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Sarah's Story: Making a Place for Historical Ethnography in Rhetorical Studies

The thirtieth anniversary conference of the Rhetoric Society of America is a landmark occasion, suggesting to me that our field is well positioned to enter the twenty-first century with strength and considerable vitality. The theme of the conference, "Rhetoric, the Polis, and the Global Village," is a focus that certainly occupies much of my attention these days, so it was with a special enthusiasm that I accepted this role, and I am especially pleased to be able to share with you, as colleagues who are most knowledgeable about such issues, some of the work I have been doing.

I would like to fulfill three objectives. First, I want to spend some time talking about how difficult it is for some rather sensitive issues to gain presence and visibility in public arenas—still. Second, I intend to use the first part of my presentation as a springboard for unfolding the story of Sarah Kinson, hence the title of the talk, as exemplary of what it means to occupy in Gloria Wade-Gayles's words, "the narrow space of race, the dark enclosure of sex" (Wade-Gayles 3), that is, the historical place of African American women in our society. And third, I would like to use both of these two parts as illustrative of the kind of work that I do in rhetorical analysis, using a methodology that I have labeled historical ethnography.

I realize that having a threefold purpose, with the parts appearing on the surface to be rather unrelated, is an invitation to be unbearably long, but what I have tried to do is to resist sharing every single thing that I know about these three points of interest and instead to try telling, quite simply, a good and unapologetically didactic story. So bear with me, please.

La Amistad

To fulfill my first objective, I need to start with the release in 1997 of the popular film Amistad. I want to conduct a short survey, two questions: (1) How many of you saw the movie? (2) How many of you had more than a casual conversation about it? As you may know from the popular press, television talk show programs, and Internet Web pages, this film is based on historical fact. It chronicles the incident of La Amistad, a Spanish schooner that in 1839 was actively participating in the illegal kidnapping and transportation of Africans into the U.S. slave system. This ship, however, was the site of a revolt led by Sengbe Pieh, who is better known by his more anglicized

name Joseph Cinque. The revolt was successful, in large part, due to the courage and determination of the African warriors on board, as well as to the smallness of the vessel and the crew: 7 white and mulatto men, who managed 49 African men, 3 African girls from age 7 to 9 (Mar-gru, Te-me, and Ke-ne), and 1 African boy (Ka-le), age 11, for a total of 53 captives.

With victory under their belts, with the captain and the cook dead, with the other sailors allowed to go free in a lifeboat, Cinque made an agreement, so he thought, with the two men remaining to sail the Africans back to Mendeland in Sierra Leone, the land from which they had been illegally captured. Cinque, being a very observant man, demanded that the two men, Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montez, sail toward the rising sun. They did this during the day, but each night they did not honor their agreement and managed to sail westward toward the shores of the United States, hoping, of course, to be picked up by southern vessels. The *Amistad* was eventually stopped by the U.S. Coast Guard off the coast of New York. The revolutionaries were arrested, jailed, and placed on trial on board the *Washington*, the ship that captured them. They were tried again in Hartford, Connecticut; again in New Haven, Connecticut; and ultimately before the U.S. Supreme Court.

The legal defense team included Seth P. Staples, a future founder of the Yale School of Law; Theodore Sedgwick, from New York and the son of a leading New York attorney; and Roger S. Baldwin, an honors graduate from Yale University, son of the governor of Connecticut, and grandson of Roger Sherman, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. This team was expanded at the Supreme Court phase to include former president of the United States, John Quincy Adams, who had been keeping close watch on the proceedings and in frequent communication with various players in the scenario, including two of the children. The court process took three years, but the Africans were eventually found to have been born free in Africa and not as slaves, illegally captured and transported against their will as free people, and therefore acting, as all free men had the right to act, in self-defense. The captives were released and provided, by a substantial fund-raising effort on the part of abolitionists, with "safe" passage back to Sierra Leone, which continued to be embroiled in the illegal business of slave trading.

