

The author crystalizes many ambiguities that have been long associated with these two early Black American poets. The book more than adequately brings to life the historical occurrences of their period, and one is left feeling sad that these literary giants lived in the right place at the wrong time. One can only believe that if these figures were

transposed into modern times, the vassal would surely soar.

Bid The Vassal Soar is easily readable. There is keenness in detail and simplicity in description. Richmond writes to the fullest measure all that the poets allowed to be scrutinized. She seems to dwell more intensely on Horton than on Wheatley. However, this may be due to Horton's own candor in his poetry. A few portions of the book move slowly, but the reader should not permit the slow passages to stand in his/her way of reading this book. □

The New York Head Shop and Museum

By Audre Lorde
Broadside Press
56pp. \$3.50

Reviewed by E. Ethelbert Miller

Hopefully before this decade is over, someone will attempt a study of the influence of New York City on Black poetry. This study would offer additional insight into the work of several well-known writers. Included among them would have to be Audre Lorde. In her latest collection of poems she opens with lines that defy the Empire State Building, The Bronx Zoo, Riverside Drive, Greenwich Village and all of Harlem.

*There is nothing beautiful left in the streets of this city.
I have come to believe in death and renewal by fire.*

What is it like to live in New York? Ask any skeleton or read Lorde who writes:

*Have you ever risen in the night
bursting with knowledge and the world
dissolves toward any listening ear
into which you can pour
whatever it was you knew
before waking
Only to find all ears asleep*