This is the story rendered in the film Amistad by Debbie Allen, who as the originator of the project took ten years to assemble the resources and connections to make the film. Allen and Colin Wilson served as co-producers, Steven Spielberg was the producer/director, David Franzoni was the screenwriter, Walter Parker and Laurie MacDonald of Dream Works Pictures were the executive producers, Janusz Kaminski was the director of photography, John Williams was the composer, Ruth Carter was the costume designer, and Michael Kahn was the editor. The filmmakers, in other words, were as stellar as the cast, which included Sir Anthony Hopkins, Matthew McConaughey, Morgan

Freeman, and Djimon Hounsou, among others. To date, the film has not received wide distribution, has been denied viewing in much of the South, and was allowed only limited distribution elsewhere. It is, nevertheless, an interestingly told tale that yielded one Oscar nomination: for Anthony Hopkins's portrayal of John Quincy Adams.

In the main, the movie has been criticized, as have other Spielberg films, for being long, for being uneven in its dramatization, for being questionable in Spielberg's choice of Matthew McConaughey as Robert (cf. Roger) Baldwin, for "over-making" (i.e., making too important and unreal, several moments in the film), and for "preaching" (i.e., for becoming too ideological). One might say, in fact, that with the last two criticisms Spielberg was charged with not "entertaining" the audience.

My general sense of this film for the context at hand, that is, for its efforts to generate public conversation about slavery and racial oppression, is that it is the type of film that I have come to call a "white man's awakening story," and I rush here to emphasize that I do not quarrel much anymore with the apparently inescapable need for a film about contentious historical moments to have such a purpose, given the power structures of the United States. In their fashioning of white men's awakening stories, my sense is that filmmakers situate the participants in the discourse as performers and viewers in a way that permits concerns to become visible and thereby capable of being discussed. What we see in Amistad, and what in my opinion works very well, is indeed just this type of awakening, two aspects of which I want to acknowledge here. The first is the portrayal of John Quincy Adams who, as an opaque historical figure for most viewers, reaches interesting clarity as a man of principle. Though reluctant to do so, Adams ultimately stepped forward in defense of the captives and acted on his principles in the arena of our most laudable public space, the Supreme Court. The second awakening is Robert Baldwin, who experienced a major shift in the perception of his task and his commitment.

In the beginning of the movie, Baldwin is positioned as a lawyer who saw not so much the humanity and inhumanity of his case, as much as the solution of it being imbedded in a compelling legal twist. He saw the case as a legal, not a moral, problem. He recognized that the central argument was not morality or the question of piracy, revolt, and murder, but "property." If the revolutionaries were human beings and not "property," then the terms of engagement for a consideration of their revolt shifted the paradigm in a way that made the case against them null and void. What made these Africans "not property" turned on the small but concrete point of whether they were born in Africa and not in the slaveholding Caribbean or the United States. Being born in Africa made them human (i.e., not slaves). As humans, as citizens of another country who were kidnapped, they had the human right by U.S. law to defend themselves.

One of the moments in the film that best symbolizes the shift in Baldwin's thinking from a simple notion of property to a more complex notion of humanity is the moment when John Quincy Adams asks him essentially, "Who are these men? Who is Cinque? What do you know, really know, about them?" Baldwin could not provide a satisfactory answer. Despite the many months that he had spent among the men, Baldwin knew nothing about them. He knew their case, not them, and at that moment of critical questioning, we have a white man's awakening to moral complexity, social responsibility, and human ties, rather than a simple lawyer-client relationship and legal ties.

This story, as dramatic as it is in the lives of people of African descent, assumed a narrative viewpoint in the film that actually made central the white men in the story. Cinque, as the central African character, most certainly looms large as the embodiment in the movie of moral consciousness and ethical obligations. However, both he and the incident of the Amistad revolt become an occasion for demonstrating how a devastatingly dramatic event makes possible white men's awakening and the opportunity to make visible the previously invisible—in white men's eyes, of course, the eyes of power and the holders of the rights and authority for public policy making. The revolt becomes the instrument by which white men's duty, honor, and obligation to others are revealed amid the unarticulated systems, legal and illegal, moral and immoral, of chattel slavery and racial oppression in the United States of America. Duty, honor, obligation, freedom, justice, equality as bedrock "American" values take on new dramatic potential for both Adams and Baldwin. The movie ultimately lives up to the challenge of providing a springboard for public conversation, as did, I might add, the original historical event when it assumed in 1839 dramatic rhetorical potential as a crystallizing event for the abolitionist movement and for the formation of one of the most long-lasting organizations of political and economic support for nineteenth-century African Americans. This organization, the Amistad Committee, was formed almost immediately after the capture of the ship with the objective of mounting the defense for the Mendi and making supreme use of the occasion to further the abolitionist cause. This committee ultimately became the American Missionary Association.

The thing that I find most interesting about this film, and about the event on which it is based, is just this last point, the potential for opening a much-needed "public" discussion of issues around which we have deep desires in this country to remain silent. What I find equally interesting is the extent to which the film was actually unable to generate such a discussion. Amistad was neither widely seen nor widely discussed, and of course Amistad was not the only film that received such treatment. Rosewood was another limited release film about racial oppression, and this latter one, also based on historical fact, was actually sent out to the public by the studio with an "apology" (Milloy), that is, with a money-back guarantee (in the tradition, perhaps, of

certification processes for slave narratives). On the surface, this guarantee was in the interest of "validating," or "authenticating," the film, and thereby declaring that it really is a good enough movie for someone to watch, that, of course, in the face of the interesting array of popular films that have not been called on to provide such guarantees. What came to mind for me with both *Amistad* and *Rosewood* was the old adage, "The more things change, the more they remain the same."

Given my viewpoint, what added yet another burning bit to this curious flame was the contrast of the internationally celebrated film *Titanic*. We now know more about the jewelry and the dinner plates on this boat than we do about the nature of chattel slavery, as a two-century-long operation in the United States, about the nature of its abolition, or about the role of *La Amistad* in the formation and work of the American Missionary Society in the interest of people of African descent.

Sarah's Story

At this point, I would like to shift attention to the dark enclosure within the small space in order to tell you the story of Sarah Kinson, that is, Sarah Mar-gru Kinson, the seven-year-old female child who was one of the captives on board *La Amistad*. If *Amistad* were our only source of information about Mar-gru, then she would remain a round-faced, dark-skinned female child, nameless among the extras, the expendables in this film, and because I assume that most, if not all of you, have not heard her name before, she would remain nameless and expendable among the pages of U.S. history and rhetorical history as well. So my effort here is to counter this erasure and say *Amistad* may be John Quincy Adams's story; it may be Roger Baldwin's story; most certainly it is Cinque's story, but *Amistad* is also Sarah's story.

Mar-gru was born in Bendembu, Mandingo country, southeast of Freetown, in Sierra Leone in 1832. She was one of seven children. According to Ellen NicKenzie Lawson, there are at least two accounts of how she came to be a captive. In one version, when she was seven years old, her parents pawned her to pay a debt and were then unable to raise the funds to reclaim her. In the second version, she was kidnapped while walking between villages. By either process, Mar-gru ended up in the slave pens at Dunbomo on the Island of Lomboko, then on the *Tecora* to Havana, Cuba, where she was sold to Pedro Montez, and ultimately taken on board *La Amistad*.

As prisoners, Mar-gru and the other *Amistad* girls, Te-me and Ke-ne, were allowed to reside in New Haven, Connecticut, in the home of their jailers, Colonel and Mrs. Stanton Pendleton. Ka-le, the male child, remained with the men. After two years, amid rumors of forced labor for the girls, both the Pendletons and the Amistad Committee (again, the abolitionists who were working on behalf of the prisoners) sued for custody. The Amistad Commit-

tee won. Mar-gru, now nine years old, was placed in the home of Reverend Noah Porter, a man of wealth. At that point, Mar-gru, Te-me, and Ke-ne were re-named Sarah, Maria, and Charlotte. During their incarceration, all of the Mende were taught to speak, read, and write English and to do math by abolitionist students from Yale Divinity School. Mar-gru proved to be academically gifted. She and the other children were frequently asked by their Christian guardians to demonstrate their adaptability to Christianity by singing hymns and reading from the Bible. Several of the Africans toured in Boston and New York, Mar-gru included, in order to raise the funds necessary for the trip back to Africa. Their program included Bible readings, African songs, Christian hymns, and a dramatic presentation of the *Amistad* story. Mar-gru was often asked to read the 124th Psalm:

If it had not been the Lord
who was on our side,
let Israel now say
if it had not been the Lord who was
on our side,
when men rose up against us,
then they would have swallowed us
alive,
when their anger was kindled
against us;
then the flood would have swept us
away,
the torrent would have gone over
us,
then over us would have gone
the raging waters.

Blessed be the Lord,
who has not given us
as prey to their teeth!
We have escaped as a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped!

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

By this process, Mar-gru became a public speaker, one recognized in fact for her talents and abilities. You can well imagine how this psalm functioned in their program, coming from the body of a nine-year-old girl.

When the Amistad Committee had secured enough funds for the trip to Africa, they held a farewell ceremony for the Mende in November 1841 at the Broadway Tabernacle in New York City. At that ceremony, Mar-gru read the 130th Psalm:

Out of the depths I cry to thee, O lord!
Lord, hear my voice!
Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with thee,
that thou mayest be feared.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption.
And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

Back in Sierra Leone, Mar-gru remained with Reverend William Raymond, the leader of the missionaries who traveled with the *Amistad* group on their return to Africa, and she continued her education at the mission school that he and his wife established there. In 1846, Mar-gru came back to the United States as Sarah Kinson under the sponsorship of abolitionist Lewis Tappan, a

New York merchant and organizer of the Amistad Committee, to attend Oberlin College. At Oberlin, she became the first African woman to enroll in an American college, first entering the college preparatory program and then the Ladies' Literary Course. Her roommate was Lucy Stanton, an African American woman from Cleveland, who was the first African American woman to be granted a four-year college degree in 1850, and who then went on to become a renowned teacher, public speaker, and community activist. Kinson, like Stanton, was an excellent student, who took advantage of the myriad of activities available to her at Oberlin to develop her rhetorical abilities in both speaking and writing. She spoke up in class and at local churches, and, in keeping with the habits of the day, she kept a lively correspondence between Lewis Tappan and her friends in Connecticut and Africa. To Tappan, she wrote, "I am studying very diligently so as to be qualified to do good in the world as this was my object in coming to Oberlin" (Lawson 14). Kinson did indeed study diligently, returning to Africa in 1849 as a young woman, educated well beyond the standards of her day, and well prepared for service as a missionary and teacher with the American Missionary Association (AMA). She was assigned with Hanah More, a white missionary who preferred not to work with Kinson, to Kaw Mendi Mission in Sierra Leone.

With this assignment,² Kinson became one of the first African-born women and one of only a few unmarried women to receive a mission assignment. A few years later, Kinson married fellow missionary Edward Henry Green, and they both continued in their commitment to missionary work. In terms of her own work, Kinson and her fellow missionary Hanah More set up an African Women's Sewing Society, called the Modest Dress Society. The thirty-six women who formed the group were required to wear Western clothes in order to attend. Kinson served as president. She told the group stories and delivered informal sermons. As Lawson reports, Kinson soon wrote to Lewis Tappan, "I am not ashamed to tell you that I am preaching to my country people . . ." (Lawson 222).

In 1855, in support of her new role as preacher, the Greens set up their own mission, believing (unlike the AMA itself) that Africans should be converted by Africans. At this point, their support from the AMA was soon withdrawn amid controversy surrounding Kinson's husband, and the historical records on Kinson blur. One version (Cable) indicates that Kinson lived out her life at Kaw Mendi Mission. The other indicates that with the controversy surrounding her husband, she fades from view and there is uncertainty about what happened to her exactly. In either case, the results are essentially the same. As an educated nineteenth-century African woman, Kinson participated in the forming of rhetorical traditions among women of African descent. I met her in the archival records of Oberlin College as I was trying to reconstruct the rise of rhetorical prowess among African American women and especially among the first generations of college-educated African American

can women. As one of the first female students of African descent at Oberlin, Kinson was a trailblazer whose personal history happened to include one of the most dramatic events in African American history. My job today, then, is to keep Sarah Mar-gru Kinson from being, once again, resubsumed in the dark enclosure within the narrow space of a racialized, gendered, and ideologically contentious world.

Historical Ethnography

This section makes a place for historical ethnography. As you can probably tell, I spend a lot of time in archives. So, as a rhetorician who focuses on African American women, why do I do that? One reason, of course, is that I get to discover little-known people and retell, as I have today, their stories. That, however, is really the lagniappe, or that little something extra, of what I do. Despite the seductive nature of storytelling as an aesthetically pleasing enterprise, unveiling little-known stories is not my primary interest. I am interested. instead, in gaining a more fully textured historical view of the rhetorical practices of African American women. I am interested in gaining a view that has the interpretive power to account for their participation as "unofficial," "unauthenticated" speakers and writers in public arenas that are typically deemed "counter." The basic question for me is this: As rhetoricians, how indeed do we account for the long-standing histories, achievements, impacts, and consequences of the "unofficial" rhetors and the "counter" discourses that have operated so consistently and with such vitality despite the hegemonic processes that support "official" rhetors and their more "mainstream" discourses.

What I have learned in looking at the rhetorical practices of African American women over time is that my viewpoint, because of its concern with "unofficial" spaces, dictates that I pay attention to the worlds that surround African American women and that I do so in two specific ways: in terms of the social, political, and ideological contexts in which these spaces are constituted; and also in terms of the material conditions under which these women are compelled to form ethos, to construct rhetorical mandates, and to operate with effect and even eloquence in language use. My viewpoint, therefore, has to be transdisciplinary and multidimensional, an agenda that fits well with ethnographic methodologies. My habit is to triangulate analyses, analyses of ethos formation, of the context for rhetorical action, and of the rhetorical event itself. I look synchronically and diachronically at the relationships of these women to the material world, looking particularly at the concrete circumstances by which they are able to live, to work, and to prosper. I look across genres or rhetorical performances to notice the resonances of a writer's habits and concerns. I chart language behavior descriptively and ideologically. I look for evidence of the relationships between ideological view and rhetorical decision making, and I draw inferences and create possible scenarios.

Mainly, I engage in processes that produce thick descriptions.³ I gather whatever data are available about the material culture and about meaning-making processes as these processes demonstrate a convergence of personal, social, and institutional mandates. What is probably most distinctive about this approach beyond an interest in thickening descriptions is that the thickening process permits personal experience to count (both mine and theirs). Experience, not just documentary evidence, takes its place as one data set that needs to be systematically interrogated in the same way that history, traditionally defined through documentary evidence, is questioned or that rhetorical performance is questioned. The challenge, of course, is to engage in such interrogations with subiects who are often long dead. Obviously, I cannot interview my subjects or check my interpretations of their actions and achievements with them directly. What I have come to accept, however, is that historical subjects, even African American women as nontraditional historical subjects, do indeed comment with their own interpretive authority. They just do so uniquely as their rhetorical performances speak both directly and indirectly to the worlds in which they operate. I acknowledge, then, the importance of listening well, of paying careful and close attention to what they say on, between, and around the lines; of listening to what they say the day before, for example, and the day after; and of paying attention to who is in the conversation with them, where it is taking place, and how it interacts with other conversations that may be occurring simultaneously. I call this process historical ethnography, and I see these types of inquiries and data gathering processes to be critical to both knowledge and understanding, not simply of African American women's rhetorical practices, but of the landscape of rhetoric itself.

Coda

In fulfilling the promise of didacticism, what instruction do I want to offer? There are at least three points to which I would like to pay special note.

The first one has to do with the construction of the public sphere. Nancy Fraser and Mary Ryan are noted for the insightful ways in which they discuss the existence of alternative, parallel public spheres. I would like to underscore, through the dissatisfaction that I have inscribed here with public discourses around issues of U.S. slavery and racial oppression as two examples, that mainstream official public discourses are inadequate. They continue to boldly disregard the interests of many groups who have sustained among themselves public spheres that are lively and long-standing. My sense is that these inadequacies are becoming increasingly problematic in the global context in which we live, a context in which power relationships are shifting and the need for negotiations of various sorts are ever-present. My sense is that we need to be much more inventive in constructing a new and different concept of the public sphere, one that permits a broader array of viewpoints, experi-

ences, and concerns to become part of the conversation, rather than peripheral to it or simultaneous with it. My view is that we need to conceptualize an arena that permits interaction and negotiation with the expectation of redress, rather than one in which there is little opportunity for cross-fertilization or even for meaningful regard.

The second point is that rhetorical traditions of women of African descent, as illustrated by the participation of Sarah Mar-gru Kinson in the formation of those traditions, are interestingly intertwined between the lines and around the edges of other traditions. My sense is that we need to bring those practices forward, to flesh them out to the extent possible, to document them, and to build interpretive frameworks that permit achievements to be acknowledged and valued. Despite the fact that these traditions have existed primarily in counterdiscourses, their long existence suggests that they have the capacity to add in a more dynamic way than we have been giving credit to the history of language well used.

Third, what these two points suggest to me about rhetorical knowledge and training is that our rhetorical past remains too narrowly rendered. We need to open up the vistas by which we set the terms of valuation so that we do not just glorify one view of the past but position and reposition ourselves to see other values easily missed if we focus too exclusively in one arena. We need research methodologies that permit us to see what is there and not there and to be imaginative and articulate about what could be there instead. My sense is that we live in a world that insists now that definitions of what constitutes the "polis" be extended. Certainly, we live in a world that is beginning to be insistent also about the need to re-vision the world as a multisplendored conglomeration of competing interests and alliances. What I see also is that contemporary research methodologies in rhetorical studies are called on to match contemporary challenges in dynamic ways. Salient among those challenges is the need to develop paradigms and practices that facilitate cross-boundary communication and cultural exchange. My sense is that language is increasingly our most invaluable cultural commodity. It is the capital by which we have the capacity to negotiate differences as we learn, sometimes under fire, to live, breathe, and prosper in the presence of others, in fact, in the presence of a whole slew of others who these days rather insistently constitute this little village called Earth and our little street called the United States of America.

With all of this said, however, I suppose in all fairness that my most didactic message is this: Given the ways of our contemporary world, rhetorical studies may just be (like "Babylon Five," for those of you who are fellow science fiction buffs) our last and best hope for the future. More than that, given the ways of our historical world, African American women and other groups who have honed their crafts in the margins may be the rhetors from whom we can learn and be inspired. So, in tribute to Sarah Mar-gru Kinson and other women of African descent who have played roles in the formation

of rhetorical history as "counter" space, I want to end by quoting from a poem by Mari Evans, entitled "I Am a Black Woman" (105-06):

I am a Black woman The music of my song Some sweet arpeggio of tears Is written in a minor key. . .

I am a Black woman Tall as a cypress strong Beyond all definition—still Defying place and time and circumstance assailed impervious indestructible.

Look on me and be renewed.

Look on Sarah Mar-gru Kinson and the landscape of unknown others like her whom we do not know but could, and yes indeed, look on them and be renewed.

Notes

- 1. Please note that, whereas this film conforms to the broad sweep of historical fact with the *Amistad* case, it nevertheless takes many liberties with some of the specific details (e.g., who the defenders actually were, the role of black abolitionists in this story, the close attention and consistent involvement of John Quincy Adams as advisor in the case).
- 2. Please note that I also discuss Sarah Mar-gru Kinson in *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women* (University of Pittsburgh Press). In this project, my intent is to secure for Kinson an appropriate place in the history of higher education for women of African descent, highlighting her participation as one of the first students to attend Oberlin College and to situate her work in Africa as part of a tradition of social activism.
- 3. The term "thick description" was popularized by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (*The Interpretation of Cultures*) as a methodological process for reaching deeper levels of understanding in interpreting data relative to specific cultural events and practices. He says that "ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with . . . is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must continue somehow first to grasp and then to render" (9-10). Geertz advocated looking, looking again, and looking again and again to push oneself as an observer to go below the surface and beyond the obvious for interpretations that are more meaningful.

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